

YOUNG AND HOMELESS IN NASHVILLE: THE SCOPE OF  
RUNAWAY AND THROWAWAY YOUTH AND  
THE EXPERIENCES OF HOMELESS YOUTH

By

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To the young people of Nashville who inspired me with their hope and optimism  
and taught me what it means to never give up

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DEDICATION .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iv
LIST OF TABLES .....	xi
LIST OF FIGURES .....	xii
Chapter	
I. COUNTING RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH IN NASHVILLE .....	1
Introduction and Overview .....	1
Methodology Summary .....	3
Research Questions .....	4
Defining Homeless Youth .....	5
Previous Research on Counting Homeless Youth .....	5
The 2009 Runaway and Homeless Youth Survey .....	7
Survey Design .....	7
Sampling .....	9
Survey Procedures .....	11
Data Analysis .....	11
Results .....	12
Discussion .....	24
Limitations .....	26
Implications .....	27
Practice .....	27
Policy .....	28
Research .....	28
References .....	30
II. SERVICE USE AND SERVICE AVOIDANCE .....	36
Theoretical Background .....	36
Previous Research .....	38



	Page
Service Use.....	38
Barriers to Service Use.....	38
Facilitators of Service Use .....	40
Study Design .....	42
Interview Instrument .....	43
Data Analysis .....	43
Interview Sample.....	44
Results .....	47
Shelter.....	48
Food Services .....	50
Homeless Youth Outreach Program.....	54
Church Programs .....	54
Safe Spaces.....	56
Mental Health Services .....	57
Education Services .....	59
Employment Services.....	61
Physical Health Services .....	62
Service Avoidance.....	64
Negative Experiences .....	65
Independence.....	67
Relationship Issues .....	69
Location.....	70
Rules.....	71
Discussion .....	71
Limitations.....	74
Implications .....	75
References .....	76

### III. “NEVER GIVE UP. EVER.”: STRENGTHS OF HOMELESS YOUTH .....82

Background .....	82
Methods .....	86
Design.....	86
Interview Instrument .....	87
Data Analysis .....	88
Interview Sample.....	88
Results .....	91
Optimistic .....	91
Self-Reliant.....	93
Strong-Willed.....	95
Altruistic.....	99
Smart .....	102

	Page
Friendly .....	104
Youth .....	105
Relationships .....	107
Faith .....	113
Discussion .....	115
Limitations.....	117
Implications .....	117
References .....	119
IV. CONCLUSION.....	125
Implications .....	126
Practice .....	126
Policy.....	127
Research .....	128
Appendix	
A. 2009 RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH SURVEY .....	129
B. HOMELESS YOUTH INTERVIEW GUIDE .....	130
C. COMMUNITY BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH .....	132

## LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1. Survey sampling and return rate .....	11
Table 2. MNPS sample demographics .....	13
Table 3. Primary nighttime residence .....	14
Table 4. 12-month runaway/throwaway experience vs. none.....	15
Table 5. Differences in runaway and throwaway youth by grade level.....	16
Table 6. Differences in current primary nighttime residence between youth with a runaway/throwaway experience in the last 12 months and those with none .....	17
Table 7. Demographic differences by grade for those with a lifetime runaway and/or throwaway experience and those without .....	18
Table 8. Demographic differences between youth with a homeless experience and youth without a homeless experience .....	20
Table 9. All places stayed by category of homeless experience .....	21
Table 10. Differences in places stayed by gender, race and grade level .....	23
Table 11. Demographic information for homeless youth sample by category .....	45
Table 12. Demographic information for homeless youth sample by individual, family, and system involvement characteristics .....	90

LIST OF FIGURES

Page

Figure 1. Services used by homeless youth, by category.....4

## CHAPTER I

### COUNTING RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH IN NASHVILLE

#### Introduction and Overview

Homeless youth are a population at great risk. They are more likely than their peers who have stable residences to suffer from health complications, victimization, substance abuse, and mental health problems (Toro, Dworsky, & Fowler, 2007). They are also a population that seems to be growing in size and in difficulty, with homeless youth service providers reporting seeing increasingly troubled clients with multiple risk factors operating in their lives (Slesnick, Meyers, Meade, & Segelken, 2000).

Estimating the actual size of the population of homeless youth is a difficult task. Three major surveys, the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (Ringwalt, Greene, Robertson, & McPheeters, 1998), the 2002 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (SAMHSA, 2004), and the second National Incidence Study of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Thrownaway Children (In) (Hammer, Finkelhor, & Sedlak, 2002) had reasonably similar results, estimating that 1.6 to 1.7 million youth experience a homeless episode consisting of at least one night on their own within a year. Ringwalt, et al. (1998) found that 7.6% of youth aged 12-17 had been homeless for at least one night in the 12 months prior to their study, staying in a location such as a shelter, public place, abandoned building, outdoors, underground, or with a stranger. The SAMSHA survey also counted those youth with a “street experience.” However, these studies both likely underestimate the true number of youth who experience a runaway or throwaway episode by not including those who stay with a family member, friend, or friend of the family. These are youth who

become known as “couchsurfers” when repeated or longer-term instances of this behavior occur, meaning they have no stable place of residence but instead move from home to home and likely remain at risk in many ways even though they are sleeping indoors on most nights (Toro, et al., 2007). The NISMART-II study did include these youth and estimated that 1,682,900 of children aged 7-17 (3.9% of the total US population of that age in 1999) had a runaway or throwaway episode lasting at least one night (Hammer, et al., 2002).

The Davidson County Runaway and Homeless Youth Coalition (RHYC) formed in 2007 for the purpose of developing and implementing a county-wide strategic plan that will end homelessness among youth and dramatically reduce the number of first-time and chronic runaway youth by identifying and addressing the root causes that lead youth to run away and/or seek alternative, temporary living situations. Members of the RHYC represent various agencies in the Nashville, Tennessee metropolitan area that serve homeless youth, either with programs specifically designed for that population, such as a youth shelter or a homeless youth outreach program, or through programs intended for a broader population of youth that subsequently serve runaway and homeless youth, such as the public health department, physical and mental health clinics, juvenile justice and the police department.

In order to marshal the resources necessary to complete its task, the RHYC required an idea of how many runaway and homeless youth there are in the Nashville area. Limited sources of data on the issue do exist; for example, it was known that the Metropolitan Nashville Police Department reported 2,071 incidents of runaway youth in Nashville between June 1, 2006 and May 31, 2007. The Oasis Center served 250 street youth in Nashville in 2007. The emergency shelter they operate served 275 youth with an average stay of 14 days. In the 2008-2009 school year, the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools Homeless Education (MNPS Heroes) Program

served about 300 homeless youth in grades 9-12, which includes youth who are homeless with their families.

Members of the RHYC felt that while these service snapshots provided helpful information, they did not provide a complete picture of the true number of Nashville youth who were experiencing a “homeless episode” as a result of running away or being kicked out of their homes, in addition to those who were literally homeless. It was decided that a survey of a representative sample of local high school youth (grades 9-12) was the most feasible and accurate way to establish the scope of the issue. This report reflects the results of that survey. Furthermore, because the coalition desired additional context for understanding the experience of youth “on their own” in this sense, an online survey was created to gather more in-depth information about the experience of young people, and this report also reflects the results of that research effort.

### Methodology Summary

This report reflects primary analyses from a district-wide survey of a representative sample of 9<sup>th</sup> -12<sup>th</sup> graders in Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools (MNPS). The Survey used a random cluster sampling procedure to identify specific classrooms, stratified by grade level. Surveys were completed by 2,169 youth, a 69.8% response rate out of those sampled and representing approximately 11% of all MNPS 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> graders at the time of the survey. Details of the sample design and response rate calculations are provided in this report.

All surveys are subject to important limitations. Those relevant to this study are also reviewed in this report. Analysis of the data collected by this study was reviewed, approved, and monitored by the Vanderbilt University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

## Research Questions

The primary purpose of this study was to estimate the number of youth in the Nashville area (Davidson County) who have experienced a runaway or throwaway episode or been literally homeless at any point in their lifetime. For the purposes of this project, those terms were defined as follows:

- runaway – a high school youth (grade 9-12) who ran away from their parent or guardian’s home and spent at least one night away without permission, staying either with a relative, friend, friend of the family, a stranger, in a shelter, or in a street location such as a public place, abandoned building, outside, or in a car;
- throwaway – a high school youth (grade 9-12) who was kicked out of or asked to leave their parent or guardian’s home and spent at least one night away, staying either with a relative, friend, friend of the family, a stranger, in a shelter, or in a street location such as a public place, abandoned building, outside, or in a car;
- homeless – a high school youth (grade 9-12) who indicates that their current primary nighttime residence is a public location, hotel/motel, or in a shelter without their parent or guardian.

To assist in creating this estimate and further our understanding of the scope of the problem in Nashville, the Runaway and Homeless Youth Coalition asked:

- 1) How many youth have experienced a runaway/throwaway episode, either in the past year or in their lifetime?
- 2) What are the demographics of those who experience these episodes?
- 3) Where do these youth stay during one of these episodes?



## Defining Homeless Youth

One major hurdle in doing research on homeless youth is the difficulty in defining them. A review of the existing literature revealed at least 44 different definitions used to qualify youth for participation in the research reported (Hoffman, 2008). The RHYC sought a definition broad enough to provide a complete picture of those youth believed to be at an elevated risk of negative outcomes in relationship to their experiences “on their own.” The definitions used by the federal government’s Agency for Children Youth and Families (ACYF) in their *Youth with Runaway, Throwaway, and Homeless Experiences Study* in 1995 (as described in Greene, et. al., 2003) were deemed to be the best fit to provide the information desired by the RHYC.

The ACYF study defined runaways as: “those who spent at least one night away from home before the age of 18 when they left home even though their parent or someone who helped raise them did not give them permission to go or want them to go; they left home with permission but did not return home when expected; or they left an institutional setting without permission and stayed away overnight” (Greene, et al., 2003, p. 2-2). Throwaways were defined as: “those who spent at least one night living away from home before they turned 18 when their parent or someone who helped raise them knew they were leaving but did not care whether they left or not; or because they were told to leave” (p. 2-2). Homeless youth were those who were “unaccompanied by their families and lack stable housing, such as those living on the street, in shelters, or in unstable residences with friends or acquaintances” (p. 2-2).

## Previous Research on Counting Homeless Youth

Completing a homeless youth “count” is a notoriously difficult task. Several locations have undertaken these counts in the past. In Las Vegas, NV (Strategic Solutions, 2006),

volunteers canvassed assigned areas of the city on one identified night and physically counted the number of homeless youth they saw. This is known as a point prevalence method, calculating results from those who are found to be runaway or homeless at a given point in time, usually one day (Greene et al., 2003). These methods can be biased toward describing individuals with longer periods of homelessness, in contrast to the typical youth who experiences episodic homelessness as opposed to chronic (Ringwalt et al., 1998). The service providers most familiar with the homeless youth in Nashville felt strongly that a point prevalence count would be an extremely ineffective way to count these young people because of the hidden nature of the problem, likely producing a biased and low number that would significantly under-represent the true extent of the homeless youth population in the area.

A period prevalence estimate is likely a more accurate way to count the population (Greene, et al., 2003). A national attempt at this occurred in 1992 by adding a question to the Youth Risk Behavior Study, a survey that used a national household probability sample, reaching youth at home by telephone (Ringwalt et al., 1998). This sampling method has obvious limitations in that it could miss youth who are currently experiencing a homeless episode. However, this strategy has been used in previous research to estimate homelessness rates because household interviews can capture a nationally representative sample of formerly homeless people who may have been hidden while homeless. Given that youth are even more inclined to be hidden than the adult homeless population, due to fears of being arrested or reported to child welfare authorities, this strategy is likely appropriate for this population. This method is also more likely to capture those with episodic experience of homelessness rather than chronic, which youth are more likely to experience.

## The 2009 Runaway and Homeless Youth Survey

Given the likelihood that a period prevalence estimate is a more accurate “count” of homeless youth, and that service providers familiar with local youth were much more in favor of this method, the RHYC chose to proceed with a survey of a representative sample of youth to establish an overall number of runaway, throwaway and homeless youth. The most feasible and representative location for this survey was determined to be the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools (MNPS).

Some may question why a “homeless” youth survey would be undertaken in public schools, when conventional wisdom would suggest that such young people would not be enrolled in schools. In fact, much published research on homeless youth shows that a high percentage of those under the age of 18 continue attending school (Baer, Ginzler, & Peterson, 2003; Cauce et al., 2000; Levin, Bax, McKean, & Schoggen, 2005; Monterey, 2002). In addition, the intent of this survey was to discover not only the number of youth who would meet a stringent definition of homelessness based on the primary nighttime residence of the student, such as the one used in the McKinney-Vento legislation that governs educational services for homeless children (U.S. Department of Education, 2004), but also the number of youth who had experienced a runaway or throwaway episode as brief as one night. Given that over 90% of youth who run away return home within a month and more than 99% return home within twelve months (Hammer et al., 2002), it was expected that most high school age youth with a runaway or throwaway experience were as likely to be present in a school setting as any other youth.

### *Survey Design*

The RHYC designed the survey with input from a Youth Advisory Panel (see Appendix C for more information about recruiting this group) of currently or formerly homeless youth.

These young people assisted in the development of survey items, wording, and generating a list of options for where youth might stay during a runaway, throwaway, or homeless episode. The survey questions were written at below a fifth-grade reading level to ensure that the vast majority of public high school students would be able to read and understand the survey without assistance.

The survey was designed to be completely anonymous, but included questions about four demographic factors: gender, race, ethnicity, and grade level. To generate a number of currently homeless youth, a question about the young person's "primary nighttime residence" was asked, in accordance with the language of the McKinney-Vento legislation (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). The wording of the question added to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey in 1992 (Ringwalt, et al., 1998) was adapted to provide answers to whether youth had experienced a runaway or throwaway episode in the last 12 months that resulted in at least one night away from their parent or guardian's home. Utilizing the 12 month timeframe and the qualifier of "at least one night," along with asking about the various locations where youth stayed during these episodes, would allow for comparisons to the often quoted national statistic indicating that 7.6% of youth are homeless for at least one night each year. Because research has shown that the experiences of runaway and throwaway youth can differ significantly (MacLean, Embry, & Cauce, 1999; Ringwalt, Greene, & Robertson, 1998), the survey asked students to specify whether in the last 12 months they had run away from home, or if they had been kicked out or asked to leave. To gain a more complete picture of the experience of Nashville youth, a question was added about whether they had ever experienced a runaway or throwaway episode (or both) in their lifetime. Finally, youth were asked to choose from a list of options to indicate where they stayed when they ran away, including all of the options identified in the YRBS (except for

“underground” because there is no subway system in Nashville), as well as options identified as the most likely places to stay by the Advisory Panel (such as with a relative, with a friend, or with a friend of the family).

Members of the RHYC worked with the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) Office of Research and Assessment (ORA) to refine the survey to meet district standards, and to plan the process of the survey, which was done in a similar fashion to the ORA’s administration of the Youth Risk Behavior Survey in prior years. An official research proposal was submitted to the ORA and approved.

### *Sampling*

Feasibility constraints required that the survey take place only in high schools, rather than junior high and high schools, which would have more closely replicated the age range of the previous national survey. The only high schools excluded from participation were those with overall enrollment numbers too small to make surveying them feasible, or those special education schools in which the reading level of the survey would be prohibitive. The MNPS Assistant Superintendent for Student Services requested participation from the principals of the remaining 17 local high schools. All agreed to participate. Contact persons, either an assistant principal or an embedded youth agency staff person, were identified to assist with survey procedures.

The survey used a random cluster sampling procedure. The clusters were intact “homeroom” classrooms, also known at some schools as advisor/advisee periods. The rationale of sampling for descriptive studies provided by Gay & Airasian (2002) was used to set the sample size initially. These authors say that a sample size between 10% and 20% of the population is adequate for descriptive studies, and for population sizes greater than 5,000, a

sample size of 400 is adequate. Because of the desire to generalize to the entire population of MNPS high school students in grades 9-12, it was decided to pursue a sample size of 10%-20% as suggested by Gay and Airasian.

The actual number of students sampled would depend on two factors: the RHYC's ability to recruit volunteers to administer the survey during the selected homerooms, and the expected completion rate of surveys. Based on the district's experience with the YRBS, it was recommended that a 75% completion or "return rate" should be used. Weitzman, Guttmacher, Weinberg and Kapachia (2003) suggest that a response rate of 70% or above is sufficient for not biasing results of adolescent risk-behavior surveys, given that schools with a response rate below that are more likely to have more at-risk students absent from the survey.

The ORA determined that the high school enrollment at the 17 selected high schools was 19,622 on February 11, 2009. A 12% sample of this enrollment, using the 75% rate of return, resulted in a needed sample of 3,140 students. With an average homeroom class size of 18, the number of classrooms needed was 175. This was at the limit of feasibility the RHYC had established for a three-week time period in which to complete all the surveys. The individual classrooms (clusters) were listed in a column on an Excel spreadsheet, along with identifying codes, their class enrollment and their respective schools. The Excel random number function assigned each cluster a random six-digit number. The file was then sorted by the random number and clusters were picked until the target sample size of 3,140 students was reached or exceeded. Changes in classrooms to be surveyed mandated by principals resulted in a final sample size of 3,109 students. A total of 2,169 students completed the survey, for a sample size equal to 11% of the students enrolled in MNPS high schools on that date, which falls within the adequate range of 10-20% of the population. Information on the overall return rate is provided in Table 1 below.

*Table 1. Survey sampling and return rate.*

Students Sampled	3,109	
Students Present	2,273	73.1% attendance
Students Excused or Refused	104	4.5% refusal rate
Students Completing Surveys	2,169	69.8% return rate

### *Survey Procedures*

The RHYC recruited volunteers from undergraduate research methods courses and graduate programs at Vanderbilt University, local homeless service organizations, and member agencies of the coalition to assist with completing the surveys. All 17 selected high schools were surveyed between March 23 and April 9, 2009. Passive permission forms were delivered to the selected advisor/advisee or homeroom classes at least a week prior to the survey date to allow parents the opportunity to opt out of their child completing the survey. RHYC volunteers attended the classrooms on the scheduled days, explained the survey and the voluntary nature of it, distributed and collected the survey forms, preserving the confidential nature of the data. No identifying information was collected from the students. These surveys were then scanned and the results entered into an Excel spreadsheet for transfer into SPSS for analysis.

### *Data Analysis*

The 2,169 total responses were analyzed in SPSS, using a chi-square test of significance. The sample size was sufficient for a minimum detectable effect size of “large” (Cohen, 1992) with traditional assumptions ( $p < .05$ , two-tailed, at 80% power). In addition, 95% confidence intervals show the likely range of the true percentage of youth in the various categories. Typically, statistically significant differences correspond to non-overlapping confidence intervals (see Table 4 for an example).

The analyses compared several groups of youth: 1) those who had run away or been thrown away in the past 12 months with those who had not; 2) those with a lifetime experience with those who had not; and 3) youth with any type of “homeless experience” – including a runaway or throwaway episode in the past 12 months or in their lifetime, and those who reported being currently homeless (i.e., living in a shelter or a public location without parental supervision) – were compared to youth with no homeless experience. Frequencies were used to determine the rates at which youth with runaway, throwaway and/or homeless experiences stayed in various possible locations, as well as chi-square analyses to look for differences in those locations by gender, race, and grade level.

### *Results*

*Demographic information.* The survey was completed by 2,169 students. Demographic information from the overall sample, as reported in Table 2 below, reflects closely the total population of the surveyed high schools and Metro Nashville Public Schools overall (MNPS, 2008). The sample was almost evenly split between male (50.3%) and female (49.7%). Almost half of the youth (47.2%) identified as black, 31.3% were white, and 21.5% were “other,” including Asian, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander, and bi- or multi-racial. Hispanic youth made up 13.6% of the sample. The breakdown in grade levels was 29.5% ninth graders, 31.2% tenth graders, 19.9% eleventh graders and 19.5% twelfth graders. A decline in enrollment is expected in the higher grades due to increased dropouts with age. This does represent a slight oversampling of 10<sup>th</sup> graders in comparison to the MNPS overall enrollment.



**Table 2. MNPS sample demographics.**

	MNPS High School Sample (n = 2,169)	MNPS Enrollment of Selected High Schools (n=19,622)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	50.3%	50.1%
Female	49.7%	49.9%
<b>Race</b>		
White	31.3%	32.9%
Black	47.2%	52.4%
Other	21.5%	14.7%
<b>Hispanic</b>	13.6%	10.9%
<b>Grade</b>		
9th	29.5%	31%
10th	31.2%	26.4%
11th	19.9%	21.1%
12th	19.5%	21.3%

*Primary nighttime residence.* Table 3 reports results from the full sample regarding the primary nighttime residence of the youth, as they reported on the day of the survey. Most youth (91.8%) indicated that the place where they typically slept at night was at home with their parents or guardians. This option specifically stated that foster parents were included. Another (4.8%) stated that they stayed primarily with their parents, but not in their own home - either with a friend or relative (1.8%), in a shelter (2.5%), or in a hotel, motel, car, park, or other public place (0.5%). About 2.2% of youth reported being away from their parents, either living one their own with a friend or relative (1.7%), in a shelter (0.2%), or in a hotel, motel, car, park or other public place (0.3%).

**Table 3. Primary nighttime residence.**

Home w/parents	91.8%
Friend/Relative w/parents	1.8%
Friend/Relative w/o parents	1.7%
Shelter w/parents	2.5%
Shelter w/o parents	0.2%
Hotel/Public place w/parents	0.5%
Hotel/Public place w/o parents	0.3%
Other	1.3%

*Runaway/Throwaway episode in the past 12 months.* In this study, 6.3% of youth (n = 135) said that they had run away from home and stayed out for at least one night without permission of their parent or guardian in the past 12 months. An additional 7.3% of youth (n = 156) responded that they had been kicked out of or asked to leave the home of their parent or guardian in the last twelve months. This is a total of 13.6% -- or more than one in six -- of Nashville public high school youth who would meet this study's definitional criteria of being homeless for at least one night.

Table 4 reports the demographic differences between youth who had a runaway or a throwaway episode in the last 12 months and those who did not.

*Table 4. Twelve-month runaway/throwaway experience vs. none.*

	<b>Runaway OR Throwaway Experience Last 12 Months (n = 291)</b>	<b>No 12 Month Experience (n = 1842)</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male (95% Confidence Intervals)	45.3% (39.5%-51.1%)	51.3% (49.0%-53.6%)
Female	54.7% (48.9%-60.5%)	48.7% (46.4%-51.0%)
<b>Race</b>		
White	33.0% (27.5%-38.5%)	31.2% (29.0%-33.4%)
Black	42.8% (37.0%-48.6%)	47.9% (45.5%-50.3%)
Other	24.3% (19.2%-29.4%)	20.9% (19.0%-22.8%)
<b>Hispanic</b>	14.5% (10.4%-18.6%)	13.3% (11.7%-14.9%)
<b>*Grade</b>		
9 <sup>th</sup>	<b>25.3%</b> <b>(20.3%-30.3%)</b>	30.1% (28.0%-32.2%)
10 <sup>th</sup>	30.5% (25.2%-35.8%)	31.3% (29.2%-33.4%)
11 <sup>th</sup>	17.9% (13.4%-22.4%)	20.2% (18.4%-22.0%)
12 <sup>th</sup>	<b>26.3%</b> <b>(21.2%-31.4%)</b>	18.4% (16.6%-20.2%)

\*p=.014

Ninth graders were significantly less likely to experience a runaway/throwaway episode in the past twelve months, and seniors significantly more likely. A logistic regression predicting the chances of having a runaway/throwaway episode in the past 12 months, comparing seniors to all other grade levels, showed that a senior's odds of having a recent episode were almost 59% higher than youth in the other grades (Exp(B) = 1.588).

When considered as a percentage of the sample as a whole, Table 5 shows that throwaway youth are significantly more likely to be 12<sup>th</sup> graders.

**Table 5. Differences in runaway and throwaway youth by grade level.**

<b>*Grade level</b>	<b>Runaway last 12 months (n =135)</b>	<b>Throwaway last 12 months (n = 156)</b>
9 <sup>th</sup>	6.3 % (4.4%-8.2%)	5.3% (3.5%-7.1%)
10 <sup>th</sup>	6.4% (4.5%-8.3%)	6.8% (4.9%-8.7%)
11 <sup>th</sup>	5.5% (3.3%-7.7%)	6.7% (4.3%-9.1%)
12 <sup>th</sup>	6.6% (4.2%-9.0%)	<b>11.7%</b> <b>(8.6%-14.8%)</b>

\*p=.032

Table 6 shows that there are significant differences between where those youth with a runaway/throwaway experience in the last 12 months and those without one are currently living. As might be expected, significantly fewer youth with an episode in the last year are currently living at home with their parents (76.4% vs. 94.2%). Youth with a runaway/throwaway experience in the last 12 months are significantly more likely to be living in any of the other possible situations, even those with their parents, such as with a friend or relative with their parents, or in a shelter or hotel/public place with their parents.

**Table 6. Differences in current primary nighttime residence between youth with a runaway/throwaway experience in the last 12 months and those with none.**

<b>*Primary Nighttime Residence</b>	<b>Runaway OR Throwaway Experience Last 12 Months (n = 291)</b>	<b>No 12 Month Experience (n = 1842)</b>
Home w/parents	76.4% (71.5%-81.3%)	94.2% (93.1-95.3%)
Friend/Relative w/parents	3.5% (1.4%-5.6%)	1.5% (0.9%-2.1%)
Friend/Relative w/o parents	8% (4.9%-11.1%)	0.7% (0.3%-1.1%)
Shelter w/parents OR hotel/public place w/parents	5.5% (2.9%-8.1%)	2.6% (1.9%-3.3%)
Shelter w/o parents or hotel/public place w/o parents	2.7% (0.8%-4.6%)	0.1% (0%-0.2%)
Other	3.8% (1.6%-6.0%)	0.9% (0.5%-1.3%)

\*p<.001

*Lifetime episode.* Nearly one in five of all Nashville high school youth (19.6%) of youth indicated that they had either run away (8.6%), been kicked out (7.8%) or both (3.2%) over the course of their lifetime. The only significant demographic variation for youth in this category from youth without an episode in their lifetime is that, similar to the 12-month episode rate, those with a lifetime episode were less likely to be freshmen and more likely to be seniors (see Table 7). This result makes sense given the chronological age difference.

**Table 7. Differences by grade for those with a lifetime runaway and/or throwaway episode and those without.**

<b>*Grade level</b>	<b>Lifetime Episode (n = 430)</b>	<b>No Lifetime Episode (n=1739)</b>
9 <sup>th</sup>	<b>25.4%</b> (21.2%-29.6%)	<b>30.5%</b> (28.3%-32.7%)
10 <sup>th</sup>	30.0% (25.6%-34.4%)	31.6% (29.4%-33.8%)
11 <sup>th</sup>	20.1% (16.2%-24.0%)	19.8% (17.9%-21.7%)
12 <sup>th</sup>	<b>24.5%</b> (20.4%-28.6%)	<b>18.2%</b> (16.4%-20.0%)

\*p=.02

*Homeless “experience.”* For the purposes of this study, a homeless experience was defined as a young person who reported being a runaway or a throwaway, either in the past 12 months or in their lifetime, or who indicated that their current primary nighttime residence was in a literally homeless setting, such as in a shelter or a public place without their parent or guardian. Slightly more than 1 in 5 youth surveyed (20.5%) indicated that they had a homeless experience meeting these criteria of being “on their own.”

Several youth indicated that they lived in situations that may or may not qualify them as homeless, such as with a friend or relative either with or without their parents, depending upon the reasons for being “doubled up.” Youth who said they primarily stayed with a friend or relative without their parents but who had not indicated a runaway or throwaway experience were not counted as homeless because we could not determine whether this was due to a runaway/throwaway episode or for other reasons. Youth who indicated that they lived with a friend or relative with their parents were not counted as homeless because they remained under the supervision of their parents/guardians. The same applies to those youth who responded that they lived in a shelter with their parents or in a hotel/motel, car, park, campground, or other

public place with their parents/guardians, which totaled 3% of the youth completing the survey. While those young people would likely be considered part of a homeless family and would be, for example, eligible to receive services from the MNPS Homeless Education Program, they were not considered a homeless youth in this study because they were not “on their own.” Only those youth who responded that they were currently living in a shelter without their parents (0.2%), or staying in a hotel/motel or other public place without their parents (0.3%) were considered literally homeless youth in this study, for a total of 11 youth, or 0.5% of the sample.

Table 8 compares all youth with any reported experience of being homeless on their own with those who had no such experience on all demographic variables, including primary nighttime residence. Similar to previous findings in this study, there are differences by grade level, with fewer ninth graders and more twelfth graders (relative to their class size in the sample) having homeless experience. As expected, and similar to youth with a 12-month runaway/throwaway episode, significantly fewer youth with homeless experience reported living at home with their parents at the time of the survey (80% vs. 94.7%), and significantly more were living in each of the remaining situations.

**Table 8. Demographic differences between youth with homeless experience and those without.**

	<b>Youth with Homeless Experience (n = 442)</b>	<b>Youth without Homeless Experience (n = 1731)</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	47.9% (43.2%-52.6%)	51.1% (48.7%-53.5%)
Female	52.1% (47.4%-56.8%)	48.9% (46.5%-51.3%)
<b>Race</b>		
White	32.4% (27.9%-36.9%)	31.3% (29.0%-33.6%)
Black	44.1% (39.3%-48.9%)	48.0% (45.5%-50.5%)
Other	23.5% (19.4%-27.6%)	20.7% (18.7%-22.7%)
<b>Hispanic</b>	13.1% (9.9%-16.3%)	13.5% (11.8%-15.2%)
<b>*Grade</b>		
9 <sup>th</sup>	<b>25.4%</b> <b>(21.3%-29.5%)</b>	<b>30.4%</b> <b>(28.2%-32.6%)</b>
10 <sup>th</sup>	29.8% (25.5%-34.1%)	31.5% (27.5%-35.5%)
11 <sup>th</sup>	20.3% (16.5%-24.1%)	19.9% (18.0%-21.8%)
12 <sup>th</sup>	<b>24.5%</b> <b>(20.4%-28.6%)</b>	<b>18.2%</b> <b>(16.4%-20.0%)</b>
<b>**Primary Nighttime Residence</b>		
Home w/parents	<b>80.0%</b> <b>(76.2%-83.8%)</b>	<b>94.7%</b> <b>(93.6%-95.8%)</b>
Friend/Relative w/parents	<b>3.4%</b> <b>(1.7%-5.1%)</b>	<b>1.4%</b> <b>(0.8%-2.0%)</b>
Friend/Relative w/o parents	<b>5.7%</b> <b>(3.5%-7.9%)</b>	<b>0.7%</b> <b>(0.3%-1.1%)</b>
Shelter w/parents	<b>3.7%</b> <b>(1.9%-5.5%)</b>	<b>2.2%</b> <b>(1.5%-2.9%)</b>
Shelter w/o parents	0.9% (0%-1.8%)	0%
Hotel/Public place w/parents	<b>1.6%</b> <b>(0.4%-2.8%)</b>	<b>0.2%</b> <b>(0%-0.4%)</b>
Hotel/Public place w/o parents	<b>1.6%</b> <b>(0.4%-2.8%)</b>	<b>0%</b>
Other	<b>3.0%</b> <b>(1.4%-4.6%)</b>	<b>0.9%</b> <b>(0.4%-1.4%)</b>

\*p =.017

\*\*p<.001



*Places stayed.* Youth indicated staying in a variety of locations while experiencing a homeless episode. Table 9 shows the percentages of youth who stayed in the various locations provided as survey choices, based on the type of experience they indicated. Youth could check more than one option, so the percentages may add up to more than 100% in each column.

**Table 9. All places stayed by category of homeless experience.**

	<b>Experience (n = 442)</b>	<b>12-mo Episode (n = 291)</b>	<b>Runaway (n = 135)</b>	<b>Throwaway (n = 156)</b>
<b>*Relative</b>	30.5%	30.6%	<b>23.7%</b>	<b>36.5%</b>
<b>Friend</b>	51.8%	55.7%	58.5%	53.2%
<b>Family Friend</b>	8.1%	8.9%	9.6%	8.3%
<b>Stranger</b>	3.2%	3.8%	3.7%	3.8%
<b>Shelter</b>	2.3%	2.7%	2.2%	3.2%
<b>Public Place</b>	4.1%	4.5%	5.2%	3.8%
<b>Abandoned Building</b>	4.1%	5.2%	7.4%	3.2%
<b>Outside</b>	11.5%	12.4%	13.3%	11.5%
<b>Car</b>	4.5%	5.9%	5.9%	5.8%
<b>Other</b>	9.3%	10.3%	11.9%	9%

\*p=.018

Note: Percentages will add up to more than 100% because youth could indicate staying in multiple locations.

Across all categories of homeless experience, youth were most likely to report staying with a friend (51.8% for youth with any homeless experience) when they were out of their parent or guardians home, with more than half of each category reporting this. The second most likely option for youth in all categories was to stay with a relative (30.5% of youth with any homeless experience). Youth who were kicked out were significantly more likely to stay with a relative (36.5%) than those who ran away (23.7%).

The next highest percentage for youth with any homeless experience was outside (11.5%), such as in a public park, on the street, under a bridge or on a rooftop, with a family

friend (8.1%), in a car (4.5%), an abandoned building (4.1%), a public place (4.1%), such as a train or a bus station, restaurant or office building, with a stranger (3.2%), or in a shelter (2.3%), either youth or adult. About 10% of youth across the categories reported staying in a location “other” than those listed, but few filled in answers to explain. One young person who had checked nearly all of the available options wrote poignantly “There are others...” in reference to additional locations where she stayed.

Table 10 shows the differences in places stayed for all youth with any homeless experience, based on gender, race, and grade level. Comparisons were made within each of these groups between those with homeless experience who stayed in each of the various locations and those who did not stay in those locations. Youth with homeless experience who stayed with relatives were significantly more likely to be black (40.5%) and significantly less likely to be white (22.2%). Those youth who stayed with friends were significantly more likely to be females (57.3%) and significantly less likely to be males (45.9%), as well as significantly more likely to be white (67.4%) than black (37.8%). Youth who stayed in an abandoned building were significantly more likely to be male (6.7%) and to be white (8.9%), and significantly less likely to be youth of “other” race (1.0%). Those who stayed with a family friend were significantly more likely to be ninth graders (14.4%), and those who stayed in a public place were significantly more likely to be in eleventh grade (11.1%), whereas no seniors had done so.

*Table 10. Differences in places stayed by gender, race and grade level.*

	<b>Relative (n=135)</b>	<b>*Friend (n=226)</b>	<b>Family Friend (n=36)</b>	<b>Stranger (n=14)</b>	<b>Shelter (n=10)</b>	<b>Public Place (n=18)</b>	<b>**Building (n=18)</b>	<b>Outside (n=50)</b>	<b>Car (n=20)</b>
<b>Gender</b>									
Male (n=209)	28.2% (22.1%- 34.3%)	<b>45.9%</b> <b>(39.1%- 52.7%)</b>	9.6% (5.6%- 13.6%)	4.3% (1.5%- 7.1%)	2.4% (0.3%- 4.5%)	5.3% (2.3%- 8.3%)	<b>6.7%</b> <b>(3.3%- 10.1%)</b>	13.9% (9.2%- 18.6%)	6.7% (3.3%- 10.1%)
Female (n=227)	33.5% (27.4%- 39.6%)	<b>57.3%</b> <b>(50.9%- 63.7%)</b>	7.0% (3.7%- 10.3%)	2.2% (0.3%- 4.1%)	2.2% (0%- 4.1%)	3.1% (0.8%- 5.4%)	<b>1.8%</b> <b>(0.1%- 3.5%)</b>	9.3% (5.5%- 13.1%)	2.7% (0.6%- 4.8%)
<b>Race</b>									
White (n=135)	<b>22.2%</b> <b>(15.2%- 29.2%)</b>	<b>67.4%</b> <b>(59.5%- 75.3%)</b>	5.2% (1.5%- 8.9%)	3.7% (0.5%- 6.9%)	3.0% (0.1%- 5.9%)	5.9% (1.9%- 9.9%)	<b>8.9%</b> <b>(4.1%- 13.7%)</b>	17.0% (10.7%- 23.3%)	8.2% (3.6%- 12.8%)
Black (n=185)	<b>40.5%</b> <b>(33.4%- 47.6%)</b>	<b>37.8%</b> <b>(30.8%- 44.8%)</b>	11.4% (6.8%- 16.0%)	2.7% (0.4%- 5.0%)	1.6% (0%- 3.4%)	1.6% (0%- 3.4%)	2.2% (0.1%- 4.3%)	8.1% (4.2%- 12.0%)	2.7% (0.6%- 4.8%)
Other (n=97)	26.8% (18.0%- 35.6%)	55.7% (45.8%- 65.6%)	7.2% (2.1%- 12.3%)	4.1% (0.2%- 8.0%)	3.1% (0%- 6.5%)	6.2% (1.4%- 11.0%)	<b>1.0%</b> <b>(0%- 3.0%)</b>	12.4% (5.8%- 19%)	3.1% (0.4%- 5.0%)
<b>Grade</b>									
9 <sup>th</sup> (n=111)	30.6% (22.0%- 39.2%)	51.4% (42.1%- 60.7%)	<b>14.4%</b> <b>(7.9%- 20.9%)</b>	2.7% (0%- 5.7%)	2.7% (0%- 5.7%)	5.4% (1.2%- 9.6%)	6.3% (1.8%- 10.8%)	14.4% (7.9%- 20.9%)	3.6% (0.1%- 7.1%)
10 <sup>th</sup> (n=129)	29.5% (21.6%- 37.4%)	57.4% (48.9%- 65.9%)	6.2% (2.0%- 10.4%)	3.9% (0.6%- 7.2%)	1.6% (0%- 3.8%)	3.1% (0.1%- 6.1%)	1.6% (0%- 3.8%)	11.6% (6.1%- 17.1%)	3.9% (0.6%- 7.2%)
11 <sup>th</sup> (n=88)	30.7% (21.1%- 40.3%)	51.1% (40.7%- 61.5%)	4.5% (0.2%- 8.8%)	3.4% (0%- 7.2%)	1.1% (0%- 3.3%)	<b>9.1%</b> <b>(3.1%- 15.1%)</b>	4.5% (0.2%- 8.8%)	12.5% (5.6%- 19.4%)	4.6% (0.2%- 9.0%)
12 <sup>th</sup> (n=105)	32.4% (9%- 23.4%)	46.7% (37.2%- 56.2%)	6.7% (1.9%- 11.5%)	2.9% (0%- 6.1%)	2.9% (0%- 6.1%)	<b>0%</b>	3.8% (0.1%- 7.5%)	7.6% (2.5%- 12.7%)	6.7% (1.9%- 11.5%)

\*p<.05, \*\*p<=.01

## *Discussion*

High school youth in Davidson County appear to be experiencing homelessness at an alarming rate. Within the past year alone, 13.6% of young people were on their own for at least one night due to a runaway or throwaway episode. Translated to the population of the MNPS high schools surveyed (n=19,622), that means that approximately 1,236 MNPS high school students ran away and 1,432 were thrown away for at least one night in the last year.

Limiting the analyses in this study to youth who reported staying in the same locations (shelter, public place, abandoned building, outside, underground, or a stranger's home) as the 1992 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (Greene, et al., 1998) resulted in about 3% of youth who would have met this definition for homelessness – or less than half of the 7.6% national rate reported by that study. It is possible that the YRBS study could have included youth who stayed in one of these locations with their families, although the survey asked about runaway behavior. If those youth who indicated that their primary nighttime residence was in a shelter or a public place with their parents (3% of youth in this study) were included, then the overall homeless rate would equal 6% or nearly equivalent to the national study.

While a 3% rate of literal homelessness in the past year for Nashville youth is well below the national statistic, it is still concerning, considering that it represents nearly 600 Metro Nashville high school youth who experienced at least one night literally homeless. We know from this study that 1 in 8 youth with a homeless experience (12.5%) stayed outside (in a public park, on the street, under a bridge, on a rooftop, etc.), 7% stayed in a car, about 4% each stayed in an abandoned building or a public place (train/bus station, restaurant, office building, etc.), and just over 3% stayed with someone they did not know. Each time a student stayed in one of

these locations, they placed themselves at significant risk. (The same youth could be represented in multiple categories, as many youth indicated staying in more than one of these locations.)

The last 12-month runaway/throwaway result of this study (13.6%) is concerning, as is the overall homeless experience rate of 20.5%, which represents over 4,000 MNPS high school youth who have been “on their own” at some point. The youth who served on the Advisory Panel for the study and the local homeless youth service providers felt strongly that staying in locations such as with a relative, a friend, or a friend of the family still qualified a young person as a runaway or throwaway youth, particularly given the young age of these respondents (18 and under), and that excluding them would severely under-report the incidence of young people who face additional risk. Furthermore, numerous studies of homeless youth define homelessness not by where the youth stayed while they were gone from home, but by the fact that they ran away from or were kicked out of or asked to leave the home of their parents/guardians and were then on their own for a period of time (Carlson, Sugano, Millstein, & Auerswald, 2006; Cauce et al., 2000; Gaetz, 2004; Gwadz, Nish, Leonard, & Strauss, 2006; Mallett, Rosenthal, Myers, Milburn, & Rotheram-Borus, 2004; Solorio, Milburn, Andersen, Trifskin, & Gelberg, 2006; Taylor-Seehafer et al., 2007; Votta & Manion, 2004).

The fact that there were significant differences in homeless experience reported by age but not by racial and ethnic categories is supported by previous research. Sanchez, Waller and Greene (2006) also found that older students were more likely to run away than younger students. Because high school seniors appear to be the most likely age group to get kicked out of or asked to leave their homes, there should be special attention paid to this group in terms of designing programs or increasing supportive services at this developmental stage. It is possible that more seniors experience being thrown away because they turn 18 years old during this year,

and their families may expect them to be independent at that time. Research has consistently shown that adolescence has extended in recent generations, meaning that today's youth are not as socially, emotionally, mentally or psychologically prepared to handle life on their own at the age of eighteen as they may have been in the past (Arnett, 2000). This time just prior to high school graduation and the accomplishment of that milestone, crucial to successful outcomes in post-secondary education and employment, should be carefully guarded so as to provide youth with as many opportunities for future success as possible.

Published research on homeless youth indicates that youth who are in street locations are more likely to be male, and those in shelter locations more likely to be female (K. D. Johnson, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2005; Klein et al., 2000; O'Grady & Gaetz, 2004; Witkin et al., 2005). This study had similar results, indicating that youth with homeless experience who stayed in abandoned buildings were more likely to be males, and those who stayed with friends were more likely to be females. Differences in places stayed were also indicated along racial lines, which to the author's knowledge has not been found in previous research. Youth with homeless experience who stayed with relatives tended to be black and those who stayed with friends tended to be white, perhaps speaking to the stronger family ties that have been reported among African-American families. White youth also tended towards more outdoor locations, such as an abandoned building, although the differences between white and black youth who stayed in outdoor locations and cars were not quite statistically significant ( $p=.057$ ).

### *Limitations*

All data in this study is self-reported, leaving it open to recall error or false reporting. However, the effects of the few individuals who might be expected to answer incorrectly or dishonestly should be negated by the large sample size. Although the sample size for this study is

large enough to be representative of youth in Metro Nashville Public High Schools and provide confidence in the generalizability of the results to the population surveyed, some of the analyses performed were on subsets of the data with small sample sizes. These small sample sizes can make it difficult to detect true differences between groups. Because the sample is specific to one school district in one county, the results cannot be generalized beyond that population of public high school youth. This data is primarily descriptive and does not speak to causality of homeless experience among youth. For example, although research tells us that family conflict is a primary reason why youth experience homelessness, these data do not speak to any reasons why the youth surveyed reported a homeless experience.

### Implications

This report provides new and important information about the scope of the runaway, throwaway and homeless youth issue in Nashville, Tennessee. With this understanding that more than 1 in 5 public high school youth have experienced homelessness for at least one night, much work remains to be done.

### *Practice*

Intervening now with youth who have or who are likely to experience a homeless episode is a wise step toward reducing problems in the future. Research shows that being homeless as a youth is a strong predictor of being homeless as an adult, which leads to added burden on city, state and federal funding sources that serve the homeless population (Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999).

Because of the evidence that high school seniors are more at risk of a throwaway episode, programs should be considered that could educate families on the continuing developmental needs of young people as they approach the age of eighteen, and that offer resources to aid in the

resolution of family conflicts that may arise at this stage. Targeting the youth alone is not enough – families and communities must also understand the needs of a young person and this time and be prepared to offer the support necessary to keep that young person in a safe, supportive environment until he or she is prepared to be successful on his or her own.

### *Policy*

Realizing that more than 20% of our public high school youth have experienced at least one night in a homeless situation should move policymakers toward funding successful prevention and intervention programming. Considering ways to keep young people off the streets in the first place should be the primary concern of policymakers. Agencies, both public and private, that serve these young people should coordinate their efforts to identify young people who are at risk of experiencing a homeless episode and target appealing services to those individuals to prevent it. For those young people currently experiencing such an episode, services must be accessible, appealing and non-threatening to the independence that is the young person's developmental task.

### *Research*

Further research is needed to understand the factors that contribute to the likelihood that a youth will have a homeless experience in Nashville. We need to understand what puts a young person at risk for running away or being kicked out of their home. Not only do the factors leading to homelessness and the experiences themselves need further examination in terms of what contributes to differing outcomes, but the individual, family, and community characteristics that lead to positive outcomes also need further study so that these strengths might be built upon to improve the outcomes of more youth in broader contexts.



Research is also needed to determine the best programs for preventing episodes of youth homelessness, as well as the specific factors that make interventions successful for these young people. The research needs to move beyond understanding what leads young people to homelessness to what it will take to lead them out of it, never to return again.

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## CHAPTER II

### SERVICE USE AND SERVICE AVOIDANCE AMONG HOMELESS YOUTH

Much of the existing research on homelessness, including the issues specific to homeless youth, focuses on aspects about the individual that lead to a homeless experience. In recent years, however, there has been a push to consider the problem of homelessness in a more systemic fashion, seeking to understand the myriad forces that can shape the experience of a homeless young person.

#### Theoretical Background

Haber and Toro (2004) proposed an ecological-development perspective that built on the early work of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1977) by setting the issue of adolescent homelessness into a broader social context. Rather than looking at homelessness as a maladaptive behavior solely on the part of a youth who has run away, or a maladaptive behavior solely on the part of a parent who has kicked their teenager out of the house, homelessness is seen as a failure on a broader level. This may include problems in the parent-adolescent relationship, an economic disruption such as the loss of a job, a history of residential instability, the loss of social networks in the community, or the failure of the service system to meet the particular needs of the individuals and families who sought help for the challenges they faced.

The various levels of the social context as defined by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and the impact they have on the individual are considered within this theory. There is first the microsystem, which encompasses the individual and the immediate setting containing that person



(e.g., the family). Then there is the mesosystem, which consists of the interactions between the various settings of the individual (e.g., relationship between family and school, church and the neighborhood). Next, the exosystem extends the mesosystem and embraces specific formal and informal social structures that influence the settings in which the individual exists but does not necessarily specifically interact (e.g., government, mass media, social networks). Finally, the macrosystem is the overarching institutional pattern of the culture that provides meaning and motivation to the systems it encompasses (e.g., the economic, social, legal, educational and political systems). This layer is comprised of cultural customs, values and laws which define the principles of the system and has a “cascading” influence throughout the system.

Higgit et al. (2003) assert that youth experience homelessness because multiple systems have failed them – family, school, community, child protection agencies, youth corrections systems, the service system and others, reflecting many of the Bronfenbrenner systemic levels. Youth become alienated from these systems that typically function to keep them anchored in mainstream society, and eventually fall through the cracks of the social safety net. The service system has the potential/opportunity to play an important role in addressing the results of this unfortunate fall through the safety net, and could perhaps prevent the fall in the first place if the gaps could be identified and addressed. This paper is aimed at this mesosystemic level of the service system, intending to describe the use and avoidance of services among homeless youth in one location.

## Previous Research

### *Service Use*

A great deal of the existing literature about homeless youth speaks to the fact that this population tends not to use services that are meant for them. Studies show a wide range of service utilization rates, from the lowest of 2% of homeless youth reporting using soup kitchen or outreach services (Toro et al., 2007) to up to 99% of homeless youth reporting that they have used some type of service since becoming homeless (Carlson et al., 2006). DeRosa, et al (1999) undertook a comprehensive study that sought to quantitatively enumerate service utilization in Los Angeles, arguably the most service-rich area for homeless youth, and qualitatively follow up with questions about barriers to service use. Among a sample of 298 youth, ages 13 to 23 years old, they found that 78% of youth used drop-in centers, followed by youth shelters (40%), medical care (28%), adult shelters (25%), crisis hotline (17%), church services (16%), employment service (14%), substance abuse treatment (10%), 12-step programs (10%), psychological services (9%), and dental care (9%). From these studies and numerous others reporting varying ranges of service utilization, one can conclude that homeless youth use services less than they could or possibly less than they need to use them. Because of this, researchers have begun to look into the reasons why services are and are not used.

### *Barriers to Service Use*

A long list of barriers to services has been developed in previous research with homeless youth. Many times, youth simply did not know of services that were available to them. Perceived lack of services negatively impacted their use (Higgit, Wingert, & Ristock, 2003; Slesnick, Bartle-Haring, Glebova, & Glade, 2006; Solorio et al., 2006). Some youth did not believe that they needed the services that were offered (Bernstein & Foster, 2008; DeRosa et

al., 1999). Sometimes youth considered the available services to be of poor quality, such as feeding programs that were believed to cause sickness (Bernstein & Foster, 2008; Thompson, McManus, Lantry, Windsor, & Flynn, 2006). Other youth felt that the services they desired were not offered, so they chose not to use anything (Auerswald & Eyre, 2002).

Often the physical location of a service and the lack of transportation played a role in youth not using services. If the particular service a youth needed was all the way across town, it might take a half or full day to get the bus fare or a token from a public agency or shelter staff person, take the public transportation, wait for the service, and get back again (Dachner & Tarasuk, 2002). Youth had too many other needs to attend to during a day to spend that kind of time getting one need met (DeRosa et al., 1999). When youth were engaged in a day-to-day struggle to survive that meant finding shelter, food, money, and protecting themselves, accessing other services tended to fall to the bottom of the priority list (Brooks, Milburn, Rotheram-Borus, & Witkin, 2004; Dachner & Tarasuk, 2002).

Youth also reported having a previous negative experience with particular service providers that made them not want to return, such as feeling unwelcome, being treated badly or rudely, or having conflicts with other clients (Bernstein & Foster, 2008; Ensign & Bell, 2004; Kurtz, Lindsey, Jarvis, & Nackerud, 2000; Thompson et al., 2006). Services were often denied to youth, either because they did not meet age criteria for that particular service (DeRosa et al., 1999; Kelly & Caputo, 2007); because youth did not have the proper identification, such as a driver's license or birth certificate, necessary to receive services (Barkin, Balkrishnan, Manuel, Andersen, & Gelberg, 2003; Dachner & Tarasuk, 2002; DeRosa et al., 1999; Kushel, Yen, Gee, & Courtney, 2007); and/or because youth lacked insurance or other means of paying for needed services (Aviles & Helfrich, 2004; Higgit et al., 2003). Sometimes youth were too embarrassed

to ask for the help they needed (Aviles & Helfrich, 2004; Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004), or too depressed or thought too little of themselves to seek help (Aviles & Helfrich, 2004; Haldenby, Berman, & Forchuk, 2007). For some youth, the required paperwork, long wait times, difficult hours of operation, and low capacity on the part of the agencies to serve them were simply too inconvenient for them to waste their time seeking services (Dachner & Tarasuk, 2002; DeRosa et al., 1999; Thompson et al., 2006).

### *Facilitators of Service Use*

Research has also provided insight into factors that can influence homeless youth towards using available services. Meeting basic needs was key to engaging youth in services (Higgit, et al., 2003; Thompson, et al., 2006). The daily challenges of finding food, shelter, income, etc. have to be met before additional higher-level services will be of interest to youth. When youth could contact an agency for one of these things, that often provided the opportunity to connect with an outreach worker or a counselor who then had an opportunity to guide them to supports and services for getting off the street (Higgit, et al., 2003).

Thompson, et al. (2006) conducted focus groups with 60 youth regarding access to and utilization of services for homeless youth, and discovered a list of qualities that made youth more likely to engage in services. Youth were more likely to frequent services that they perceived treated them as individuals with unique needs, were flexible, and had fewer strict requirements, particularly around mandated reporting. The implications of the study were that it is necessary for the staff within these settings to be able to engage youth. This begins with recognizing the choices that youth have, starting with their choice of how involved to be with the street culture and with the service being provided. Youth desire service providers who listen to them and work with them from where they are. When youth are able to help determine the course of action and

set the goals for treatment in consultation with youth workers, they are far more likely to engage in services long term.

Youth identified a number of specific characteristics that made it easier to accept help or achieve the goals they set for themselves as part of receiving services. For example, Aviles and Helfrich (2004) found that the availability of staff, the perceived level of support offered, and the respect with which the staff treated the youth directly impacted the youth served. Kurtz, et al. (2000) reported that the trustworthiness of the helper was a key factor in youth being able to receive from staff, particularly when youth had numerous interactions in the past that resulted in abandonment and negative experiences. Kidd, et al. (2006) found that staff who valued, respected, and genuinely liked a youth were the ones who were able to develop this kind of trusting relationship that is essential for effective interventions. Youth wanted to interact with staff who could relate to them and to their experiences (Higgit, et al., 2003). Dostaler and Nelson (2003) found that the young women in a shelter wanted staff to hold them accountable for achieving their goals while at the same time respecting their individuality, or in other words, staff who could be flexible.

Numerous studies mention the positive impact that a caring adult could have on the journey of a young person through homelessness (Aviles & Helfrich, 2004; Cauce et al., 2000; Cauce, Stewart, Whitbeck, Paradise, & Hoyt, 2005; Joniak, 2005; Kidd, 2007; Kidd et al., 2006; Laursen & Birmingham, 2003; Lindsey, Kurtz, Jarvis, Williams, & Nackerud, 2000; McGrath & Pistrang, 2007; Paradise et al., 2001; Rew, 2008; de Winter & Noom, 2003) Kurtz, et al. (2000) stated that in almost every case they examined, youth mentioned at least one positive adult who helped them navigate the “troubled waters” they had experienced. These caring adults, when

they were found, were often found within service organizations that were meeting the basic needs of the homeless youth.

This study is intended to describe a population of homeless youth in a particular mid-sized city in the southeast region of the United States, their use of available services in that city, and their reasons for use and avoidance of particular services. To date, no published homeless youth studies have been undertaken in this geographic area. This study includes a subpopulation of homeless youth that has rarely been addressed in the literature – “couchsurfers.” The purpose of this study was to discover if youth in this geographic location reported similarly to those from other studies, usually in large metropolitan areas, in terms of their use or avoidance of services, and to make that information available to the service providers of this city in order that they may better understand the homeless youth among their clientele and perhaps adapt their services to better reach this segment of the homeless population.

### Study Design

In-depth interviews were conducted with forty-two homeless youth. Using purposeful sampling, youth were recruited by advertising the opportunity to participate in the study through various service agencies working with homeless youth, and then “snowballing” from there as other youth heard about the opportunity to participate, particularly as a result of doing interviews in a street location. To participate in the study, youth had to be 25 years of age or younger and living on his or her own without parental supervision. The age criteria reflects the upper age of the street youth who served as the advisory panel for the study, and was the age they indicated after which one was no longer considered to be a “youth” on the streets.

The youth either identified as a “street youth” (their experience on their own primarily consisted of staying in street locations, such as a tent, in a car, or otherwise outdoors) or a “couchsurfer” (having no stable place of residence, but typically sleeping on the couches of friends and/or family members rather than living on the streets). Youth often crossed over between these categories, i.e., sometimes couchsurfers spent a night on the streets, sometimes street youth slept on a friend’s couch for a week or so, or in many cases, youth started out couchsurfing but eventually ran out of options of places to stay and ended up on the streets. However, these youth were categorized for this study by the way in which they described their experience with homelessness. Most often, they identified themselves as a couchsurfer or a street youth by describing one of those two settings when initially asked to talk about their situation.

#### Interview Instrument

All study respondents participated in a semi-structured interview with the same researcher, guided by a discussion outline that was developed in accordance with the developmental-ecological theory upon which this study is based and with the assistance of the youth advisory panel. Questions relating to each level of the social context were asked, i.e., questions about the individual, the family, the community, schools, the service system, and the broader society in which homeless youth existed. The data presented here focus on responses to questions about service use in the city where the interviews took place. Respondents were asked where they had gone for help since being on their own, what was helpful, why certain services were more popular than others, and whether or not there were services that the youth refused to use.

## Data Analysis

Once transcribed, the qualitative interview data were analyzed line by line, identifying and naming all the phenomena or general categories that are revealed through this process. The themes that developed were further explored with subsequent readings of the transcripts to look for inter-relationships among the coded ideas. For example, all data that were originally coded as “service use” was then re-examined to look for examples of positive and negative experiences, and inter-relationships with other data coded as “service avoidance.”

## Interview Sample

A total of 42 youth were interviewed. Two youth were considered not to meet the criteria for the study following the interview; one was living on the streets with his mother, and the other admitted to lying about his age to receive the study incentive payment. Of the 40 qualifying youth, twenty-eight (70%) identified as street youth and twelve (30%) identified as couchsurfers. Twenty-six of the interviews took place at the downtown branch of the public library, a popular daytime gathering place for the homeless community in general, particularly during the winter months. Five interviews took place at a popular youth entertainment/recreation center, five were completed at a local coffeeshop or restaurant, and the remaining four were done at a transitional living program for homeless youth where those youth were currently housed. Youth were compensated for the interview with a \$25 American Express gift card.

Table 11 describes the demographic and background characteristics of the sample. Of the forty participants, 28 (70%) were male and 12 (30%) were female. The majority (65%) identified as Caucasian, 10 (25%) as African-American, three (7.5%) as bi-racial, and one (2.5%) as Hispanic. The ages of participants ranged from 17 to 25, with a median age of 20. The average



age at which youth reported being “on their own” for the first time was 17.3 years old. Twelve youth (31%) reported graduating from high school, one of those with a special education diploma, seven youth (18%) received their Graduation Equivalency Diploma (GED), seventeen youth (44%) had dropped out of high school, and three (8%) were currently in twelfth grade. Of those who graduated or completed a GED (49%), five (28%) reported having some type of continuing education – two had enrolled in college but had to drop out, two had completed technical certificates of some kind, and one was currently a college freshman.

*Table 11. Demographic information for homeless youth interview sample, by category*

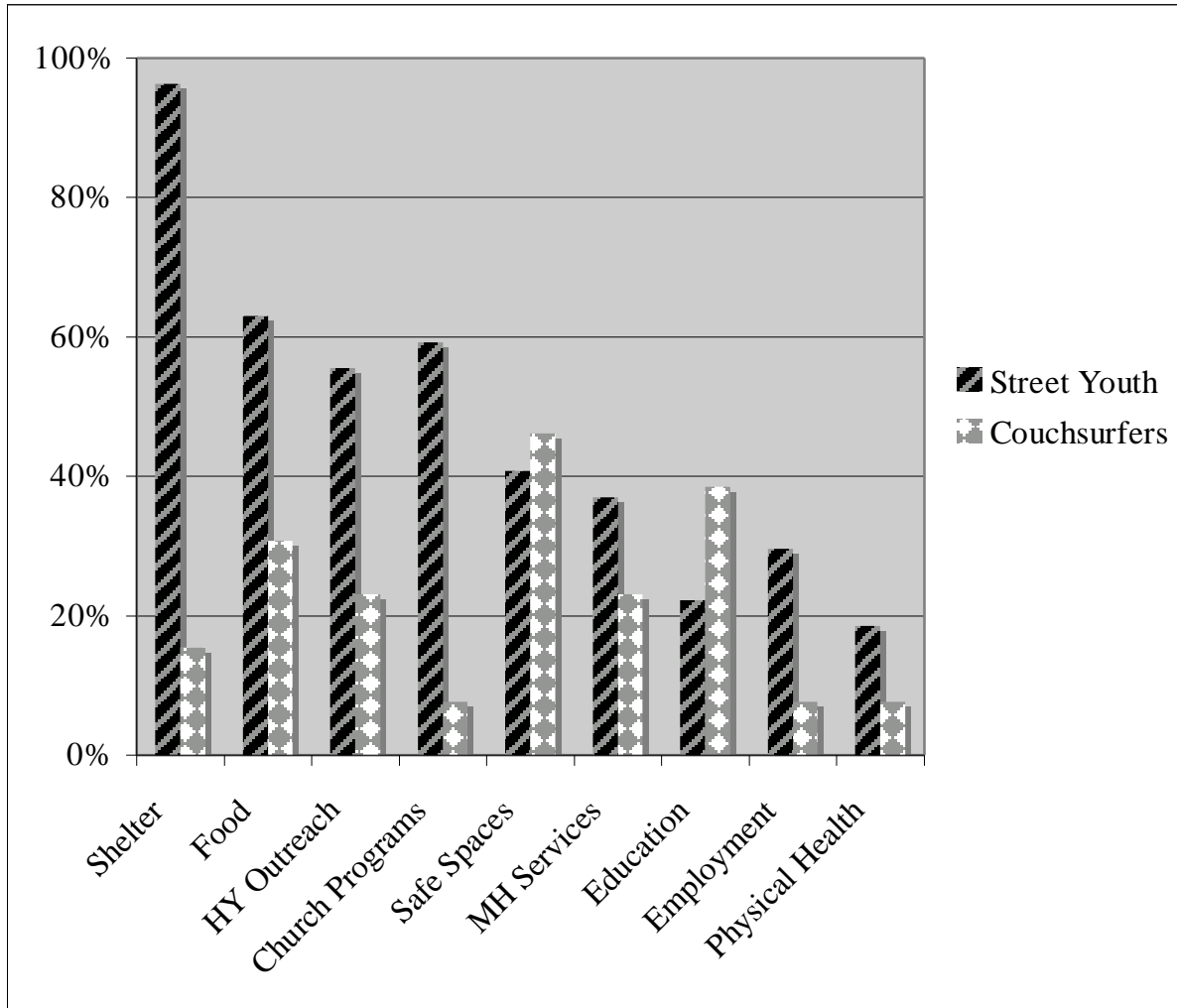
	<b>Street Youth (n = 28)</b>	<b>Couchsurfers (n = 12)</b>	<b>All Homeless Youth (n = 40)</b>
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	68%	75%	70%
Female	32%	25%	30%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>			
Caucasian	64%	67%	65%
African-American	25%	25%	25%
Bi-Racial	7%	8%	7.5%
Hispanic	4%	0%	2.5%
<b>Educational Attainment</b>			
High School Diploma	30%	33%	31%
GED	19%	17%	18%
Dropped Out	52%	25%	44%
Currently Enrolled	0%	25%	8%
<b>Age</b>			
Median Age at Interview	21	19	20
Average Age First Homeless	17.7	16.2	17.3
<b>System Involvement</b>			
Juvenile Justice	64%	75%	68%
Mental Health	75%	42%	65%
Foster Care	54%	42%	50%
Special Education	43%	17%	35%
Any System	89%	83%	87.5%

All but five of the youth (87.5%) had been involved in at least one formal “system” – the mental health system, special education, foster care, or juvenile justice – while under the age of eighteen and usually prior to their first experience of running away from or being kicked out of

their homes. Five of the youth (13%) reported having interacted with all four systems. Two-thirds (68%) of the sample had been involved with juvenile justice at some time, 65% were in the mental health system, exactly half (50%) of the youth had been in foster care at some point, and 35% had been in special education. An additional three youth (8%) indicated that they were not in special education classes, but were placed in behavior modification programs in school.

## Results

All but one youth mentioned at least one service that they had used while being homeless. The exception was one couchsurfer who reported relying only on his friends for assistance with food, housing, and transportation. Youth discussed a variety of formal and informal services that were available and utilized at least to some extent. Seventy percent of the total sample reported use of formal shelters, 53% used food services, including food stamps, 45% received help from a local homeless youth outreach program, 43% received help through local churches, 43% identified “safe spaces” as a service they used, 33% used mental health services, 28% received educational assistance, 23% received employment assistance, and 15% used formal physical health services while they were homeless. See Figure 1 for a breakdown of service use by category of youth (i.e., street youth vs. couchsurfer).



*Figure 1. Services used by homeless youth, by category*

### *Shelter*

There were differing experiences by category of youth around the issue of finding a safe place to stay. For the most part, the couchsurfers rarely stayed in formal shelters or outdoors, relying on a network of friends, family and/or acquaintances. Street youth, on the other hand, sought shelter in a variety of locations, including tents, under bridges, behind buildings, in alleyways, and in parking garages, as well as occasionally with friends or family when the weather was particularly bad or when they were physically ill or exhausted. These youth also

rarely made use of formal shelters or sheltering programs, although almost all had used formal shelter services at least once since becoming homeless.

*Adult shelters.* The majority of the street youth interviewed had at least attempted to stay in adult shelters at some point during their homeless experience, but it was an overwhelmingly negative experience. One young man shared his opinion freely:

I tried [the mission], it sucks, it's stupid, waste of your time. They really don't do much for nobody, and yeah, so. They feed you, they give you a little gel mat to sleep on, ah, they do got beds but they stay so packed a lot of 'em gotta sleep out in the halls. So, it's all, it's like still being out in the streets. It's nothing. You gotta be patted down when you come in and out like you're in jail. You're not supposed to do all that, you're homeless.

So yeah, I just stay in the tent.

Several female street youth had tried staying at the local women's shelter and had similar negative feelings toward it. As one young woman stated, "I felt safer on the streets than I would've in there, and that's bad."

*Transitional living program.* Four youth were interviewed while currently in a transitional living program for 18-21 year olds, and several other youth had either been in that program previously or had applied to go in and been accepted, but decided not to enter for various reasons. Those youth who had experienced the program found it to be a positive experience overall, in spite of a few struggles with living in a structured environment. For example, one female resident of the program stated:

So, and then like, we have a group meeting on Mondays and that's, I mean I understand that, but that's kind of becoming a little bit difficult because I'm trying to do things to better myself, and I get two days off a week. I need to be able to take advantage of them

both. So like last week I wasn't here and this week I won't be, so that's frustrating to me and to them, because I want to be able to do what I need to do and they want me to be able to be here. So, I don't know, it's just now that I'm, I guess I'm getting a little bit better and further ahead and wanting to get things done, it's becoming a conflict, which hopefully somehow can be worked out. Because, I mean, it's not a bad place, it's good, and they are trying to help.

### *Food Services*

There were a variety of experiences around meeting the basic need of food for these homeless youth, and often these experiences also differed between street youth and couchsurfers.

*Feeding programs.* Youth with street experience tended to make use of feeding services. Street youth described food in Nashville as readily available. According to one young man, "You can never go hungry in Nashville, especially when you're homeless. You can never go hungry. There's always somebody to feed you." Often these young people knew where to get at least two meals daily, having a complete schedule in their minds of where they could and would eat from day to day.

...on Mondays I go to, um, Loaves and Fishes for lunch, then Steve under the bridge at 6:00 for dinner. Then Tuesdays...Belmont is where we go on Tuesdays. Then Tuesday night we go to Candy Christmas under the bridge, then Wednesday in the afternoon, we either go to the Presbyterian or Loaves and Fishes, and then that night, we pretty much go to all of them, but we would go to Greene Street Church, and then Thursday we would eat...how do we eat on Thursday afternoon? Isaiah 58, that's over on Dickerson Road. And then Thursday afternoon, later on Thursday afternoon, we'd go the...church for Chinese, or Mongolian. And then, Fridays were kind of tough, because um, we'd eat,

well no, we'd eat Belmont and then we'd go down the bridge, but a lot of times Friday nights were easier to get to-go boxes, so we'd go down by Broadway, whatever, and try to get some real food. Cause some of the food, I mean it was good, but a lot of times it was pasta, because they think that pasta's gonna keep you full all the time, and it gets old.

I: Sure. What about on the weekends, do people feed on the weekends?

R: Yes, actually we found about Layman's Lessons on Saturday mornings, and then we found out about 61<sup>st</sup>, the church on 61<sup>st</sup>... Sunday is Belmont, or the Food not Bombs...

I: So every day, you can eat twice a day, it seems like.

R: Pretty much. It's just, you know, getting there.

Some youth found food services to be the only helpful thing offered in the city. When asked where he found help, one young man responded:

Pretty much nowhere, other than the feedings. We get a lot of feedings, but you know, they feed our bellies, but you know a lot of 'em don't feed us spiritually. They don't help us out. Here, have some food, get out of our hair. You know, that's pretty much what it is around here, all of it.

Certain feeding programs, such as the one that is part of the primary adult shelter in the city (a rather unpopular place overall with the youth in this study, as discussed later) were considered dangerous:

...one out of every three meals they feed, you're gonna get sick. It's like when they cook the chicken it's still pink in the middle and bloody. They give you food that I wouldn't even feed an animal. I wouldn't give that food they feed you there to my dog.

Finding food on a consistent basis was a different story, however, for the couchsurfing segment of homeless youth. In general, these young people were far less connected to services than their counterparts who had spent significant time on the streets. Several couchsurfers mentioned going days at a time without food, and having to resort to methods they did not necessarily like in order to eat.

There's so many times that like I just went without eating because I didn't have the money to eat, you know, and I mean, go into grocery stores and steal food. Like, I had to. I mean, I hate to be like, yeah I just walked in Kroger and just stole a bunch of food all the time, but that's really how I survived. Like I would just walk into a grocery store or a gas station and I mean, I wouldn't just be like, yeah candy bars and Mountain Dew, like I would get real food so I could like nurture my body and stuff, like. But I mean that's really like how I survived and when I worked at the, I worked at a sandwich shop when I was living at that apartment, they gave me free food. They gave me free food every day. They were like, you can eat as much as you want. Because like they knew my situation, and they knew like where I'd come from. They were all really cool dudes, everybody I worked with at that job was really laid back, they were like, you can take like two or three sandwiches a day, we really don't care that much. So that was nice.

For some couchsurfers, the issue with eating was not necessarily the availability of food, but the sense of shame that they felt in taking food from their friends or their friends' families when they already felt badly for having to stay with them in the first place.

[My friend]'s family, they feed me, but most of the time I have to work, you know and so I don't really get to eat, and if I do eat, I get my employee meal here, but it's not often because sometimes we're just so busy that it's just not an option, so I end up like just



going home and going to sleep and I only got one meal. I mean, I get hungry a lot, but school...they get me like free meals and stuff. So it's like school meal and that's it some nights...I feel horrible about it. [My friend's] mom has to actually like make me some nights to eat. The fact is that my parents shoulda been, should be taking care of me, and it shouldn't be some strangers that - it's not my place. They have their own kids to provide for. And that's why they're - my friends, all my friends, their parents have been amazing. And I don't know where or what would happen. But yeah, some nights she has to fight with me to get me to eat, but I try to just take care of myself, that's why. I don't eat from their stuff as much, I try to get my own stuff.

*Food stamps.* Several youth mentioned getting food stamps as a helpful service that provided a way for them to eat. A young man who had been couchsurfing for nearly five years since getting kicked out of his father's home at the age of fifteen, had recently found out how to apply for food stamps and it had relieved some of his stress around the issue of eating.

I'm on food stamps now, so that's how I eat. And like I have a lot of friends who like cook for me and stuff like sometimes, but other than that - I don't really worry about like eating, cause I eat. Like I eat enough. Some days though I'll go without eating, but most of the time, I'm usually I'm always eating.

This seemed to be one of the services that couchsurfing youth accessed youth more than street youth did, and was at times something that they could barter in exchange for a place to stay. One young woman described how food stamps factored into the decision about whether she and her boyfriend could stay in his brother's home:

...he was talking to his brother and he was just like, well she don't have nowhere to go, and I don't want to leave her out there, so his brother talked to his wife and they was like

okay, and they was like, I get food stamps, so she was like just buy your own food and clean up and stuff, and I was like, okay.

### *Homeless Youth Outreach Program*

Many of the street youth found help through a local non-profit's homeless youth outreach program. This program provided practical items, such as blankets, clothing, and bus passes, as well as opportunities to make phone calls and arrange other necessary services.

...they help kids from like 13 to 21, and uh, they help with clothes, with sometimes they give you a backpack that's got like gift cards and stuff like that in it, they bring out socks, they bring out like granola bars and stuff like that, and they're helping me and my fiancé get married.

Youth who had experience with this program generally found it to be the most helpful service available to them, primarily as a result of the attitudes of the staff people.

They just have a kind heart. They know how to put a smile on your face when you don't have one. They give you hope where hope should be. They make you believe that there's somebody out there who can help and will help when everybody else just turns their back on you.

### *Church Programs*

The street youth interviewed in this study seemed to have a particularly positive outlook on the many churches that operated programs in the city to help with the very practical needs of homelessness. For some youth this was surprising, as one young man who came to this city from out of state explained: "...there's so many churches in [this state], and like where I'm from I'm not used to all this, like people willing to help you."

Churches often met the most basic needs of food and shelter for the street youth. One

young man explained, “Well, there’s a lot of churches that feed in [this city], so I don’t have to worry about going hungry and I always have a place to stay.” The Room at the Inn program was utilized by several of the older youth in the survey, as it provided a warm place to sleep on cold winter nights.

Another young man was able to list a series of services offered by churches of which he took advantage on a regular basis.

I’ve went to a place...it’s [at a church]. They feed you breakfast Monday through Friday...Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday they’ll feed lunch too, they’ll wash your clothes once a week. I’ve been to the [church] down here that feeds breakfast every Sunday morning. I’ve been to [the church] right over here that feeds Chinese every Thursday, and then there’s just a lot of people on the streets that just pull up in their cars, hey you need clothes, you need tobaggans, you need food, sack lunches, anything. It’s really just amazing what’s going on down here as far as I think more and more people are becoming aware of the situation and they’re putting more effort in there to help.

For some youth, this was the only help they found while on the streets, such as the respondent who stated, “I don’t really know of any places that’ll help me out, besides the churches.”

Youth mentioned specific churches that helped homeless people in general with getting ID’s, birth certificates, and Social Security cards, documents that were often lost or stolen in the process of street life. Other churches had very popular services that met several needs in a comfortable, welcoming environment that was very positively received by the youth.

It’s like a place where you can go and take showers, and they’ll do laundry, they’ll do a 10-lb bag of laundry, like once a week I think now, and then they’ll feed you like

Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, or something like that. It's just a place to kind of hang out where you can sit and talk or whatever. It's church-affiliated. I met the lady that actually runs it, she's very nice. It's just a nice place.

Certain church-affiliated organizations came out into the street environment to bring practical assistance to the homeless population in general, and the youth felt comfortable taking advantage of these services as well.

...they come out under the Jefferson Street Bridge, as a matter of fact tonight at about 5, 5:30 they come out and they give out blankets and give you a little sack full of some goodies to take back with you and yeah, they feed you warm food.

### *Safe Spaces*

Some of the services that youth identified as helpful were not technically services at all, but were still important to the young people. These seemed to fall into a category of "safe spaces" or places where the youth could go to spend time without being hassled too much and where they could find various helpful things, such as community, adult relationships, and internet access.

*The public library.* In many ways, the downtown branch of the public library is a de facto service provider for the homeless population of the city. Particularly on cold or rainy days, the majority of the library's daytime patrons are homeless individuals looking to keep warm and dry, avoiding getting hassled by the police, and utilizing the computers and internet access that is available there on an hourly basis. The majority of the street youth interviewed for this study were met and interviewed in this location, and they spoke of it as providing positive help for them.

I just, you know, there's a lot of things, I mean, especially coming to the library, you know, you're able to do things, you know. It's a good thing that they don't prevent homeless people from coming in here because ninety percent of the people that come in here and get on the computers are homeless.

*Teen entertainment/recreation center.* Several couchsurfers found community and positive adult relationships through a local "under 21" entertainment and recreation center. For at least one young man, it was the only place he sought help other than from his friends.

...this building was the only place that I really ever went for any kind of help other than you know, just asking my friends or talking to my friends. I would come here. But I haven't been here in a really long time. This is really the only other place that I went. I talk to [a staff member], like all the time. I used to. I used to talk to [another staff member] all the time, and that was three years ago. I used to come here a lot.

### *Mental Health Services*

About two-thirds of the youth in the sample (65%) indicated having received a mental health diagnosis of some kind. Bipolar disorder was the most commonly reported diagnosis, followed closely by and often in conjunction with attention deficit disorder, or attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder. "Anger issues," depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and schizophrenia were also mentioned as mental illnesses with which youth struggled while being homeless. However, only 33% had used any formal mental health services since becoming homeless.

Youth discussed their experiences with seeking and receiving help for mental health issues while homeless. Two particular agencies were the most frequently mentioned mental

health service providers and youth who received counseling, medication, or case management services through these agencies were generally positive about their experiences, although some youth mentioned having issues with particular staff members or caseworkers. A number of the youth reported deliberately not seeking help for their mental health problems in general, embodied in the statement of one participant, who said: “I generally don’t go to mental health services. I tough out my problems alone.”

Quite a few young people chose to self-medicate their mental illnesses, often with illegal substances. One young man, when asked how he dealt with the severe depression and anti-social anxiety disorder with which he was diagnosed, stated: “Smoke marijuana (laughs). I’m gonna be honest, I smoke weed. I don’t give a f\*\*\*. I mean, I don’t do it all the time, but every once in a while.” The use of marijuana as a coping mechanism for mental health problems was mentioned by several of the youth in the sample, particularly by those who struggled with anger issues and had a history of fighting, often to the point of being arrested on assault charges. They described their marijuana use as a treatment for, not cause of, their aggression. As one couchsurfing youth explained, “I smoke weed every day, but that’s just cause I have a really bad temper and like I have to, I have to be chill.”

Another young man described the relationship of his mental health problems to his substance use, and the eventual ineffectiveness of that approach, in this way:

It got to the point where my mental health problems got so bad that I would start smoking weed, then I’d smoke crack, then I’d smoke heroin – and I’d start using, experimenting with all these different drugs to cover up my emotions, to cover up the way I feel, and that’s when my life turned to hell, cause I started doing all these drugs and getting addicted. And it never really covered up. It covered up my problems for a little while in

the way I felt, but then when I started coming down off of that high, it's like it gets a thousand times worse. It's hard.

A number of youth indicated that while they at one time received services for their mental health challenges, once they became homeless, it was very difficult to access the same services. This was particularly true in the case of medications, which they could no longer afford if they did not have health insurance. Some youth were able to continue taking their medication as prescribed, usually by maintaining or re-instating their insurance coverage with the help of one of the mental health agencies. Others did not have the same success. For one young woman, her multiple mental health diagnoses and the difficulty in maintaining her medications had frustrating results.

I'm bipolar. I have post traumatic stress disorder. I have, they told me I had borderline traits, something like that, schizophrenic and um, what was that other one, it was another one...I have all that mixed in together. And then I have dealing with that, cause I haven't been on my medicine, cause I haven't been able to get it, so dealing with that it's making that even harder, my situation harder because it's like I'll be fine, and then five minutes later I'll be ready to cut somebody head off. And my boyfriend, I know it's hard on him because we'll be fine and the next minute later I'll hate the living daylight out of him and try to kill him. He's like you can't, you have to control that, and I'm like I can't control it!

### *Education Services*

The sample was fairly evenly split between youth who had completed high school or received a GED and those who had dropped out and not yet finished their high school education. Several couchsurfing youth were enrolled in high school at the time of the interview. Youth

received assistance from various sources regarding their education, whether that was pursuing a GED with help from classes offered by several different agencies, or through programs that operated through their high schools and focused on helping them stay in school and achieve a regular high school diploma.

*GED classes.* Several youth mentioned currently taking GED classes, whether they took advantage of those offered through the public library or at various agencies. For one young man, it was a part of his daily routine of living on the streets, because he had realized that he would need it to accomplish the things he hoped to in his life.

I just, I get up, I go to my GED classes, well I go find somewhere to take care of my hygiene first, find me some clean clothes and go to my GED classes, and after that I go job hunting...I shouldn't have waited this long, but it's better I get it now than waste my life, then I'll be 35 or close to 40 and be like, oh man, I gotta do something.

Others had been able to receive their GEDs with the assistance of an agency. Still others intended to complete their high school educations as soon as they addressed other issues in their lives and felt more stable.

I'm gonna get my GED, I just haven't had time, and like money. I haven't studied really, but apparently it's like all ninth grade stuff, so I mean I'm smart, like I know I'm smart, I know a lot about a lot of things. I've just been trying to like concentrate on the important thing to me. Cause like I've gotten a job before without my GED, it is harder, but that's just, I'm gonna get it though, before I do anything serious with my life.

*Career center programs.* Three of the couchsurfing youth found assistance while still enrolled in high school from a program operated by the local career center. Although this program was initially set up to provide help getting youth into postsecondary education, job



training programs, and employment experience, the staff recently realized that so many of their clients were dealing with issues of homelessness that they could not meet those needs until the young person had a stable place to live. The program adapted to include helping youth with that task. These youth were very positive about their experiences with this program, finding help with everything from getting health insurance through Medicaid, to talking to their teachers and asking for extra time on major assignments because of the stressful living situation the youth were facing, to approaching local utility agencies for assistance with utility bills after they had managed to secure their own housing.

### *Employment Services*

Nearly all of the youth, whether they had a high school education or not, struggled with finding steady work that paid enough to help them change their living situation. Many youth blamed the current economic situation for their difficulties in securing employment. Others pointed out the near impossibility of maintaining employment without a steady place to sleep at night and shower in the morning, or without transportation to get to and from a job. As one couchsurfing youth explained:

...ok, when you don't have a car, and you don't have a place to live, it's really hard to keep a job. (laughs) It's really hard. It's like one or the other, almost. It's you gotta have a steady place to live, or you've gotta have a car. I would sleep in my car, outside my work, in the parking lot, wake up the next morning and go into work. Like, I would do that. Or, I have a steady place to live so I have a home, I sleep there, wake up, walk to work, ride a bike to work, I don't care, but it's, you gotta have one or the other.

Although most youth spoke about trying to get work, and many named it as the most important factor in getting off the streets, few (23%) talked about seeking help from services to

get a job. Street youth did share several frustrating experiences working through a temporary job service or day labor agency. Even when youth found work, it often didn't provide enough income to fundamentally help the youth. One young man talked about his experience with temporary services and the choices he often had to make as a result of working this way:

I go to the temp service every now and then, you know. Sometimes they'll send me out, sometimes they don't, and when they do it's never nothing but a measly thirty, forty bucks, you know, enough where you know you can either try to get a room and starve, or get something to eat and a pack of cigarettes and go camp.

Working through a temporary service could be a hindrance for youth who were trying to make permanent changes to their situations. One respondent said that even though he and his girlfriend had been working consistently, it wasn't enough to satisfy the requirements for public housing or other assistance. "We work through a temp service, so we've not had a regular full time job for six months, so Section 8 won't help us. [The private agency] won't help us because, you know, we ain't got a regular job."

Several youth mentioned issues with criminal records and felony charges in their pasts as keeping them from being able to find employment.

I've gone to almost every employment agency I can think of and they all told me, as of January 1<sup>st</sup> of 2008 they are no longer permitted to hire anybody with a felony, which was a major blow to the throat, you know. That was a kick in the shin, hard.

### *Physical Health Services*

Very few youth (15%) discussed using services for physical health issues since becoming homeless. Most often, if the topic came up in the interview, it was because the young person was noticeably ill, either coughing and sniffing or stating that they were not feeling well, or injured,

as in one case when a respondent was on crutches. Five youth mentioned visiting the downtown free clinic for health care when they became sick, and three mentioned past visits to the Emergency Room.

However, the predominant form of health care mentioned was “toughing it out” or just taking care of it themselves, usually with over the counter medications. As one young woman, who was living in a tent near the riverfront when she was interviewed in December explained, “It’s just gonna get colder. Why get better now? Might as well stay sick until it gets warm, and worry about it then.” The conversation about health care with one couchsurfer went as follows:

I: So what do you do when you get sick?

R: I don’t do anything, I just sit sick.

I: Ride it out?

R: Yeah, just hope that one day like it just goes away, and if it doesn’t and I die then dang that sucks.

One street youth, a young man who was twenty-five years old at the time of the interview and had been living on the streets since he ran away at the age of fourteen, explained that his reasons for not seeking health care were essentially a strategy for survival. He said:

I would pretty much just keep on going on with the pain. I wouldn’t let up on nothing.

Like if I got sick, I would keep work – I’d keep hiking and everything and sweat the sickness out. If I broke an ankle, or if I broke my finger, I’d set my finger myself, you know I’d just keep on acting like nothing ever happened because I was afraid if I let my guard up and went to a hospital or something and then I go back out on the streets with a cast, someone’ll see that I’m hurt and they’ll think I’m an easy target. So, I like to act like

nothing ever happened and I'm "Billy Bad Butt." I can take on the world even if I'm hurtin'. I tried not to show it as much as possible.

A couchsurfer talked about how his physical health problems were a direct result of the stress he experienced because of his situation, and why he had not yet sought treatment.

I was just going through so much at that time, it was like the most stressful time. I actually got ulcers because of that time, and it's, it's been hard... I can't take medication for it because I don't have insurance. But now I do because [the career center program] helped me get [Medicaid] finally. But before that I didn't, before now I had no insurance on anything, which was really pretty difficult. It was so stressful.

On occasion, becoming ill could be the impetus for getting a young person off the streets, as was the case for one street youth who was enrolled in the transitional living program at the time of her interview.

It was actually, it was really bad, and then about, it was the day before Thanksgiving I called home because I was really really sick, I had a really severe case of bronchitis, and um, I was like, look uncle I can't do this anymore. I'll do whatever it takes to come home, I'll do what you say, whatever, just please come get me. I'm really sick. And he was like, okay, I'll come get you.

### Service Avoidance

Interviews with these youth provided insight into the reasons why they chose not to use certain services. Much of it related to a negative experience they personally had with a particular service provider at some time in the past, or the negative experiences of others they had heard about on the street. Many times youth did not feel that they needed help, or they simply wanted

to be independent, to make it on their own. Other reasons for avoiding services ranged from not wanting to be separated from their romantic partners to not having transportation and not being willing to walk the distance between where they were staying and where the service was located.

### *Negative Experiences*

The primary negative experience that was mentioned repeatedly in the interviews was with the largest homeless shelter in the city, known to most of the homeless population as simply “the mission.” Every male who identified as a “street youth” talked about the mission during their interview, and almost exclusively in negative terms. In most cases the overall sentiment was that they would not go back there unless they absolutely had to, and sometimes not even in that case. This young man’s quote seemed to sum up the general opinion of homeless youth about this agency:

I end up in [the mission]. Stayed there three days. I didn’t like the place, they run it too much like a jail cell, too many rules, too many weird people, you gotta sleep with one eye open. They shove their, you know, I’m religious but they shove religion down your throat and a lot of people don’t like that, you know, they like to believe their own beliefs. And me, I would rather live out here in the bush than I would stay at that mission. So I end up living out here on the street.

One major complaint about staying in the mission was how often the few possessions that youth had with them were stolen as a result of staying there.

And then when [my car] got stolen I just hitched a ride into town here and stayed at the mission for a couple days, or like three weeks, but everything that I had, I had a backpack, that’s all I could save, and it had clothes and a cell phone and stuff in it, and they stole it at the mission. So I just quit staying at the mission and just started sleeping

under a bridge or wherever.

Only one young man in the study had relatively positive things to say about the mission. Twenty-one years old, he had been living with various extended family members since he was fourteen, and on his own bouncing around from friend's house to friend's house since he was eighteen. His mother passed away of a rare brain disorder when he was twelve, and when his father remarried, he felt that the "new family" that came along with his step-mother pushed him out of his father's home. The small town about 30 miles away where he had been living did not have any homeless services available. He had come to the city because he heard about the mission, where he had been staying for about a month when he was interviewed. By forming a relationship with one of the staff members there, he was able to get a locker and protect his things from being stolen, once he started to accumulate a few items of his own. He was grateful for the place to stay while he worked and saved up enough money to get his own place, but he also recognized the negative aspects of the mission that the other respondents spoke of consistently.

...being young and in the mission, you get looked down upon, you get told every day that you shouldn't be there...I only go to the mission to sleep. I mean the mission is just, overall it needs, it really needs some big changes in the way they do things. I'm not there at all unless I'm sleeping or eating.

Females in the study also had negative experiences with the primary shelter for women and children in the city.

Last year, I stayed there for a week. I did not like it. You had to be out of the place by like seven [in the morning] and you couldn't come back til three, so what am I supposed to do? New to Nashville. I'm just new to Nashville, I don't know where anything is, and

you don't give me bus ticket, bus anything, um they just tell me, downtown's that way.

OK, what am I supposed to do there? I don't know anything there, I don't know anybody, I'm all by myself here. I didn't even know where the library was. So I was just walking around Nashville until about three o'clock and then I shoot back that way. But, I won't go there because they didn't help me at all.

In some cases, just the expectation of a negative experience was enough to prevent youth from seeking services. A respondent spoke of being hopeful that his mental illnesses would qualify him for disability payments, so that "I can get a place and me and my old lady and my child soon-to-be will have a warm place to stay." (This respondent's girlfriend was five months pregnant at the time of the interview and both were living on the streets.) However, he had not made an appointment to speak with anyone about getting on disability, because "I just didn't want to go and do it and waste my time and them deny me."

### *Independence*

There was an element of personal independence that a number of the youth expressed as a reason why they did not seek services at times, wanting to do things on their own, and wanting to prove that they could make it without help. As one respondent explained, "I just decided if I'm gonna have anything, I'm gonna have it on my own, so I went out to get it on my own." Another one stated, "I just don't, you know, I don't look for no handout. I try and do everything myself. I don't ask nobody for nothing."

Some youth felt that the services that were being offered were unnecessary because they could accomplish those tasks for themselves, without the help of an agency. As one young man said:

There's not a lot of things that people [can] do for me that I can't do for myself. I can go to [a local program] on Wednesday at 9:00 to talk to the job coordinator, or I can do the exact same thing that he's gonna do, pick up a newspaper, look at craigslist, go to nashvillejobs.com, because when you do walk by to sit all he does is give you a sheet of paper with a whole bunch of places that are hiring and their phone numbers. So he's not doing anything that I can't do for myself, there's no need to set aside a time and a day and all that that I need to come up and waste three hours to talk to you, I can just pick the paper up myself.

Sometimes that sense of independence started growing long before youth were street-involved or couchsurfing, with a lack of parental supervision that either left youth completely on their own, or in a position where they had to care for their younger siblings while still a child themselves. One young woman, who consistently bounced around in and out of both parents' homes, stayed with friends, and often spent the night on the "twirly-slide" on the playground across the street from her mother's home because of her mother's alcoholism and the constant conflict between them, explained how quickly she had to grow up in order to care for her sister and the impact that it had on her.

I mean there were times when my mom would leave and not come home for days at a time. And my little sister, you know, I'd get her up for school and I'd bathe her, and I would her, I'd take her out to the bus stop to go to the bus and then I'd have to walk to school because I missed the bus...I got in trouble and got ISS [in school suspension] because I was late to school so many times.

One young man had been couchsurfing for the past three years, ever since his mom and step-father threw his belongings out in the front yard on his eighteenth birthday. He was ten



when his parents divorced, and his father got custody of him and his brothers. Shortly thereafter, his father married a woman with whom the young man did not get along. He explained how his fierce need for independence got started and the negative consequences he suffered because of it, which in his case took the form of a serious drug addiction.

So I just kind of went off on my own, and I kinda just like did what I wanted and raised myself. I barely ever saw my dad or my step-mom...[the house was] this really long one story, their room was on this side and my room was on the total opposite side of the house. So I come and went as I pleased...they never really paid any attention to me, and like I guess that's how I got involved with drugs when I did, and the drugs that I got involved with that were nothing a sixteen-year-old should have been messing with at all.

This sense of independence was at times expressed almost as guilt or shame for taking services away from someone else who might need it more than the young person did, because the young person was physically able to care for him or herself. One young woman explained her reasons for not staying in the women's shelter in this way: "I just felt so bad because there are women and kids there, and I just felt like I was taking a woman and child's spot, and that's not fair. Because I can take care of myself, I just gotta learn how."

### *Relationship Issues*

Several youth, primarily the females in the study, stated that they did not seek certain services, such as housing or longer-term programs because they would have to be separated from their romantic partner in order to partake of the services. One young woman explained why she and her boyfriend chose to sleep in a tent rather than to go into the programs offered by the mission by saying, "I didn't want to be away from [my boyfriend] because, I don't know, he's my security blanket."

A young woman who was five months pregnant and living on the street with her fiancé had applied for a program through Vocational Rehabilitation when she dropped out of high school. The program would have provided her with housing and job training, but the news of her acceptance came too late.

They was wanting me to go, so I said fine, and did all the paperwork and everything. I get a call after I found out I was pregnant, that I'm eligible, I was approved. I'm like, shoulda told me this before. I can't go. One I'm engaged, and two I'm pregnant, I ain't going.

This same young woman stated that she refused going into an eight month-program at the mission because she was pregnant and she wouldn't be able to see her fiancé for the full eight months. "Not gonna happen," she said.

#### *Location*

Many times youth knew that services were available that they desired, but they were located further away than they were willing to walk to access them, and transportation was not readily available or affordable. When talking about her experience on the streets, a female resident of the transitional living program stated,

I mean, it was like, you know you had to walk halfway across town just to take a shower, you know you had to walk halfway across town just to eat or find some blankets or whatever. I would not walk halfway across town to go get food, I would just be like, I'm not that hungry anyways.

For another young woman, her pregnancy was a factor in keeping her from walking to various places for help. "Well, I need to like, go and fill out an application for public housing, but that's like a far walk too. It's like everything you gotta walk to, and I can't do it, especially with the whole (indicates her belly)."

## *Rules*

Numerous youth mentioned not wanting to follow the rules of an agency or a program as a key reason why they avoided going there for services. Often the draw of making one's own choices was stronger than the idea of having a safe, stable place to stay, even when youth had been on the streets for an extended period of time. This young man was first on his own at the age of fourteen, and spent most of the next eleven years on the street. He explains:

I never wanted to go to the [youth shelter]. I was thinking they're just like the government, they're just gonna make me reform to their rules and make me do this and that, and I liked the freedom of telling myself of when I can go to bed and what I eat and when I can go to the bathroom and shower.

One respondent mentioned that he regretted not going to Job Corps as he had originally planned to do when he left high school. When asked if that was still an option for him, he stated that it was not because he felt he would not be able to follow the rules after having experienced life on his own on the streets for the past three years.

I'm a grown man and you know, I mean which I still got a lot of growing up to do, I ain't but 22, but I just can't - I'm not gonna have nobody sit and tell me I can't go outside and smoke a cigarette, or I can't go over my girlfriend's house, you know, or I gotta wait til next weekend to get a weekend pass if I'm good to go see my girlfriend, or to go to the store to get a pack or cigarettes or something, you know, I can't do that.

## Discussion

Results of this study show that homeless youth do use an array of services that are available to them, primarily those which focus on meeting their basic needs of food, shelter,

clothing and hygiene while living on the streets. However, the data reflect that while these services are being used, there are few long-term services in which homeless youth are actively engaged. For example, while a high percentage of youth had sought shelter from a service provider at one time, the vast majority intended not to return to the shelter because of previous negative experiences, and only a few youth had been willing to enter into programs that would keep them housed for a longer period of time if they could follow the rules of the program. The location of the agencies and difficulty getting to them were also key factors in why youth did not use particular services. Highlighted in this study is the sense of independence that these young people have and the overarching need to accomplish getting off the streets on their own, with as little interference from outside sources as possible. For the most part, the youth expressed a desire for help, but more important than the help they needed was the way in which it was offered to them. If a particular service was not provided in an atmosphere of respect that preserved their dignity and their right to make their own decisions, most often the youth chose to do without assistance.

These findings confirm much of what has been found in previous studies with youth in larger locations, and indicate that homeless youth in this particular city struggle with many of the same issues. The majority of the youth in this study did use some type of service, similar to the findings by DeRosa, et al. (1999), but there were many services available that youth used infrequently or avoided all together. Reasons for avoiding certain services were similar to those found in previous research, such as negative experiences with service providers (Bernstein & Foster, 2008; Ensign & Bell, 2004; Kurtz et al., 2000; Thompson et al., 2006), challenges with location and transportation (Dachner & Tarasuk, 2002; DeRosa, et al., 1999), poor quality

services (Bernstein & Foster, 2008; Thompson, et al, 2006), or services being unnecessary (Auerswald & Eyre, 2002) or unaffordable (Aviles & Helfrich, 2004; Higgitt et al., 2003).

As Thompson and colleagues (2006) found, youth in this study were more likely to frequent services where they felt treated as individuals with unique needs, were flexible, and that had fewer strict requirements. The resistance to rules and doing things according to someone else's schedule was pervasive throughout the interviews. Youth who have survived difficult situations and lived on their own for a length of time may understandably balk at having to follow rules.

To date, there has not been much published research regarding the population of couchsurfing youth such as the thirteen who were included in this study. This was identified as one of the gaps in homeless youth research (Toro, et al., 2007) and this study was undertaken with that in mind. The results suggest that these youth who move consistently from friend's house to friend's house are in some ways more at risk than youth who are on the streets. While intuitively it might seem that they have a more stable environment given that they typically sleep with a roof over their heads every night, these data show that these youth are far less connected to the service system than their street-involved counterparts. They are more likely to "fly under the radar" and therefore not be identified for services that could be helpful to them. For example, the only youth who spoke of going days at a time without eating in this study were those who identified as couchsurfers.

The amount of time that youth focused on services issues during their interviews indicates that it plays a major role in the experience of homeless young people in this city. Respondents spoke at length and with strong emotions about their experiences finding help – or in many cases, not finding help – from agencies and service providers. There are clearly

opportunities to strengthen what is available to youth on this mesosystemic level and thereby decrease the risk of youth becoming or remaining homeless. The desire of these youth was for a service system that provided individualized services in an environment that respected them as independent young adults and allowed them to make their own decisions as young people who have proven their capacity for survival in the most difficult of circumstances.

### Limitations

There are several limitations that should be considered in regards to this study. First, all data are self-reported, leaving it subject to recall error and false reports. Service use by homeless youth was not objectively verified. Second, qualitative data cannot determine causality as clearly as other forms of data might, but it can add context to other quantitative research results. Third, although the researcher believes that the youth surveyed were representative of the homeless youth population in the city where the study took place, primarily because they were recruited from a variety of locations and spoke of experiences that had both similarities to their peers and broad differences from them, homeless youth in other geographic locations will differ from this sample in demographic and other factors. Therefore, the results of this study are not necessarily generalizable. In addition, a sample size of forty youth is far too small to draw any firm conclusions about the population of homeless youth. Finally, some of the services about which youth spoke positively were those from which youth were recruited for the study, so that information may have been biased. Youth who were not actively engaged in these services may have had different opinions about them that were not reflected in these data.

## Implications

This study presented a broad picture of the service use of homeless youth in one city, as well as provided insight into the reasons why these youth do and do not choose to use particular services that may be available. Service providers who target youth should understand that the typical structured service environment may not work for a young person because of the developmental need to assert independence during adolescence in combination with a unique set of experiences that has demanded that homeless youth fend for themselves, often for long periods of time. Services need to be tailored to the needs and the developmental stage of each young person and provided in an environment of respect for their experience and ability.

Further research is needed into the characteristics of a service environment that is effective with homeless youth, and what the positive outcomes are that can result from this type of service. It is important that the goal be not only to alleviate the circumstances of homelessness, but also to provide young people with the tools they need to permanently change their situation and not extend or repeat the experience. As one young woman poignantly said:

If we know we can get fed every day, we're going to go get fed. But if we know we can get shelter somewhere, and like maybe start in a really low income apartment complex or something, that's when people are gonna say hey, I will get my act together, and I'm gonna, I'm gonna try.

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## CHAPTER III

### “NEVER GIVE UP. EVER.”: STRENGTHS OF HOMELESS YOUTH

#### Background

Research on homeless youth has traditionally been deficit-oriented, focusing on the risk factors likely to lead to negative outcomes for these young people (Toro et al., 2007). Given the overwhelming number of risk factors and poor outcomes shown in the research, it is understandable why this orientation has dominated the literature. However, in recent years there has been a push to study the phenomenon of youth homelessness from a decidedly different approach, one that is strengths-based as opposed to risk-based, and which takes into account the strengths present in youth that allow them to survive such difficult circumstances.

A strengths-based approach acknowledges the difficulties inherent in a situation, but balances that perspective with a focus on the empowerment of individuals and their innate capability for resiliency (Laursen & Birmingham, 2003). This point of view allows for consideration of the social context of the issue being studied and moves away from the tendency to blame the individual or negatively label a population as deficient or deviant (Bender, Thompson, McManus, Lantry, & Flynn, 2007).

This approach is in keeping with the ecological-development perspective on homeless youth, proposed by Haber and Toro (2004), which built on the early work of Urie Brofenbrenner (1977) by setting the issue of adolescent homelessness into a broader social context. Rather than looking at homelessness as a maladaptive behavior solely on the part of a youth who has run

away, or a maladaptive behavior solely on the part of a parent who has kicked their teenager out of the house, homelessness is seen as a failure on a broader level. This may include problems in the parent-adolescent relationship, an economic disruption such as the loss of a job, a history of residential instability, the loss of social networks in the community, or the failure of the service system to meet the particular needs of the individuals and families who sought help for the challenges they faced.

In the case of homeless youth, a strengths-based orientation also draws a great deal on the positive youth development framework, which promotes the idea that focusing on individual strengths, enhancing access to protective factors (such as community support and mentoring), and developing opportunities for meaningful participation for youth are ways to reduce exposure to risk and to therefore promote successful transitions to healthy, stable young adulthood and avoid homelessness (Taylor-Seehafer, 2004).

In the existing literature, articles that took this strengths-based approach were primarily qualitative studies that allowed investigators to dig deeper into the experiences of runaway and homeless youth and provide richer descriptions of both the risks and the resiliencies that shaped their lives. These studies found a way to acknowledge the difficulties of and the risks inherent in the experience of youth homelessness, and yet frame their discussion of it from a deeply held belief in the internal resources available to youth who survive this experience. For example:

In here are messages of hope that persons have the strength to get what they want, with strength tied in both as necessary and arising from adapting to the streets, and helping a person to maintain herself in the face of forces/problems that can drag her down or make her want to give up (Kidd & Davidson, 2007, p. 220).

The focus on strengths is often evident from the phrasing of the original research question, such as in this study:

How do runaway and homeless adolescents navigate the troubled waters of their adolescence?...this question reflects the researchers' interest in utilizing strength-based perspective to identify the keys to successful problem solving and marks a move away from a problem-focused perspective that emphasizes understanding the causes and negative consequences of social problems (Kurtz et al., 2000)p. 383).

Authors who tend to support this strengths-based perspective often go on to advocate for including the same problem-solving approach to interventions with homeless youth, including developing positive emotion-focused coping strategies and a sense of agency that can then be channeled into advocacy and making positive changes for homeless youth in the areas of greatest risk for homeless youth, such as education, employment, and housing (Kidd, 2003). Hyde (2005) eloquently explains the reasoning for a strengths-based approach to serving at-risk youth:

...by focusing only on their victimization, service providers are likely to overlook young people's resiliency in the face of adversity and [fail] to acknowledge their efforts to create new life experiences. They are also likely to overlook the sense of agency that young homeless people espouse in their every day lives and the importance of maintaining their independence at any cost (p. 180).

Researchers who took a strengths-based approach in their work created a very different picture of homeless youth than those who focused solely on individual deficits leading to homelessness or the risk factors present in the lives of these youth. These authors found homeless young people to be:



- fiercely independent (Bender et al., 2007; Dostaler & Nelson, 2003; Hyde, 2005; Kidd & Davidson, 2007; Lindsey et al., 2000; de Winter & Noom, 2003)
- determined (Kidd, 2003; Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004; Williams, Lindsey, Kurtz, & Jarvis, 2001)
- altruistic (Lindsey et al., 2000; Williams et al., 2001)
- “street smart” (Bender et al., 2007; Kidd & Davidson, 2007; Lindsey et al., 2000; Rew & Horner, 2003)
- self-sufficient (Kidd, 2003; Lindsey et al., 2000; Rew, 2003; Rew, Taylor-Seehafer, Thomas, & Yockey, 2001)
- self-confident (Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004; Rew & Horner, 2003)
- goal-oriented (Bernstein & Foster, 2008; Lindsey et al., 2000; Lindsey & Williams, 2002; Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004; Rew & Horner, 2003)
- strong (Kidd & Davidson, 2007; Kidd et al., 2006; Lindsey et al., 2000)
- responsible for themselves (Ferguson, Dabir, Dortzbach, Dyrness, & Spruijt Metz, 2006; Lindsey et al., 2000)
- responsible for others, i.e., pet ownership and caretaking (Bender, et al., 2007; Lindsey, et al., 2000; Rew & Horner, 2003)
- connected to others (Bender, et al., 2007; Kidd, 2003; Kidd & Davidson, 2007; Williams, et al., 2001)
- hopeful (Ferguson, et al., 2006; Kidd, 2003; Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004; Williams, et al., 2001)
- spiritual (Bender, et al., 2007; Ferguson, et al., 2006; Kidd, 2003; Kidd & Davidson, 2007; Lindsey, et al., 2000; Williams, et al., 2001)

- resilient (Bernstein & Foster, 2008; Kidd & Davidson, 2007; Rew, et al., 2001; Williams, et al., 2001)
- positive (Bender, et al., 2007; Bernstein & Foster, 2008; Ferguson, et al., 2006; Lindsey, et al., 2000)

In short, the strengths-based approach allows a more complete view of the issue of youth homelessness, not ignoring the obvious risk factors but highlighting the internal strengths that allow youth to survive primarily negative environments and describing the competencies that develop as a result of struggling with the difficulties of life on your own as a young person.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the strengths identified by young people in a small sample of homeless youth in one mid-sized southeastern city in the United States, where no published research on homeless youth has been done to date. This paper can contribute to the growing field of strengths-based research on homeless youth, as well as discover whether the young people from this specific geographic location reflect the same qualities reported in other samples of homeless youth from across the country, or if there is an as of yet unreported source of strength drawn upon by these youth in particular.

## Methods

### *Study Design*

In-depth interviews were conducted with forty-two homeless youth. Using purposeful sampling, youth were recruited by advertising the opportunity to participate in the study through various service agencies working with homeless youth, and then “snowballing” from there as other youth heard about the opportunity to participate, particularly as a result of doing interviews in a street location. To participate in the study, youth had to be 25 years of age or younger and

living on his or her own without parental supervision. The age criteria reflects the upper age of the street youth who served as the advisory panel for the study, and was the age they indicated after which one was no longer considered to be a “youth” on the streets.

The youth either identified as a “street youth” (their experience on their own primarily consisted of staying in street locations, such as a tent, in a car, or otherwise outdoors) or a “couchsurfer” (having no stable place of residence, but typically sleeping on the couches of friends and/or family members rather than living on the streets). Youth often crossed over between these categories, i.e., sometimes couchsurfers spent a night on the streets, sometimes street youth slept on a friend’s couch for a week or so, or in many cases, youth started out couchsurfing but eventually ran out of options of places to stay and ended up on the streets. However, these youth were categorized for this study by the way in which they described their experience with homelessness. Most often, they identified themselves as a couchsurfer or a street youth by describing one of those two settings when initially asked to talk about their situation.

The study received Institutional Review Board approval from Vanderbilt University. All required procedures regarding the protection of human subjects were followed, including informed consent, confidentiality, and data storage procedures.

### *Interview Instrument*

All study respondents participated in a semi-structured interview with the same researcher, guided by a discussion outline that was developed in accordance with the developmental-ecological theory upon which this study is based and with the assistance of the youth advisory panel. Questions relating to each level of the social context were asked, i.e., questions about the individual, the family, the community, schools, the service system, and the broader society in which homeless youth existed. The data presented here focus on responses to

questions about the young people's personal strengths and how they survived the situations they currently faced.

### *Data Analysis*

Once transcribed, the qualitative interview data were analyzed line by line, identifying and naming all the phenomena or general categories that were revealed through this process. The themes that developed were further explored with subsequent readings of the transcripts to look for inter-relationships among the coded ideas. For example, all data that were originally coded as "strengths" was then re-examined to look for sub-categories and inter-relationships with other data, for example data coded as "optimism" or "independence."

### *Sample*

A total of 42 youth were interviewed. Two youth were considered not to meet the criteria for the study following the interview; one was living on the streets with his mother, and the other admitted to lying about his age to receive the study incentive payment. Of the 40 qualifying youth, twenty-eight (70%) identified as street youth and twelve (30%) identified as couchsurfers. Twenty-six of the interviews took place at the downtown branch of the public library, a popular daytime gathering place for the homeless community in general, particularly during the winter months. Five interviews took place at a popular youth entertainment/recreation center, five were completed at a local coffeeshop or restaurant, and the remaining four were done at a transitional living program for homeless youth where those youth were currently housed. Youth were compensated for the interview with a \$25 American Express gift card.

*Individual.* Table 1 describes the demographic and background characteristics of the sample. Of the forty participants, 28 (70%) were male and 12 (30%) were female. The majority (65%) identified as Caucasian, 10 (25%) as African-American, three (7.5%) as bi-racial, and one

(2.5%) as Hispanic. The ages of participants ranged from 17 to 25, with a median age of 20. The average age at which youth reported being “on their own” for the first time was 17.3 years old. Twelve youth (31%) reported graduating from high school, one of those with a special education diploma, seven youth (18%) received their Graduation Equivalency Diploma (GED), seventeen youth (44%) had dropped out of high school, and three (8%) were currently in twelfth grade. Of those who graduated or completed a GED (49%), five (28%) reported having some type of continuing education – two had enrolled in college but had to drop out, two had completed technical certificates of some kind, and one was currently a college freshman.

*Family.* Not one youth reported leaving from a two-parent (biological) home when they first ran away or were kicked out. The three youth who did report leaving a two-parent home had been adopted into those families as children. Most young people left single parent situations, while others left relative caretakers, such as grandparents or aunts and uncles. Nearly half of the youth (48%) reported being in a current romantic relationship, often with their partner also being on the street, and 43% reported having parented a child. Seven of the twelve young women (58%) interviewed had either given birth or were currently pregnant.

*Past system involvement.* All but five of the youth (87.5%) had been involved in at least one formal “system” – the mental health system, special education, foster care, or juvenile justice – while under the age of eighteen and usually prior to their first experience of running away from or being kicked out of their homes. Five of the youth (13%) reported having interacted with all four systems. Two-thirds (68%) of the sample had been involved with juvenile justice at some time, 65% were in the mental health system, exactly half (50%) of the youth had been in foster care at some point, and 35% had been in special education.

Table 12. Demographic information for homeless youth sample, by individual, family and system involvement characteristics

	Street Youth (n=28)	Couchsurfers (n=12)	All Homeless Youth (n=40)
<b>Individual</b>			
Male	68%	75%	70%
Female	32%	25%	30%
Caucasian	64%	67%	65%
African-American	25%	25%	25%
Bi-Racial	7%	8%	7.5%
Hispanic	4%	0%	2.5%
High School Diploma	30%	33%	31%
GED	19%	17%	18%
Dropped Out	52%	25%	44%
Currently Enrolled	0%	25%	8%
Median Age at Interview	21	19	20
Average Age First Homeless	17.7	16.2	17.3
<b>Family</b>			
Left Single Parent Homes	68%	83%	73%
Currently Partnered	54%	33%	45%
Have Children	54%	17%	43%
<b>System Involvement</b>			
Juvenile Justice	64%	75%	68%
Mental Health	75%	42%	65%
Foster Care	54%	42%	50%
Special Education	43%	17%	35%
Any System	89%	83%	87.5%

## Results

Throughout the interviews, youth expressed the belief that they had many strengths, sometimes in response to a direct question about what they thought their personal strengths were, and sometimes in the course of answering other questions or simply telling stories about their lives. The picture that emerged was one of young people who were optimistic, self-reliant, strong-willed, altruistic, smart, and friendly. These individuals also saw their youth as a factor that worked in their favor, relied on their relationships for strength, and called on their personal faith to help them through the challenging situations they faced daily.

### *Optimistic*

There was a consistent theme of optimism and hope expressed throughout the interviews. For the most part, youth believed that things were going to get better. One young person said simply, "...no matter how hard things get you can always move past them." Another explained:

...life can't always be like this, it's gotta get better at some point. I try to always have a good attitude. Every now and then I get upset but, I don't know, I just always look forward to, it could get better, and the ways it will get better. That's how I think about it.

This sense of optimism was essential for many of the youth to survive. Some answered the question "How do you survive in your situation?" by expressing that optimism, as this young woman did: "I know it sounds crazy, but I always had this feeling, um, that things would get better." Another explained how he survived:

I try to have faith that, have hope that things are gonna change. I tell myself continuously, my blessing is coming, when I least expect it. So I use that as fuel to keep me going, you know what I'm saying? Even when I, when I feel like giving up, and I feel like that a lot...it's gonna get better. Your blessing is coming when you least expect it.

Although their circumstances were often dire, youth seemed to be able to find a way to look on things positively. This young man was 21 years old and had been on his own for about seven years. After the death of his mother and his father's remarriage, he lived with various family members until he was eighteen, and then couchsurfing with friends in his rural hometown for the next three years until he finally moved to a nearby city where there were services for the homeless. He was living in the local adult shelter at the time of the interview, when he said:

I think what helps me keep going is just the light of a better day, knowing that, knowing things will get better. Applying myself, doing things the right way instead of the wrong way, like going to work every day... You never know, you take one wrong step or you get in that mindframe where no, it's never gonna happen to you and then boom everything's gone and you're stuck in that situation. But you know, I've hit rock bottom, I've hit rock bottom on my back so I can always you know, look up, so I can see where I'm going.

One young man, who had been couchsurfing for nearly a year after aging out of the foster care system explained how he was able to look for the best in his situation, saying, "...even though people get put in bad situations, there's always a way to look for the better in something, and that's what I try to do, and just like, be happy. At least you're living life."

Some youth were even able to find positive things in traditionally negative labels that had been applied to them, such as this young man who had an interesting take on his mental health diagnosis:

I have ADHD, which at times can come in handy. In a situation like this you have to always be able to think one step ahead, as best you can. And so I'm able to process stuff a little faster than most people and after having so many experiences be the same it's like I can look forward in a little different way.



Youth understood the importance of holding on to hope, because they had been through periods when they did not have the belief that things would improve and felt the effects of that, as well as seeing other people suffer. One young man explained what it was like for him and how he encouraged other young people in his situation:

You know, it's gotta get better. I keep telling myself, it's gotta get better, it can't get no worse. You know, this is the bottom of the totem pole. You gotta get better. Sometimes you take three steps forward and you get knocked two steps back... There is a better life out there, you just gotta want it. You gotta wake up every morning and fight for it. You gotta tell yourself that, you know, you're better than this. Cause it's - don't fall into the trap. Don't fall into the hole and get so deep that you can't dig yourself back up out of it. That's when a lot of kids commit suicide, cause they get so far in the hole that they can't dig themselves back out... talk to somebody, find a friend, find a buddy, you know, anybody you feel comfortable to. Get some feelings out, it'll help. Because it, it's got to get better.

### *Self-Reliant*

The youth in this sample expressed a strong sense of independence, a deep desire to take care of themselves, and the belief that they were able to survive on their own. One respondent explained, "I'm more of a self-sufficient person, I try to be at least, and because I'm basically a loner, I know how to survive. I've survived for the last twenty-two years pretty much doing what I'm doing."

For many of the young people, being independent and self-reliant was a skill they learned while still with their families, having to care for themselves and sometimes younger siblings due to absent or substance-abusing parents. As one young man said, "I just kind of just went off on

my own and I kinda just like did what I wanted and raised myself.” A young woman said, “Two years I missed school because I had to raise my little brother.”

For others, self-reliance developed in the course of their homeless experience. This young woman became homeless with her mother and sisters after her step-father passed away unexpectedly and the money from his life insurance ran out. Her mother stayed with various friends and family members, but this young woman was uncomfortable in many of the situations, and unwelcome in others. At the age of nineteen, she was essentially on her own, often with her younger sisters and at times younger cousins in tow. Relying on herself seemed to be the only option she had left.

I knew that we couldn't rely on anybody else but ourselves, so it's like if we make it, then we just will. We didn't really look for help too much, cause we figured that like, in our family we mostly felt like we could depend on our family. But that mostly got shot down. So it's like, we felt like, hey, we can't depend on family and you can't depend on nobody else, so we might as well do what we can for ourselves, and you know, it was basically fend for yourself situation.

In some cases, self-reliance was a skill demanded by the kind of life homeless youth were living, particularly if they were primarily on the streets. As this young man explained:

I mean, once you're out here on the streets by yourself, you know, you're taking care of yourself, you're pretty much grown. I mean, if I don't take care of myself, nobody'll take care of me. I gotta do what I gotta do, gotta go to temp service and make money to eat on and to wash clothes and survive on, you know?

Often, the young people saw their experiences on their own as a positive thing that had made them into a stronger person. One young woman had struggled to deal with her mother's

alcoholism and the constant fighting between them. She moved repeatedly between her parents' homes and various friends' houses until finally getting to a stable home with her grandparents in another state when she was a senior in high school. In college and working two jobs at the time of the interview, she explained her feelings about how the circumstances she survived helped her grow into a successful young adult:

I didn't know anybody when I moved here. I've met people now that of course I could always run to, but I think for the most part, I mean I help out around the house, I pay all, everything for myself, my food, my insurance, my car payments, my you know everything, it's all paid for and I don't think I'd be such a hard worker now if I didn't have to work for everything when I was growing up... I've worked very, very hard for everything I have and I think that's really important.

Another respondent expressed the same idea in these words:

I think being on the streets for two and a half years, three years, has made me grow like as a person because, constantly, every single night you're going through the questions in your head of where am I gonna sleep tonight, how am I gonna get there, what am I gonna do tomorrow, how am I gonna get a ride out of this person's house, how am I gonna get from here to here to - and you never know. Like I pretty much just lived three years of my life on the fly, and whatever came up I just went with it right then.

### *Strong-Willed*

Numerous youth in the study discussed being strong-willed. Youth used powerful words like "fighter" and "survivor" and "warrior" to describe their attitudes toward life. The following three quotes from young men in the study exemplify how many youth expressed their opinions of themselves and how they survived by the strength of their will.

I'm a fighter. Not necessarily physically, but I wake up every morning and I fight, and I make sure that I have what I need. You know, I don't let people push me around. I don't let people put me down, or talk bad about me. I mean, they can talk bad, but it's not gonna affect me.

Not being a quitter. Cause anybody could just easily lay down and say I give up. I think everything I've went through in my life has made me mentally stronger and I believe it builds character, makes you a better person. That's what I keep holding on to, knowing I'm a survivor, I'm a fighter and I'm gonna get through it, and knowing that I'm gonna be back where I need to be.

I am a survivor, I'm a warrior. I've been through a lot of hell, and I'm gonna say hell. Cause that's what I felt like, it was hell on earth. Been through a lot of hell. Still going through a little bit, but I promise once I get this job I'm gonna be on cloud nine. I want everybody to know I've survived the worst and you can do the same.

One young woman, nine months pregnant at the time of her interview and recently housed with friends she and her boyfriend met on the street when they came out to feed the homeless stated that it was nothing more than her will which had prevented her from making drastic decisions. "My will not to fail. Yeah, there's been this suicide thoughts in the streets, cause you don't think you can make it to getting off, but then you do, and (laughs) and then you make it and (laughs) it feels different."

Often youth discussed being strong-willed using words such as determination or stubbornness, or ideas like standing up for oneself or never giving up.

*Determination.* Several young people described their willingness to do whatever it took to make their circumstances better as determination. One young man said, "Determination is

everything to me, so I try to make it happen.” Another explained, “I’m a young man, and I’m trying to stand up on my own two feet. So, before I, some people call it pride, I just call, I call it determination. I’m determined to show, well the only person I really have anything to prove to is myself, and I’m trying to prove to myself that I have what it takes to make it happen for myself, you know?”

*Stubbornness.* Sometimes youth framed their strong-willed nature as a negative quality, as in the case of the young man who said he was “being too stubborn to call my family and ask for help, because if I did that, they would help me. But I don’t want their help. I want to do it on my own, so I am stubborn.” Another explained how he survived by saying, “I don’t know, just not giving up. Maybe it’s even being hard-headed.”

*Standing up for oneself.* Other youth found evidence of themselves being strong-willed in the fact that they did not allow people to take advantage of them. One young man said he could have avoided ending up on the streets by enduring a situation with his family, but that was not a choice he felt he could make. “Could have been a coward and just kept my mouth shut and let them treat me the way they were treating me, but that’s not me. I won’t be treated like trash by no one.” One young man said, “I guess some of my strengths are like just when I get in one of those moods when I feel like somebody’s pissing me off and when I feel like the need to let them know, then I let them know.” Another respondent explained:

I think I get myself into way more trouble than I should be because I’m such like a don’t take anything from anybody kind of person. And so, I don’t know if that’s really a strength, but it could be, I guess, so... You know, I don’t let people push me around. I don’t let people put me down, or talk bad about me. I mean, they can talk bad, but it’s not gonna affect me.

*Never giving up.* Youth often expressed being strong-willed in terms of choosing never to give up, as in this young man's statement. "I'm a very strong-willed person and I don't just give up easily." This strength can also be viewed as a survival skill, much like the youth described their self-reliance. Often the circumstances these youth were facing in their lives were overwhelming, and the desire to give up was strong. They were able to find the strength to go on, however, sometimes from an intangible source that even the youth themselves could not identify. A young woman explained, "I wanted to give up. I wanted to give up so bad. The things that happened to me, I wanted to just scream and just die. But I knew that one day it would be better. I didn't know how, I didn't know, I just had a will to keep going."

Some youth believed that their will to never give up came from having something to prove to people who had told them that they would never make it. One young man said, "I mean everybody tell me you not gonna be nothing, you not gonna be nothing... They said you weren't gonna live to see eighteen, but look, I'm eighteen, I'm still trying my best to do something in life." Another young man explained his refusal to give up by saying:

So the best thing I can do from this point, I feel, is not give up. Because then everyone who's ever doubted me, who's ever said I wouldn't be anything, anyone who's ever downed me, stopped me from trying to succeed, would win. And I refuse...that's gonna show everybody else that was expecting me to fail that hey, I'm still here, I'm still standing, and I did it all without you, so.

The young people interviewed consistently said that their advice to other youth in a situation like their own would be encouragement to adopt a similar attitude and never give up. Youth said they would tell another person, "...don't give up. Giving up is the worst thing you could do," or "Don't give up. That's the key word. That's gonna be the big piece, the big

headline. Grind hard. Don't give up," and "Never give up. Ever. Always keep your head up. Don't ever let anybody tell you differently. Don't ever let anybody bring you down, because in the end, it's you, it's not anybody else."

### *Altruistic*

Youth interviewed for this study consistently expressed kindness or compassion as a strength, such as this young man who answered a question about what he thought his personal strengths were by saying:

I'm kind and compassionate. If others are in need of help, I give them the shoes off my feet if they need it. I could care less, I can get more shoes, I can get more clothes. I'm willing to help people out. Or if I seen another kid out on the streets, and you know, when I was homeless, if I had a little bit of money in my pocket and he was hungry and I'd already ate, I'd take him and get him something to eat. I was more than willing to help the other kids in my position.

Helping one another seemed to be a shared value in the homeless community. Youth expressed that particularly within the homeless on the street, everyone helped each other out. A young woman explained the relationship within the community this way: "When I run out of food, they help me. When I don't have any cigarettes, they help me. So it's pretty much like a whole group trying to help each other but getting in a fight, like a regular family does."

Another young man spoke with amazement about some of the things he had seen while living on the street.

I've actually sat in front of this library and actually saw people who doesn't have anything feed each other, you know clothe each other, watch out for each other. People who need help are willing to help because they understand what it's like to be without.

These youth seemed to understand that helping others was a benefit to themselves as well. Often when the youth were struggling, somebody they once helped would then help them in return. One young woman explained why she and her boyfriend made it a point to look for others in need, saying:

We try to help people out, cause we've noticed if you try to help people out when you can, then somebody helps you out too. Cause even though me and him's in the same situation, there's a lot of people out here - we follow our hearts and if somebody's in desperate need, we help them out before we help ourselves.

Her boyfriend concurred (in a separate interview), saying, "...doing to others as I want done unto me really is my main [strength]. I've actually, somebody needs help even though I'm down and out and on the streets, I help them out before I help myself. Cause it will come back to you."

Not only could those you helped sometimes be able to help you when the roles reversed, but youth also believed that intangible forces operated on their behalf when they helped people.

You know, me, I would rather see somebody else do better, and it helps me to help somebody else. When I'm hungry and I've got food in my bag and I see somebody digging through a trash can, I give them the food out of my bag. I'll find somewheres else... I believe in karma. If you do good to others, good comes back to you.

The altruistic nature of these homeless youth often came out when they spoke of their hopes and dreams for the future. Many were determined to take care of other homeless people once they got on their feet, because they knew first hand of the struggles they faced. A young man explained his desire to get off the streets as related to what he could then do to help others in a similar situation:



I wish I can do something, make myself, make me keep staying off these streets. If I could stay off these streets, you know the more I could stay off these streets the more I could help somebody else to get off the streets, or to help them with a job, you know? See I'm a very, very nice person, I'm a Virgo, I'm a very caring person...

A young woman, speaking of herself and her boyfriend, said:

Cause if me and him, get our own place, and we got money, we're coming down here and giving people some money. It may not be a lot. We're gonna cook food, and sandwiches and stuff, and we'll bring it down here for everybody, just to help out.

Other youth simply wanted to help people in general, motivated by the experiences they had been through, such as this young woman who explained her career goals by saying:

I really want to help people. Really want to, and even if that doesn't work out now, I'm looking at going to school to be an RN or maybe a paramedic, you know, I'm starting all these night classes, like on understanding basics of medical, and it's just so fascinating to me because I know I'm going to be able to help people with it. And I think that that is my purpose in life is to help people, and I think that I went through everything I did to help people, to know what it's like, to be able to give back.

Some youth were even appreciative of the experience of being on their own because they believed it would allow them to help others in the future, such as this young woman who said, "I'm actually grateful that like God let me experience you know that so I would know, and that maybe like one day when I become successful, get through college, I can go out and help some of those people."

## *Smart*

Many of the youth in this study remarked about being smart, making statements such as, “I’m smart, like I know I’m smart, I know a lot about a lot of things” or “Really, I don’t want to like toot my own horn or anything, but I’m really smart.” Being “smart” seemed to mean one of two things to the youth in this study: book smarts or street smarts. One young man, who stated that he knew he had both kinds of smarts, explained the difference this way:

Book smarts is a bunch of useless knowledge that you won’t have unless you go to college or on to a game show like Jeopardy, and street smarts, helps you survive...it lets you - it’s more of an instinct that tells you who to hang out with and who not to and what places to go and what to do - you know, when’s the good time to do this and to do that.

Street smarts were often spoken of as a skill vital to survival for youth living on the streets. One respondent said, “If you’re not street smart, you’re not gonna survive. Just gotta know how to handle yourself in certain situations around certain crowds, you know, know what you can get away with and what you can’t get away with and stuff like that.” Another young man, who had been couchsurfing for five years at the time of the interview, explained that he knew how to make his way because of skills he had learned growing up. “I know how to, I know, like I grew up in the projects, like I know how to survive on the streets. I know how, I mean, I know how to do what I have to do to survive.” A young woman talked about the necessity to learn this skill in order to successfully navigate her time on the streets. “I didn’t have a lot of street smarts when I came out here. I didn’t know who to hang around or where not to go or you know, but I learned really quick.”

Book smarts were also important to the youth. Some youth shared that their level of educational attainment did not reflect how intelligent they believed themselves to be. One young

man who had challenges in school blamed those problems on being too smart, explaining his behavioral issues by saying, “I was too smart for the teachers, and so I was able to - I was easily getting into trouble way too easily because everything was boring to me, so I had to find ways to occupy my time.” Another said that his challenges in school were not due to a lack of intelligence, but rather to peer pressure, saying “I’m a smart person, I just wanted to be that cool cool guy who don’t do his work.” Other youth explained that the life circumstances that eventually led them to being homeless were the cause of not being able to perform in school to the true level of their ability.

...growing up I was an A/B student, I took Honors English, I excelled at everything I did. I was in the marching band, loved instruments. I would say about 15 or 16 when all this started happening with my mother, I lost interest in school, you know cause then I couldn’t enjoy school, it was about survival.

Other youth pointed to their educational attainment as proof of their book smarts. One young man expressed great pride in being able to complete high school and be accepted into college in spite of his life circumstances, saying, “I got approved for TSU, and they said I can start in January, so I mean that’s something special. I mean, I graduated.” Several youth in the sample had been accepted to or able to attend college. One young woman was currently a freshman studying to be an air traffic controller. “I know I can handle the highest stress situations, just because of what I’ve already been through,” she explained. “I took a career test that said I should do that and I thought I could be really good at it.”

## *Friendly*

Several youth recognized that being friendly had been a source of strength for them in the course of their homeless experience. At times it was surprising to the youth that this trait could be a strength, as detailed by one young woman who said:

I'm outgoing, I'm bubbly...it's just funny because like I would have never thought that being outgoing could have been to a benefit of this amount, you know. But if you're a recluse and you don't talk to anybody when you're out on the streets then you don't have anybody. But at least if you try to be a little bit outgoing, it's gonna help you in the long run.

Another youth realized that not everyone on the streets was the same as him, but he did not let that change his outgoing nature, which he found to be helpful to him in his experience.

Easy to talk to. Easy to talk to and just a friendly guy overall. I mean, that's one thing that I had - it's one thing I had to learn. Being homeless, everybody ain't gonna be friendly. Everybody ain't gonna do you right, everybody ain't gonna treat you with the respect that you need to be treated with. But that's them. You gotta be yourself.

Being friendly was a particularly important source of strength for youth who were couchsurfing on a long-term basis, given that they were primarily relying on friends to provide shelter, transportation, food, and other necessities. One young man shared how relieved he was to discover that the kind of person he had always been served to rescue him when he found himself kicked out of his home with nowhere to stay.

But the only thing that got me through it was, my strength that I know was that I'm always friendly to people so, I mean I make friends really easy. I don't see a person that might be different to me or weird or be like well, I'm not going to be friends with

them...I mean I'll just be their friend because everybody's different a little bit. So I think just me being friendly to people, nice to people, I have nothing to worry about because I know a lot of people and I'm friends with people and make a lot of friends and it always helps...if I was, like before all this situation happened if I was all snobby and thinking I was better than everybody then this situation would have been just horrible.

### *Youth*

A number of the young people interviewed saw their age itself as a strength, particularly in comparison to other members of the homeless community. As discussions unfolded about the differences between themselves and older people who were homeless, a theme developed that the researcher termed "critical time." Youth in this study seemed to feel strongly that, if they could get the help they felt they needed to change their situation at their age, they had more opportunities to make that change last than an individual who was either older or who had been homeless for much longer. As one young man said about those under the age of twenty-five on the streets, "They're young enough to see the hardship and realize they don't want this when they are the older people's age." Two other youth explained the differences in the following ways:

...the ones under 25 actually have a chance to change, and actually have a chance to get off the streets. The ones who are 25 and older, most of them are on the streets for a reason, because they either are on the run from something, or they don't wanna face their past. The ones that are younger than 25, they could actually change and get off the streets and work for the better and be more successful than everybody else.

As you get older, your mind's set. We still have a chance as young people to turn the situation around. Older people set their ways. They just, it's their way or no way. I mean,

we still got, we still got learning to do. We still got people out there to influence our lives for the good, for the better.

Some youth felt that because of this difference, those with resources to direct toward assisting the homeless should have a specific focus on the younger people. As this couchsurfing female explained:

Young people...they should have it where they will help them before, you know, they will help somebody that they know they'll get in there and they're gonna do the same thing. Younger, if you help a young person before you help an old person, the younger person you know, can catch on quicker and do better before an older person. Cause an older person, they can get help, but two months later they gonna be back doing the same thing.

Several youth feared becoming like the older homeless individuals in their community, and not getting off the street because they grew used to the setting. While knowing where to go to get specific needs met and where not to go in order to avoid trouble were positive things about being used to the streets, getting comfortable there was not an attractive option for the youth.

One young man explained:

Uh, some the younger ones, it seem like we're all trying to get out of here, um even if things don't go our way, we're still trying to get out of here, but it seem like with the older people they're stuck in their ways and they're pretty much um, kept this life and they want to keep it. They don't know what else to do. And, but I don't want to get into that path. I don't want to stay out here longer than I need to, cause I think I am accustomed to everything around here now and that's good and bad at the same time.

## *Relationships*

Various kinds of relationships were mentioned as a source of strength during the interviews, ranging from family members to friends to romantic partners. Youth were often hesitant to believe that people would consistently come through for them in a time of need, but they still found that they both needed and wanted to depend on people as much as possible. As one young man explained:

And you know, it doesn't hurt having people in your corner. I mean, even though you know some of the people that's in your corner is full of crap, and really probably worse for you than better for you, but I mean when your back is against the wall, they'll sometimes pull through. So it doesn't hurt to have someone in your corner.

*Family.* For the most part, youth in this study maintained some level of contact with their parents or other members of their biological families, in spite of the fact that conflict within these families was the primary reason they stated they initially went out on their own. Sometimes these family relationships were continued sources of strife for the young people and they could not yet seek support from them. As one young man said, "I'm not gonna go to my family, cause I'm still working through that, I'm still - just now trying to get in communication with my mom, cause I haven't talked to her since February."

Another respondent spoke of the challenges she faced when trying to reach out to her family:

[I'm] kinda starting to get back in contact [with my adoptive parents], but it's just really stressful cause haven't really talked to them since last year, and my dad didn't really have say in me getting kicked out. So I'm not really talking to my mom, because I just like, every time I call my hands start shaking, I'm like I can't do this.

Other times, youth were able to draw strength and support from their family members, but sometimes only after the traditional parent-child relationship had been severed. A young woman explained that she felt she could now look to her mother for support, because “me and my mom now have more of a friendship relationship, rather than a mom and daughter relationship.” One respondent, who had been couchsurfing for the past three years since the age of eighteen, explained that the difference in his relationship with his parents was based on which one had been able to shift roles.

I have a lot better relationship with my dad, because I’ve been on my own, you know, surviving for this long, you know, and my dad...he’s just kind of dropped the whole like authority figure and now it’s just almost like it’s a friend basis. Because like I’m an adult and you know, I’m gonna do what I’m gonna do and he doesn’t have to watch over me anymore, and so now he’s on the level to where it’s like I’d rather just have a relationship with my son rather than you know have all this fighting all the time.

Often other relatives were able to offer support to young people in the study. A young man credited his aunt for helping him survive, “cause I coulda been dead a long time ago, if it weren’t for her saving my butt too many times, I woulda been gone.” Some youth had not known certain family members were an option for support, as in the situation of one young woman who had never met her maternal grandparents until she came to live with them.

I got given a second chance that a lot of people don’t get. I had somebody that just cared automatically, when they didn’t even know me, they loved me, you know. I didn’t even know that I had this family here. I always thought, I always heard the worst about them and then they turned out to be the best people of them all, you know?

In some cases, it took the young people a long time to accept help that was offered. A



young man who had lived on the streets for eleven years before recently moving in with an aunt and uncle said:

It actually took me til about the last year and a half to realize my family's actually there for me. This whole time I never wanted to admit it or believe it. I always wanted to think the whole world's out to get me, so screw the world, I'm gonna get them first. But, that's changed too in the last year and a half. I actually realize my family is there, the world's not out to get me, I was just out to get myself... And my uncle and aunt still tells me, you don't have to pay no rent, you don't have to help out with the bills, you're family. As long as I see you're trying, you're gonna actually have - you're gonna have a place to stay here. And I've just been putting forth that effort every day, to try to do something with my life and do something right just so I can have that place to live, cause I've actually gotten tired of being on the streets, and it's wintertime and don't nobody deserve to stay on the streets.

Several youth interviewed had children of their own, although none of them were in situations where they could have their children with them. One young woman who was in the transitional living program at the time of her interview shared that her motivation for getting her life together was to regain custody of her child. "...as of now it's just I don't want my daughter to live with my mom for - I want my daughter."

A young father spoke about how he found the strength to keep fighting in the knowledge that he could teach his three young daughters something important about life, even though he was not able to be a part of their daily lives.

If for nothing else, you know I have to teach my girls something. I mean, if I can't be around them, at least they can see for themselves, saying dad was this, and now he's this.

You know, dad was in this situation, and now you know, we can come to him for anything. You know, if nothing else I can teach them perseverance, dedication, commitment, you know, love. And I don't even have to be around to do it.

A nineteen year old young woman credited her daughter with giving her the strength to change her life situation, although she had been forced to place her up for adoption at seven months old when her mother dropped her off at a local homeless shelter and told her that she and her daughter needed to fend for themselves. She said, "...my daughter, she made me into a better person, so I'm striving a lot harder to get off the streets because of her... I don't want this. I made my daughter have a better life with a better family. Now it's my turn. I looked out for my daughter. God blessed me with her and I blessed her with somebody else. It's my turn, and I think it's time for me to better myself. "

*Friends.* Peer relationships were very important to the young people interviewed. Several youth talked about friendships that developed as they shared the experience of living on the streets. One young man said, "A lot of times it, you know, it takes a group of people. We're not loners out here, we all stay together." Another explained the common bond that developed:

I never really, I didn't really make like too many of friends until after I got out of high school and that's how I have a lot of the friends that I have now is through my experience in the streets and stuff, you know. There's just something about, yeah, living in the streets is not where you wanna be but it brings you closer to other people who have the same, who are in the same boat that you are.

While friendships were important to most of the youth, it was primarily among the couchsurfing youth that friends were discussed as a strength. In one case, it was the only strength that one young man could identify, saying, "My friends. I feel like my friends are my strong

point.” Another couchsurfer explained the extreme importance of friendships in his life:

...if it wasn't for my friends I wouldn't be alive, like if it wasn't for my friends I wouldn't be like sitting, I wouldn't be sitting here right now, cause I would have either starved to death or I would have just - I don't know, like I really don't know where I would be without like all of my friends being as close as we are, because what we do is like just take care of each other. That's just how we do it, I don't know, we all look out for each other and make sure each other is okay, and I mean - for a while there, there was quite a few of us that was running like in a pack, like just a bunch of kids that were homeless...you know, I could sit there, I had five hundred plus contacts in my phone and I had to delete a bunch of them to put new ones in. And when you've got that many people's phone numbers in your hands, to where you can just call 'em (snaps fingers three times). You can just go down the line almost and just call - you're gonna find somebody.

One couchsurfer talked about how difficult it would be for him to move on with his life after graduating high school, even though he felt he needed a geographical change, because leaving his friends behind was a much more drastic loss for him than for another teenager who had not been forced to rely on his friends the way he had.

Cause my close - like, I love my friends and that's the only close thing I've had to a family is my friends and I just, I love them but like so many bad situations have [gone] on here and my coach, who I look up to a lot, he told me that he thinks it would be better for me to just step away from this place for a while and get away cause nothing good's happening for me here...it's just rough, like especially gonna be rough for me because like they have their families, but I don't have any family. That's my family.

*Partners.* Nearly half of the youth interviewed were currently in a romantic relationship. All of the female street youth were partnered with a male, and most of them expressed relying on their boyfriends to a great extent, often for safety. "I always had someone around me. I never did run alone. Because it's not safe," said one woman. Relationships also provided emotional support, explained by one young woman who said of street life, "It's hard, but having somebody else who's going through the same thing, has been through the same thing or whatever is a lot of help." Another explained that she needed guidance from her boyfriend, saying her source of strength was "My old man, he's got really good knowledge, and he keeps me on the right path." One female, five months pregnant, discussed how her fiancé looked out for her and cared for her needs before his own:

He's the only way I get through it...If it wasn't for him, I'd (laughs) - I wouldn't even leave the campsite. This guy gave us five dollars...and [my fiancé] bought me a plate of fries - well, he bought the fries for him, but I was hungry and he gave them to me. He didn't even eat. He makes sure I eat before he does.

Being partnered was a source of emotional and practical support for many of the male youth as well. One street youth said, "My girlfriend over there, she gets Social Security, so she makes enough just to pay rent, and um, I'm gonna try to get my license today and start working, like I got a job lined up I just gotta get my ID and stuff."

A couchsurfing youth discussed the importance of his romantic relationships:

Yeah, I mean like my girlfriend at the time, like, I mean that, it's been pretty much like the only, not the only support I had, because like I've got my bros and I've got my girlfriend, so like I don't know, the past two girlfriends I've had, I've dated each of them for three years, and those two girls know everything about me, period. And so I mean,

that's where I went, if I was ever upset, that's like the first place I went is call my girlfriend, and I mean, she's my girlfriend she was always there for me, you know, so it worked. I mean, I made it, it was, I mean, as long as you've got somebody, you're not dealing with it by yourself, you'll be okay.

### *Faith*

A number of young people expressed relying on their personal faith to help them through difficult times. When asked how he survived, one young man said, "My spiritual connectedness with God. I mean, that has to be first and foremost because if it wasn't for him and his strength, I wouldn't have made it, and I mean, that's just honest." A young woman said, "I was taught like there was something. And God is what got me through that. And he's the only reason, you know."

For some youth, it was a sense of purpose stemming from a religious belief that helped them keep going in life. This young man explained that even though he had been turned off from Christianity when he was younger by "bigots and hypocrites" in the church, his feelings changed as the result of a traumatic event.

I had a motorcycle accident when I was eighteen, and my life flashed in front of me, and somebody kept me alive. I had a purpose in this world. I don't know what this purpose is yet, but for some reason I've got a purpose here. I've strived on that, I guess. That's the only thing that keeps me going, you know, it's got to get better.

One young man in the study, a couchsurfer and one of the youngest interviewed at age seventeen, talked about how developing his faith was key to helping him leave home at the crucial time that he was trying to get away from a drug-addicted mother who was fueling his own personal battle with drugs.

It was really hard for me to leave, but I think it was a lot easier because towards the end of that like I really got connected with you know, Christ during this whole thing, and you know like in the past like I really never believed in you know, God or anything, like I always like questioned and I did you know, like bad things, but um whenever I was coming off of meth, I really, I really got connected with him. I asked him to give me an opportunity to get me out of all that and he did... I didn't reach out to anyone but God and then he helped me, he gave me people to actually show me that it was real, you know that all my hard work was gonna pay off, and it really has so far.

In spite of the personal reliance on faith expressed by many in the study, the same youth also spoke about not wanting to be in programs where "God" or "religion" was impressed upon them. Their sense of independence was stronger than their desire for help from organizations that made Christianity a requirement of receiving the help. One young man explained his reasons for not enrolling in a drug rehabilitation program even though he believed that getting clean was a key to getting himself off of the streets, saying:

It's a seven-month program, Christian based, um, I consider myself to be a Christian, but they just pushed too many things on me, so it's kinda hard to uh, get a clear view of what you believe if everybody's trying to push a different thing on me.

Speaking about the kind of program she would develop to help youth in situations similar to hers, one young woman said:

Well it wouldn't be, it definitely would not be a place where - I mean, I believe in God. I mean, he's my savior, if it wouldn't have been for him I wouldn't have made it through those three months on the street. But it wouldn't be a place where God was pressed, religion was pressed, because I don't believe in religion. I believe that you know,

everybody has their own way of worshipping their own God, or their own idea of God, you know, and like I believe that religion shouldn't be pressed.

## Discussion

Youth in this study discussed a variety of personal strengths that they felt helped them survive their homeless situation, whether they were on the street or couchsurfing. An overall positive and optimistic attitude helped them keep going each day, looking forward to the day when things would be better. They saw themselves as independent and able to rely on themselves, calling at times on nothing other than the force of sheer will to survive. They called themselves fighters, warriors, and survivors who would not give in to anyone who wanted take advantage of them and who would not give up in the face of at times overwhelming circumstances. Youth were committed to helping one another, both in their present situations and in the future when they believed their personal circumstances would be better and they could give back. Young people considered themselves to be smart, capable, outgoing and friendly. They believed that their age made them more likely to take advantage of opportunities for help, if they could find such opportunities. They also relied on their relationships with family, significant others and friends, as well as on their personal faith for strength.

Many of the strengths outlined in this study are supported by the previous literature. What has been called optimism here has been termed by other researchers as being positive (Bender, et al., 2007; Bernstein & Foster, 2008; Ferguson, et al., 2006; Lindsey, et al., 2000) or hopeful (Ferguson, et al., 2006; Kidd, 2003; Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004; Williams, et al., 2001). Previous research found the same concept of self-reliance, terming it "fiercely independent" (Bender et al., 2007; Dostaler & Nelson, 2003; Hyde, 2005; Kidd & Davidson, 2007; Lindsey et

al., 2000; de Winter & Noom, 2003), self-sufficient (Kidd, 2003; Lindsey et al., 2000; Rew, 2003; Rew et al., 2001) or responsible for themselves (Ferguson et al., 2006; Lindsey et al., 2000). In other studies, the idea of being strong-willed was discussed as youth who were strong (Kidd & Davidson, 2007; Kidd, et al., 2006; Lindsey, et al., 2000), determined (Kidd, 2003; Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004; Williams et al., 2001) resilient (Bernstein & Foster, 2008; Kidd & Davidson, 2007; Rew et al., 2001, Williams, et al., 2001) self-confident (Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004; Rew & Horner, 2003), and goal-oriented (Bernstein & Foster, 2008; Lindsey et al., 2000; Lindsey & Williams, 2002; Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004; Rew & Horner, 2003). Existing research also supports the idea of homeless youth as altruistic (Lindsey, et al., 2000; Williams, et al., 2001), “street smart” (Bender et al., 2007; Kidd & Davidson, 2007; Lindsey et al., 2000; Rew & Horner, 2003), spiritual (Bender, et al., 2007; Ferguson, et al., 2006; Kidd, 2003; Kidd & Davidson, 2007; Lindsey, et al., 2000; Williams, et al., 2001) and connected to others (Bender, et al., 2007; Kidd, 2003; Kidd & Davidson, 2007; Williams, et al., 2001).

Unique in this study is the concept that being young while homeless is a strength, based on the idea that younger homeless individuals are more likely to want to change their situation and more willing and/or able to take advantage of the right kind of help to make a permanent change in their situation. These youth were motivated to not become “comfortable” with homelessness, because they saw individuals around them who had seemingly accepted the fate of being homeless indefinitely. They did not want that future for themselves, and they desired help in changing their circumstances and having a chance for a better life.

Also present in this study was an emphasis from many of the youth on not giving up, both as an attitude they adopted in their personal lives, and as advice they would give to any other young person dealing with a homeless situation. In spite of the trials of being young and



homeless, these youth fiercely believed that there were better days ahead and they refused to let go of that hope.

### Limitations

There are several limitations that should be considered in regards to this study. Although the researcher believes that the youth surveyed were representative of the homeless youth population in the city where the study took place, primarily because they were recruited from a variety of locations and spoke of experiences that had both similarities to their peers and broad differences from them, homeless youth in other geographic locations will differ from this sample in demographic and other factors. Therefore, the results of this study are not necessarily generalizable. In addition, a sample size of forty youth is far too small to draw any firm conclusions about the population of homeless youth.

### Implications

Homeless youth face difficult situations and dire circumstances on a day-to-day basis. Their lives are doubtlessly fraught with challenge and risk, and they struggle because of the severity of the tasks they face and the extreme stress of making it on their own at a young age with a lack of the resources and support necessary for young people to achieve successful and stable adult lives. However, homeless youth also prove themselves able to survive on a daily basis in spite of these harsh difficulties. Their experiences often develop their strengths and provide them with wisdom and insight that they may not have found had they not been through trying situations.

Service providers need to acknowledge the strengths of the youth they serve and plan services that capitalize on these while adding support and resources in the areas of lack (Hyde, 2005; Kidd, 2003). Young people should be trusted to know what they need, since they have demonstrated their ability to survive and provide for themselves while on their own. Therefore they should be included in the decision-making processes of the organization, including planning services, designing models for the provision of such services, and targeted marketing of those services to potential clients.

Further research is needed to determine what the most successful services and service provision environments are that lead to positive outcomes for youth, and how capitalizing on strengths improves those services. Research is also needed on how the strengths of youth impact their long-term outcomes, i.e., whether youth who have higher self-esteem or a stronger belief in their ability to control their personal destiny fare better longitudinally in terms of leaving homelessness and making a successful transition to young adulthood.

Policymakers and funders should focus on long-term solutions targeted toward homeless youth. As the young people in this study expressed, homeless youth have often experienced enough during their time couchsurfing or on the streets to know that they do not want to remain in this situation any longer than they must, and they have the ability and desire to work towards change with the appropriate support and guidance. This “critical time” must be taken advantage of by providing assistance in obtaining attractive and safe housing options, employment, and transportation for these youth so that they can begin to establish the foundation of a stable and successful young adulthood.

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## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

The studies represented in this dissertation indicate that there is legitimate cause for concern about youth in Nashville. High school youth in the public school system who are running away from their homes and/or being thrown away at an alarming rate. Young people are literally living on the streets in Nashville, or couchsurfing from friend's home to friend's home in the absence of a permanent place to live. The stories of these homeless youth indicate that there is most often a cycle that they go through before ending up in these situations, where they are running away or being kicked out and then returning home for a period of time before leaving again, and eventually choosing the streets or couchsurfing rather than returning home once more. This lends further support to the idea of youth homelessness being episodic more often than chronic (Ringwalt, et. al., 1998) and leads us to believe that the youth who express having run away or being kicked out already are at risk of experiencing it again and possibly becoming literally homeless in the near future.

These studies indicate that connecting youth to services, particularly those who are couchsurfing, is a challenging prospect. There is evidence to suggest that even those who are sleeping indoors most nights are at great risk because of the nearly complete disconnect from the service system and the hidden nature of their homeless experience. These young people tend to believe that now is a "critical time" for intervention that could permanently change their situation and help them become healthy, successful young adults. The suggestions in the following implications section provide insight into the practical ways this work can be continued.

## Implications

### *Practice*

Since there is a significantly increased risk of running away or being kicked out during their senior year in high school, prevention programs to reduce the incidence of runaway and/or throwaway episodes should be aimed toward rising high school seniors, potentially involving their families since more seniors tend to be kicked out of their homes. These programs will likely need to begin well before the actual senior year, both because of the increased likelihood of a runaway/throwaway episode happening during that time and because of the evidence suggesting that young people who are experiencing these episodes at a more critical level are prone to drop out prior to their senior year and perhaps become part of the literally homeless youth population.

Homeless youth service providers need to be aware that the typical structured service environment may not work for youth who have had extended street experience because of the developmental need to assert independence and the unique set of experiences that has demanded that homeless youth fend for themselves. Programs and services for homeless youth should:

- be designed with the strengths of the young people in mind
- listen to the specific needs of the youth
- be individually tailored to the needs and the developmental stage of each young person
- be provided in an environment of respect for the youth's experience and ability
- give the youth opportunity to participate in designing their service/treatment plans
- have the goal of not only alleviating the circumstances of homelessness, but also providing young people with the tools they need to permanently change their situation and not extend or repeat the experience.

One possible approach, as suggested by several youth in this study, could be to develop a one-stop solution to the needs of homeless youth that would provide temporary housing, health care, and access to needed government and private services all in one location that is easily accessible by public transportation and well advertised to a broad spectrum of youth to ensure that they know help is available.

### *Policy*

The primary role for policymakers is most likely ensuring that the best level of care is provided with the appropriate level of funding. This requires first funding systematic research into what constitutes the best care (discussed in the following section regarding implications for research). Keeping youth off the streets in the first place should be the primary goal of any successful prevention and intervention efforts that are funded. These prevention/intervention services must be accessible, appealing and non-threatening to the independence that is normal for young people to assert at this developmental phase.

It is also important for those agencies that impact the lives of runaway and homeless youth work together. Policymakers should encourage coordinated efforts among public and private agencies to identify young people who are at risk of experiencing a homeless episode. This study indicated that homeless youth have most often come into contact with at least one public system and in many cases more than one prior to their homeless experience. Increased awareness of the likelihood that these youth will experience homelessness should lead to preventive services. Improved communication among agencies can also help in the delivery of comprehensive services to homeless youth, aimed at both meeting their immediate needs and working towards a long-term solution. The connections between experience in the child welfare

and the juvenile justice systems especially need further examination, and likely systemic reform to change poor practices that lead to youth homelessness.

By working together, the “critical time” of youth homelessness can be leveraged by providing assistance in obtaining attractive and safe housing options, employment, and transportation. Funding increased housing options for these youth that also provide supportive services is likely the best approach to helping youth establish their independence as healthy and safe young adults.

### *Research*

Research on homeless youth needs to move beyond understanding what leads young people to homelessness and what that experience entails to what will lead them out of it, never to return again. This will require research on existing programs and models to determine those that are most successful at preventing youth homelessness and intervening to create long-term solutions, including housing, education, employment, and community life adjustment factors. Creating a literature about best practices for homeless youth can lead to significant increases in funding for successful programs and broader impact for these models.

The research must also continue to focus on strengths, looking for the individual, family, and community characteristics that lead to positive outcomes, so that programs can build on these strengths to improve the outcomes of more youth in broader contexts. We must also understand how the personal strengths of youth impact their long-term outcomes, i.e., whether youth who have higher self-esteem or a stronger belief in their ability to control their personal destiny fare better longitudinally in terms of leaving homelessness and making a successful transition to young adulthood.

APPENDIX A

**High School Runaway and Homeless Youth Survey**

March/April 2009

Please bubble-in the **circle** that best describes your answer. Thank you.

1.	Gender (Only check <b>one</b> response)	<input type="radio"/> Male <input type="radio"/> Female
2.	Hispanic? (Only check <b>one</b> response)	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
3.	Race (Only check <b>one</b> response)	<input type="radio"/> White <input type="radio"/> Black <input type="radio"/> Asian <input type="radio"/> American Indian/Alaskan Native <input type="radio"/> Hawaiian/Pacific Islander  <input type="radio"/> Bi- or Multi-Racial <input type="radio"/> Other
4.	Current grade level (Only check <b>one</b> response)	<input type="radio"/> 9th grade <input type="radio"/> 11th grade <input type="radio"/> 10th grade <input type="radio"/> 12th grade
5.	What is your primary nighttime residence? In other words, where do you typically sleep at night? (Only check <b>one</b> response)	<input type="radio"/> At home with my parents/guardians (this includes foster parents) <input type="radio"/> At a friend's or relative's house with my parents/guardians <input type="radio"/> At a friend's or relative's house without my parents/guardians <input type="radio"/> In a supervised shelter with my parents/guardians <input type="radio"/> In a supervised shelter without my parents/guardians <input type="radio"/> In a hotel/motel, car, park, campground, or other public place with my parents/guardians <input type="radio"/> In a hotel/motel, car, park, campground, or other public place without my parent/guardians <input type="radio"/> Other: _____
6.	In the last 12 months, have you run away from home or been kicked out of or asked to leave the home of your parents/ guardians? (Only check <b>one</b> response)	<input type="radio"/> Yes, I ran away and spent at least one night away from home without my parents'/guardians' permission in the last 12 months. <input type="radio"/> Yes, I was kicked out of or asked to leave my home and spent at least one night away in the last 12 months. <input type="radio"/> No, I have not run away from or been kicked out of my home in the past twelve months. <input type="radio"/> No, I have been on my own or living apart from my parents/guardians for more than one year.
7.	Have you <b>EVER</b> run away from home or been kicked out of or asked to leave the home of your parents/ guardians? (Only check <b>one</b> response.)	<input type="radio"/> Yes, I have run away and spent at least one night away from home without my parents'/guardians' permission. <input type="radio"/> Yes, I have been kicked out of or asked to leave my home and spent at least one night away from home. <input type="radio"/> Yes, I have both run away from and been kicked out of or asked to leave my home. <input type="radio"/> No, I have never run away from or been kicked out of or asked to leave my home.
8.	If you answered "Yes" to Item 6 <b>or</b> 7, where did you stay while you were gone? (Check <b>ALL</b> that apply)	<input type="radio"/> With a relative <input type="radio"/> With one of my friends <input type="radio"/> With a friend of the family <input type="radio"/> With someone you did not know <input type="radio"/> Homeless shelter (youth or adult) <input type="radio"/> Public place (train/bus station, restaurant, office building, etc.) <input type="radio"/> Abandoned building <input type="radio"/> Outside (public park, on the street, under a bridge, on a rooftop, etc.) <input type="radio"/> In a car Other: _____

## APPENDIX B

### HOMELESS YOUTH INTERVIEW GUIDE

Describe your homeless experience for me.

How did you become homeless?

Where did you stay while homeless, and how did you decide to stay there?

How did you survive?

If still homeless/precariously housed:

- What keeps you homeless?
- What one thing would be the biggest help in getting you out of your current (homeless) situation?

If stably housed:

- How did you get out of homelessness?

Micro:

What was life like with your family, before you left home?

What was your experience in school (before and while homeless)?

What supports did you have in the community before leaving home?

What do you wish you had been able to find in the community?

What could have prevented you from becoming homeless?

Exo:

What was your experience with the child welfare system? The juvenile justice system? Special education? Mental health system?

Meso:

Where have you gone for help since coming to Nashville?

What places/agencies have you found most helpful? Least helpful?

What is it about the helpful places that makes them helpful?

Are there places you will not go to receive help? Why won't you go there?

What services do you wish were available to you?

Macro:

What do you think the government (city, state, federal) could/should do to help homeless youth?

|

## APPENDIX C

### Community Based Participatory Research

Community based participatory research (CBPR) is an approach to research which seeks to address systemic social inequalities traditionally represented in the research process through active involvement of community members, organizational representatives, and researchers in all phases of the project (Israel, Schulz, Parker & Becker, 1998). This perspective believes that each of the partners has some expertise to offer, and something to learn from the other partners at the table. The common goal of the research is to benefit the community being researched with some sort of resulting action. CBPR insists that nonacademic researchers are fundamentally involved in the creation of knowledge through the research process.

Participatory research methods are those which emphasize carrying out research with participants rather than simply doing research on them (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). Local knowledge and perspectives form the basis for research and planning, thereby primarily locating the power of the research process with the participants who live the issue rather than with an “expert” researcher who views the issue from the outside. There is a broad continuum along which participatory research projects can be located, from some inclusion of participant’s views on the instruments used or the individuals studied, to a completely integrated program of research that includes participants at every level from research design through data collection, analysis, and reporting.

Several existing studies on youth homelessness incorporate participatory research design methods (Barber, et al., 2005; Bernstein & Foster, 2008; de Winter & Noom, 2003; Ensign &



Gittelsohn, 1998; Farrin, Cheers, Jones, & Venning, 2004; Higgitt, et al., 2003; O'Grady & Gaetz, 2004). Some simply piloted the interview guides or surveys with a small group of staff in an agency or homeless youth themselves and revised the instruments based on their feedback, and considered that participatory research (e.g., Barber, et al., 2005). Others were true participatory research, employing members of the population studied to do interviews with homeless young people or recruiting them to take a survey. These studies were typically qualitative, full of rich descriptions of life on the street and generous amounts of information about the experience of youth homelessness (Bernstein & Foster, 2008; Higgitt, et al., 2003). Ensign and Gittelsohn (1998) combined unique qualitative research techniques (physical observations of graffiti on shelter bunk beds, community mapping, free listing, pile sorting, key informant interviews, and participant observation) to dig deeply into the issue of access to health care for homeless youth in Baltimore. O'Grady and Gaetz (2004) included six peer outreach workers, who were homeless youth themselves and represented a reasonable cross-section of the community they were studying, as survey administrators. DeWinter and Noom (2003) also employed youth as interviewers in a unique study that gathered youth perspectives on the professionals who were providing them services.

This dissertation project incorporated participatory research methods in several ways. First, the study design, research questions and instruments were developed in conjunction with a youth advisory panel drawn from the community of interest of homeless youth, described below. These youth were also actively engaged in developing recruitment materials and assisted the researcher with the recruitment of study participants. Second, the researcher performed member checks of the information gathered in the study with study participants. Where possible the researcher will include study participants in reporting the results to members of the intended

audience (i.e., policymakers, service providers). Finally, in addition to this dissertation, an action research project utilizing PhotoVoice methods is in progress that intends to impact policy on behalf of homeless youth. Although this is not part of the dissertation project, it is a related study which youth will enter as a result of participating in this project and which incorporates the principles of community based participatory research.

### *Youth Advisory Panel*

The project began by convening a group of currently or formerly homeless young people to serve as the Youth Advisory Panel. In this instance, the researcher was looking for youth who could be considered “experts” on homelessness in Nashville, not particularly representative members of the population. These youth were familiar with services in the area and have taken advantage of them in the recent past. The young people were recruited from a variety of youth-serving agencies that interact with homeless youth on a regular basis, through existing contacts held by the researcher with various staff members at this agency. Most of the youth who served on the panel throughout this project were recruited from the Oasis Center, which has Nashville’s only emergency youth shelter, as well as outreach programs to homeless youth and a new drop-in center for homeless youth which opened in January of 2009.

The specific responsibilities of the Youth Advisory Panel were to give input into the design of the survey, the design of marketing materials (posters, flyers, social networking website pages) to drive traffic to the survey website, and the initiation of a marketing campaign to get the word out about the survey. This involved spending time in locations that are known hangouts for homeless youth, which these youth will be able to identify as participants in the community itself. Most of the youth on the panel were interviewed for the study as well. The preliminary results of the study were reported back to this group as a “member check” of the

information gathered to ensure that the researcher was presenting an accurate picture of their experience. As a group these young people will generate ideas for the next steps of action to be taken given the information that has been produced.

The Youth Advisory Panel helped design a survey that was intended to provide basic information about the demographics of the homeless youth population in Nashville, asking questions about such topics as age, education level, age at first homeless experience, reasons for leaving home, the places youth have stayed in the past year, what services they have sought, and their current living situation (homeless, precariously housed or stably housed). A series of questions targeted factors on the various levels defined by the developmental ecological framework discussed within the paper about service use in an attempt to identify relationships between individual, family, community and societal factors and the housing outcomes of the youth. The youth advisory panel ensured that relevant questions were asked in language that was readable and clear.

The intention was for the panel to serve as interviewers with this survey, taking it out using handheld computer devices and recruiting other youth to take the survey on the spot. However, this plan did not meet with the approval of the Institutional Review Board because the youth were not Vanderbilt University faculty, staff or students. This led to a more limited role for the youth as “marketeters,” in which they handed out flyers for the survey and hung up posters in central locations to attempt to attract youth to the study. As a result of this limited recruitment strategy, far fewer youth took the survey than anticipated. The intended analyses comparing stably and precariously housed youth could not be completed on the data gathered due to the lack of statistical power represented by the small sample size.