

Homeless Street Youth: Personal Strengths and External Resources¹

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Who are homeless youth?



Youth between the ages of 12 and 24 years who spend at least one night on the streets, in public places, or in shelters are considered homeless. Around two million children run away from home each year in the U.S., and most are likely to end up homeless (Bender, Thompson, McManus, Lantry, & Flynn, 2007).

What do we know about homeless youth?

Research on homeless youth has explored their challenging living situations and life stresses.

Most findings focus on the mental and physical health risks of homeless youth, including:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Suicide
- Trauma
- Substance abuse
- School difficulties
- Legal problems (Kidd & Davidson, 2007).

Homeless youth are also at increased risk for contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS (Rew & Horner, 2003).

Criminologists believe that homeless youth lack self-control. Low self-control is significantly linked to deviant behaviors (Baron, 2003). Service providers, law enforcement, peers, and society alike often stigmatize this group of youth (Bender et al., 2007). Such problem-oriented viewpoints label homeless youth as deficient or deviant.

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A new look at homeless youth

Current research is moving away from this problem-oriented point of view to concentrate more on the strengths of homeless youth. This view focuses on the resilience of youth, as demonstrated by their extraordinary coping and survival skills. Protective factors that can help homeless youth cope include:

- Self-reliance
- Feelings of self-worth
- Positive motivation
- Reliance on spirituality
- Good connections with other people

Research shows that homeless youth are in the process of re-establishing their sense of self, their relationships with others, and their ability to fit into street culture as well as mainstream culture (Bender et al., 2007; Kidd & Davidson, 2007).

The following strengths have been revealed through interviews with homeless youth (Bender et al., 2007).

1. *Personal strengths: coping skills, motivation, attitude, and spirituality*

Homeless youth are resourceful in their capacity to locate resources, such as free lunches from charity organizations or drop-in centers. They tend to maintain a positive attitude about their lives, believe that their situation will improve, and be motivated by other young people's successful transitions from street life. Some believe that a higher power is watching out for and protecting them (Bender et al., 2007).

2. *External resources: peer networks and society*

Homeless youth rely on trustworthy peers as well as adults for emotional support and protection while on the street. They readily share useful information and resources with their peers (Bender et al., 2007).

3. *Street smarts: Balancing inner strengths with the social environment*

Homeless youth must figure out whom they can trust and find a balance between self-reliance and help from others. This ability helps them to locate useful resources while avoiding being controlled by exploitative people and situations (Bender et al., 2007).

Implications for practice

Community-based programs and service providers often focus on homeless youth's deficiencies and risk factors. This perspective neglects to acknowledge their positive assets and skills. For example, an evaluation of staff-client conflict in a drop-in center demonstrated that staff regularly promoted the beliefs that street youth behave poorly and need to be disciplined and controlled. Such staff-held beliefs create and escalate staff-client conflicts. It is possible that homeless youth desire to express their positive sense of self but are denied and delegitimized by service providers (Joniak, 2005). Moreover, homeless youth may be accustomed to living by their own set of rules. Youth shelters and centers with strictly enforced and numerous rules are likely to become a last resort for homeless youth (Borden et al., 2007).

Effective service programs for homeless youth should be strengths-based, not problem-oriented, empowering youth to gain a sense of control over their lives. Also, it is important for teens to feel a sense of safety that is based on trust, not just on "rules." Programs that focus on skills and strength-building will help homeless youth adapt to hardships and successfully move into adulthood.

For example, health care providers should familiarize themselves with the strengths of homeless youth. This can help them promote healthy behaviors and lifestyles. In addition to improving the coping skills of homeless youth, service programs should help these youth to acquire a sense of self and self-worth and to plan their life course, while providing them with

opportunities to build competencies for adulthood (Bender et al., 2007; Kidd & Davidson, 2007).

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