



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Barbara Ray
312-624-7642

Community-based programs can help homeless youth make the “perilous passage” to adulthood

New book chapter assesses steep challenges facing homeless young adults

NOVEMBER xx, 2005 – Homeless youth face an array of problems that can seriously impair their ability to become productive adults. But research included in a new book suggests that community-based support programs that help these young people avoid contact with the criminal justice system can bolster their chances of making a successful transition into adulthood.

The research into the lives of homeless young adults is detailed in one chapter of a major new research collection, “On Your Own Without a Net: The Transition to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations,” a product of [The MacArthur Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood](#).

“[On Your Own Without a Net](#)” will be a valuable resource for policy makers, elected officials, researchers, advocates, journalists and members of the public interested in society’s response to the overwhelming needs of the homeless and other at-risk groups of young people.

In a chapter entitled “Homeless Youth and the Perilous Passage to Adulthood,” sociologists John Hagan and Bill McCarthy draw on their study of different approaches to youth homelessness taken by two Canadian cities. Toronto adopted a policy that provided housing and welfare support to many older teenagers and young adults. By comparison, Vancouver did not allow homeless youth to receive certain services and provided no housing network for them.

The study found that youth in Vancouver were more likely than those in Toronto to be involved in theft, prostitution and drugs. The authors concluded that exposure to the criminal justice system was a factor in leading young people toward peers who were also engaged in criminal activity and away from employment or schooling.

“This law enforcement complex is an obstacle to be avoided in the perilous passage from the street to a chance at successful passage to adulthood,” the authors write.

The stakes are high. As many as two million young people in the United States run away each year, many becoming homeless. Research has also shown that roughly one in 10 young people between the ages of 16 and 19 are “disconnected” from mainstream society – neither studying or working, and becoming increasingly unlikely to lead productive adult lives.

Research by members of the MacArthur network has found that the transition to adulthood has become more protracted in the last several decades and that more young adults are relying on family members for crucial financial support, housing or access to health insurance. But young people who have been homeless rarely have strong family support as they reach their early 20s. The authors conclude that society must do more to assist this group of youths.

“There is an extraordinary variation across urban settings in the way these ‘street youth’ are helped, or hindered, with services as they attempt to make their way into more secure and productive adult lives,” says co-author John Hagan. “Youth are taking longer to make the transition to adulthood, and we are seeing more of them on the street. That means the lifelines we offer them become all the more important. The good news is that there are some successful urban examples to learn from.”

John Hagan, PhD., is John D. MacArthur Professor of Sociology and Law at Northwestern University and a Senior Research Fellow at the American Bar Foundation. Bill McCarthy, PhD., is a Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Davis and a visiting professor at the University of Toronto.

“On Your Own Without a Net” focuses on homeless youth and six other vulnerable populations of young people – those leaving foster care, the juvenile justice system or the criminal justice system, young people with mental disorders, those with disabilities or special health needs, and those who are transitioning out of special education settings.

The book is part of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Mental Health and Development, a series of more than 20 policy- and research-oriented books published since 1987.

The book is available at many book stores and can be ordered through the [University of Chicago Press](#), at 800-621-8476.

“On Your Own Without a Net: The Transition to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations,” edited by D. Wayne Osgood, E. Michael Foster, Constance Flanagan and Gretchen R. Ruth. ISBN: 0-226-63783-2.

The Research Network on the Transitions to Adulthood examines the changing nature of early adulthood, and the policies, programs, and institutions that support young people as they move into adulthood. Significant cultural, economic, and demographic changes have occurred in the span of a few generations, and these changes are challenging youths’ psychological and social development. Some are adapting well, but many others are floundering as they prepare to leave home, finish school, find jobs, and start families.

The network is both documenting these cultural and social shifts, and exploring how families, government, and social institutions are shaping the course of young adult’s development. The Network is funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and chaired by University of Pennsylvania sociologist Frank Furstenberg.

###