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## Homeless Youth and the Perilous Passage to Adulthood

John Hagan and Bill McCarthy

Life on the street is hard for anyone, but it can be especially treacherous for homeless youth. Reconnecting to the traditional avenues into adulthood, whether school, job training, or employment, is imperative if these youth are to escape the hardship of the streets. In their chapter in *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 Ruth (forthcoming, University of Chicago Press), John Hagan and Bill McCarthy survey homeless youth from two Canadian cities that have vastly different approaches to homelessness. They find that, if supported, and if contact with police is minimized, homeless youth can better regain their foothold on a productive path to adulthood. The authors suggest that frequent contact with the police, for example, can perpetuate feelings of shame, which often lead youth to identify with criminal street-life and away from employment.

### Life on the Street

Recent U.S. figures suggest up to 2 million youth run away each year, many of whom become homeless. In their longitudinal study of 460 homeless youth aged 16–24 living in Toronto and Vancouver in 1992, Hagan and McCarthy find that a little more than one-half of these youth had, before age 18, stayed on the street for more than a few days, and one-third had slept in a hostel.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, one-third had slept on the street and 9% had stayed in a hostel before they were 16.

The findings paint a grim picture of the daily lives of urban street youth in the period when their nonhomeless peers are taking their first steps toward adulthood. Although most young people invest the largest part of their daily energies in benign settings, homeless youth spend most of their time less profitably and more dangerously on the street and in parks, social assistance offices, shelters, and abandoned buildings. Together with friends acquired on the street, they spend much of their time looking for food, shelter, and money. Most remain unemployed, filling their days with hanging out, panhandling, and partying.

Unlike the majority of youth their age, 85% of homeless youth aged 18 or older in the study did not graduate from high school; 30% had not even completed their first year of high school. The vast majority first left high school because they were expelled. Almost one-third of youth had never lived with both biological parents, approximately 60% had lived in three or more different family situations, and 20% had lived in six or more. (For more information on youth aging out of foster care, see Mark Courtney's policy brief in this series.)

Only 14% of the youth surveyed reported that they were in school, and their employment records were similarly spotty. Only 10% worked consistently full-time since leaving home, and about 29% had worked in a nontemporary job; yet, about 17% were working at the time of the study. Predictably, youth often resorted to panhandling, trading sex for food or shelter, stealing, and drug trafficking to survive. Some of these youth also sustained themselves with government support. About one in five relied on some form of support during each month of the study.

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<sup>1</sup> H. Hagan and B. McCarthy, *Mean Streets: Youth Crime and Homeless*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Also see L.B. Whitbeck and D.R. Hoyt, *Nowhere to Grow: Homeless and Runaway Adolescents and Their Families*. New York: Adline, 1999.

## Promoting Resilience: Social Policies in Two Cities

Yet, as the statistics above show, some of these youth do experience modest success in the legal labor market. Nearly one in five was working fairly steadily, and another 59% of the unemployed youth were actively seeking work. In addition to a paycheck, employment exposes street youth to friends and contacts who also work, helping to extract them from the stigma and criminality of street culture. Against steep odds, these youth were anxious and sometimes able to find legal employment during their transition from adolescence to adulthood, revealing great resilience in navigating that transition. The authors argue that effective policy should build on and encourage this resilience. To illustrate, the authors compare approaches to homelessness in Vancouver and Toronto, two cities that take quite different approaches to addressing the issue of homeless youth.

Toronto's approach to homeless youth in the late 1990s was more responsive than Vancouver's. It had defined the age of majority as 16, providing shelter to youth without requiring parental consent in the form of four hostels reserved solely for youth aged 16–21. In Vancouver, by contrast, most statutes dictated that parents were legally and financially responsible for their children until they turned 19, making it extremely difficult for youth living apart from their families to receive public welfare. Moreover, care providers could only offer shelter to those younger than 19 if they first had parental permission. There was also no established network of housing or shelters.

Toronto's social welfare model of providing access to overnight shelters and social services reduced exposure to criminal opportunities, whereas Vancouver's crime control model and absence of assistance, in contrast, made it more common. The authors' analysis showed that youth in Vancouver were more likely to be involved in theft, drugs, and prostitution. This heightened exposure to crime in Vancouver urged youth toward their more criminally engaged peers and away from employment opportunities.

Hagan and McCarthy suggest that contacts with law enforcement combined with the turbulent family histories can foster feelings of shame and humiliation among homeless youth, which in turn can impede their ability to secure and sustain legal employment. Drawing on several psychological and sociological studies, the authors contend that early family experiences of shame and rejection can interact with state-imposed criminal stigma to provoke homeless youth into defiant criminal behavior and unemployment. Employers, parents, and teachers increasingly recognize large numbers of "touchy," angry young people ready to punish any available target for the sins of their past insulters, a process that likely started, the authors argue, with the shame many young people felt as children on rejection by caretakers. This sense of shame among homeless youth, coupled with constant arrests or police contact, can set off a chain reaction of emotions that leads to crime sprees and disdain for any job that, in their eyes, requires menial and demeaning work. Lessening contact with the police by offering youth refuge and by supporting them with needed services may ease the pressures to commit crimes to survive, and set them on course for a more healthy transition to adulthood. Given the findings in Toronto and Vancouver, homeless youth may be most likely to traverse the less perilous passage to adulthood in community settings that promise to include rather than threaten to exclude them.

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The Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy 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 youth's 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 adults' development. The Network is funded by the MacArthur Foundation and chaired by University of Pennsylvania sociologist Frank Furstenberg.