

Developmental and Mental Health Issues Among Homeless Youths

A review of



Mental Health and Emerging Adulthood Among Homeless Young People

by Les B. Whitbeck

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Reviewed by

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Several years ago, I took a position as assistant director of a homeless shelter for teens. It was one of the few places on the East Coast that housed up to 12 boys and 12 girls. We would get referrals from different parts of the country due to the lack of shelters for this population. When I accepted the position, I tried to find out as much as I could about the special population.

One area lacking in the literature was the use of longitudinal studies with homeless youths. Whitbeck's book *Mental Health and Emerging Adulthood Among Homeless Young People* fills this gap in the literature. Whitbeck's work focuses on developmental and mental health issues for runaway and homeless teens, including the prevalence and course of mental illness and substance abuse among homeless youths.

Understanding the extent of the emotional damage that has already occurred among this population or the degree to which persistent homelessness during adolescence affects the onset, persistence, and co-occurrence of mental disorders and substance abuse disorders into adulthood is fundamental to the question of life chances. (p. 16)

To examine issues faced by this population, Whitbeck traces the development of a group of runaway and homeless teens from ages 16–19 through 19–22 years. At baseline, teens 16–19 years old were administered diagnostic interviews that included the Diagnostic Interview Schedule for Children—Revised for conduct disorder and the University of Michigan—Composite International Diagnostic Interview for major depressive disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and substance abuse disorders. The participants were interviewed every three months for three years, with a final diagnostic evaluation when they were 19–22 years old.

The homeless and runaway youths in this study came from small- to medium-sized urban areas in four Midwestern states: Des Moines, Iowa; Lincoln, Nebraska; Omaha, Nebraska; St. Louis, Missouri; and Wichita, Kansas. Interviewers were assigned to each of these areas. Seven full-time street interviewers recruited teens through checking and rechecking locations where homeless teens were likely to be found.

In order to participate, youths had to be homeless and between the ages of 16 to 19 years. “Our definition of homeless was that the adolescents must be residing in a shelter, on the street, or living independently (e.g., friends, transitional living) because they had run away, been pushed out, or drifted out of their family of origin” (p. 26). Of the 455 teens recruited, 428 (94.1 percent) completed both the study questionnaire and the diagnostic interview. Follow-up interviews were conducted every three months, with a total of 60 (14 percent) of the sample completing all interviews.

The author used a variety of measures throughout the study, covering the following areas: conduct disorder, major depressive episodes, trauma histories, substance abuse patterns, dissociative symptoms, victimization, self-mutilating behaviors, suicidal ideation and attempts, and utilization of health services. In addition, Whitbeck discusses the sample’s adult roles in social networks, intimate relationships, economic adjustment, and emerging adulthood. Last, Whitbeck provides an overview of survival strategies, hunger, education, and housing.

Of great interest are the chapters on the traumatic histories and victimization of homeless teens. One third (35.5 percent) of the participants met the criteria for PTSD, with young women being twice as likely to be affected as young men. In this sample, PTSD was also occurring with other mental health diagnoses. The young women in the study were very susceptible to sexual abuse and the feelings of helplessness associated with it:

I was 12, almost 13, it happened for a whole summer every night after he got off work.
And sometimes during the day my mom would leave and go somewhere then he’d do it. I

guess my stepdad felt as if he wasn't being loved by my mom and he didn't know how to show my mom affection so he took it out on me. And at night he pretty much raped me or played with me with his fingers and fondled me (female, aged 19 years). (p. 83)

Caretaker neglect was reported among 83.8 percent of the youths in this sample. Caretaker emotional abuse was reported among 80–90 percent of the sample. Further, 70 percent of the sample reported physical abuse. Thirty percent of heterosexual young women, compared with 46.55 percent of nonheterosexual young women, reported that they were sexually abused. Nonheterosexual young men (17.6 percent) were twice as likely to report sexual abuse as heterosexual young men (8.9 percent).

In the preface, the author notes that it is the first study of its kind that follows homeless and runaway youths into their adulthoods. In addition, it stands out because this study provided a screen for psychiatric diagnoses in adolescence as well as in adulthood. Whitbeck states that the book is directed at policy makers, and, for each chapter, the author provides one page dedicated to policy issues. It would have been interesting if the policy implications sections of the book had been expanded to more than one page. This would be particularly helpful not only for political science students but also for actual policy makers.

The author also reports on rates of substance abuse, self-mutilation, suicidal ideation, and social networks within the sample he studied. This is a very detailed volume, including an overview of disorders associated with homeless teens along with statistics, charts, and tables. The chapters are well written and well organized. Whitbeck's work is thorough and provides a clear picture of developmental and mental health issues among homeless teens. Since this is heavily research based, it may be a challenge to undergraduates as well as to those unfamiliar with the field. I highly recommend this volume to those dedicated to working with homeless teens.