Who Is Supporting Unaccompanied Homeless Youth?

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Four Types of Social Support

- *Emotional support*: offering empathy, concern, affection, love, acceptance, intimacy, encouragement, or caring

- *Tangible support*: provision of financial assistance, material goods, or services

- *Informational support*: provision of advice, guidance, suggestions, or useful information

- *Companionship support*: the type of support that gives someone a sense of social belonging
Social Support Is Associated With Better Well-Being

• Benefits on both mental and physical health

• Two models of social support:
  – Main effects model vs. stress buffering model

• Two ways of assessing social support:
  – Actual support vs. perceived support
Homelessness Can Adversely Impact Social Support

- Homelessness disconnects youth from family, peer, school, and community social systems that are typically important sources of support.

- Some studies have found that homeless youth with more social support actually tend to engage in greater risk behavior.

- To understand social support and its potential effects among homeless youth, the important questions are not only if support is available to homeless youth, but also who is providing it.
Study Aims

• Aim 1: To learn more about the social networks of unaccompanied homeless youth

• Aim 2: Within their social networks, to understand who is supporting homeless youth
Surveyed 419 Homeless Youth

Eligibility criteria:

- Ages 13-24
- Not currently living with family or guardian, or receiving most of their food/housing support from these sources
- Spent previous night in a homeless setting

Randomly sampled from 15 shelters, 7 drop-ins, and 19 street venues in Los Angeles County
Snapshot of the Sample

- Mean age = 20 years
- 63% male
- 47% high school graduate/GED
- 14% employed
- Mean years homeless: 4.6

Race/ethnicity:
- 24% African American
- 20% Hispanic
- 34% White
- 8% Multi/other
How We Collected Information on Youth’s Social Networks

• Participants provided first names of 20 network members ("alters") aged 13+ years who:
  
  – they knew

  – who knew them

  – and with whom they had contact (face-to-face, phone, mail or online) in the past 3 months

• 8,380 network members were identified
Youth Provided This Information For Each of the 20 Network Members

- Gender
- How they met
- Frequency of contact
- Attends school regularly
- Employed
- Homeless
- Provides emotional, tangible support

- Does the network member...
  - Drink heavily?
  - Use drugs?
  - Engage in risky sex?

- Do the two of them...
  - Drink together?
  - Use drugs together?
  - Have sex together?
How We Defined Social Support

- **Emotional support**: “Who can you count on to really care about you no matter what?”

- **Tangible support**: “Who can you count on to lend you money, give you food, or give you a place to stay without asking for anything in return?”
There is Considerable Diversity in the Personal Networks of Homeless Youth

$Avg. \ # \ of \ network \ members \ (out \ of \ 20) \ who\ldots$ 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Average # of Network Members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Met on the street</td>
<td>4.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relatives</td>
<td>3.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex partners</td>
<td>1.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional support</td>
<td>7.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tangible support</td>
<td>6.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>6.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attends school</td>
<td>4.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinks heavily</td>
<td>8.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeless</td>
<td>6.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Of 8,380 Network Members, 44% Provided Some Type of Support

Support Provision

- Tangible only
- Emotional only
- Both types
- No support

- 56% No support
- 22% Both types
- 14% Emotional only
- 8% Tangible only

What Predicts Tangible and Emotional Support?

1) Characteristics of network members

2) Characteristics of dyads (the youth’s relationship with the network member)

3) Characteristics of the larger social network
## Network Member Characteristics Associated With Social Support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Type of support</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More support:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Attends school (+)</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Employed (+)</td>
<td>T, E, B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less support:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Homeless (-)</td>
<td>T, B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Engages in risky sex (-)</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Legend:**
- E = Emotional
- T = Tangible
- B = Both

**Ref group = no support**
# Dyad Characteristics Associated With Social Support

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<tr>
<td><strong>More support:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Relative (+)</td>
<td>T, E, B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Frequency of contact (+)</td>
<td>T, E, B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Drinking partner (+)</td>
<td>T, E, B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sex partner (+)</td>
<td>T, E, B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Less support:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Met on the street (-)</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Met at a service site (-)</td>
<td>T, B</td>
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Tangible and Emotional Support Experienced by Homeless Youth…

• Cannot be understood solely from the perspective of the support recipient

• Rather, it also depends on:
  – the types of social contacts they have
  – the nature of the relationship they share with these contacts, and
  – the social networks in which these relationships are embedded
Relatives: An Important Source of Support

- On average, youth had 3-4 relatives in their personal network.
- Relatives were the most likely network members to be counted on for support.
- Assisting youth in fostering or maintaining healthy relationships with relatives may substantially increase their access to social resources.
Relatively Low-Risk Persons: An Important Source of Support

- Homeless youth receive, or may strategically seek out, support from relatives, friends, and acquaintances that are in the best social or economic position to offer it.

- **THE EXCEPTION**: Relationships that involved shared substance use were likely to be counted on as sources of tangible and emotional support.
  - Relying on support from relationships that also promote risky substance use likely mitigates some of the beneficial effects of support.
Sex Partners: An Important Source of Support

• On average, youth had 1-2 sex partners in their personal network (*but some had as many as 11 partners in their network*)

• Sex partners provided both tangible and emotional support

• Dependence on sex partners for meeting tangible and emotional needs may be an important consideration for HIV prevention programs. Support recipients may not feel empowered in sexual encounters.
Street-Based Peers: Not An Important Source of Support

• Both researchers and practitioners have emphasized the important role of these peers as sources of support.

• But we found that youth especially lacking in support are those whose social networks are mostly comprised of street-based peers who are unemployed and not engaged in school.

• Encouraging youth to distance themselves from street-based peers may not negatively impact their access to support providers.
Implications

• Assisting homeless youth to build relationships that are supportive, and that promote healthy lifestyles, could be combined with programs that focus on individual-level change (e.g., risk behaviors, mental health) or vocational change (e.g., social enterprise interventions)
Implications

• Frequency of contact was a strong predictor of support. Technology that facilitates regular contact with low-risk support providers such as family and prosocial peers is likely to help homeless youth in taking an active role in shaping these relationships, and the social networks in which they are embedded.
Implications

• Empowering homeless youth to create social environments that are supportive and promote healthy lifestyles is likely to have both immediate and long-term protective effects that will hopefully sustain them in future transitions off the street.