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ABSTRACT

Youth homelessness has become a more visible problem in recent years, and is exacerbated by changes in the central city economy, schooling, and the family. This article describes the "Street Youth Employment Program," a program designed by sociological practitioners to intervene into the lives of homeless street youth through a collaborative effort between a socio-medical clinic and an urban university. Program elements included (1) Stabilizing the living conditions of homeless youth, (2) Providing immediate part-time employment for participants on subsidized work projects, (3) Ensuring participation by youth in program policy and operation, and (4) Providing education and on-the-job training for youth.

Of the youth who participated in the program (N = 16), the majority (70%) successfully moved away from living on the street to more stable involvement in work or school. The limited success of the intervention was attributed primarily to the linkage of meaningful employment with stable living arrangements, and attention to medical and mental health needs. It was noted that direct job creation is a more appropriate intervention strategy for homeless youth than pre-employment and job readiness services alone.

Homelessness in American cities has become a increasingly serious and visible problem in recent years. Many cities are facing serious problems in attempting to manage the growing numbers of "traditional" poor and homeless (i.e. older, skid row alcoholics, transients) as well as the increase in homeless women and youth. Although some attribute an increase in the number of home-

less individuals to the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill (Hope and Young, 1984), this is a debated assumption (Snow, et al., 1986; Mowbray, 1985). The number of women on the streets has been increasing (e.g., see Baxter and Hopper, 1982) and there is general agreement on the need for structural (e.g., housing, employment, and a variety of social services) solutions (e.g., see Sexton, 1986; Snow, et al., 1986; Mowbray, 1985). Kaufman (1984) insists that a comprehensive policy, including provisions for a continuum of services, is needed most in addressing homelessness (see also Stoner, 1984 on this point).

The number of single, young adults living on the streets without resources for survival has also increased significantly as a problem in the 1980s. This has alarmed the public and overwhelmed skid row shelters and other social service agencies who are attempting to respond to the homelessness problem (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 1986). For youth who end up on the streets, homelessness is characterized by fear, exploitation and violence, and by the constant attempt to find food and shelter (Young, et al., 1983; Wooden, 1976).

Factors Related to Youth Homelessness

The homeless youth problem comes at an unfortunate time in that most U.S. cities are hard pressed to marshall the resources to meet the needs of an increasing number of homeless youth. Cities' efforts to address youth homelessness are further handicapped by changes in the central city economy, the increasing number of school dropouts, and changes in family structure. As a result, the number of urban youth who are homeless or living in poverty has increased.

The Central City Economy

The youth labor market has suffered dramatically in recent years due to fundamental changes in the central city economy. These changes are most evident in the decline in manufacturing and production employment, which has led to the elimination of numerous entry-level positions which were traditionally occupied by youth (Kornblum and Williams, 1985; Waldinger and Bailey, 1985). Moreover, it has been suggested that remediation efforts, such as job training programs for low income youth, are inferior and that, overall, there is an inadequate supply of summer work opportunities (Kornblum and Williams, 1985). Polk (1984) asserts that these changes have resulted in a "new marginal youth," that is, youth growing up in the inner city without the means or prospects of achieving self-sufficiency and stable employment.

School Dropouts

The literature suggests that most homeless youth have a history of poor school performance and oftentimes withdraw or drop out of school before completion (e.g., see Burgess, et al., 1986; Schaffer and DeBlassie, 1984; Young et al., 1983). The large number of homeless youth who have dropped out and failed to acquire marketable skills further exacerbates the cities' ability to remedy their homeless situation.

Furthermore, there are changes occurring in the mission of the public school which may create additional barriers for homeless youth. The "excellence" movement in education is a case in point. The trend appears to be toward a more rigid and disciplined approach to education, and focuses a greater amount of school resources on the socially and economically advantaged student. This creates the potential for leaving a significant number of disadvantaged youth behind, therefore diminishing their career prospects (Bastain, et al., 1985; Apple, 1985; Smith and Hester, 1985). Observers claim it is the disadvantaged student who will be unemployable and left with reduced prospects for competing with college-bound peers for the highly skilled and well paying jobs in the central city.

Family Structure

Another explanation for the increase in youth homelessness involves the negative effects of dysfunctional families and changes in family structure and stability. The increasing numbers of runaway, abused and abandoned youth illustrate the role of the family in contributing to homelessness. Several recent articles point to physical and/or sexual abuse at home as a contributing factor to many runaway situations (Burgess, et al., 1986; Wiseberg, 1985). Other studies note that some youth are abandoned or "thrown out" of the home because they are unwanted (Adams, et al., 1985). In addition, Wooden (1976) has cited crumbling family structure and increased family mobility as contributing to runaway behavior.

One result of these developments is a new form of urban poverty and homelessness that affects young people between the ages of 15 and 21. This form of poverty is characterized by restricted occupational mobility and disrupted family situations which, furthermore, increases the number of teenagers and young adults who are unable to assume independent lifestyles, and who are without the "natural" support systems traditionally provided by family members. The resulting lifestyle is marked by the following:

1. relatively long term homelessness
2. infrequent and sometimes hostile contact with a single natural parent or step parent

3. moderately advanced stages of drug or alcohol abuse
4. relatively long periods of unemployment or marginal employment
5. and extended absence from formal schooling.

New integrative strategies clearly are needed to respond to the problem of teenage homelessness, and the negative consequences that this marginal existence presents to American cities. Some of the more promising elements center around combining a small range of services directed at stabilization, school reintegration, part-time employment, and youth participation and empowerment programming.

The Street Youth Employment Program

This is a case study of the collaborative effort between a socio-medical clinic located in a central city and an urban university in order to design and implement an intervention program for homeless youth. Specifically, the intervention attempted to identify the service and program elements that would stabilize housing and health problems, and to target work experience and job finding assistance for youth who desired to leave the streets. The overall goal of the intervention was to identify the elements of a model that would enable youth to move away from the street toward stable living and working conditions.

The intervention program was carried out in a major west coast city (1984 population 374,000) with an estimated homeless youth population of 300 -500 (MacRae, 1985; Donough, 1985). The social service agency involved in the intervention operates a small program to assist homeless youth. The youth program provides on-street outreach and operates a medical and prenatal clinic. The program provides homeless youth with emergency food and clothing, and operates a 90-day transitional housing program in cooperation with the county and several single room occupancy (SRO) hotels. The youth program staff provide counseling and case management, and assist youth in reentering school or enrolling in alcohol and drug treatment programs. The agency had been awarded short-term funding to supplement its existing medical and social services, and to target these services to homeless youth. University researchers were initially contacted as consultants for grant activity, and later for summary evaluation. The intervention model which resulted was called the Street Youth Employment Program (SYEP), the purpose of which was to determine which combination of strategies were most effective in dealing with youth living on the streets.

One of the difficulties encountered in creating a program for homeless youth is that, many times, the nature of their "street lifestyle" does not conform to operational procedures of established agencies which serve youth. There are a number of specific difficulties in working with street youth, which are related

to the structural conditions of homelessness itself. Table 1 lists several of the most important of these difficulties the SYEP had to take into account in the intervention program.

Table 1
Circumstances Surrounding Homeless Youth

● Homeless youth do not have access to shower facilities or a place to keep clothing or other personal effects. Therefore they often look and dress in a bizarre fashion.

● Homeless youth may have been living without conventional rules or structure and, therefore, may find it difficult to move to a more structured environment.

● Homeless youth often lack legal identification (i.e., birth certificate, driver's license, etc.) and have few means to obtain them.

● Homeless youth are inaccessible to contact by social service agencies due to the lack of a stable address and access to a telephone. Without access to a telephone, homeless youth have difficulty making medical, employment and other contacts.

● Homeless youth are forced to live in the present, since they must constantly focus upon immediate survival needs. This makes any attempt to plan for the future difficult.

● Existing pre-employment training and training services, such as resume writing and job search skills, do not impact homeless youths' need for immediate food and shelter. Dealing drugs or prostitution may therefore take precedence over completing a job training program.

● Many homeless youth have chronic substance abuse problems, as well as a range of emotional disorders.

● Very few homeless youth have obtained their high school diplomas and may have serious academic deficiencies.

The Intervention Model

The intervention model was comprised of four interrelated strategies:

1. Stabilize the living conditions of homeless youth in order to reduce the disruption to intervention efforts caused by the lack of secure shelter.

The first and most critical aspect of the intervention was to provide temporary shelter and to arrange for health screening for youth participants. Temporary shelter was provided by securing 90-day emergency housing vouchers from the county Department of Social Services; these vouchers enabled the youth to live in single room occupancy (SRO) hotels, the local YWCA, or other low cost housing arrangements. In addition, the youth were assisted in establishing eligibility for a range of social services including food stamps, medicaid, clothing allowances, and health screening and assessment.

2. Respond directly to homeless youths' need for regular employment in order to assist them in establishing healthy, independent lifestyles.

Homeless youth have proven to be difficult clients for federally funded private-industry council (PIC) programs to serve. Many of the young people participating in the SYEP had previously been enrolled in PIC job readiness classes only to fail or give up due to lack of progress in being placed in regular employment. The Street Youth Employment Program was designed to provide immediate, part-time employment for participants on subsidized work projects. The youths worked 20 hours per week at the minimum wage on projects that involved small teams of youth working under the supervision of program staff.

3. Involve homeless youth in decisions affecting program policy and operation so that they might gain greater control over their environment and exert ''ownership'' over the intervention effort.

It was important for the intervention effort to enable participants to assert greater control over events affecting their lives. The SYEP involved youth in the planning of work projects and in setting program policy, thereby increasing the youth's participation in workplace decision making. This resulted in the creation of both a personnel policy for the program that established sanctions for absences and repeated tardiness, and a grievance procedure designed to resolve work-related conflicts. This form of participation was intended to increase ownership and investment in the program, and to develop a sense of accomplishment and competence from the work projects.

4. Provide education and on-the-job training so that homeless youth can learn marketable job skills and become reconnected to schooling.

This aspect of the intervention was designed to train participants in the skills needed to complete the work projects. At the same time, youth were kept eligible for future job choices by being encouraged to complete high school credentials. On-the-job training was provided by project staff and a university faculty member. University students assisted in the development of training materials and other resources for use by program staff. The faculty member led weekly group discussions on work-related subjects (e.g., ''urban parks'') and facilitated project staff meetings. Participants who had not done so were encouraged to complete their high school education (through classes which met GED requirements) while enrolled in the program.

The Participants

Sixteen homeless youth entered the program between October, 1985 and March, 1986. This represented approximately 3–5 percent of the city's street youth population. Program staff recruited participants through street outreach efforts and by screening referrals from shelters in the downtown area. The criteria used for selecting participants were: (1) the youths had to be between

the ages of 16–20; (2) they had to be living on the streets; (3) the youths had to agree to participate in treatment services; and (4) they could not be runaways. SYEP participants were comprised of five females and thirteen males. The age distribution was five sixteen-year olds, three seventeen-year olds, and four each at eighteen and nineteen years of age.

Youth participants varied in terms of the length of time they had been living on the streets. Three of the youth had been on the street less than 30 days; five had been on their own for one to six months; two for as long as one year; and six for lengths of time ranging from two to three years. There were no significant differences between males and females in terms of how long they had been homeless.

Four of the youth (three females and one male) had been involved with prostitution, ten had been sexually assaulted or physically abused while growing up; one female was pregnant and three males had fathered children. Twelve of the sixteen youth (ten males and two females) had contact with the juvenile justice system; four had previously been psychiatrically hospitalized; and three were taking psychotropic medications. All sixteen youth were current or past alcohol or drug users; four were recovering alcoholics, three were recovering drug addicts and four were still abusing drugs or alcohol but were currently in treatment for these problems.

The educational backgrounds of the youth were similar in that all had dropped out of school before graduation. Five of the youth (three females and two males) had since completed their GED certificates; five (two females and three males) had gone as far as the eleventh grade; one to the tenth grade; two each had gone as far as the eighth and ninth grade, and one had only a sixth grade education.

The Work Projects

The Street Youth Employment Program was designed to employ youth at work that had meaning to the youths and value to the broader community. In addition, the program was planned to be small in scale, with a low supervisor-to-youth ratio. The youths worked in small teams (of 4–6 members each) with an adult supervisor. The small group nature of the projects allowed youths to actively participate in planning and policy setting for their work group.

The first work project was planned in cooperation with the City's Bureau of Parks and Recreation. The project involved trail marking, clearing and construction on a section of forest trail that is part of a historic 40 mile loop of walking and bicycle trails which encompass the entire city. The work crews were supervised by SYEP staff and trained by Park Bureau staff in trail design, landscaping and in elementary botany and plant identification. During the six-

months of SYEP operation, the youths completed 2½ miles of trail through steep wooded areas and did landscaping and planting in the city's Arboretum.

The second project was a news and speakers bureau. The youths wrote and produced a quarterly newsletter and made presentations before public audiences on the problems of street life and related issues, such as drug and alcohol abuse, street crime and family problems. The youths spoke before a wide variety of community groups including church groups, social clubs and public school classes.

The news and speakers bureau designed and produced six 8-page newsletters containing short stories, poems and articles authored by the youths. The program approach, borrowed from the successful Foxfire concept (Wigginton, 1978), emphasized the development of writing, interviewing and small group discussion skills. This approach was found to be successful in terms of helping youth to gain an understanding and perspective on their life situations, and to make plans for their future.

Outcomes of the Intervention

In very general terms, the small scale of SYEP allowed friendships to develop, which many times extended outside of the program, thereby enabling the youth to act as confidants and advisors to each other. Program participants also assisted in educating new team members on program operation and policy. Finally, the youth spent considerable time together when not on the job, often times sharing meals and leisure time. These informal associations enabled the youths to establish support systems that created a more positive environment in which to address other social, medical or personal needs.

Of the sixteen youth who participated in SYEP, seven (four males and three females) remained employed on projects after five months. This represents a considerable amount of stability for youths who had been living on the streets and who had very little work experience. Four of the sixteen youths (two males and two females) moved on from the program after successfully applying for full-time employment or returning to school; thus, eleven of the sixteen homeless youths succeeded in moving away from street life to more stable involvement in work or school.

The remaining five participants (all males) were not as successful by the same criteria. Two youths worked for a few days, but were forced to leave the program due to interruptions in their housing; one was terminated from the program for fighting, one failed to comply with drug treatment, and one youth was terminated from the program for being a fugitive from justice.

The limited success of the intervention was attributed to several factors: (1) The combination of meaningful employment with stable living arrangements,

and attention to medical and mental health needs. (2) Recognition that, although most homeless youth are school dropouts, they are not incapable of learning. The youth involved in SYEP were not opposed to learning, but had a history of conflict with teachers and other school staff and, therefore, did not utilize the conventional school to meet their needs. (3) The collaboration between social service agencies and the university, which reflects the fact that complex community problems can be addressed by establishing organizational linkages in new ways.

Conclusions

The major difficulty confronting successful strategies for homeless youth is establishing an organizational network that can provide the specialized services that enable youth to move off of the streets. The reported intervention program blended short and long term services to stabilize the youth, provided education and job training and enabled the youth to perform useful and personally gratifying work. The SYEP brought together housing, food, health, education, and employment services in a way that created a positive support network for program participants.

Homeless youth are similar to other young people in that "make work" projects are generally performed poorly, while more challenging and socially useful work is embraced and done well. Planning employment services for homeless youth ought to take account of their need and desire to make a meaningful contribution to the broader community. In this context, direct job creating is a more appropriate strategy for intervening with street youth than pre-employment and job readiness services alone. The latter services prepare youth for employment, but do not directly provide a job. Street youth need both types of services, with primary emphasis on direct employment.

In the final analysis, this paper is a report on the attempt by social scientists to address a complex and persistent problem in urban areas. The intervention model which emerged was the result of careful collaboration in response to the crush of an immediate problem which has very large implications. The interventionists took into account the structural factors which often account for the failure of street youth to enter the "mainstream" of the job market and a stable lifestyle. By incorporating the natural abilities of the youth, and by allowing them to contribute to something larger than themselves, this model reflected the potential for a much larger effort with street youth.

It is the collaborative effort, which combined practitioners and researchers, that underscores the importance of a clinical sociological approach. With the overarching purpose of intervening for positive change, sociologists were engaged to provide a unique perspective on a thorny social problem. The linkage of program elements to theoretical and empirical analyses of structural and

institutional determinants of homelessness produced a creative approach to problem solving. In addition, sociologists were incorporated into practitioner roles during the course of the intervention (as staff and youth trainers) and in the evaluation process. (The major shortcoming in this respect is that the researchers were not incorporated earlier, which would have permitted a more controlled intervention.) In these ways, sociological practitioners demonstrated productive responses to the challenge of refining intervention procedures for homeless youth.

This case study represents only one effort; however, the central elements of the model call into question the factors which eventually lend themselves to a growing social problem. What is needed (in addition to increased collaboration between sociological practitioners and social service workers) is a comprehensive, national policy which deals with homeless street youth. A good deal of work has been done with other street populations; however, this population of young people may be, in the final analysis, the most important in terms of their long-term impact on our society.

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