

The Social Construction of Deviant Behavior in Homeless and Runaway Youth: Implications for Practice

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Abstract This study examined the social construction of deviance in a sample of homeless and/or runaway youth in metropolitan Phoenix. In depth semi-structured interviews with 14 youth were conducted, and the data were transcribed and analyzed using a qualitative research computer program. The findings from the study point to an emerging theory, which suggests that ambiguous local policies relevant to homeless youth (e.g., trespassing, loitering) resulted in their selective enforcement by local security and police. Respondents described the ways that they adapted their behaviors to the environmental stressors resulting from these policies. Implications for practice are discussed.

Keywords Homeless youth · Deviance · Social construction · Qualitative research

Much has been written on homeless youth and their involvement in criminal activities in the academic literature (Baron 1999, 2003; Bessant 2001; Eugene 1997; Kidd and Kral 2002; Kurtz et al. 1991), newspaper/media (Slavin 2001; Holthouse 1998; Piasecki 2006), and books (Hagan and McCarthy 1997; Whitbeck and Hoyt 1999; Robertson 1996; Russell 1998). While on the street, homeless youth are often exposed to environments with excessive criminal activity. Further, these youth are

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often at risk of being victims of criminal activities due to the unlikelihood they would report such crimes to police (Baron 1997; Kipke et al. 1997). The criminal focus of these youth has been on drugs (Bailey et al. 1998; Baron 1999, 2003), prostitution (Kidd and Kral 2002; Robertson and Toro 1998), and violent crime (Bessant 2001; Ennett et al. 1999; Eugene 1997; Kurtz et al. 1991), which plays a role in the construction of the image of homeless youth as dangerous. Research has also linked homelessness with drug use and conduct disorder (Cauce et al. 2000; MacLean et al. 1999; McCaskill et al. 1998), emphasizing the pathology of these youth. While much of the research on these youth has focused on individual pathology and criminality, only a few researchers have discussed the contextual and environmental factors associated with youth homelessness (Baron et al. 2001a, b; Baron and Hartnagel 2002; Cauce et al. 2002; Hagan and McCarthy 1997). It is important to note that a handful of researcher have begun to look at strengths and resiliency in homeless youth (Bender et al. 2007; Rew 2000; Rew and Sternglanz 2005; Rew et al. 2001; Thompson et al. 2002), which has begun to challenge some of the assumptions about pathology among homeless youth.

Using two types of qualitative data (videotaped ethnographic data and semi-structured interviews), the purpose of this study is to examine the social construction of deviance in the homeless youth population. Some research has suggested that the environmental context may play a role in the etiology of deviant behaviors (Baron et al. 2001a, b; Baron and Hartnagel 2002; Cauce et al. 2002; Hagan and McCarthy 1997). This study uses ethnography and interviews of homeless youth in a university town within a conservative southwestern city to examine the interaction of environmental context and individual behavior in the construction of deviance of these youth.

Literature Review

Homeless Youth in Context

The context of the street creates a unique and complex array of issues for homeless youth. Researchers have found that negative peer affiliations, exposure to crime and violence, and substance use exposure, are characteristics of homeless youth street life (Bailey et al. 1998; Bessant 2001; Ennett et al. 1999; Hagan and McCarthy 1997; Kidd and Kral 2002; Kurtz et al. 1991). Homeless youth have been described as participating in deviant behaviors such as minor crimes (petty theft, trespassing, truancy etc.), major crime (assaults, rape, prostitution, drug dealing etc.), and drug use (Hagan and McCarthy 1997; Kipke et al. 1997; Whitbeck and Hoyt 1999). Therefore, deviance has been described as part of the lived experience of homeless youth. Developmental psychologists have suggested that youth deviance may be both normative and constructive (Chassin et al. 1988). Further, they emphasize that youth are rooted in an ecological niche, and while biological factors play a role in development, they do so in conjunction with contextual forces (MacLean et al. 1999). The sociological theories of strain and social control also provide a framework for understanding the relationship between the environmental context

and behavior of runaway/homeless youth (Baron and Hartnagel 2002; Hagan and McCarthy 1997). Street life functions as an agency of both social strain and social control. The local policies and community attitudes can increase or decrease the level of strain or control for homeless youth. These policies and attitudes serve as barriers to achieving positively valued goals for the youth, and foster negative relationships between the youth and their communities. According to Agnew (1999), these are part of the foundation for societal strain. Further, these policies and attitudes alienate these youth, resulting in a lack of connectedness with the larger social norms of society (Hirschi and Gottfredson 1983, 1985).

Several researchers have highlighted the role of situational contexts in criminality and deviancy among homeless youth. For example, Hagan and McCarthy (1997) found, when controlling for street exposures to crime and youth demographics, that lack of food and shelter were related to theft, and lack of employment and shelter were related to prostitution. Their work shifted the focus of deviance from developmental issues to an emphasis in looking at the situational context of deviance. The idea of situational deviance incorporates aspects of both strain and social control theories (Agnew 1999; Hirschi and Gottfredson 1983, 1985). In the case of homeless youth, the most serious deviant behaviors were produced by the conditions of living on the street. Hagan and McCarthy's work has implications for policy and its role in changing the situational context of the streets. Similar to their work, Baron and colleagues (Baron 1997, 1999, 2003; Baron et al. 2001a, b; Baron and Hartnagel 2002) have also examined the situational contexts of deviance in homeless youth. Baron and colleagues placed a strong emphasis on the contribution of situational factors to street violence among homeless youth, particularly how the labor market/economy related to homeless youths' involvements in crime and substance use. These studies emphasize the importance of understanding the context of street life as it pertains to criminality and deviance among homeless and runaway youth.

Youth Homelessness within the New Urban Context

In recent years, advocacy and support of affirmative homeless policies and services, including those for homeless youth, have dwindled. The diminishment in public motivation is partially due to compassion fatigue, which is produced by an inability to curtail the tide of the homelessness (Duffield 2001; Sommer 2001; Sossin 1999; Stoner 1995; Takahashi 1997). Another contributing factor to the shift in the support for homeless services has been the need for availability of commercial property in urban centers due to rapid economic growth during the 1990s (Aguirre and Brooks 2001; Mitchell 1997; Snow and Mulcahy 2001; Stoner 1995; Sossin 1999). Compassion fatigue, combined with economic factors of the 1990s, created a new negative homelessness sentiment (Mitchell 1997; Takahashi 1997). This negative sentiment is often embedded in the practices of residential organizations, business organizations, and city governments (Oakley 2002; Rosenthal, 2000; Takahashi 1997, 1998).

In the new urban context, the result of this political shift has been to exclude homeless youth from community based support or to target them with punitive

measures (Miles 2003). Local practices for excluding and targeting homeless youth have been also used to target youth of various ethnicities, youth in malls, and street-cruising youth. Therefore, homeless youth are dually stigmatized based on their social and developmental locations, resulting in exclusionary and punitive measures to address their behaviors.

Relevance of the Study

This study is unique, in that it focuses on individual youth behavior as it is related to the macro (political) and community context. Similar to prior research, this study explores the experiences of street youth within an ecological context. However, unlike prior research, this study employs qualitative methodologies to better understand the interface between the community context and homeless youth behavior. Much of the earlier research has examined homeless youth behavior through in-depth case studies (Miles and Sills 2002; Finley and Finley, 1999) or has examined homelessness at the community or policy levels (Mitchell 1997; Stoner 1995; Takahashi 1997). This study is relevant, in that it examines the dynamic interplay between the micro, mezzo, and macro levels and how these systems influence homeless youths' lived experiences. Consistent with this focus, two major research questions were addressed in this study.

1. How does the ecological context influence “deviant” behaviors of homeless youth?
2. How do survival strategies of homeless youth relate to prevailing notions of “deviance” in society?

Methods

Strategy of Inquiry

The interpretive theoretical framework for this study was phenomenological in nature. The principles of phenomenology emphasize the aspects of lived experiences, focusing on specific phenomena (Heidegger 1962; Ricoeur 1967; Van Manen 1990). In this case, the phenomena were the negative homelessness policies of criminalization, relocation, and privatization within the City of Tempe. Phenomenological research seeks the embodiment of an experience. In this framework, there is a realization that the interpretation of these experiences is constructed through a reflexive exchange in the telling and analysis of these experiences (Van Manen 1990). Initial experiences were elicited from raw video data for the *Street Life on Mill Project* (Miles and Sills 2002), which is a video ethnography of the lives of homeless individuals in Tempe, Arizona. Thicker explorations of the homeless lived experiences in Tempe were developed through face-to-face interviews. The video footage and individual interviews resulted in 14 youth participants, which were included in this study. The interviewer utilized bracketing techniques to minimize the influence of preconception and biases that the researcher might hold

(Ricoeur 1967). Van Manen (1990) states that when we interview participants about their experience with a particular phenomenon, it is important to stay close to the experiences as they lived it.

Analysis of Video

The preliminary analysis began with a frame-by-frame analysis of the raw video footage from the *Street Life on Mill* project¹ (Miles and Sills 2002). Through a review of the video footage, any segment pertaining to the homeless' experiences with Tempe's policies related to privatization, relocation, and criminalization were documented by time code. On a later date, these specific segments of video footage were intensively reviewed and re-reviewed for purpose of documenting the homeless peoples' unique experiences. Eight homeless youth participants from the video footage were included in this study. Their experiences were coded into preliminary thematic categories, and transcribed and analyzed using a qualitative research computer program (QSR NUD*IST).

Interviews

In addition to the video ethnography data, six homeless youth participants were interviewed and videotaped. Interviews were scheduled for 2-h periods to allow time for rapport building and full exploration of participants' lived experiences.² Audiovisual techniques provided an alternative or supplement to the extensive written record that is the hallmark of traditional fieldwork while enhancing the ability of the researcher to create a broader and permanent record of the events (Schensul and LeCompte 1999a). Participation in these interviews was encouraged through incentives of phone cards or gift certificates. The interviews were guided by research questions related to negative homelessness policies and preliminary findings of the video analysis. Similar to the video ethnography, homelessness policies related to criminalization, privatization, and relocation were the focus of the inquiry. Criminalization questions focused on experiences with Tempe's three anti-homeless laws (aggressive panhandling, no sitting on the sidewalk, and no urban camping). Privatization questions focused on experiences the large privatized areas of downtown Tempe (e.g., Centerpoint). Relocation questions explored experiences with accessing agencies in a city with limited services. The participants were also asked about their overall experiences with these policies (see Table 1).

Participants

The participant selection process for the interviews took place at two sites in Tempe, Arizona. One site provided services to the homeless population in general, while the

¹ This project was reviewed and approved by a university Institutional Review Board (HS-06294-02). Furthermore the project received a certificate of confidentiality from the National Institute of Mental Health.

² This project was reviewed and approved by a university Institutional Review Board (HS-06982-03).

Table 1 Interview guide

Criminalization

1. What do you know about [aggressive panhandling, sitting on the sidewalk, and urban camping] laws?
2. What is your opinion on these laws?
3. How do they affect you on a daily basis?
4. Have you ever been stopped by the police for [aggressive panhandling, sitting on the sidewalk, and urban camping]? What happened?
5. What do you think about these types of laws?

Relocation

1. Where do you access services for: food, clothing, shelter, health care, job search, transitional housing, and mental health/substance abuse treatment?
2. How do you get to those agencies?
3. How does the lack of services in Tempe affect your access to services?
4. What do you think about zoning services outside of the city?

Privatization

1. What are your experiences at Centerpoint (area bordered by Ash, 6th, Mill, & University)?
 2. Have you been 86'd (trespassed)? If so tell me about it?
 3. Have you ever panhandled [at Centerpoint]? If so tell me about it?
 4. What do you think of privately owned public space?
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other was a drop-in center for homeless youth. Signup sheets for participation in this study were posted at both agencies. From the signup sheets, six youth were selected, five from the drop-in center and one from the generalist agency. The selection process for the video ethnography involved identifying 2 key youth informants on the streets, followed by a snowball sampling procedure. Eight homeless youth cases were identified during the frame-by-frame analysis of the video ethnography, based on their experiences with authority figures and local homelessness policies. Participants in this study ranged in age from 18 to 26, which is comparable with the age range for homeless youth in previous research (Robertson and Toro 1998). While the selection procedure attempted to achieve a balanced heterogeneity of gender and race, this goal was difficult due to the overrepresentation of white males in the homeless population in the community of study. Ten males and four females participated in the study. Two participants were Latino, while the remainder were Caucasian.

Data Analysis

The qualitative analysis computer software program (QSR NUD*IST) was utilized for the data analysis of transcribed interviews. The coding generated during the analysis phase involved formulating themes into a coding tree (Schensul and LeCompte 1999b). In a phenomenological study, the analysis required is a hermeneutical/phenomenological method, which is a three-step process (Van Manen 1990). This reflexive process started with *selective coding* of a subset of interviews, which was used to find major themes that stood out in the data. These were added to the *wholistic codes* already established from the theoretical/empirical

knowledge on the topic, which were the foundation of the interview questions. A coding tree was formed and then *line-by-line coding* was done on the transcription of the interviews. These codes and schemes were then outputted and analyzed again through a *selective coding* process to identify meaningful findings (Van Manen 1990). These themes were transformed into a thematic guide of quotes on the issues homeless people confront in their everyday lives. The use of a phenomenological approach attempts to grasp the essence of a lived experience, not a numerical representation (Heidegger 1962; Ricoeur 1967; Van Manen 1990). Therefore, the final audio/video analysis was done with the participants to get their reflections on the data and thematic findings. Using participants as supplemental analysts allowed for an insider's point of view on the data, and provided a "member check" on emergent themes (Padgett 1998). These themes helped in the formulation of theoretical propositions about the experiences of the homeless (Schensul and LeCompte 1999b).

Themes

Ambiguity of Homelessness Policies for Youth

The criminalization of homelessness is one of the major issues emerging in Tempe over the past several years. The passage of several recent policies, such as those related to urban camping and aggressive panhandling, were spearheaded by the criminalization of the homeless. When asked about these laws, the homeless youth in our study acknowledged that they did not really know much about the meaning of them. However, they described firsthand experience of law enforcement's ambiguous interpretation of them. A few participants said they knew the laws, but their definitions often contradicted those of other homeless persons. One example of this was provided by Manuel (26-year-old male) illustrates the ambiguity of local homelessness policies.

I don't know all of the guidelines of what urban camping consists of. It's been brought up to me, and a lot of the homeless people have been threatened with it or have been told they can't camp because of the law. I can understand that they do not want the homeless to be camping in the City of Tempe. They want they try to keep them [on] the outskirts. They don't want nobody [who is homeless] living in main downtown Tempe. I mean, at one time I was living on Mill Avenue on the balcony of one of the restaurants.

Another example of the confusion about the laws related to panhandling. Some respondents initially thought that any type of panhandling was illegal, until they discovered that only aggressive panhandling was against the law. When asked about the specifics of aggressive panhandling, respondents' definitions differed significantly, to the point that two of them got into an argument over the law. This confusion about laws is highlighted by Geri (21-year-old female). She said that different cops told her different stories on what the laws were.

Yeah. And it's like, you know, they're supposed to be upholding the law, but they don't even know what the laws are. If you don't know what the laws are, then it's absolutely arbitrary.

Not only were respondents unclear about the laws, but several more reported that the police and local security hired by the business community were also unclear about the meanings of the laws. Making the confusion about these laws greater is the fact that the city has not publicized specific or complete information about the existence of them. There are no signs warning anyone about the policies related to "no sitting on the sidewalk," "no camping," or "no aggressive panhandling." When asked about how the homeless are informed about these Tempe-specific laws, Kate Hanley, Director of Tempe Town Council stated, "We haven't been very overt about it."

Anti-Homelessness Policy Implementation

The result of ambiguous policies related to homelessness is the option to enforce them in a punitive manner. For example, "Seven" (24-year-old male) illustrates the ambiguity of the urban camping law, as he tells a story of his interaction with police while "napping" in a public park.

I've literally gotten myself kicked out of this park. They'd (the police) [would] wake me up at 11:30, [and would say] you know about [the] curfew? [I would say] "Yeah man, I gotta half an hour dude!" [Then, they would say] do you know about urban camping? [I would say] "Does it look like I have a fucking tent?"

The police first attempted to kick "Seven" out of the park for curfew violation, then switched to urban camping as a means for removing him from the public park. Another example of the punitive enforcement of the urban camping law was provided by a young couple, who talked about their experience with trying to find a place to sleep.

Tisha (21-year-old female): We've been sleepin' behind the Salvation Army and nobody has bothered us there at all.

Richie (24-year-old male): But the cops are going to start coming by...we got warnings not to stay there.

Tisha: So now we got no where to go...so we have to find a place and hope the cops don't find us. [If they do] they may or may not take us to jail. I don't know. It depends on what cop it is and if he is bored or busy. Most of the time they just tell ya to leave.

Respondents suggested that the selective enforcement of the urban camping law reflected a larger issue of the "policing" of space within the Tempe area. Several examples were given where, by virtue of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, homeless youth were "harassed." For example, during an interview with Jay (20-year-old male) on a public sidewalk, a police officer approaches him and says,

“Stand up! Keep your hands out of your pockets! Do you have any identification?” Jay responds, “Yeah that is what I was reaching for.” As the officer steps away and radios in the information, Jay is asked if the officer is running him for warrants. He stated,

That is what they always do. They think [someone] is homeless, so he must have warrants. I don’t understand the whole logic behind it nor do I care to...It’s completely archaic and it makes no sense. You know how many times these guys have fucked with me for no goddamn reason?

Similarly, Jarod (19-year-old male) described how he has witnessed the Tempe police harassing some of his peers.

They’re (the police) down there harassing people everyday and I’m just not one of them. I think it’s messed up like everywhere. They do the same thing in Boulder. And it’s always targeted towards, like, the homeless kids. I mean it’s ridiculous. They’re sitting there, homeless, out on the streets, or whatever. I mean, they shouldn’t be put through [that], ya know? It’s just messed up. It’s just that [being on the streets] is a lot harder than people think. It’s hard, man, especially when you’re singled out by cops and stuff.

In Jarod’s view, this feeling of harassment creates greater strain in the lives of people who already live very stressful lives. Aaron (19-year-old male) similarly described his experience of being harassed by a security officer in a popular shopping area in Tempe.

I went to sleep at the bottom of the Chase parking garage underneath the stairs, me and two of my friends. Well, we got woken up in the morning [by a security guard] and she said you guys got to leave. So we were like alright, whatever, and we started packing up our stuff. As we finished packing up our stuff and waiting for the elevator to go up to the ground level, the elevator doors open and the same security officer stepped out. She looks at us and says don’t go anywhere. [She] gets off her phone and says the cops are on their way, you’re getting trespassed off Centerpoint [and] you can’t be here anymore. When we asked her why, she said we took too long to leave. So we let the cops come and give us a trespass.

Then 3-month later, Aaron is back in the same area of the shopping district, and is approached by the same security officer.

She remembered who I was and she told me that it was okay that I was on Centerpoint, just to stay out of the parking garage. Well about 10 min later, I got walked up on by a cop. I walked up and there was a cop standing there and he turned around and said you’re going to jail and I spent the night in jail.

Manuel described what he believed were the motives behind “policing” of space in Tempe. He suggested that these practices were intended to push homeless youth out of the Tempe area, where they pose less of a “threat” to the college community.

Well, see, they don't want it in Tempe, because they'd rather have the homeless [elsewhere]. Well, this is another thing, when school season starts and everything...the Tempe police go and hit all of Apache and go hit on Mill and everything, and they go and they ransack all the camps. They ransack all the homeless people and they push them out or arrest them to find out if they have any outstanding warrants. Then they go to Sheriff Joe's, Durango, or whatever. They send them out there [to arrest the homeless youth] for prior things that they screwed up on or [the] mistakes or bad choices [they] made in their life. [College students] have to go pay [their tuition], and [the police arrest homeless youth] to keep the homeless hidden from the city from the out-of-towners—the people who are paying the high tuition to come here for a better education. 'Cause they don't want ASU to be tarnished by the homeless or the riff-raff.

Adaptive Behavior of Homeless Youth

Homeless youth in our study adapted their daily behavior to avoid harassment by police and security. Respondents identified various ways in which they adapted to the enforcement of ambiguous local policies which served to drive them out of the Tempe area. These included avoiding areas which were heavily monitored by security and police, and overtly resisting pressures by police and security to leave the Tempe area.

Avoiding Authority

Several respondents stated that they avoided specific areas (e.g., storefront property) for fear of being arrested. For some of them, it was not worth the risk of being harassed by security or police. For example, while walking down Mill Avenue (the main thoroughfare for tourists and college students in downtown Tempe), one respondent described how he moved into the street in order to avoid the storefront property. In order to avoid problems with security, another respondent stated that he “doesn't even go over [by the storefront] anymore.” “Forty” (23-year-old male) describes how he avoided problems with authority figures,

Right now I can't go over there because I was recently trespassed. So, it is just better to not risk it. Because that guy working security (he points out a security officer), he's an asshole, he knows me and he was the one who trespassed me.

While the policy related to loitering and trespassing may be ambiguous, all of the participants were very aware that once homeless people have been arrested for trespassing, they would not allowed back on the property and could be arrested if they returned.

Jesse's (24-year-old male) describes how, by keeping a low profile “squat,” he avoids problems from the local police related to the urban camping law.

I found a squat that the cops don't know about and haven't found yet. [I] keep it a secret with my friends, and only we know about it. The way most

squats get busted is one kid tells another kid, and that kid tells another kid and that kid tells another kid, and another kid and another kid and soon you've got a whole lot of people coming there and the cops see a whole group of kids mobbing over to some place, you know? [They begin thinking] "What's going on?" If you have two people...and you don't tell anyone about it, it's not going to be busted. That's the way you have to do it. If you don't do it that way, then you're going to get caught for urban camping one way or the other. I mean, know a bunch of the old-school street kids are still down there, and they do the same thing. They have squats and I don't even know where [they are] at. That's the way you keep it secret. That's the way you don't get busted.

Jesse suggested that it is not sufficient to be out of sight with your living space. The police actively hunt for the squats, thereby providing ample reason for homeless persons to keep multiple squats. Several respondents mentioned that they kept several of them and attempted to keep them hidden. Therefore, to avoid arrests for urban camping, the homeless must stay mobile, usually by frequently sleeping in different areas.

Resisting Authority

Homeless youths' experiences with privatized space demonstrated the most overt resistance strategies to Tempe's local homelessness policies. Groups of homeless youths opposed the restrictions imposed by authority by spending most of their day on the corner by a popular coffee house. These homeless youths would buy something small, or get an empty cup with the coffee house's logo on it, and sit on the property as an act of rebellion against the local security's attempts to bar them from the property. One example of this is illustrated by Jarod when he describes strategies of resistance that he used to deal with the local security.

I kinda like to stick it to them. A lot of guys make a minimum purchase, [but] that's not what I do. Some people find cups in the trash that have [the coffee house's logo], and they sit 'em on the tables. You can't sit [in front of the coffee house] relaxing in the sun; that's the big deal [to local security and the police]. The cops have been stopping on the corner by that thing with the flowers in it. [Homeless] people sit around the edges [of it], and cops have been moving [them away from it]. Like, you cannot sit there. They don't give a reason. They just say you can't sit there.

Jarod described a strategy of leaving a heavily monitored area, and then returning later, after police and local security have left. Respondents referred to this as the "cat and mouse game" between the homeless people and the local security. Jared also mentions another frequently used strategy, which is getting a cup that someone discarded or left on a table, and using it to make the claim that you bought something. Another respondent, Jesse (24-year-old male), describes his response to demands by the coffee house staff that he make a minimum purchase or leave:

I'll go walk out with a cup right in front of her and I'll get a refill, and go, "Happy?" You know, for free. I know girls who work in the Coffee Plantation. I'm friends with half of them. I'm friends with the owner. So she said, "Oh, well, the owner's the one that wants to get all of you kids out of here." I'm like, "Bullshit." I said, "The owner came out yesterday and sat down and talked with me. You kidding me?" It's mainly the [local security] members. The cops will roll by and say we can't do that or we need to get up or something like that, but mostly it's the [security] members that have no authority whatsoever who get power happy and start talking shit, basically.

Homeless youths' frustration and desire to challenge the authority of the local security and police were demonstrated in a story from Aaron.

Over on Ash and University, there's the Phoenix Anarchy Coalition, Tempe division. It's an office over there. Well, we had a rally here on Mill about a year ago. But there was a big rally up and down Mill and right there in front of the Harkins Theatres, there was a little fight between the officers and the people in the rally because we got in the middle of the road and we stopped traffic. The whole idea behind the rally was to take Mill back from the officers and all that because they'd pretty much taken it (Mill Avenue) over. It is not public anymore. We actually succeeded for a while. I think it's about time for another rally. It got better, initially. They kinda backed off, you know. But lately, I've noticed that they have kinda forgotten [about] all that. They've kinda forgotten that we're willing to do that, so I think it's about time again.

This rally clearly was the strongest form of resistance presented in any of the stories of the homeless youth in this study. This form of resistance required the support of an organized group that consisted of both the homeless and non-homeless to question the repressive organization of the local security and police. But this type of strategy had some consequences, as some homeless youths were arrested during the protest.

Ecological Model for Homeless Youth

Based on the qualitative data from our study, we propose a model that relates local homelessness policies to the behavior of homeless and runaway youth (see Fig. 1). At the community level, ambiguous policies relevant to homelessness (e.g., those related to trespassing and loitering) are created, and are enforced more stringently toward homeless and runaway youths. This selective enforcement leads to two primary adaptive behaviors of these youth: (1) Avoidance of authority, and (2) overt defiance or resistance toward authority. Youth who chose to avoid authority figures in the community in our study were forced to make accommodations related to their "place" in the community. The goal of the Tempe community appeared to be to increase the level of discomfort for these youth, so that they migrate to a less-affluent area within the metropolitan Phoenix area. Alternatively, youth who chose to resist authority made a political statement, but at the risk of punishment.

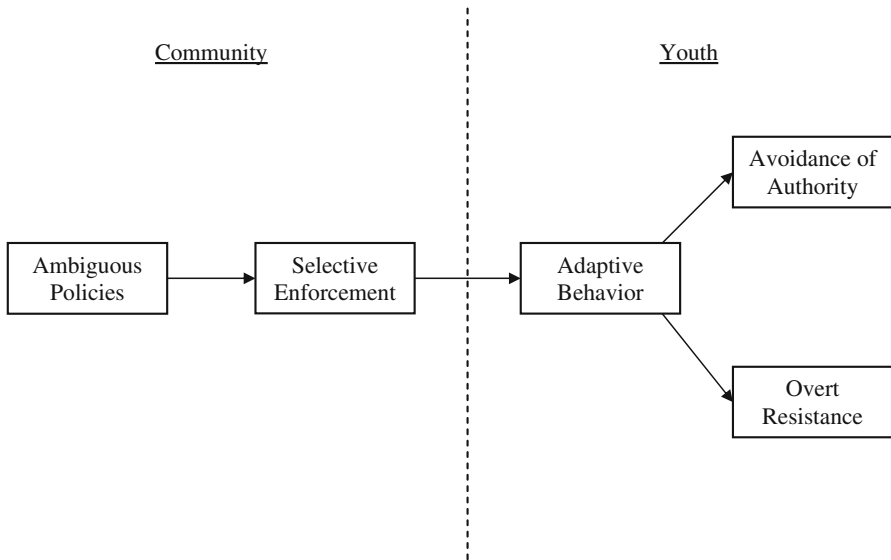


Fig. 1 Ecological model for homeless youth

Discussion

This study examined the ways in which homeless and runaway youth negotiated “space” within the context of a metropolitan southwestern area targeting college students and tourists. The findings from our study suggest that, through manipulation of local policies related to homeless and runaway youth, the community developed a process to drive these youths away from this area. Therefore, youths in our study were forced to adjust their behavior in various ways in order to survive in the area. Through this process of adjustment, youth exhibited behaviors which violated societal norms for public behavior. In this way, youth “deviance” reflected more of an adaptive mechanism to oppressive environmental structures in our study, rather than being motivated by an internally driven pathology. “Deviant” behaviors also resulted from social strain related to the adversarial relationship between the youth and members within their community. Youth in this study developed a keen perception related to the values and beliefs of authority figures, and learned how to adapt to them. Coupled with other day-to-day challenges (e.g., where to sleep and eat), these youth developed inherent strengths in order to survive on the streets. Viewed from this perspective, their behaviors become functional to the environments in which they lived.

Implications for Practice

This study has several implications for practice. First, the findings have implications for strengths-based social work practice with homeless and runaway youth. Developing survival strategies and resistance toward oppressive social structures

can be viewed as strengths and at times are reflective of developmentally appropriate youth behaviors. Rather than eliminating these types of behaviors because they are thought to be “pathological,” the goal should be to translate those behaviors into prosocial outlets. For example, Aaron’s ability to organize the Tempe community around unfair police enforcement on Mill Avenue demonstrates his inherent abilities toward community organization and change. The goal would be to encourage this skill, while minimizing the adverse consequences to him and his peers. This might be achieved by partnering with allies in the community, such as social service agencies and grassroots organizations, which could support his efforts.

The study’s findings also question both the development and implementation of local policies related to homeless and runaway youth, as well as the availability of services for these youth in the Tempe area. Analysis of existing policies for homeless youth may need to be conducted, taking social justice issues into consideration in policy development and implementation. A spatial analysis of homeless youth programs and shelters in the metropolitan Phoenix area mapped against the numbers of homeless and runaway youth in adjoining communities could identify the relative needs for these programs in each community.

Finally, the findings from this study also call into question the use of clinical interventions to treat homelessness. Treating homeless and runaway youth using empirically based practices for conduct disorder, for example, may be contraindicated, because they do little to address the larger social structures that affect homeless youth behaviors. Further, some of these practices, such as family-based interventions, might not be feasible due to the degree of emotional cutoff from immediate family members. Community-based approaches that focus on life skills training and on transitioning homeless youth into adulthood might be more appropriate, as these build on the youths’ independence and relevant social context. Several studies

Limitations of the Study

The study has limitations related to sampling and transferability to homeless youth in other regions outside of Phoenix. In terms of sampling, the findings were based primarily on the perceptions of homeless youth in Tempe, and did not include the perceptions of other key stakeholders and constituents in the area (e.g., police officers, security, government officials, etc.). Because of this, the data and emerging theory presented may be biased toward the views of the homeless youth population. Further, the youth that were interviewed for this study were located in an urban, politically conservative, southwestern region of the United States that is currently undergoing substantial economic growth and revitalization. The findings may not transfer to other regions of the U.S., particularly to those that are not similar in structure and development to the community described in this study.

Conclusions

Using a phenomenological approach within an ecological framework, this study describes how “deviant” youth behaviors evolved from adversarial community based systems, and suggests that these behaviors may be alleviated through local

policy reform efforts toward homeless and runaway youth. Future applied research should examine effective community/homeless youth partnerships which meet the needs of these youth and their surrounding community businesses and members. Within the context of economic growth and development, community leaders within urban regions have a social responsibility to address youth homelessness. In doing this, they will indirectly address related issues of youth delinquency and deviance, and will promote the well-being and self-sufficiency of the homeless and runaway youth population.

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