

Risk Detection and Self-Protection Among Homeless Youth

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Utilizing qualitative interviews with a large sample of 145 homeless youth seeking services at homeless youth service agencies from across three U.S. cities (Los Angeles, Denver, and Austin), this study sought to explore youths' perspectives on ways in which they detect risk and protect themselves on the streets. Results indicated that youth use a combination of internal cues (affective responses) and external cues (reading people) to detect danger, although many times danger was described as undetectable. Certain contexts, includes those that were unfamiliar, difficult to escape, or involved drugs were described as most dangerous. In response to these dangers, youth employed self-protection strategies such as carrying weapons, banding together with trusted others, isolating, or seeking programming to leave the streets.

Trauma experiences are pervasive among homeless youth (Tyler & Cauce, 2002). The majority of homeless youth report histories of familial abuse (Baron, 2003; Ferguson, 2009; Sullivan & Knutson, 2000), and many describe family violence as a factor in their decisions to leave home (Tyler & Cauce, 2002). However, leaving for the streets often exposes youth to violent crime and victimization (Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010), with 45% of homeless youth reporting having been beaten up, 35% assaulted with a weapon, and 21% sexually assaulted while on the streets (Tyler, Hoyt, Whitbeck, & Cauce, 2001a).

The continuous exposure to trauma-inducing experiences has serious consequences for youths' mental health (Stewart et al., 2004). Compared to the general population, homeless youth experience higher rates of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Bender, Ferguson, Thompson, Komlo, & Pollio, 2010; Foy, Eriksson, & Trice, 2001; Merscham, Van Leeuwen, & McGuire, 2009; Whitbeck, Hoyt, Johnson, & Chen, 2007). Rates of PTSD are particularly high among youth who have experienced both early abuse prior to leaving home and later victimization once homeless (Whitbeck et al., 2007). Chronic and repeated victimization and associated symptoms of PTSD such as avoidance, numbing,

and hyperarousal (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Stewart et al., 2004) may inhibit youth from engaging with and trusting formal and informal support systems (Auerswald & Eyre, 2002). Without the tangible and emotional supports provided by these pro social interactions, youth may fall behind in acquiring social and emotional skills (McManus & Thompson, 2008) necessary for transitioning off the streets.

The current study investigated youths' perceptions of dangerous situations, how they detect risk, and how they protect themselves from dangers inherent on the streets. Because homeless youth face pervasive danger in their day-to-day lives, understanding their ability to detect and respond to potentially risky situations is critical to developing services to prevent further exposure to harm and deleterious mental health symptoms associated with on going victimization.

Background Literature

Research has yet to identify strategies homeless youth use to detect risky and dangerous situations. Rather, the homeless youth literature focuses on identifying situational and behavioral risk factors for victimization as well as delineating youths'

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methods of self-preservation and self-protection. This previous work indicates that homeless youth are at increased risk for victimization when they are transient (Ferguson, Bender, Thompson, Xie, & Pollio, 2012), abuse substances (Bender et al., 2010), commit criminal acts (Tyler & Johnson, 2004), associate with delinquent peers, remain on the streets for longer periods of time (Yoder, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2003), and engage in survival behaviors to earn money or obtain resources on the streets (Tyler et al., 2001a; Tyler, Hoyt, Whitbeck, & Cauce, 2001b; Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Bao, 2000; Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Yoder, 1999). Furthermore, those youth who lack adequate resources, such as employment and housing, often find themselves excluded from traditional social networks, which intensifies their risk for trauma and victimization (Gaetz, 2004).

Research on self-protection suggests that homeless youth develop “street smarts” as a way to navigate around potential dangers (Bender, Thompson, McManus, Lantry, & Flynn, 2007). Homeless youths’ street smarts evolve as they gain more exposure to street life. Youth become more experienced with the street culture, learn who may be trustworthy, and which places are safe (Bender et al., 2007). To avoid the various dangers on the streets, homeless youth typically rely on basic fight or flight mechanisms for self-preservation and protection (Mounier & Andujo, 2003).

Although little is known about risk detection among homeless youth or adults, the ability to detect cues that indicate potential danger has garnered significant research attention as a risk factor for victimization, particularly in the sexual assault literature (see Chu, DePrince, & Mauss, under review; Marx & Soler-Baillo, 2005). Indeed, safely navigating potentially dangerous situations likely involves many steps, from initially detecting potential danger cues to labeling cues as danger risks, and ultimately generating effective responses (Freyd, 1996). Successful detection and labeling of risk cues likely involve cognitive as well as emotional or affective processes, as illustrated by individuals’ descriptions of sensing danger through intuitive or instinctual reactions based on previous experience with others or their surroundings (Slovic & Peters, 2006).

Research on cognitive processes affecting risk detection emphasizes the important role previous trauma can play in inhibiting risk-detection abilities (Cromer, Stevens, DePrince, & Pears, 2006). Experiencing childhood maltreatment increases individuals’ risks of subsequent victimization (Cloi-

tre, 1998; DePrince, 2005; Wyatt, Guthrie, & Notgrass, 1992); this link between familial abuse and subsequent street victimization is supported in the homeless youth literature as well (Thrane, Hoyt, Whitbeck, & Yoder, 2006). Some have suggested that a youth who forms attachment to, and becomes dependent upon, a caregiver perpetrator is less likely to perceive the relationship as abusive, and this misperception could generalize to missing risk cues in other interpersonal interactions (Freyd, 1996). A range of cognitive factors may explain this process. Dissociation—a disconnection in functions of memory and perception often resulting from previous trauma—may be responsible for individuals missing risk cues, underestimating threats, having difficulty processing abuse-related information, and making errors in social reasoning (DePrince, 2005; DePrince & Freyd, 1999; Sandberg, Lynn, & Matorin, 2001). For example, foster care children with high levels of dissociation have difficulty with tasks requiring inhibition and auditory attention, and thus may be less likely to selectively attend to danger cues and apply self-protection strategies (Cromer et al., 2006).

Other work has focused on the importance of emotional cues in risk identification. Although in low-risk situations individuals rely on logic and organized thoughts to inform their decisions, when in danger intuition or instinct are frequently responsible for determinations of risk and drive individuals’ ensuing reactions (Slovic & Peters, 2006). The emotion of fear, for example, often occurs in situations where the individual has little control and is uncertain of his or her surroundings; this fear response elicits perceptions of high risk (Lerner, Gonzalez, Small, & Fischhoff, 2003). Subtler feelings or affective responses, often experienced in calmer states before crisis situations arise, can be useful to guide risk detection and increase a sense of safety (Slovic & Peters, 2006). Thus, although careful logical analysis of one’s situation may be helpful in avoiding risk, affective reactions, intuition, or “gut feelings” often come more quickly and more easily to individuals and thus may be more efficient means of identifying danger (Slovic & Peters, 2006).

Particularly among youth with histories of victimization, errors of either omission or commission in response to danger cues can affect overall risk-detection ability (e.g., DePrince, 2005). For example, individuals with victimization histories demonstrate greater difficulty correctly identifying violations of social and safety rules compared to nonvictimized individuals (DePrince, 2005). In

addition, even in the face of accurate risk detection, individuals' behavioral responses aimed at self-protection may be unhelpful (Sandberg et al., 2001).

Recognizing the elevated rates and serious consequences of victimization among street-involved youth, it is critical to better understand strategies they use to detect risks for danger in their environments. Although the literature notes that the majority of homeless youth fear victimization (Kipke, Montgomery, Simon, & Unger, 1997), no known studies have examined how these youth recognize dangerous situations and employ self-protection strategies. Utilizing qualitative interviews with a large sample of 145 homeless youth across three U.S. cities (Los Angeles, Denver, and Austin), this study sought to explore youths' perspectives on ways in which they detect risk and protect themselves on the streets. Our exploration views risk and protection as interrelated—a process by which youth must first identify dangerous contexts and interactions and then determine methods of self-protection when faced with these risks. As such, this study aimed to address the following three research questions: (1) How do homeless youth detect risky and dangerous situations? (2) What contexts, environments, individuals do they perceive as dangerous? and (3) What behavioral strategies do they employ to protect themselves against victimization? Better understanding youths' perspectives may inform the development of interventions aimed at preventing victimization among this vulnerable population. Future efforts to help homeless individuals avoid victimization during the important developmental stage of late adolescence and early adulthood are also likely to aid them in seeking safety and stability.

METHOD

Sample and Recruitment

Through purposive sampling, 145 street youth were recruited through host agencies serving homeless youth in Los Angeles ($n = 50$), Denver ($n = 50$), and Austin ($n = 45$). The sample averaged 20 years of age ($SD = 1.4$), was mostly male ($n = 95$; 65.5%), and was ethnically diverse (32.4% White, 31% Black, 22.8% Latino, and 13.8% other). The majority of the sample currently lived on the streets ($n = 89$; 61.4%) as opposed to other forms of short-term shelter ($n = 56$; 38.6%). On average, youth in the sample had been homeless 30.79 months ($SD = 28.74$) or 2.6 years. The sample reported high rates of

victimization on the streets, with the majority ($n = 110$, 75.9%) reporting experiences of indirect victimization such as witnessing assaults or being threatened with serious bodily injury or death; an even larger proportion ($n = 123$; 84.8%) reported experiences of direct victimization such as physical assault, sexual assault, and robbery. Table 1 displays detailed sample characteristics.

Youth were asked to participate in semi structured qualitative interviews that took place as part of a larger mixed-methods study with 601 youth across the three cities. The first 50 youth at each site who participated in the broader study were invited to also participate in a qualitative interview section. Host agencies included drop-in centers that provide case management, referral services, and basic subsistence items (food, hygiene supplies); shelters that provide short-term (40 days) residential services, counseling, and GED preparation trainings; and transitional housing that offers temporary (6 months) apartment-style residential services. Each principal investigator received human subjects' approval from her university Institutional Review Board.

Recruitment occurred between March 2010 and April 2011. Procedures were nearly identical across cities with minor variations due to services emphasized in each location (e.g., more crisis shelter users in Los Angeles and more drop-in service users in Denver and Austin). Inclusion criteria consisted of 1) being 18–24 years of age, 2) spending at least

TABLE 1
Sample Characteristics

	Frequency	%
Gender		
Male	95	65.5
Female	50	34.5
Ethnicity		
White	47	32.4
Black	45	31.0
Latino	33	22.8
Other	20	13.8
Current living situation		
Streets	89	61.4
Short-term shelter	56	38.6
Experienced victimization on streets		
Direct victimization	123	84.8
Indirect victimization	110	75.9
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age	20	1.4
Months homeless	30.8	28.8
Intercity moves since homeless	3	3.5

2 weeks away from home in the month before the interview (Whitbeck, 2009), and 3) providing written informed consent. Youth were excluded if they were incapable of comprehending the consent form because of cognitive limitations (psychotic symptoms or developmental delays) or if they were noticeably intoxicated at the time of the interview. In the latter case, youth were asked to return for an interview at a time when they were not impaired. Agency case managers determined whether individuals were eligible for recruitment based on their knowledge of each individual and his or her current level of sobriety before referring eligible youth to research staff. Research staff consisted of masters- and doctoral-level graduate students in social work (approximately 2–3 per site), who were trained by the principal investigator at each site regarding background on homeless youth and interview protocols. Research staff interviewed youth in a private office at the host agency to assure confidentiality where they began by explaining the study procedures and securing written consent. Interviews took approximately 1 hr, and youth were compensated with a \$20 gift card for a local food vendor. Each interview was audiorecorded and transcribed with the participant's permission.

Interview Guide

Individual qualitative interviews were conducted using a semi structured interview guide. A core list of questions provided a preliminary structure for interviewers, who were then given autonomy to add prompts and explore issues that were identified as important to the individual participant. The interview focused broadly on the topic of trauma, with specific open-ended questions relevant to this analysis querying youths' perspectives on (1) detecting risk ("How do you know when you are getting into a dangerous situation?"), (2) dangerous contexts ("When are you most in danger? Where are homeless youth most in danger? Which people are most dangerous?"), and (3) self-protection strategies ("Life on the streets can be dangerous. ... What do you do to protect yourself or keep yourself safe? What advice would you give a youth who was new to the streets about how to avoid being harmed? Please be specific about how they might protect themselves.").

Data Analysis

Audio recordings of qualitative interviews were transcribed, and transcripts were analyzed using

an iterative process (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Patton, 2001) involving the lead author and two research assistants. Members of the research team began by examining the 50 Denver transcripts to identify major codes or categories (low inference codes) directed by the core questions asked. The interview guide thus served as a template for the initial codes of risk detection, dangerous contexts, and self-protection strategies. Each team member used Atlas.ti software to code statements within each major code. Agreement among coders was compared after coding the first five transcripts; 80% agreement was achieved. Following discussion and clarification, agreement among coders was compared again after coding the next five transcripts, at which time 96% agreement was achieved. Established guidelines suggest interrater agreement ranging from 66% to 97% is adequate in qualitative research (Boyatzis, 1998). Once consistency was established, each coder took responsibility for coding the remaining transcripts into the specific themes.

Once each statement had been categorized into a major code, Atlas.ti reports were printed listing all participant quotations for each major code. The team utilized a high-inference coding process (axial coding) by reading through each report multiple times to identify a list of themes that emerged from the data. This list of themes was then used to identify each individual quotation (phrase or sentence) that supported each theme. The research team then reviewed printed reports of each theme and identified specific statements that provided the typical participant responses. Interpretations of the categorized statements were then summarized and elaborated upon to establish connections using memoing (personal note-taking). Summaries of themes were reviewed by multiple team members for their adequate representation of participant responses (Lofland, 1995). Coders then used this coding template to code Austin and Los Angeles transcripts. Novel material from Austin or Los Angeles that did not fit into the established coding template was bracketed and analyzed separately to allow for new themes to emerge from these sites. Denver transcripts were then reexamined using the revised coding template to ensure that data from all three sites were incorporated into the final coding template. Whenever possible, we used youths' original words (in quotation marks) to describe themes in an attempt to capture youths' specific language and terminology. When full quotes were provided to illustrate themes, demographic characteristics of the participant were indicated and a pseudonym

was given. Furthermore, for each theme, the percentage of youth endorsing that theme was provided to indicate how commonly each theme occurred in the data.

FINDINGS

The findings below are organized by research question and major code, including three major codes: (1) risk detection, (2) dangerous contexts, and (3) self-protection. Major codes, related themes, and exemplary quotes are displayed in Table 2.

Research Question #1: How Do Youth Detect Risk?

In regard to the major code, risk detection, three themes emerged from the youth interviews; youth described (1) internal risk cues, (2) external risk cues, and (3) struggling to identify risk.

Internal cues. To detect danger, half of the youth interviewed (51%) noted that they rely on

their intuition and attend to internal cues to sense possible threats. They intuitively recognized ominous “vibes” connected to specific situations or people. For example, if a person’s “aura” or “air” changed, this indicated danger was looming. Using their instinctive minds, they acknowledged situations that did not “feel right” or felt “fishy” and sensed trouble coming. This “animal-like instinct,” or vibe, was referred to as mysterious, with something “clicking” inside that alerted them. Feeling instinctually uncomfortable, youth trusted their “guts” or “common sense” to pick up on vibes that indicated danger. Ryan, age 22, used a snake analogy to describe this instinctual reaction: “Well, you know the difference between a garden snake and a rattlesnake, right? Okay, it’s just like that. A garden snake, you’re just gonna like, ‘Oh crap. A snake.’ Rattlesnake, you’re like, ‘Oh sh*t!’ You know? And it’s a lot like that.”

Youth referred to physical and physiological reactions that, in the moment, alerted them to danger. Some youth described “this little numbing type feeling” or a “tingling sensation” in

TABLE 2
Codes, Themes, and Exemplary Quotes

<i>Major Code</i>	<i>Themes</i>	<i>Exemplary Quote</i>
Risk detection	Internal cues	You just get butterflies in your stomach, really. Like it doesn’t feel right. I don’t really know how to explain it—it just doesn’t feel right.
	External cues	If they try to get you to deviate from something you’re trying to do by yourself or they’re trying to get you to do something they want to go do. If a person doesn’t want to see you be successful or do something to benefit yourself for the day it just clicks in my head.
	Struggling to detect risk	They are real friendly and they try to put on a facade that they are a good person and they have your back. And then one day, you can go somewhere with them, and they just turn their back on you and you would be put in harm’s way.
Dangerous contexts	Unfamiliar territory	When I’m in a different neighborhood. Well the times I’ve really been most in danger is in the areas where I’ve never been in before. Period. I don’t know it, they don’t know me, you know— it’s 50-50 there.
	Stuck and trapped	But if you feel intimidated by someone and you feel like somebody is gonna come after you or something, you just catch, like... You freeze for a little bit before you actually come up to reality. Once you come back to reality, that’s when you... Like, you pick yourself up, like, ok... You need to get out of the house before anything happens.
	The drug scene	Like, if you’re out at a party or something and you know people are getting too drunk and you can just kind of see that they’re going down on a hill. It’s like I better get away from these people before something bad happens.
Self-protection	Carrying weapons	I usually just carry like a knife or probably a bat, like with some tape or some tacks on there or something like that. I keep that up in my house. So, no guns or nothing like that. I don’t own no guns. But, I mean, just like small things, you know? Or just my fists, you know?
	Someone to trust	I watch my friends. My inner circle is really tight. I don’t take to new faces, knowing who I can trust in every situation.
	Keep to yourself	I guess it’s just from learning too being on the streets and learning like the number one rule is: don’t trust anyone, the only people you can really trust is yourself.
	Mindset to leave streets	Like keep your mind, you know, like focused on what you gotta do for the day or the week or the month or whatever. Just to get yourself out of the situation.

their bodies; others indicated racing hearts, feelings of panic, or “butterflies” or a “weird feeling” of knots in their stomach. Tingles in the spine or hair rising on the back of the neck also preceded danger. Craig, age 20, explained, “Like, I just get a sour taste and the air smells sour. And that horrible deafening quiet. Before everything, all hell breaks loose.” Similarly, another youth, John, age 21, noted, “You just get butterflies in your stomach, really. Like it doesn’t feel right. I don’t really know how to explain it—it just doesn’t feel right.” Some youth sense things are wrong all over, with one describing: “You’ll get an uneasy feeling. Like in your stomach, heart, mind. Everywhere” (James, age 18). These physical and physiological reactions were extreme and intense and often prompted youth to make decisions. Gina, age 18, remarked:

I remember a day when there was a little pathway under the street, and I was staying there and um, I heard gunshots and I heard footsteps; not running, but getting closer and closer. It felt like my body went numb and I felt a knot—a really tight knot in my stomach. And I was literally wondering: “Should I run? Should I stay? What should I do?” And um, I chose to quietly grab my things and walk away. I crossed the street and I walked to the closest main street. And I pretended to be a pedestrian. And luckily, um, that day, they killed two other bums. And had I been there, that could have been me.

Intuition was explained as something that might be developed over time. Youth related previous experiences when they did not sense dangerous situations and were hurt as a result. For example, Lisa, age 20, shared:

When I was 18, I just liked the friends that I had, that were close to me, it was, um, I didn’t really have good intuition with them. It hurt me a lot. So I couldn’t really tell if that was good or bad but now I’ve learned from people. So... I don’t know. I don’t, I don’t hang out with people who do drugs. So that’s one thing.

Youth learned from watching others and their own experiences to detect risk and make decisions to avoid dangerous situations. Difficult and challenging street life gave youth the abilities to build risk detection skills. For example, Chris, age 19, shared:

Generally it’s very obvious for me because... I’ve been around a lot of dangerous situations with my family and I’ve gone through a lot of abuse situations so ... I’ve dealt with drugs, I’ve dealt with sexual abuse, I’ve dealt with uh, physical abuse and emotional abuse. Generally when I’m around people I can tell if they’re going to lead me into a situation that I am not going to want to be in.

Upon noticing intuitive or gut-level warning signs, youth used self-talk to evaluate the situation and make a quick decision. For example, Shana, age 20, described her internal dialogue:

Sometimes I can’t really tell unless I talk to them more to see. But if I can’t put my finger on it, my body will start to get, like, this little numb aching type feeling. Then it’ll, like, it’ll have my mind racing and stuff, and when my mind starts racing that’s when I sit there and think, like, “Hold on, this person could, is this person trying to do something to hurt me?”

Another youth, Maria, age 21, stated:

Sometimes I can sense it. Like I will get a little tingling feeling. It is like, okay, I should not be in this area or I shouldn’t be doing this. I need to think about my baby and what I am doing to endanger it. In order to keep it safe I need to make sure I am safe and stay in a safe area away from all the dangers cause if something happens to me I know it will also happen to my child as well and I don’t want that.

External cues. Similar to relying on internal cues, half of the youth interviewed (50%) also appraised external cues that were apparent in the way individuals approached them. They scanned their environments for individuals with suspicious intentions. Numerous homeless youth discussed “reading people” or watching the reactions of others as helpful danger cues. Sometimes these risk cues were explained vaguely. Certain “people had airs about them,” and individuals who seemed angry or upset could pose risk, as could those who appeared mentally unstable, suspicious, and “sketchy or shady.” Other descriptions included specific actions they scrutinized; for example, youth watched others’ facial expressions, lack of eye contact, and attire (wearing gang colors) to determine if they posed a risk. Body language and

mannerisms were key signals, including observing people who appeared nervous by fiddling with their hands, may not be telling the truth, may be agitated, or who may be high on substances.

Youth reported paying close attention to how individuals approached and interacted with them. People who came towards them too directly, snuck up behind them, "came on" especially strong, or approached them on the street with invitations to unfamiliar places were viewed with suspicion. Also concerning were people who watched them, stared at them "with certain intentions", pursued conversations with them, and "asked weird questions." Youth were also suspicious of people who appeared too nice or friendly when the youth did not know them, or who repeatedly offered unsolicited assistance, or worried excessively about them. For example, Laila, age 20, related her experiences:

If you're asked to do something that you don't want like, "You should do this and we'll give you money or we'll help you out with this person or you'll like sleep at our house with us tonight." If they try to get you to deviate from something you're trying to do by yourself or they're trying to get you to do something they want to go do. If a person doesn't want to see you be successful or do something to benefit yourself for the day it just clicks in my head.

Invading personal space was also a suspicious behavior; when someone tried to "get too close," they were perceived as possibly dangerous. Youth suggested one should always be scanning their surroundings to identify dangerous people or situations.

Struggling to detect risk. Two-fifths (42%) of the youth interviewed appeared to struggle to detect risk and described never knowing where or when danger may appear. Some blamed this ignorance on lack of experience, but most blamed the unpredictable nature of the circumstances of their environment. They suggested that one could never tell if a person or situation would "turn sour" or "surprise" them. These youth described making mistakes in determining whom they could trust and who could pose harm. In some situations, youth appeared to mistakenly trust strangers without noticing the danger until it was imminent. Lonna, age 18, shared the following experience:

Me? I can never tell at first. Ever. But once, I went to guy's house that I didn't know, I

just met him that day and we started talking, we took the bus to his house um, and then we were in his house and started smokin' and all that and it turned into, it turned wild, where I had to call the police because he hit me so I had a big old bruise on my back. He hit me with a frying pan. So see, in that situation 'cause I didn't give him anything, like sex or anything so, that's why he hit me with a frying pan. Yeah, he went to jail. And I did get arrested for possession of crack.

Participants stated that the most dangerous situations were ones in which people were mistakenly trusted – situations where someone they thought they could "rely on and trust the most" later turned out to be dangerous. These people acted "fake" and made the youth believe they were safe when they actually were not. Maria (age 21) described:

They are real friendly and they try to put on a facade that they are a good person and they have your back. And then 1 day, you can go somewhere with them, and they just turn their back on you and you would be put in harm's way.

Youth described often being deceived by individuals' appearance or behaviors. Ryan (age 22) noted:

I know bikers out there that listen to opera. They have bunnies as pets. And, ah, they're the nicest people you run into. Whereas, there's a guy wearing a Brooks Brothers suit. He's got a 9 mm in his pants. It's just the situation comes up and then you deal with it the best you can.

Youth believed that one "really couldn't tell" who was dangerous and that "you never know" what might happen. This random occurrence of danger was related to a sense of lack of control over others in one's environment and the potential to be in the "wrong place at the wrong time." Youth described danger lurking "around every corner" and felt the need to always be prepared to protect themselves; for example, one noted: "when I got mugged or jumped, I never really knew until like a few seconds before, and by that time it was too late. So I really don't know when I'm getting into a situation like that."

Research Question #2: In What Contexts are Youth in the Most Danger?

In regard to the major code, dangerous contexts, three themes emerged from youth interviews; youth described (1) being in unfamiliar territory or with people they did not know, (2) feeling trapped or stuck in inescapable situations, and (3) spending time with individuals who use or sell drugs.

Unfamiliar territory. One-third (34%) of the youth reported that they were most at risk in new or unfamiliar situations when they were not sure where they were or who could be trusted. For example, Craig (age 20) stated:

When I'm in a different neighborhood. Well the times I've really been most in danger is in the areas where I've never been in before. Period. I don't know it, they don't know me, you know—it's 50-50 there.

This unfamiliarity often occurred when youth arrived in a new city or neighborhood and needed to secure basic resources such as food and a safe place to stay. They talked about being frequently unaware of people or places to avoid in these new surroundings and felt particularly vulnerable. Lacking familiar support systems or a friendly place to “couch surf,” these youth had to take risks to meet their needs, including relying on strangers, panhandling, or engaging in survival behaviors to make money. In these unfamiliar environments, youth often felt isolated and alone, surrounded by people they did not know and could not trust.

Stuck and trapped. Slightly more than two-fifths (44%) of the youth described feeling particularly vulnerable in situations where they could not easily make decisions to leave. At times, youth found themselves sleeping in dangerous places where they would be vulnerable to whoever discovered them. Sleeping under trees in parks near pathways, under streets, and in dark alleys alone where they would have difficulty escaping if approached increased their sense of danger. Although youth chose these more secluded locations to avoid police who monitored public spaces, these locations were also more dangerous. In addition to sleeping arrangements, youth described feeling stranded and stuck in social interactions that spontaneously erupted and were difficult to escape: “the scene gets elevated and kind of hostile and you don't know what to do.” Youth sensed

tension rising, noticed conversations stop, and a shift in energy, but often felt trapped.

Participants also talked about being coerced into dangerous situations; one youth explained feeling at risk when “people ask you to do things you don't want to do and offer you incentive to do it.” For some youth, the most dangerous individuals appeared in the form of older, more experienced people on the street. Because of their experience, these individuals possessed more knowledge about street life and used this wisdom to hurt less experienced youth. This advantage resulted in those with more experience controlling or attempting to “manipulate” or “trap” those who were inexperienced in street culture. Specifically, older homeless individuals introduced youth to drugs. As these youth became dependent on the substances, the more experienced peers manipulated them to engage in dangerous acts to fund their addictions.

The drug scene. Over three-fourths (76%) of homeless youth stated that the most dangerous situations were associated with using or dealing drugs. One youth, Nola (age 19) described:

Umm... Like, if you're out at a party or something and you know people are getting too drunk and you can just kind of see that they're going down on a hill. It's like I better get away from these people before something bad happens.

Drug use and sales were viewed as highly likely to be dangerous situations. Those addicted to and desperate for drugs were viewed as willing to do anything for money, including “pulling guns” and assaulting others. In general, homeless youth suggested that “crackheads” should not be trusted and substance abusers were “not in the right mind” to function and live safely. Those selling drugs put themselves at risk of being killed over the product they were selling. Youth also recognized that their own drug use placed them at risk for various types of victimization. Being high on substances placed youth in dangerous situations in which they might not perceive risks and could not protect themselves.

Research Question #3: How Do Youth Protect Themselves?

In regard to the major code, self-protection, four themes emerged from youth interviews; youth described (1) carrying weapons, (2) being with

someone they could trust, (3) isolating themselves from others, and (4) actively working towards leaving the streets.

Carrying weapons. Over half (57%) of participants described carrying weapons for protection, such as knives, pepper spray, bats (with tacks attached), and even guns, though several preferred avoiding guns. In addition, youth used their bodies as weapons and were pursuing “training in karate and judo” to prepare for dangerous situations. Most youth hoped not to use this training or their weapons but wanted to be prepared in case it “came down to that” because “the streets are crazy”.

Someone to trust. Half (50%) of the youth emphasized the importance of staying close to someone they trust to stay safe. They “band together” with trusted peers who would provide assistance or support when needed, help protect them, and offer emotional support. Ronnie (age 19) explained: “I watch my friends. My inner circle is really tight. I don’t take to new faces, knowing who I can trust in every situation.” Peer networks were typically small and carefully chosen. Street families were often described in which groups of individuals would care for each other financially, physically, and emotionally. Great loyalty and allegiance were reserved for street family members or close friends, and youth were particularly guarded concerning those who joined these groups.

Keep to yourself. Not everyone found groups to trust. One-third (31%) of the youth suggested isolating from others to stay safe. This allowed them to avoid getting “messed with” and to “stay out of trouble.” As hanging out with others seemed to some as possibly leading to vulnerability, many youth argued that they needed to keep their “guard on high.” In isolation, youth did not have to discriminate who could be trusted. It also prevented youth from getting involved in interpersonal conflicts—by keeping to themselves, they felt they had fewer problems. Likewise, having fewer problems or issues allowed these individuals to pursue other activities, like school, without unhealthy distractions. One youth, Tony (age 18) described:

I guess it’s just from learning too being on the streets and learning like the number one rule is: don’t trust anyone, the only people you can really trust is yourself. Even my dog, you know my dog could bite me if she wanted to,

like I don’t think she ever would but I can’t promise that.

Similarly, another youth, Shannon (age 19) demonstrated a lack of trust or reliance on others by stating:

[A]voiding places and not trusting people cuz, you could trust someone and they could do you dirty. So you just gotta keep- like watch yourself, and stay out of places, or with people that might hurt you... cuz you can’t trust nobody. I think- just trusting is a big part. Just I don’t know.

Mindset to leave streets. Close to one-third (29%) of the youth described protecting themselves by acquiring a mindset to get off the streets. This involved not only seeking support from relatives or homeless shelters but also searching for employment or continuing their education; these activities were noted as positive, and ultimately kept youth away from the streets. Essentially, youth needed to “utilize their resources” and keep their “priorities straight” through planning and determination to leave the streets. Youth explained that they stayed focused on short-term goals with the ultimate aim to “get out of here as soon as I can.” They viewed this as a tool for avoiding trouble. If a shelter had no vacancy, youth suggested that staying with friends or relatives would assure they did not have to stay on the streets and be exposed to dangerous situations. Consistent with this mindset was the avoidance of using drugs; youth could protect themselves by not using or selling drugs or associating with anyone using or selling. Drugs were considered a major “setback” to anyone working to get off the streets. The focus and investment in the tasks required to leave the streets prevented youth from becoming involved in dangerous social groups and high-risk situations.

DISCUSSION

This study explored homeless youths’ perceptions of risk and danger in their day-to-day lives, including how they detect when they were in danger, the situations they view as most dangerous, and the behaviors in which they engage to protect themselves. Overwhelmingly, youth asserted that victimization is a “part of life” on the streets. Given the danger they faced, youth reported becoming guarded to prevent being hurt by others. This

guardedness allowed them to sense both internal and external cues that others might be untrustworthy. In addition, youth converged on a repertoire of behaviors in which they commonly engaged to protect themselves.

Youths' descriptions of internal cues to danger included instinctual responses or gut feelings, suggesting that homeless youth rely heavily on affective indicators to tell them they are in danger. Importantly, such instinctual, affective responses may be salient when youth are asked to retrieve memories of being in danger, while a host of cognitive and affective responses that are less accessible to explicit recall may also contribute in important ways to risk detection in real time. Furthermore, previous research suggesting that instinctual reactions may be most common in situations where risk level is high and imminent (Slovic & Peters, 2006) fits with the youths' perceptions of the streets as chronically dangerous. Affective reactions, intuition, or "gut feelings" may occur more quickly and easily in volatile situations, allowing for more efficient means of identifying danger (Slovic & Peters, 2006).

Although "gut feelings" may be more salient to youth, leading them to think these feelings are the most effective means of detecting danger, research suggests that subtler thoughts or responses, experienced in calmer states before crisis situations arise, can be useful to guide risk detection and increase a sense of safety (Slovic & Peters, 2006). From an intervention perspective, if youth believe that they are effective in detecting danger through affective or instinctual processes, they may be less open to or skillful at using more cognitive, logical reasoning-based risk detection in ambiguous situations before overt danger is clear. As we come to better understand young people's own models of successful danger detection, this information will be critical to designing prevention curricula that are relevant and acceptable to youth. For example, this research suggests that a key part of intervention would be to explain to youth that "gut feelings" are important, but likely reflect that danger is already present; building skills to detect more subtle risk cues earlier may help youth navigate risky situations more safely before overt danger occurs. Mindfulness-based approaches may be one avenue for enhancing youths' abilities to detect subtle risk cues and problem solve to prevent victimization – such approaches deserve further study.

Youth in this study also described external cues that indicate when a situation or person place them in danger, by "reading people" and noting both

verbal and nonverbal cues that others might be suspicious. On the one hand, participants' abilities to describe attention to external cues may seem surprising in light of previous research that suggests disruptions in information processing among such trauma-exposed youth (DePrince, 2005; DePrince & Freyd, 1999). Life on the streets is characterized by exposure to multiple forms of trauma, including frequent assaults, witness to violent crimes, threats, and other forms of victimization (Ayerst, 1999; Fest, 2003), which suggests that homeless youth may be at risk for poor information processing when it comes to danger cues (DePrince, 2005).

On the other hand, these data do not yet help us understand the degree to which youth *accurately* detect danger cues in others. Some youth embedded in high-risk environments on the streets may come to increase their watchfulness and vigilance such that they flexibly and accurately detect risk, allowing them to respond more effectively. For other youth, trauma-related symptoms such as dissociation, may contribute to hypovigilance of danger cues whereby they fail to detect relevant cues and therefore do not generate behavioral responses to self-protect. For still other youth, trauma-related symptoms or expectations of danger related to chronic trauma exposure (e.g., DePrince, Combs, & Shanahan, 2009) may lead to hypervigilance to danger. When hypervigilant, the meaningfulness of any single danger cue may be diminished because the system is overwhelmed by chronic cues; in response, youth may fail to generate behavioral responses to self-protect.

The dichotomy between internal and external cue detection may be a false one. Youth who report detecting risk through internal, gut-level reactions, may most easily notice (and remember) those cues, but it is likely that they were actually reacting to interpersonal or external cues that simply were not recalled or made explicit by youth. Thus, subconsciously, youth may be attending to external cues in their interpersonal interactions or environment, yet neither noticing the danger nor processing it cognitively until they have an internal or affective reaction. With further exploration of this process, interventions may be developed to help youth process external cues more intentionally, connect them to internal reactions, and tie them to healthy problem solving and self-protection strategies.

Through this exploratory qualitative study, we were able to uncover a range of danger cues commonly detected by homeless, street-involved youth while also suggesting a language with which youth

think and talk about risk on the streets. As a next step, additional quantitative research is needed to investigate the effectiveness of youths' risk-detection strategies in averting or managing risk. Future work is necessary to more thoroughly examine whether youth have difficulty protecting themselves and preventing victimization (when using vs. not using the strategies described); whether use of risk detection strategies may lessen the severity of the victimization experienced; or, conversely whether the streets (compared to housed or sheltered environments) introduce such inherent and extreme danger that risk detection abilities fail to effectively prevent victimization. Specifically, our findings suggest one working hypothesis that should be tested in future research: homeless youth who rely upon a combination of both internal and external cues are more likely to avoid victimization.

Although youth described affective and cognitive cues to danger, some also mentioned inevitable and undetectable danger. A subgroup of youth (42%) described the unpredictable nature of violence, stating that it is often difficult to know who is dangerous, where danger might occur, or who might be the target. They shared a view that danger could happen at any time, in any place, and to anyone. Due to the qualitative nature of this data, it was difficult to compare the characteristics of the youth who shared this viewpoint with those who described more apt risk-detection skills. In fact, our attempts to categorize youth based on qualitatively described risk-detection strategies demonstrated to us that categories were not mutually exclusive, with many youth describing some concrete strategies yet also describing difficulty in detecting risk at times.

One explanation for this difficulty detecting risk described by some youth in this sample may be a high occurrence of extensive victimization histories, leading youth to struggle to attend to, perceive, and process risk cues (DePrince, 2005) as well as distinguish potentially dangerous situations (Cromer et al., 2006).

Notably, youth in this study perceived the opposite relationship between past trauma experiences and risk detection, citing that previous experiences of abuse and manipulation facilitated skill development in avoiding future victimization. Furthermore, youth appear to believe that one's ability to detect risk increases as one becomes more experienced on the streets. In previous research, youth describe developing street smarts that help them detect danger and protect themselves; the more

experienced they are on the streets, the less naïve they are to possible victimization (Bender et al., 2007). By this rationale, some youth in this study may have been at greater risk for further victimization as they represented inexperienced targets with poorly established skills for identifying danger. Youth new to the streets should be studied further as a unique subsample that could be especially at risk for victimization due to inexperience identifying dangerous situations and instituting effective protection strategies. Furthermore, quantitative analyses should examine the significance and direction of the relationship between length of time on the streets and ability to detect risk.

In regard to identifying dangerous contexts, youth described being in the most danger when they were unaware of or unable to avert risks in their environments. This occurred when they were intoxicated, high, or in new places where they were unfamiliar with resources, unaware of particularly dangerous locations, and frequently introduced to individuals who should not be trusted. Transience has been associated with greater likelihood of victimization, trauma risk, and PTSD symptoms among homeless youth in previous studies (Bender et al., 2010; Ferguson et al., 2012), likely due to unfamiliarity with new locations and other "travelers." Descriptions provided in the current study may serve to illuminate the risks inherent in a transient lifestyle. Thus, a second working hypothesis that should be tested with future research is homeless youth who are situated in unfamiliar territory, who become trapped in inescapable or confining situations, or who are involved in the drug culture are more likely to experience victimization.

In the face of myriad risks, youth developed their own methods of self-protection. These strategies included aspects of taking care of oneself (isolating and carrying weapons) as well as relying on others (finding someone to trust, utilizing services to leave the streets). This balance between feeling alone and unable to trust others with a need for support appears to be a constant struggle for homeless youth. The positive and negative effects of peers and social supports have been reflected in the literature, with peers negatively influencing homeless youths' drug use (Rice, Milburn, Rotheram-Borus, Mallett, & Rosenthal, 2005), HIV risk behaviors (Rice, Milburn, & Rotheram-Borus, 2007), and risky sexual behaviors (Tyler, 2008) but protecting youth from physical and mental health problems (Baron, 2009; Unger et al., 1998). Youth needed to be acutely aware of their surroundings, including who they were with, where, and when;

and they only cautiously trusted others to “have their back” after a long vetting process. Future research should test a final working hypothesis incorporating themes of self-protection: Homeless youth who use multiple protection strategies, including engaging in support systems that advocate leaving the streets, are more likely to avoid victimization than those who use fewer strategies.

Limitations

This exploratory study has certain limitations that should be considered in interpreting these findings. It is likely that youth may have felt hesitant to discuss sensitive topics like victimization openly and honestly. We made efforts to provide interviewers with extensive training on interviewing and engaging homeless youth. Trained interviewers attempted to overcome social-desirability bias by ensuring privacy and confidentiality during interviews and encouraging youths’ own opinions without judgment.

Second, this study was limited by one-point-in-time interviews, preventing the development of relationships and trust afforded by repeated exposure to interviewers, and thus may have limited the extent of sensitive information shared. Furthermore, data were collected via service settings; findings may have limited applicability to youth living on the streets and not seeking services—a group that may be at even greater risk for trauma. As with any self-report data, youth may have been hesitant to disclose the true extent of their challenges, hardships, or trauma experiences. Future research should investigate the three working hypotheses presented here related to the relationship between risk detection and self-protection strategies and youths’ experiences of victimization on the streets.

Implications

As risk detection among homeless youth is better understood, interventions should be developed to help youth develop effective risk-detection and self-protection skills. Current evidence-based skills trainings demonstrate success in teaching homeless youth to avoid other high-risk behaviors, including substance use and sexual risk behaviors (Rotheram-Borus et al., 2003). New interventions could utilize this skills-training model to teach youth risk-detection and problem-solving skills for avoiding victimization. Such interventions could be preventative for youth new to the streets, or may

reinforce existing skills of youth more engrained in street life to help them avoid new risk and reduce further revictimization.

Youth referenced having a mindset to leave the streets as a protection strategy. In describing this mindset, youth referenced both formal and informal supports. It is clear that pro social support systems, whether housed family and friends or service providers, offer youth resources and a sense of safety. Shelters and transitional housing offer more immediate protective services, removing youth from risks inherent in street living. In the longer term, engaging youth in educational and employment opportunities are described as replacing involvement in dangerous street situations (Ferguson, Bender, Thompson, Xie, & Pollio, 2011). Such engagement in formal services is also likely to provide stability for youth at risk of transience and the victimization associated with traveling frequently from one location to another. Linking youth with housing, educational and employment opportunities and providing support mechanisms such as ongoing case management or connections to informal support networks may thus enable youth to avoid danger on the streets.

While trauma on the streets is pervasive, it is clear some homeless youth have developed strategies for identifying and avoiding dangerous individuals and social contexts. A better understanding of homeless youths’ naturally developed self-protection skills and street knowledge may enable service providers to educate vulnerable youth to avoid further street victimization.

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