

Learning from the Resilience of Street-involved Youth

What you need to know:

Street-involved youth adapt and develop skills that allow them to cope with many difficulties they face on the street. These skills can be forms of protection and sources of risk. But these strategies can only help youth for a limited time. Youth were able to more successfully cope with street life when they had access to sources of stable community and financial supports.

What is this research about?

Research on street-involved youth typically looks at difficult experiences and deviance. It has focused on pregnancy, violent victimization, mental illness, and addictions. These are important issues as street-involved youth experience higher rates of morbidity, suicide, and mental illness.

Past studies also look at behaviours such as self-harm, violence, theft, and drug dealing and drug use. Many do not look at these behaviours as coping strategies within the context of a homeless person's life.

Studying resilience means looking at the way people cope with stressful events. These events are common in unstable and dangerous environments. Resilience is complex and should be looked at as a process. Resilience is specific to a situation, and is not a character trait. Someone may be resilient in some cases, but may not be able to cope successfully in other cases.

What did the researchers do?

Researchers interviewed 10 street-involved youth. Social workers and counselors recommended youth who had been homeless for at least one month and made positive changes in their life. This included getting help for addictions or trauma, and building healthier relationships. Some also got education, housing, and employment.

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youth homelessness, suicide, risk, marginalization, resilience

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What did the researchers find?

Many youth developed distrustful attitudes and extreme independence. This was a way to cope with the volatile street environment where support is highly unreliable. The research called this a 'social distancing' strategy. In some ways this strategy was positive, because it allowed youth to avoid association with people involved in drug use and drug dealing. It also allowed youth to avoid unstable sources of support. This social distancing strategy can also be negative since it resulted in isolation more generally. Youth then found it hard to trust more stable sources of support such as counselors.

Engaging in violence is typically seen as a bad behaviour or risk factor for street-involved youth. The research found that it is also a coping strategy. To survive on the street youth often had to defend themselves. This meant at times acting violently or aggressively. Though it was often a necessary strategy for self-defense, it could lead to arrest or being violently attacked as 'payback'.

The researchers found that suicidality and self-harm aren't proof of a lack of resilience. These issues are common among street-involved youth as a result of their trauma and marginalization.

Even with these self-harm issues, several participants managed to improve their well-being and mental health. They did so by connecting with resources that enhanced their financial and housing stability. Some of the support came from counselors, social workers, community groups, and sometimes family and friends.

In spite of the marginalization and trauma street-involved youth faced over their lives, they achieved major advancements. Some went to college and maintained stable employment, while others made positive progress in their addictions and mental health.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

Policy makers should try to understand how people cope with life in difficult circumstances. This will allow the creation of support that builds on positive coping strategies to improve the well-being of marginalized youth. Understanding how street-involved youth have used support and coped can help in the informed development of services.

Service providers can help improve the positive coping of street-involved youth by providing stable support and connecting youth to social and financial resources. They can help youth recognize their own strength and ingenuity regarding their positive coping strategies. This should be done while helping youth understand negative consequences of some strategies.

Researchers should continue to focus on resilience. This can build on our understanding of how people overcome difficult and traumatic experiences. More research should look at ways to provide extra support at the individual, community, and societal levels.

ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

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The Canadian Homeless Research Network (CHRN) has partnered with the **Knowledge Mobilization (Kmb)** Unit at York University to produce Research Summaries on the topic of Youth Homelessness in Canada. The CHRN focuses on education, networking and knowledge mobilization in order to move towards effective long-term solutions to homelessness.