

# Social networks and heavy drinking amongst homeless youth



## What is this research about?

People are influenced by those whom they regularly interact with. This includes friends and family. Youth who are experiencing homelessness are at additional risk of substance use, and in the case of this study, heavy drinking. Heavy drinking can lead to immediate and long term health risks. Immediate risks include an increase in risky behaviours such as higher risk sex. Issues of race and youth homelessness are typically not directly addressed in research. Similarly it is important to understand the different ways that youth engage with substances in order to create programs that cater to their needs.

## What you need to know

Youth's social environments affect their experience with heavy drinking. This varies between black and white youth. However, youth that have at least four people in their immediate social network who are students are less likely to drink.

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### KEYWORDS

*Parents, Social assistance policy, Coping strategies, Caregiving, Welfare-to-Work programs*

### ARTICLE SOURCE

Wenzel, S. L., Hsu, H. T., Zhou, A., & Tucker, J. S. (2012). Are social network correlates of heavy drinking similar among black homeless youth and white homeless youth? *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 73(6), 885.

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## What did the researchers find?

Youth had different experiences with heavy drinking depending on whether they identified as black or white. Black youth were more likely to have students and relatives in their network. White youth were more likely to have homeless peers in their network.

White youth however were more likely to have relatives and peers that drink until drunk. More white youth had been drunk in the past 30 days. A greater number of white youth also reported having homeless people in their network.

Less black youth drink heavily, but those that do have a greater chance of engaging in risky behaviours. Conversely, youth with at least four students in their social network are less likely to drink heavily, no matter whether the youth or black or white. There are cultural implications that may account for the different experiences of being homeless.

## What did the researchers do?

The researchers interviewed 235 youth at 41 sites in the Los Angeles Area. Sites included shelters, drop-in centers, and street locations. The youth were all between the ages of 13-24, spoke English, and self-identified as either white/Caucasian or black/African American.

The researchers asked youth if they had had more than 5 drinks in the past 30 days. The youth were also each asked to identify 20 individuals, who made up their network. Youth were also asked to identify whether the people in their network had been drunk within the past 3 months.



## HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

Policy makers and educators should understand the importance of facilitating communication between youth who are experiencing homelessness and their peers who are in school. Additional programs should be established by the school boards to integrate youth who are homeless into classrooms, if they have left school.

Service providers can understand the importance of organizing programs that cater to the needs of youth who are homeless, but may also involve an aspect that caters to students. Through allowing youth to change their networks, it can increase their inclusion, creating a form of risk prevention.

Researchers and academics can recreate this study in different cities to understand how these dynamics may differ within a different cultural context.

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