

research snapshot

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Homeless Youth Need More Than Low-Paying Employment to Succeed

What is this research about?

The public often sees homeless youth as criminals who use crime, violence, and intimidation as a way to make money and support drug habits. In reality, homeless youth use flexible economic strategies that include a number of legal, deviant, and illegal activities to meet basic needs of food, shelter, and clothing. Most homeless youth prefer a stable job, but are forced to turn to crime for their income.

What did the researchers do?

Researchers at York University and the University of Guelph asked 360 Toronto area homeless youth to describe their source of income. They used surveys and interviews. They grouped the results into 6 categories:

1. paid employment (official and non-official)
2. social assistance
3. Panhandling
4. Squeegeeing
5. the sex trade
6. crime

What you need to know:

Most homeless youth do not lack the motivation to work and do not prefer a criminal lifestyle to a law-abiding one. Homeless youth see deviant and criminal activities as a short term economic necessity for survival rather than as a lifestyle choice.

What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that most homeless youth have difficulty obtaining and maintaining regular jobs, not because they do not want to work, but because difficult life circumstances – including lack of housing, poverty, hunger, and poor health. The bulk of street youth who struggle to get legitimate jobs are affected by a number of background factors like sexual and non-sexual family abuse, leaving home early, dropping out of school, and an overall lower level of education. In addition, the economic strategies that homeless youth choose are not random, but are connected to specific background and environmental factors. For instance, those who make their money in the sex trade or by squeegeeing typically left home at a younger age, have a poorer education, more addictions problems and worse health.

How can you use this research?

Policymakers and community groups could benefit from this research. It shows the complex challenges that homeless youth face and the reasons why they ended up on the street. It shows that street youth need these money making strategies to survive, and that criminalizing homelessness (through banning squeegeeing or panhandling for instance) will not lead homeless youth to get jobs, but may make their lives much worse. Rather than focus on skills and employment training, there need to be more effective policies and programs in place that target the reasons why youth became homeless in the first place, and support transitions out of homelessness.

About the Researchers

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Knowledge Mobilization at York

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