

Understanding Developmental Pathways of Runaway and Homeless Youth [Book review]

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Abstract:

Reviews Whitbeck and Hoyt's "Nowhere to Grow: Homeless and Runaway Adolescents and their Families" (see record 1999-02882-000). In their book, Whitbeck and Hoyt present the results of their multisite, multistate study of youth homelessness in the Midwest. The purpose of this book is to not only present the research findings, but also to examine the findings within a life course development theoretical framework. The authors propose a risk-amplification model of development that explains risk factors associated with precocious independence among this population. The book also explores the family and social lives of homeless and runaway adolescents, as well the experiences such adolescents face. The authors conclude that only future longitudinal research into factors associated with successful transition into adulthood will provide the information necessary for a more complete understanding of the entire developmental process of runaway youth, both in terms of resiliency and development of adult antisocial behavior. (PsycINFO Database Record (c) 2017 APA, all rights reserved)

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Article:

The picture of youth homelessness has evolved in the past 35 years. In the 1960s, the popular conception of an adolescent runaway was a rebellious youth who fled the confines of upper and middle-class suburbia to join the antiestablishment subculture and engage in a lifestyle of recreational drug use, free love, and political protest. In their typology of runaway and homeless adolescents, Zide and Cherry (1992) characterized such youth as "running to" anticipated adventures rather than "running from" problems at home. Even during the 1960s and, especially, into the 1970s, there was evidence that adolescents who ran away from home were often fleeing violence, alcoholism, and poverty within their families. Thus, however romanticized the view of runaway youth as portrayed in the popular media, many, probably most, youth were not running to but running from.

In their book *Nowhere to Grow*, Whitbeck and Hoyt present the results of their multisite, multistate study of youth homelessness in the Midwest. Ongoing misconceptions about the youth homelessness are reflected in the difficulty the authors had finding funding for the study.

Potential funders believed that youth homelessness was an East Coast and West Coast phenomenon limited to large “magnet” cities and metropolitan areas. Funders had to be convinced that “street kids” existed in smaller towns and cities and “were being victimized at rates similar to those in New York and Los Angeles” (p. 15). This very phenomenon underscores one of the important contributions of this book: to broaden our understanding of the nature and scope of youth homelessness in America.

The authors' purpose for this book is to not only present their research findings, but also to examine the findings within a life course development theoretical framework. They propose a risk-amplification model of development that explains risk factors associated with precocious independence among this population.

The book is based on a study of 602 runaway and homeless adolescents and 201 of their parents or caretakers, all of who were interviewed from early 1995 through August 1996. The authors acknowledge the limitations of self-report data, but contend that any systematic bias in the data is probably a result of underreporting negative experiences rather than overreporting them. They also assert that the sample probably underrepresents the extent of disorganization and dysfunction among families of runaway and homeless youth, because youth from extremely problematic family situations would have been less likely to allow the researchers to contact their parents or caretakers. This assertion is all the more harrowing as one begins to read about the level of family disorganization and dysfunction that is represented in this sample.

Youth homelessness and developmental theory

Whitbeck and Hoyt divide the book into four parts. Part I provides an overview of Society's Forgotten Children. In Chapter 1 the authors draw on existing research to define the terms homeless and runaway youth and describe what is known about the prevalence, causes, risks, and consequences of youth homelessness. Chapter 2 includes a brief description of the study design, sample, and limitations. Here the authors also provide descriptive data about the youth and the parental caretakers in their sample.

Chapter 1 also includes a brief introduction to the life course developmental approach to precocious independence that is used as a theoretical framework for the study. In the United States, normative development involves a gradual transition from adolescence to adulthood, frequently accompanied by rebellion, mistakes, and experimentation with adult behaviors along the way. According to life course development theory, the interaction of individual characteristics, social environments and relationships, and biology influence individual life trajectories. This model also includes the concept that “adolescents progressively become entrapped by the consequences of their own behaviors...[and] the accumulation of negative chains of events diminishes opportunities to change” (p. 12). Whitbeck and Hoyt contend that “running away puts in motion negative chains of events” that result in a “life course-persistent antisocial trajectory” (p. 12). Thus, they hypothesize that runaway and homeless youth are at risk for moving beyond normative experimentation with adult behaviors to development of patterns of antisocial behaviors that will persist into adulthood.

Runaway youth and their families

Part II of *Nowhere to Grow* describes the family lives of adolescents in the study sample, with chapters on their early lives, adolescent and parent or caretaker reports of various family

problems within and across generations, and adolescent and parent or caretaker perceptions of their relationships with each other. Here Whitbeck and Hoyt make one of their most unique contributions to the literature: the inclusion of information on the social and developmental context of the lives of runaway and homeless youth, with data from both youth and their parents. The researchers used a life matrix approach to interviewing the adolescents. This approach is congruent with their developmental theoretical framework, because it allowed them to identify key event transition points in the lives of these adolescents and their families in a chronological fashion. In addition to presenting descriptive data about such phenomena as changes in family structure and parent, child, and institutional initiated transitions, the authors also include brief profiles of two adolescents, a male and a female. The inclusion of this qualitative material on life events enables the reader to put human faces on the quantified experiences reported in tables and charts. In fact, the book would have been strengthened by the use of additional profiles or perhaps even inclusion of additional qualitative information about these same two respondents in relation to the topics covered in each chapter.

One of the most compelling findings in relation to family problems is the prevalence of substance abuse, not only in the adolescents' families of origin, but in earlier family generations or among members of the extended family as well. Both adolescents and their parents or caretakers agreed "family alcohol and drug abuse contributed to family conflict, violence, and the adolescent leaving home" (p. 47). Parental substance abuse also was associated with serious problems in the parent-child relationship, including both sexual abuse and "extraordinary rates of physical abuse" (p. 58). The authors make a strong case for their assertion that family disorganization is "fundamental to the process of precocious independence" (p. 38), and that "early independence for children is the result of a long process of events originating within the families from which they leave" (p. 41). The extent of agreement between adolescents and their parents or caretakers regarding family problems and relationships is compelling support for the validity of the self-report data.

Life in the streets

Part III describes the adolescents' experiences while they are homeless. These chapters deal with the social support networks of runaway adolescents, their survival strategies, the risky behaviors they are likely to engage in, and how they are victimized and traumatized by life on the street. This section of the book provides little new insight into the street experiences of homeless youth, as the experiences of the study sample closely parallel those reported in other studies. However, Whitbeck and Hoyt do go beyond previous descriptive studies in their effort to develop models for predicting social network composition and use of both conventional and deviant subsistence strategies.

Using structural equation modeling, they found evidence that affiliation with a deviant peer group was more likely among runaways with a history of family abuse and family disorganization and among those who left home multiple times and for longer periods of time. Only perceived parental warmth was associated with continued family support. The authors extend this model to account for subsistence strategies used by homeless youth. Use of deviant strategies to secure food and money was highly associated with affiliation with a deviant peer group and negatively associated with continued support from family. Additional modeling shows predictors for dealing drugs, using sex for survival, and using victimization of others as a survival strategy.

In Part IV, Whitbeck and Hoyt provide support for their risk amplification developmental model. They conclude that the study findings “converge into a single developmental theme: psychologically harmed children run away from home and the process of running away further harms them. The risks are multiple and cumulative. Negative developmental trajectories gain momentum across time” (p. 150).

The authors make a strong case for their model which predicts both externalization problems (substance abuse and conduct disorder) and internalization problems (depressive symptoms and posttraumatic stress disorder) based on two initial causal variables: parental problems (substance use or serious crime) and family abuse. Each of these variables is associated with other variables, either directly or indirectly, that lead to or manifest risky behaviors (e.g., time on own, deviant peers, drug use, deviant subsistence strategies, dangerous sexual encounters, and street victimization).

To their credit, Whitbeck and Hoyt attempt to understand exceptions to their model (i.e., runaways who are resilient in the face of multiple traumas). On the basis of literature on childhood resilience, they used four measures of resilience: a measure of self-efficacy, ability to maintain school attendance, ability to maintain conventional means of self-support (as opposed to deviant subsistence strategies), and a measure of externalization. The primary factors they found to be associated with resilience were gender (with males more likely to meet criteria for resilience than females), parental criminal activity, deviant peer affiliation, and victimizing behaviors.

This model offers not only a framework for understanding how development is affected by precocious independence, but also offers the opportunity to consider points along their developmental trajectory where effective intervention might minimize or reverse the damage suffered by these youth. The concept of such “turning points” is integral to developmental theory. Crockett and Crouter (1995) describe these as “decision points where the person can select from among several alternative courses of action, each leading in a different direction” (p. 77). For each variable in their model that appears to lead, almost deterministically, toward internalization or antisocial behavior, Whitbeck and Hoyt might have offered recommendations that would have aimed to disrupt the negative developmental pathways that accumulate momentum over time. However, the authors do not address this potential opportunity. Rather than using their findings to make recommendations about assessment strategies that might identify high-risk families prior to a youth running away or early intervention strategies that might prevent runaway, they limit their recommendations to policy and program recommendations to address the problems of youth once they have left home. Given the high level of risk associated with running away, I would have liked to see the authors offer some preventive strategies.

The policy suggestions Whitbeck and Hoyt offer place a priority on safety and prevention of further developmental harm once youth have run away from their dysfunctional and often abusive family environments. They note that programs that emphasize family reunification will not have much credibility with runaway youth who are escaping such environments. The authors recommend aggressive outreach and shelter programs to minimize the length of time youth spend on the street, where they are subject to various types of victimization and exploitation. They also recommend that youth-serving agencies team with researchers to develop accurate databases and evaluate intervention efforts. These are all excellent recommendations, and many programs with these characteristics are already in existence. The authors acknowledge that there are already many such programs, but note that a lack of resources and a national commitment to

preventing and reducing adolescent runaway results in many fewer programs than are needed to seriously address the problem throughout the country.

This book makes a valuable contribution to the literature on homeless youth. The use of the life course developmental perspective is a welcome introduction of theory into what has primarily been an atheoretical, descriptive body of research regarding homeless youth. The authors note that only future longitudinal research into factors associated with successful transition into adulthood will provide the information necessary for a more complete understanding of the entire developmental process of runaway youth, both in terms of resiliency and development of adult antisocial behavior. I hope that, in the future, these researchers and others will focus more attention on identifying resiliency factors that protect youth from experiences that lead to runaway and development and evaluation of prevention and early intervention strategies that will help families deal with the problems that Whitbeck and Hoyt so amply demonstrate lead youth to leave home prematurely.

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