

Definitions of Youth Homelessness: A Review of the Peer-reviewed Literature

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Introduction

•Youth homelessness is associated with a number of health problems, including infectious diseases (HIV, hepatitis B & C), substance abuse, violence, and mental health disorders (Boivin et al., 2005; Kipke et al., 1993).

•Research on homeless, runaway, and street youth is hampered by lack of a standard definitions. This lack of consistency makes it difficult to compare results across papers, and limits generalizability.

•We conducted a systematic review of the literature to categorize the definitions of youth homelessness and related terms such as “runaway/throwaway” and “street youth” in the peer-reviewed literature.

Methods

We conducted searches in July 2007 in PubMed, using MeSH heading “homeless youth,” and in Psych Info, using keywords “homeless” and “adolescent.” Inclusion criteria were:

- From a peer-reviewed journal
- English or French language
- Published since 1996
- Research conducted in the United States or Canada
- Original research.
- Including persons of adolescent or young adult age.
- Not limited to youth living with homeless families

As the journal article was the unit of analysis, there are multiple articles from some research projects, such as the Midwest Homeless and Runaway Adolescent Project (MHRAP), the AIDS Evaluation of Street Outreach Projects (AESOP) and the Seattle Homeless Adolescent Research and Education Study (SHARE).

Results

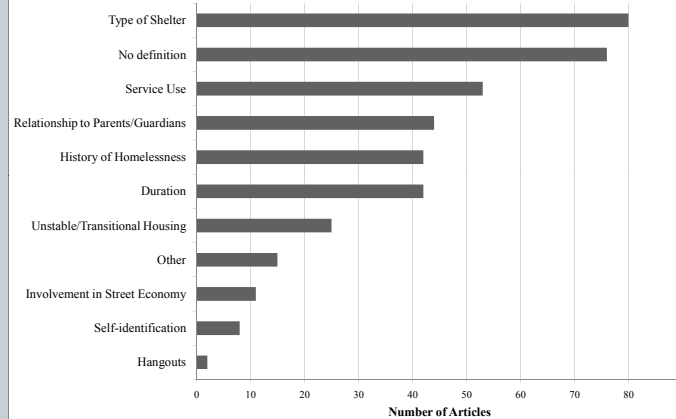
We identified 193 articles that met our inclusion criteria. From these, we identified twelve non-exclusive “dimensions” of definitions, presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Dimensions of Definitions of “Youth Homelessness”

Dimension	Description	Number	Percent*
Service Use	Recipients of services from agencies such as drop-in centers, shelters, and clinics	53	27
Type of Shelter	Type of places that youth sleep, spend the night, or use as shelter	80	41
Involvement in Street Economy	Meeting subsistence needs by illegal or marginal means such as panhandling, survival sex, theft, or drug dealing	11	6
Relationship to Parents/Guardians	Lack of a typical relationship with parents, legal guardians, or caretakers, often including youth not living with, or receiving financial support from parents or guardians, or in a living situation without parent or guardian permission	44	23
Duration	Specification of a certain amount of time that a youth must be in a living situation before being considered homeless	42	22
History of Homelessness	Includes youth who may be currently domiciled, but have been homeless in the past	42	22
Unstable/Transitional Housing	Living in shelters that are not expected to be permanent	25	13
Self-identification	Self-identification with the term “homeless” or a related term	8	4
Hangouts	Persons encountered in areas frequented by homeless individuals	2	1
No definition	No definition specified, or a definition that is unclear or vague	76	39
Other	Specification of another definition of youth homelessness that does not fit into any of the categories above.	15	8

*Percents sum to more than 100, as categories are not exclusive.

Number of articles using each Dimension of the definition of “Youth Homelessness”



Discussion

•There are a wide range of definitions of youth homelessness employed in the current peer-reviewed literature. No one definition predominates.

•Of note, 39% of the articles surveyed gave no definition, or an unclear definition of homelessness.

•27% of surveyed articles defined youth homelessness via receipt of agency services, which limits generalizability and excludes non-service accessing youth, who may be at higher risk for poor outcomes than youth who access services (Carlson et al, 2006; DeRosa et al, 1999).

Implications and Future Directions

These results highlight the need for a consistent, explicit, and easy to understand definition of youth homelessness. When evaluating the generalizability of research on homeless youth, it is important to consider how the investigators defined their source population.