Homeless Youth in CT
Research Proposal

Background

During the course of one year, approximately one in 45 children and youth, or 1.6 million are homeless\(^1\). Homeless youth and children are comprised of two groups, 1) children and youth in families that are experiencing homelessness, and 2) unaccompanied youth. Unaccompanied children and youth have been estimated to account for approximately one to three million youth and children, or 1% of the urban homeless population\(^2,3\). This population includes children and youth up to age 17 who are not residing with their legal guardians and young adults ages 18 through 24 who are not residing with families and who are experiencing poverty and homelessness. Runaway, “thrown away” (children and youth kicked out of their homes) and children and youth living alone on the streets are examples of unaccompanied youth populations.

Obtaining accurate data on the prevalence and service needs of unaccompanied homeless youth have been noted as difficult due to issues such as failure of families to report youth that are no longer living with them, variable definitions for what accounts for “runaway” behavior, and unaccompanied youths’ lack of participation in social service programs\(^2,4\). Additionally, unaccompanied youth may live with other friends, family or extended family members, posing further difficulties in capturing this population. National surveys and research studies may fail to provide a clear definition of the homeless children being accounted for and/or do not include unaccompanied youth populations. For example, major surveys and reports on homeless children and youth often adopt the definition of homeless children and youth provided by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act\(^5\), which defines homeless students in public schools as, “individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.” This definition fails
to capture those unaccompanied homeless children and youth who have dropped out of school. When unaccompanied youth are described in surveys, the question of whether or not this is an accurate picture of this population comes to bear. For example, during the last Point in Time Count, a statewide census of Connecticut’s homeless shelters, an estimated 3,818 individuals were living in homeless shelters across the state of CT on the night of January 27, 2010, with half of this population found in Hartford, Bridgeport and New Haven. Additionally, of the 3,818 individuals counted, approximately 771 were children in families. Only 18 individuals were identified as unaccompanied youth.

The consequences of homelessness on children and youth in general have been described extensively within the literature. Children and youth who experience homelessness are at risk for suffering from hunger and poor physical health. In studies comparing homeless and non-homeless youth populations, unaccompanied homeless youth were found to be more likely to suffer from depression and other mental health or substance abuse concerns as opposed to youths with stable housing. Unaccompanied homeless youth may have few employment opportunities due to their age and engage in activities, including sex trade or gang violence, that may place them at greater risk for sexually transmitted diseases and as victims of violence. Lack of a stable residence may also place unaccompanied youth at risk for school absenteeism and school dropout, resulting in a barrier to educational attainment. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) unaccompanied youth may experience additional traumas from being kicked out of their homes due to their sexual orientations in addition to experiences of homophobia in communities.

**Purpose of and Design of Study**
The purpose of this study is to examine the scope of experiences of unaccompanied homeless children and youth and identify the needs of unaccompanied homeless children and youth in CT. This study will adopt a mixed methods approach including qualitative data obtained from interviews with key informants, and focus groups conducted with unaccompanied children and youth. The study participants will be recruited through a snowball sampling method with a focus on populations in three major urban areas in Connecticut: Bridgeport, New Haven, and Hartford. Current national and state literature and data will be explored to examine potential additional data to inform the experiences of this population. Longer-term school surveys will be utilized to further examine the magnitude of these issues.

Findings from this are hoped to assist in the development of policy briefs for policy makers to assist in advocating for services and programs for unaccompanied children in the state of Connecticut.

References


