Social relationships and social support among street involved youth

Key Details

KEY WORDS
Street-involved youth; Social support; Social relationships

POPULATION GROUPS
Youth In and Leaving Care
Youth Living in Poverty
Youth Workers

STEPPING UP THEMES
Health & Wellness
Strong, Supportive Friends & Families

RESEARCH ORIGIN
Canada

SOURCE
Academic

> "Specifically, this work has found that street-involved youth often maintain relationships with a variety of people, including family members, service providers, intimate partners and both street and non-street-based friends" (p. 1329).

1. What is the research about?
Recent studies suggest that street-involved youth may have more robust and diverse social networks than previously thought. Researchers analyzed quantitative data and open-ended interviews with 130 street-involved youth. The researchers explored youth perceptions of supportive relationships. The study found that street-involved youth received support and cultivated meaningful social relationships in both on- and off-street networks.

2. Where did the research take place?
The research took place in Victoria, BC, Canada.

3. Who is this research about?
The research is about street-involved youth aged 14-18. Canada has an estimated 65,000 street-involved youth at any given time, comprising one-fifth of the country's street involved population. Street-involved youth are youth who are "absolutely, periodically, or temporarily without shelter, as well as those who are at substantial risk of being on the street in the immediate future" (p. 1328). The label street-involved includes youth who live on the street, live in homeless shelters, couch surf and those moving in and out of care.

4. How was the research done?
The data presented in this paper is drawn from a mixed methods study. The study used several sampling techniques to recruit participants, including in-community referral. Researchers asked youth to reflect on their social networks and the degree to which they access emotional support, instrumental support and informational support within their social networks. The study used a modified form of what is known as the *Social Provisions Scale*, which assesses the degree to which participants' social relationships provide various dimensions of social support.

5. What are the key findings?
The majority of the study participants reported relatively high degrees of social support in close-ended responses. A minority of participants said they wouldn't have anyone to turn to in the event of something going wrong.

The study delineated between support received from on-street and off-street relationships. 42% of study participants described their social networks as including individuals who weren't street-involved. In many cases these were connections made before becoming street-involved, e.g. connections with family. The data gathered on off-street relationships "challenged the assumption that all street-involved youth have limited or strained ties with off-street contacts" (p. 1335).

49% of study participants discussed relations with other street-involved youth. Participants noted the importance of familial-like emotional support in these relationships. They particularly noted the importance of companionship and support. Youth described connections with other street=involved youth as non-judgemental spaces where they could foster a sense of belonging and feel at ease.

A small minority of participants said they had no close or meaningful relationships with other people, although some noted the importance of their companion animals in their lives.

The study found that street-involved youth perceive higher levels of social support availability than is typically thought. However, researchers did note that longer periods on the street are linked to reductions in size of social networks. Researchers identified a few limitations with the study, such as increased risk of bias due to the sampling technique. Additionally, the small sample size makes transferability and generalizability difficult. Finally, researchers noted that they likely failed to capture complexities of relations and social networks due to study limitations.

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

The study points to the importance of developing interventions that help street-involved youth build or enhance supportive connections, which may promote positive health and social outcomes. Youth workers can play a role in fostering supportive connections for street-involved youth.

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