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Capacity for Survival: Exploring Strengths of Homeless Street Youth

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Abstract

The majority of research on homeless youth has focused on the multitude of problems faced by this vulnerable population. The current study, while acknowledging the hazards of life on the streets, seeks to explore the personal strengths and informal resources street youth rely on to navigate their environments. Qualitative data from seven focus groups conducted with street youth ages 18–24 were analyzed using content analysis. These data, rich with interactions among youth participants, highlight three important themes: developing “street smarts,” existence of personal strengths, and informal resources relied upon by youth to survive. Results provide valuable insights into the strengths of homeless youth that can be useful to providers in assessing street youths’ service needs and increasing the likelihood of long-term positive outcomes.

Keywords

Homeless youth; Resiliency; Coping skills; Strengths-based; Street youth

Introduction

Approximately two million U.S. adolescents leave home without parental permission each year (Farrow, Deisher, Brown, Kulig, & Kipke, 1992; Greenblatt & Robertson, 1993). Homeless young people have been defined as those between 12 and 24 years of age who have spent at least one night on the streets, in a public place (e.g., parks, under highway overpasses, abandoned buildings), or in a shelter (Greene & Ringwalt, 1997; Thompson, Safyer, & Pollio, 2001). The predominant focus of research with this youth population has been on the multitude and magnitude of their problems, including depression (Kennedy, 1991; Unger et al., 1998), anxiety (Kidd, 2004), suicide (Mallett, Rosenthal, Myers, Milburn, & Rotheram-Borus, 2004; Yoder, 1999), trauma (Thompson, 2005; Whitbeck & Simons, 1990), substance abuse (Lawrenson, 1997; Mallett et al., 2004; Thompson, 2004), school difficulties (Heinlein & Shinn, 2000), and legal problems (Mallett et al., 2004). Studies from various regions of the United States have consistently identified the challenges faced by this population and the service providers who offer assistance; however, few studies have investigated the personal strengths and informal resources that enable homeless young people to survive on the streets.

For homeless youth living in dangerous and stressful environments, the “raw struggle for existence” requires extraordinary coping skills (Rowe, 1999). To face the immense challenge of day-to-day homeless existence, these young people must learn to adjust to the hardships associated with life on the streets. While acknowledging the difficulties associated with unstable living situations, research has suggested that innate capabilities of resiliency enable individuals to overcome the adverse effects of hardship (Laursen & Birmingham, 2003). This point of view encourages a balanced examination of individuals’ limitations and strengths as challenges are regarded from a position of empowerment. This perspective is often preferable to problem-oriented approaches that ignore important social contexts and label the population as deficient or deviant (Rapp, 1998). Homeless youth are often negatively labeled and stigmatized by service providers, law enforcement, peers, and society in general. Characterizing homeless youth in terms of deficiencies potentially limits recognition of their internal and external resources, leading them to consider themselves as lacking future choices (McCullum & Trepper, 2001). As choice is essential to motivate change, youth who believe they have even modest personal control over their destinies will persist in mastering tasks and become more committed to making positive life changes (Selekman, 1997, 2005).

Service providers working from a strengths-based perspective assist individuals to maximize their resources in order to accomplish their desired outcomes (Lankton & Lankton, 1983). Clinicians who emphasize strengths and resources demonstrate a belief in a client’s power to make change, often resulting in increased cooperation of clients (Selekman, 2005). Although few studies utilize a strengths-based perspective to investigate the homeless youth population, recognizing the strengths and informal resources utilized by street youth may increase recognition among professionals of the capabilities inherent among this unique group of young people.

Background

Outcome research has recently moved from solely examining risk factors to recognizing and investigating protective factors that counteract or buffer negative outcomes (Zweig, Phillips, & Duberstein Lindberg, 2002). Protective factors such as individual strengths (i.e. intelligence, social orientation), social bonding (i.e. relationships, warmth, empathy), healthy beliefs, self-reliance, and self-efficacy have been positively associated with improved behavioral outcomes (Pollard, Hawkins, & Arthur, 1999; Werner & Smith, 1992). Although research that specifically focuses on protective factors associated with homelessness among adolescents is limited, some have described specific assets and capacities these youth rely upon to resolve challenges and difficulties. Developing new attitudes and behaviors concerning relationships with others, self-confidence, self-care, and reliance on spirituality appear to help homeless youth better cope with street culture and more successfully transition off the streets (Lindsey, Kurtz, Jarvis, Williams, & Nackerud, 2000). Personal attributes such as independence, self-reliance, motivation, feelings of self-worth, and being positive about the future are major sources of personal pride and appear to increase positive outcomes (Kidd, 2003).

Previous research exploring correlates of resilience in homeless youth from a nursing perspective (Rew, Taylor-Seehafer, & Fitzgerald, 2001; Rew, Taylor-Seehafer, Thomas, & Yockey, 2001) has suggested that knowledge of resources and peer networking are key components and foundations of strength. Loneliness, often described as inevitable for youth living on the streets, is counteracted by having a community of peers for companionship and animal companions to provide safety, unconditional love, and motivation to survive (Rew & Horner, 2003). Furthermore, youth who perceive themselves as resilient are less likely to feel hopeless, lonely, or to engage in dangerous behaviors.

Living on the streets is fraught with danger, and homeless young people are often victims of physical assault, sexual abuse, and other forms of exploitation. Youth who have learned where

to find resources, established who to trust, and adapted to the social structures and culture of the street economy have developed street smarts (Lankenau, Clatts, Welle, Goldsamt, & Gwadz, 2005). These skills, gained through observation and experiences while homeless, may not be prosocial behaviors; however, they enable homeless youth to develop competencies to endure their daily existence. For example, these young people may protect themselves from harm using adaptive strategies such as carrying weapons, avoiding certain places or people, and networking with streetwise peers who can protect them (Greenblatt & Robertson, 1993). Many form surrogate families with other street youth, connections which offer all parties involved an increased sense of security and belonging.

Drawing upon the limited research of resilience and the strengths of homeless young people, the current study aimed to (a) identify attributes and characteristics of homeless young people as they develop street smarts and adapt to life on the streets, and (b) examine the precarious balance of reliance on interpersonal strengths versus reliance on external resources. This study is unique in that it involved a large number of youth engaged in focus groups where an interactive approach encouraged participants to discuss their perspectives and insights within a group of similarly situated young people.

Methods

Focus group research design

A focus group design was chosen as the preferred methodology for the study, because one strength of focus groups is the ability to produce extensive amounts of data on the topic of interest in an efficient manner. Second, focus groups inherently include group interactions that can provide a deeper understanding of participants' perceptions and experiences than individual interviews (Morgan, 1997; Morgan & Krueger, 1993). The process of participants sharing, discussing, and comparing experiences and attitudes is a valuable source for understanding behaviors, motivations, and attitudes (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). The group format was preferable to one-on-one interviews as group interactions promoted reactions and discussions inaccessible in individual interviews (Morgan, 1997).

Participants

Participants were recruited from among homeless young people receiving health and social services from a community drop-in center in a major city in the Southwest. Drop-in centers are one of the most common sources of services accessed by street youth as they provide greater flexibility, less paperwork, and less necessity to disclose personal information (De Rosa et al., 1999). These centers typically provide a safe environment during the day for homeless young people and offer showers, laundry facilities, and clothing (Karabanow & Clement, 2004). They also provide the most likely source of homeless young adults assembling at one location.

Flyers that announced the focus groups were displayed in and around the drop-in center. Drop-in center staff contacted potential participants, provided them with a short description of the study, and requested their participation in one of seven focus groups. All focus groups took place in a private room at the drop-in center. Before each focus group, the research team detailed the purpose of the project, explained that participants could withdraw at any time without consequences, and reported that each group would be audiotaped with anonymity for participants. All subjects provided written consent before each focus group and were paid \$10 for their participation. All procedures, including informed consent, were reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) to protect human subjects from research risks.

A convenience sample of 60 homeless young people participated in one of seven focus groups that included an average of 8 participants per group; groups ranged from 5 to 12 participants. Participants included both females ($N = 28$, 47%) and males ($N = 31$, 52%); one youth self-identified as “transgendered.” Most were Caucasian ($N = 39$, 65%), with the remainder identifying themselves as Hispanic and/or Latino ($N = 14$, 23.3%) or African-American ($N = 6$, 9.7%). Their ages ranged from 16 to 24 years (mean = 19.4 years). All groups included nearly equal proportions of males and females, had an average age of 19–20 years, and were ethnically diverse.

Procedures

Several open-ended questions were developed and critiqued by a panel of researchers to minimize potential biases introduced by the wording of questions. The questions and probes are shown in Table 1. In addition, a pilot focus group was conducted with 8 runaway/homeless youth to evaluate the questions, assess the facilitator’s capability to elicit in-depth information concerning participants’ perceptions, and gauge participants’ willingness to discuss the topics. Focus groups were semidirected through use of the open-ended questions and sought youths’ perspectives related to several areas, including (a) the types of services they used, (b) how they located services, (c) what aspects of services and providers they found helpful or not helpful, (d) identification of their perceived strengths, and (e) other experiences of life on the street. The focus group facilitators were trained in the use of nondirective methods to probe for information beyond the core semistructured questions. Key phrase repetition was used as a primary method to elicit discussion of specific topics and encourage participants to introduce topics they felt were important (Morgan, 1997). Focus groups were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim, and reviewed for accuracy.

Analytic procedure

The analysis was developed through an iterative process using transcript-based procedures (Krueger, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Patton, 2001) and involved all members of the research team. Analysis of the textual data followed methods specific to focus groups outlined by Krueger (1994). This process included examining the transcripts to identify major themes arising from the core questions. Major categories were identified, and subcategories were developed that more specifically illustrated components of the broad categories. Coders then separately examined each transcript and identified all distinct statements (any word, phrase, sentence, or response that pertained to a single concept). Differences in identifying these statements were reconciled through working toward consensus among the coders.

Coders compared the categories/subcategories to reach consensus concerning specific categories and their definitions, as shown in Table 2, and each textual element was then coded into specific categories and subcategories. Coders worked independently and then came together to resolve discrepancies. Once each statement had been coded into a category/subcategory, NUDIST computer software was used to organize the coded statements into the categories and subcategories. Printed reports of each category and subcategory were then reviewed by the research team and specific statements were identified that provided the typical participant responses, as suggested by Krueger (1994). Interpretations of the categorized statements were developed from notes concerning the context and interaction of focus group members, coupled with the research team’s personal experience working with homeless young people. Because the present study focused on the youths’ perceptions of their strengths and street survival skills, only statements reflecting those categories were included in the current study. These categories included: Street smarts, internal strengths, and external resources. Finally, focus group tapes were reviewed to examine the interactions and discussion mechanisms among group participants concerning their perceptions of strengths and survival

on the street. These were analyzed by repeatedly listening to the focus group recordings and discussing these interactions among the research team members.

Results

Street smarts

For homeless youth, negotiating the balance between self-reliance and accepting help from others required the development of street smarts. These skills helped youth to avoid dangerous situations and increased their efficiency in locating valuable resources. However, developing these skills required extensive experience living on the streets, and street smarts are not easily acquired.

In the course of acquiring street smarts, the focus group participants spoke of learning to differentiate those they could trust from those who were untrustworthy. They noted that being guarded and hesitant to develop relationships helped them identify and avoid reliance on undependable people, especially exploitive adults. As they had often been victimized by those professing to be their protectors and providers, including parents, youth felt they had to balance their ability to fend for themselves with the need to seek assistance from others. One youth noted, "You can look at a person and actually tell which ones might not be there when you need them." Another youth stated:

There are some people who will use you up. That's how you pick your friends on the streets. Some people will share. You share with someone, they'll share back with you, and there's other ones who will just stick around and just take everything 'til you have no more. And then they'll be gone and come back when you are back on top again.

Youth participants reported being extremely cautious when sharing information about themselves, especially with those who had not gained their trust. Several youth described learning to "keep their business off the streets" and "holding back" until they could test or read the individual. Implicit in this guardedness was the development of keen observation skills that helped them protect themselves. One youth described it this way: "Sit back and observe...I was sitting back there everyday just watching people, learning people. People fighting people and stuff and all that...That's how I learned it. I've been on the streets for a while."

Homeless youth described labeling individuals by their street smarts. For example, youth new to the streets and naïve to street culture are identified as "Oogles." As one youth pointed out, "Everybody that has come out here on the streets was once an Oogle." Oogles are typically younger and often not considered legitimate by experienced street youth due to their inexperience and continued contact with parents who may continue to provide money and other necessities. Participants blamed Oogles for being too eager to impress, giving street youth a bad name, and being "dumb asses." In one exchange, participants stated:

An Oogle is pretty much a person who has a place, who comes out and hangs out with the homeless and acts stupid. They don't really know the street rules. Believe it or not, we have street rules. You don't act stupid. It's just basic knowledge.

They (Oogles) ruin it for a lot of us. We had a kid who was on the news and said that, yeah, he drinks and smokes because he can and he uses the money from his parents and the people who give him money. I mean you have a lot of stupid people who say stuff like on the news that ruin it for everyone else.

If street youth remain entrenched in street culture for an extended period, they eventually "work their way out of Oogle status" and develop street smarts. Seasoned street youth are often referred to within street culture as "Crusties." These young people are typically older, have

traveled for many years by “hopping trains,” use few formal services, and are given deference and respect by homeless counterparts as tough and knowledgeable.

The varying degrees of participants’ street credibility were evident in their interactions during the focus groups. The youth often voiced disparate perceptions of their experiences of homelessness and the impact of street smarts. These differences became evident in many of the focus groups when disagreements between participants demonstrated divergent opinions concerning street survival. During these interactions, it was apparent that the more experienced street youth were the primary leaders of the discussion. Focus group participants further demonstrated street smarts as they defended their own beliefs and appeared skeptical and distrustful of other group members. Participants frequently challenged others’ views and perceptions in areas of daily survival as well as political and service use issues.

Some aggression and defensiveness was apparent when youth felt it was important to hold their ground. For example, during one particular argumentative interaction, one male participant voiced intense anger toward drug addicts by using threatening and violent language to express his distaste. A quiet-voiced young woman who admitted to drug use responded to this participant with her own aggressive and threatening words. She accused him of having no good reason for being on the streets and of simply being lazy. She stated: “I hope you step on a dirty rig and die.” Her aggression and forceful defense of her position appeared to earn her credibility and respect. No one disagreed with her for the remainder of the focus group.

Personal strengths

coping skills, motivation, attitude, and spirituality

Coping skills—Analyses demonstrated the extraordinary resourcefulness of these young people. As youth navigated service systems, new communities, and varied social cultures, they described developing proficiency in locating resources and solving problems. They learned to coordinate times when various services were available, such as taking advantage of free meals or clinic services during times public transportation services were also available. This coordination often necessitated youth “piecing together” a number of services in various locations. Understanding the restrictions and rules of different service agencies entailed using problem-solving skills in order to utilize resources effectively and efficiently. For these youth, the necessity to overcome challenges posed by living without stable residences and basic needs was a daily struggle.

Several youth cited their own intelligence and ability to rely on their interpersonal skills to meet their needs. They noted that their social and interpersonal skills were most useful in getting their needs met. Interpersonal skills that focused on the ability to interact with other youth who offered information about sources of food, shelter, and other services were viewed as essential. Youth suggested that an outgoing personality was a necessary attribute when approaching strangers on the street and seeking out other street youth who had useful information and resources. One youth’s description exemplified resourcefulness and networking skills, as well as his ability to negotiate a system replete with rules and regulations:

I woke up in the morning and found my way, and I got downtown. So I asked someone where the Salvation Army was, and they pointed me to there, and from there I found out what Caritas was and went over there and ate some lunch, and I ran into these young kids ...and they see a new face... and they get up in your business, but that was cool because I was trying to figure out where I was going and they asked me how old I was. I was 20 at the time and they said, “Why don’t you come down to PHASE’ ...it’s like a drop-in shelter that opens at 1:00.” I was like, okay, that’s like this place I seen in Minneapolis that I used.

Motivation—Focus group participants frequently mentioned various sources of motivation that encouraged them to improve their lives. Several youth talked about the importance of viewing others who had successfully transitioned off the streets as role models, increasing their own motivation to move into a more stable environment. One youth stated, “Seeing somebody who was on the bottom come up on top—like getting a house, getting a job—seeing people actually come up through the system, that’s kinda motivation.” Youth who were hopeful of a better future relied on the success of others to support this belief. Still other youth noted that other people who pushed them to improve also encouraged and motivated them.

Perhaps the most passionately discussed topics among street youth participants were related to their pets. Pets were identified as the youths’ first priorities and were their companions, protectors, and sources of comfort. For many street youth, who had little connection to their biological family, pets were described as the “closest thing you have to kin out there.” One youth described feeling like he could confide in his dog; another stated that having a pet helped “keep my head straight.” As one participant aptly stated:

[A dog] gives you somebody to talk to—I mean my dog is my home—he keeps me warm when it’s cold and gives me somebody to talk to when I’m walking down the highway.

Pets, usually dogs, were described as a source of stability for homeless youth who found these qualities lacking in their lives on the streets. Participants described their need to be able to rely on their pets to remain with them, no matter the circumstances. For example:

If you have a dog or some sort of animal, it’s like—unlike supposed friends that you make out here that turn their back on you—a dog’s not going to do that—if a dog knows how to behave, it’s not going to like run off on you—he’s gonna be there no matter what.

Caring for their animals provided the young people with a sense of pride and accomplishment. They were proud of how they treated their animals and how well-behaved they were. The responsibility of caring for a pet provided meaning in the lives of pet owners, increased their sense of well-being, and motivated them to continue trying to meet basic needs and survive on the street. One youth described the importance of a pet:

It also gives you a little bit of responsibility—when you have a pup. It gives you somebody to take care of. It gives you like a sense of being—you’ve got a meaning in life—you’ve got a reason to do things—my dog was the reason I didn’t get locked up in Frisco or anything else I’ve done because I’ve had to keep straight so I can keep my dog.

Attitudes—Street youth described adopting specific attitudes that helped them to deal with living on the streets. Maintaining a positive attitude was identified as essential in continuing to meet the day-to-day challenges of life on the streets. Youth spoke of avoiding “drama” and maintaining a “no worries” attitude to prevent them from becoming overly stressed and pessimistic. They also remained intentionally hopeful that their situations would improve. One youth exemplified this attitude: “I guess my greatest strength is just to take things as they come—not dwelling on it—just like whatever it is, is going to happen—and just to keep going and to keep moving—and tomorrow’s gonna come.”

In addition to maintaining a positive attitude, participants discussed the benefits of living on the streets. It appeared that focusing on the positive aspects of street culture helped them maintain optimism about their lives. Focus group participants identified mainstream societal values as “boring” when compared with their lifestyle which involved freedom and interesting opportunities. Traditional societal structures were labeled as overly “conforming, pointless,

monotonous” while life on the streets was depicted as an opportunity to travel, to meet interesting people, and be independent of societal conventions and expectations. One street youth remarked, “You smile at us because we’re all different. We smile at you because you’re all the same.” Many youth make the most of their homelessness by highlighting the benefits of their lifestyle instead of dwelling on the difficulties or circumstances that led to their current situations. In this way, youth felt empowered to define the meaning of homelessness for themselves. While the youth acknowledged that life on the streets was difficult and often dangerous, they found comfort and control over their environment by identifying the positive attributes of their lifestyle. Although participants noted their current freedom was desirable and preferable to “normal lifestyles,” many expected a different future. Education and employment, while not pursued in the present, were expectations of many youth for the distant future. This attitude appeared to help them cope with living in their current uncertain circumstances.

Spirituality—Several group discussions mentioned a higher power as a source of support and hope. Participants acknowledged their belief in God and were comforted by knowing that God was protecting them. They explicitly identified their beliefs as a source of strength. One youth remarked, “The man upstairs is what helps me. Just knowing that he’s [God] there. There may be times when I feel like he’s not there, but he’s helping me out slowly. I just have to hear him.”

External resources

peer networks and society

When asked about strengths that help them to survive life on the streets, most participants explicitly identified several external resources rather than highlighting their own internal strengths. They discussed various forms of formal aid, such as shelters and outreach centers. Issues associated with the use of formal services among this group of young people have been addressed elsewhere. (Thompson, McManus, Lantry, Windsor, & Flynn, 2006) Therefore, the external resources discussed below focus on assistance from nontraditional or informal sources. Youth participants described several informal external resources, including peer networks, donations from strangers, and pets.

Peer networks—Respondents commonly identified a community of other homeless young people as a key source of emotional support and protection while on the street. As these young people had limited ties to supportive families, they came to depend upon other homeless young people who were approximately their own age. While they identified some of these homeless peers as friends, they noted that friendship was not a term they used lightly and they felt they had to be very cautious about who they trusted and considered a friend. Leaving their belongings in the care of another person or trusting that person to protect them when they needed it were responsibilities reserved for a trusted few. Small groups of similarly situated young people often formed “street families” to which they felt a sense of belonging and support, while also sharing valuable information regarding subsistence strategies. These trusted friends, often referred to as “road dawgs,” were travel companions over prolonged periods and great distances. One youth described the importance of a particular friendship:

I’m going to tell you how I met my best friend, the only true friend I’ve had in my whole life. So, like for instance, I came to this town, like I was ignorant, I was young, I was giving away all my stuff. I met this kid named Paul...because I needed to meet a real friend and I think he needed someone too. I shared my stuff with him; he didn’t have nothing. One day it had been raining, all my stuff was drenched and he says, “Hey John, you need some cigarettes?” I had no cigarettes...he gave me 5 packs...he said “Hey you need some money?”...he pulls out of his pocket, gave me a hundred

dollars...he said “You need some change for the bus?” ...he reaches in his bag, grabs a handful of change and gives it to me.

The connection with a trusted friend was also described as a source of safety and security, especially among young women. Females described the challenges of trying to find a safe place to sleep at night and being on guard against predatory males. Many spoke of facing a choice between “camping” in open spaces where the risk of arrest was increased but protection from physical/sexual assault was diminished, or choosing to find a more secluded location. These young women attempted to establish trusting friendships with those who did not expect sexual favors but with whom they could camp and find protection.

...Stuff happens to girls...they have problems living on the streets that guys don't have to deal with...being a girl, I always worry about like...if I am going to have someone to sleep with—not to have sex with me, but to camp with—because I get scared camping outside by myself. You don't want to sleep out in the open, because you don't want to get arrested and also because you don't want anybody to fuck with you. And then you think that if I'm like hidden away, then someone could come up and rape me, and if I'm all hidden away then no one could see me struggling or hear me screaming so it's like you get real nervous about things like that...and I don't know if guys do think about that—like worrying about sleeping by themselves—but that's like a major thing.

The importance of peer networks was also evident concerning drug use. Several homeless youth chose friends based on the types of drugs they used; however, others emphasized their choice to “hang out” with those who did not use drugs, crediting their own sobriety with this decision. Associating with those who were heavy drug users often made it difficult to refrain from use; thus, peer networks were often divided into groups who used certain types of drugs such as only alcohol or more “hard core” drugs. Several youth also discussed wanting to help their friends with drug problems, and one youth suggested the development of programs aimed at drug prevention through peer intervention. His following comment exemplified the tight network and sense of community found among street youth who frequently take care of one another: “[Staff need to] educate some of the people that don't shoot up, but that have friends that do, so like to educate them how to take care of them if they were to like overdose—and you know what to do in like an emergency with like a friend that is in that kind of situation.”

Non-homeless friends were also described as an important resource that provided basic subsistence, housing, and hygiene necessities. “Couch surfing” from one friend's house to another was a common strategy among participants and provided them with the welcome opportunity to sleep indoors, shower, and wash clothing. While these non-homeless friends typically offered only a temporary reprieve from living on the street, the participants voiced enthusiastic appreciation for these periods of respite from living outdoors.

The importance of peer networks was evident during focus group interactions as participants spontaneously shared information and resources with each other. Youth shared detailed information concerning: directions to various locations, bus routes, rules and regulations required to receive services, safe places to camp, processes required to get food stamps, how to get computer access at libraries and drop-in shelters, access to free meals, and job opportunities. Youth shared their experiences in specific areas and cities across the country, noting those that were most responsive and welcoming to homeless youth. More experienced young people appeared to enjoy offering advice to less experienced youth.

Homeless youth participants also validated each other's common struggles such as obtaining and maintaining employment, negotiating service systems, dealing with the weather conditions, difficulty in finding shelter from the rain and heat, and obstacles in taking care of themselves. Groups discussed the complexities of service systems, including difficulties in

accessing services without an ID, the innumerable steps required to meet daily needs, and the unrealistic expectations and requirements of services given their transient lifestyle. Group discussions also centered around the difficulties of maintaining employment while homeless including finding a shower every day, requiring an alarm clock, keeping clean clothes, finding transportation, and trusting someone to guard pets and belongings from theft.

The connection, camaraderie, and shared experiences among focus group participants were evident in their common language and understanding. This language and terminology for various street-oriented subjects included labels for various groups of homeless youth (i.e. “Oogles”—young, naïve street youth; “Crusties/Gutterpunks”—experienced street youth who have traveled extensively; “Dreadys”—street youth with poor hygiene who attend “Rainbow gatherings”; “spanging”—asking for spare change; “flying signs”—standing on street corners with signs seeking money from passersby; and “dumpster diving” for discarded food). Youth appeared to understand each other’s meanings and shared a similar respect (or lack thereof) for others in the group. Although youth bonded with each other and provided support for each other’s struggles, they were at times confrontational with those they felt were not taking responsibility for their own future. While recognizing shared challenges to obtain basic needs, participants also endorsed the belief that each person must take personal responsibility for their own successes, challenges, and futures.

Societal resources—Street youth acknowledged the significance of charity from strangers in their survival on the streets. Flying signs, spanging, and panhandling were commonly described methods of getting money while on the streets. Participants also talked about strangers offering help without being solicited: “When you’re on the road you get kicked down a lot of crazy stuff.” Participants reported that families or individuals approached them and offered cash, rides, clothing, cigarettes, and food. Other times, these youth used various strategies to get handouts, including offering to pump gas at gas stations, offering to clean up restaurant parking lots for free food, or helping out at churches for donations. Assistance from strangers on the street or from restaurants were resources that were relied upon heavily. “Once you get there if you see like a bunch of homeless people gathered around a truck you know like it’s a feeding—or like a big line of homeless people coming out of a church, you know like there is something free in there.”

A few participants disclosed that accepting help from strangers came with risks—charitable strangers may expect something in return. Although these young people took risks when accepting places to stay or rides in strangers’ cars, they believed these risks were a natural consequence of accepting help from strangers. One young man told the following story to exemplify this point:

Others, they will let me stay here and there, but it’s like on one condition—that they won’t try and mess with me. Like I was staying with this one guy ...It like he was like a slave driver. Then one day I woke up in the morning and he was like trying to grind me and I was like laying back like this and I’m all like whatever, it’s time to leave again.

The street youth participants described their experiences feeling misunderstood by society. They discussed the general public’s negative perceptions of them and the incorrect stereotypes of homeless youth as “lazy and no good.” These fiercely independent young people viewed their ability to survive on the street as an exceptional strength, a trait to which they were very proud despite the stigmatization and lack of respect demonstrated by the general public. Many groups described their appreciation of help from strangers, but disliked those who viewed them simply as victims.

Discussion

Leaving home at an early age forces young people to decide prematurely whom they can rely upon to survive. Because most street youth cannot depend on parental or familial assistance, options are limited. They are forced to pursue nontraditional resources and internal strengths to navigate this often precarious and hazardous street environment. Focus groups were conducted to contextualize the experiences of homeless young people and elucidate resources for meeting the myriad challenges they face in their daily lives. Results of the focus groups underscore the multidimensional complexities of the lives of homeless young people while demonstrating their many strengths, abilities and resources.

Some service providers and society in general view homeless young people on a one-dimensional level as victims, emphasizing the maltreatment, substance abuse, and poverty that lead to their precocious disengagement from the family. Although these viewpoints have merit, depicting homeless youth only as victims may advance the notion that they have diminished skills and capacities. Therefore, this study was conducted from a strengths-based perspective to identify the various aspects of fortitude that allow youth to survive and succeed in homeless lifestyles. Homelessness clearly requires problem-solving skills and resilience often ignored in more problem-oriented research and service provision. By encouraging street youth to discuss their opinions, feelings, and perspectives, the strengths they had developed to survive their hostile environments became evident.

Developing street smarts appears necessary to live within the street economy and function in spite of adversity and often unsafe and harsh conditions. Homeless youth develop subsistence skills and knowledge required to survive. More experienced, street-entrenched youth often offer support and assistance to less experienced peers; however, individuals are expected to be independent and self-sustaining. Little respect is given to those with limited street smarts or those who remain connected to traditional sources of support, demonstrating these youths' conviction concerning the significance of independence and its role in homelessness. Gaining experience on the street significantly shapes these young people's behaviors and perceptions (Raffaelli & Koller, 2005).

The young people in this study infrequently acknowledged or recognized their own internal and external strengths. Only when asked specifically about their skills did they appear to identify their own individual competencies. When elicited, however, they did note that a positive attitude was needed to survive day-to-day, and they viewed their own intelligence and ability to interact with others as skills they had developed and used to "get along." Similar to other research (Rew & Horner, 2003), these young people felt they were caring for themselves better than others could or had done previously.

Pursuant to findings in previous research (Johnson, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2005), these young people came to depend on similarly situated peers for support, safety, and subsistence. While some spoke of conventional friends who were not homeless and allowed them to stay with them temporarily, social networks were typically described as consisting of other homeless young people. As previous research suggests, these peers and associates often incorporate a social support system of youth who are also troubled (Johnson et al., 2005; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). Although these peer groups often lead to behaviors that are counter to social norms (Robert, Pauze, & Fournier, 2005), interpersonal relationships within this subculture, including those with their pets, serve as a source of motivation to transition off the streets. Young people who left the streets to find stable housing were often viewed as role models and served as an inspiration for other homeless youth aspiring to leave the homeless lifestyle. Pets motivated them to be responsible and avoid situations that were likely to lead to separation from or harm to their pets. Interpersonal relationships appear to be a key source of support, protection, and

guidance as youth negotiate the transition from life on the streets to more stable housing (Lindsey et al., 2000; Rew, 2002).

Practice implications

Practitioners working with homeless youth may find it especially helpful to utilize a “strengths perspective” to empower their clients to become masters of their own lives. Focusing on assets has considerable advantage in working with clients because it is their strengths in overcoming difficulties that mitigate negative outcomes (Selekman, 2005). Thus, effective programs are those that target the skills and capabilities of those served (Clark, 2001) and offer providers a means to engage these youth that does not involve acting as quasi-parents or guardians. As voiced by the young people in this study, they need to maintain control over their lives and protect themselves from further abuse; thus, providers recognizing this unique attribute are more likely to provide services that resonate with these young people (Hyde, 2005).

Several authors (De Rosa et al., 1999; de Winter & Noom, 2003; Greene, Lee, Trask, & Rheinscheld, 1996; Kidd, 2003; Reid & Klee, 1999; Rew, 2002) support the use of strengths-based and solution-focused therapeutic approaches for homeless youth because these approaches focus on mobilizing the strengths and resources of the client. Operating from a strengths-based model rather than an individual-deficit perspective increases the inevitability that deficiencies are minimized and competencies are enhanced. Conversely, focusing only on their victimization may result in overlooking these young people’s resilience (Hyde, 2005). By capitalizing on the youths’ strengths and resources and what is going right in their present lives, these young people can create their own positive outcomes. Strengths-based work is best accomplished by providers conveying an optimistic attitude while capitalizing on the youths’ areas of competency, respecting their defenses, and giving them room to tell their painful stories when, or if, they are ready to do so (Selekman, 1997).

Providers must attend first to the immediate needs of persons who are homeless. Offering basic items such as food, clothing, and hygiene supplies can initiate the necessary mechanisms for establishing communication and trust. The primary aim of this first phase of treatment is to convey respect, empathy, and a genuine desire to be of assistance (Fall & Berg, 1996; Levy, 1998). Rapport can then be established and maintained with the homeless youth by allowing the youth to choose the subject and direction of conversation, focusing on their strengths, and by “not rushing the client to change or make any long term plans” (Fall & Berg, 1998, p. 435). Emphasis should be placed on fostering a sense of control, autonomy and self-efficacy by way of collaboration and allowing the client to establish the direction of the interaction and target for change.

Utilizing a strengths-based approach can assist homeless youth in looking toward the future with the belief that they have the power to effect positive change in their lives and transition out of homelessness (Levy, 1998). Assisting youth to explore solutions and mobilize their resources and strengths to attain desired goals can be highly effective. Providers must recognize that many of the strengths identified by homeless youth are necessary, not only for them to survive and succeed on the streets, but also for navigating their environments and communities when they transition off the streets and back into mainstream society. Table 3 shows the skills and attributes that street youth implicitly described during the focus groups. The positive link between coping skills utilized by these youth and those needed to function and thrive in the mainstream culture is clear. Recognizing the skills youth have likely developed in becoming street smart can give providers a starting place to help youth explore their goals for the future.

Strengths demonstrated by youth are human attributes, behaviors, and skills characteristic of highly functioning and successful individuals within the mainstream culture. An examination of these strengths demonstrates homeless street youths’ ability to navigate environments and

communities. Clearly these skills are fostered and supported within the homeless subculture in which youth often learn, interact, and practice prosocial behaviors. Thus, the recognition of their survival skills and behaviors suggests the availability of these attributes when they decide to move back into the mainstream. For youth workers, these findings suggest that strengthening and encouraging the further development of positive attributes, behaviors, and skills is likely to facilitate and expedite the transition to life off the streets and back into mainstream society.

Finally, participants' interactions in focus groups demonstrated a willingness to share, teach, confront, and participate in group processes, illustrating their ability to develop and use a network for their own and others' advantage. Thus, there may be potential benefit in developing and offering self-help groups for homeless youth focusing on enhancing the skills needed to navigate their environments. Although it is not clear whether they brought the strengths with them, or developed and enhanced them in their life on the streets, positive attributes and skills are instrumental in their survival against adversity.

Limitations

Caution is warranted regarding the application of the results of this study to other homeless young people in other settings due to several methodological weaknesses. First, focus group methods were chosen because of the efficiency of data collection and capacity to incorporate group interactions; however, these strengths also create concerns as groups have a tendency to create conformity among members. For example, less experienced street youth may have felt more restricted in articulating their opinions in the presence of more experienced, streetwise participants than would have occurred in one-on-one interviews. "Polarization" may also occur where some participants express more extreme views in a group situation than they would in individual settings (Sussman, Burton, Dent, Stacy, & Flay, 1991). Finally, because the convenience sample was drawn from one city in the U.S., questions concerning validity of this sample of young people may arise. For example, it is unclear how different or similar these homeless young people are compared to others across the country with respect to their level of transience. Some research has shown that in San Francisco 78% of homeless youth come from outside the state (Kennedy, 1991), while only 10% of programs in Southeastern states report youth coming from outside the state (Kurtz, Jarvis, & Kurtz, 1991). Thus, further research is needed to corroborate these results among other similarly situated young people in various cities across the U.S.

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Table 1

Open-ended questions and probes utilized in focus groups with homeless youth

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- | | |
|----------|---|
| 1 | During your time on the street, which services have you used?
Can you tell me how you located these services?
Which services have you used the most? |
| 2 | Which services were helpful?
What characteristics of staff are most helpful?
What characteristics of the organization are most helpful?
What services were the most helpful? |
| 3 | Which services were not helpful?
What characteristics of staff are most unhelpful?
What characteristics of the organization are most unhelpful?
What services were the most unhelpful? |
| 4 | What are your greatest strengths that help you cope with street life?
What would you say are your own, internal strengths?
What strengths come from outside yourself, like family, friends, other street youth? |
| 5 | If you had a camera in the room and you could talk to funders of services you use, what would you say to them? |
| 6 | Are there other experiences of your life on the street or your own history that you would like to tell use about? |
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Table 2

Categories, subcategories, and definitions

Major Category	Definition
<i>Subcategories</i>	
Developing street smarts	Skills necessary to avoid dangerous situations, locate resources, determine who to trust, and adapt to the social structures and culture of street economies.
Personal strengths	Youth perceptions of internal positive attributes
<i>Coping skills</i>	Skills used to overcome obstacles, problem solve, and meet basic needs
<i>Motivation</i>	Sources of inspiration, support for improvement, and incentive to improve one's situation.
<i>Attitudes</i>	Mind-set, outlook, or way of thinking that helps one deal with life situations.
<i>Spirituality</i>	Comfort, support, or hope through belief in a higher spirit or power.
External resources as strengths	Youth perceptions of external positive attributes
<i>Peer network</i>	Reliance on other youth for support, safety, resources, protection, and survival.
<i>Societal resources</i>	Informal assistance from community members, organizations, restaurants through handouts of food, cash, places to stay or menial work.

Table 3

Attributes and skills of homeless young people

Attributes	Skills
Responsibility: for themselves, their futures, and any pets they acquire Aspirations/goals: to admire and emulate those who have transitioned off the streets Maturity: developing a sense of judgment as to who to trust and what to share Positive attitude: to meet day-to-day life challenges Trust: relying on others	Coping skills: to conform to adverse conditions Interpersonal skills: to interact appropriately with others for their well-being Organizational skills: to coordinate times, places, services, etc. Observational skills: to guard and protect against predators Problem-solving skills: to find, access, and utilize resources