1-1-2013

Asking for Directions: Partnering with Youth to Build the Evidence Base for Runaway and Homeless Youth Services

Don Schweitzer
Pacific University,

Chris Helmer

Lorna Lee

Matt Linderman

David Moore

See next page for additional authors

Asking for Directions: Partnering with Youth to Build the Evidence Base for Runaway and Homeless Youth Services

Description
[From the executive summary]

Each year it is estimated that almost 2 million American youth run away from home, are thrown out of their homes, or otherwise end up homeless. As concerning as those numbers are, the risks runaway and homeless youth are exposed to when they find themselves on the street are even more so. Running away from home dramatically increases the risk of victimization, both physically and sexually. Moreover, youth living on the streets exhibit much higher health risks including higher rates of substance abuse, suicide attempts, sexually transmitted disease, pregnancy and death. Because runaway and homeless youth find themselves lacking skills and resources necessary to fully engage in employment, they are left with few legally permissible options for survival.

The research literature has addressed many aspects of the lives of runaway and homeless youth (RHY): the history, policy, practice and research but has neglected youth perspectives on their needs. The complexities associated with the RHY population such as age, pathways to running away and/or homelessness, mental health, abuse, neglect, etc. make this a challenging field to work in. Yet understanding these complexities and evaluating the interventions used by community social service programs designed to help youth return home, or enter other safe, stable housing, is critical to helping this field develop and improve interventions, programs, and prevention strategies that will be used by this uniquely vulnerable population.
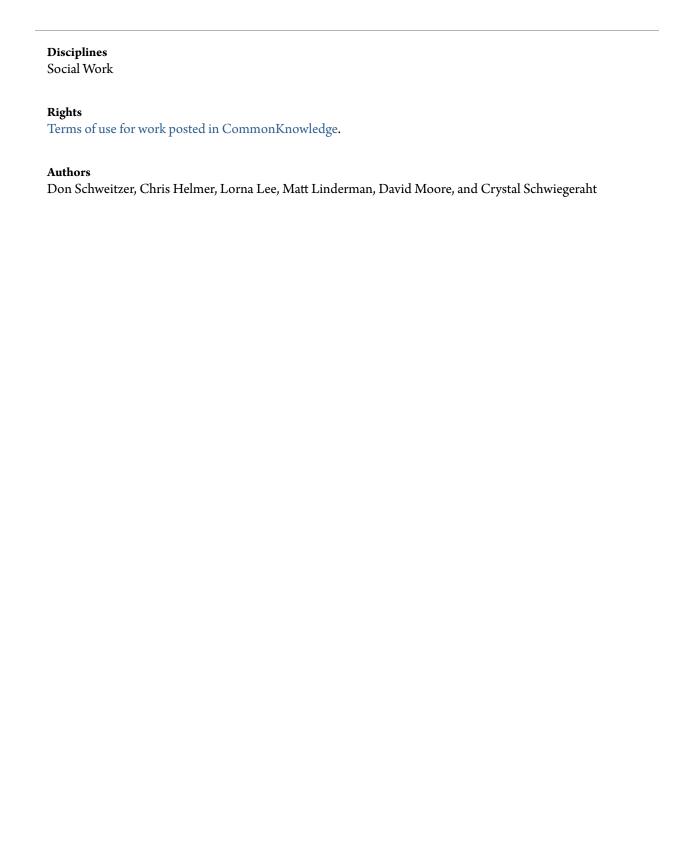
In 1974, Congress first passed the Runaway Youth Act (RYA) providing funding for community shelter programs called Basic Centers. In subsequent years Transitional Living Programs (1988) and Street Outreach services (1994) were added to the act. Unfortunately, researchers, youth advocates, and many service providers report that the vast majority of runaway and homeless youth reject the services and programs designed to meet their needs and keep them safe. This dynamic exacerbates an already perilous situation for youth who find themselves on the streets.

Much of the research to date has focused on the pathology of youth and/or their families. This project suggests that if to understand the complexities of these youth and move toward a system with improved utilization rates, we should begin by asking – what are programs doing that work for RHY? Which services or practices do the youth feel are most helpful? Is there a way to synthesize these practices, codify them, and begin to build the evidence base for working effectively with RHY?

This study began this process by conducting 14 focus groups with 52 youth ages 14 – 21, who were receiving services from a Basic Center (3), a drop-in center (3), a street outreach program (2), or a Transitional Living Program (6), and asking them what is it about this program that works for you? Then the researcher hired RHY to analyze those responses. Findings hold the potential to begin filling the chasm that exists in the literature around effective practice with RHY.

Keywords
Runaway youth, homeless youth, runaway and homeless youth services, youth voice, youth empowerment

Disciplines
Social Work

Rights
Terms of use for work posted in CommonKnowledge.

Authors
Don Schweitzer, Chris Helmer, Lorna Lee, Matt Linderman, David Moore, and Crystal Schwiegeraht

Asking for Directions
Partnering with Youth to Build the Evidence Base for Runaway and Homeless Youth Services

Don Schweitzer, PhD, MSW, BSW

Chris Helmer

Lorna Lee

Matt Linderman

David Moore

Crystal Schwiegeraht

January 2013

Please direct any questions to:

Don Schweitzer, PhD, MSW, BSW
Assistant Professor & Director of Field Education
Pacific University
2043 College Way
Forest Grove, OR 97116
p: 503.352.3036
f: 503.352.3195
dons@pacificu.edu

Table of Contents

Executive Summary ▸

Each year it is estimated that almost 2 million American youth run away from home, are thrown out of their homes, or otherwise end up homeless. As concerning as those numbers are, the risks runaway and homeless youth are exposed to when they find themselves on the street are even more so. Running away from home dramatically increases the risk of victimization, both physically and sexually. Moreover, youth living on the streets exhibit much higher health risks including higher rates of substance abuse, suicide attempts, sexually transmitted disease, pregnancy and death. Because runaway and homeless youth find themselves lacking skills and resources necessary to fully engage in employment, they are left with few legally permissible options for survival.

The research literature has addressed many aspects of the lives of runaway and homeless youth (RHY): the history, policy, practice and research but has neglected youth perspectives on their needs. The complexities associated with the RHY population such as age, pathways to running away and/or homelessness, mental health, abuse, neglect, etc. make this a challenging field to work in. Yet understanding these complexities and evaluating the interventions used by community social service programs designed to help youth return home, or enter other safe, stable housing, is critical to helping this field develop and improve interventions, programs, and prevention strategies that will be used by this uniquely vulnerable population.

In 1974, Congress first passed the *Runaway Youth Act* (RYA) providing funding for community shelter programs called Basic Centers. In subsequent years Transitional Living Programs (1988) and Street Outreach services (1994) were added to the act.

Unfortunately, researchers, youth advocates, and many service providers report that the vast majority of runaway and homeless youth reject the services and programs designed to meet their needs and keep them safe. This dynamic exacerbates an already perilous situation for youth who find themselves on the streets.

Much of the research to date has focused on the pathology of youth and/or their families. This project suggests that if to understand the complexities of these youth and move toward a system with improved utilization rates, we should begin by asking – what are programs doing that work for RHY? Which services or practices do the youth feel are most helpful? Is there a way to synthesize these practices, codify them, and begin to build the evidence base for working effectively with RHY?

This study began this process by conducting 14 focus groups with 52 youth ages 14 – 21, who were receiving services from a Basic Center (3), a drop-in center (3), a street outreach program (2), or a Transitional Living Program (6), and asking them what is it about this program that works for you? Then the researcher hired RHY to analyze those responses. Findings hold the potential to begin filling the chasm that exists in the literature around effective practice with RHY.

Findings

Some of the findings reported from this study confirm previous research. Yet, because youth analyzed the focus group data, there is added validity to these findings. Findings from this study suggest there are key elements that programs and staff should be focusing on to improve service utilization rates. Additionally, findings from this study begin to provide some of the details of the behaviors staff should be trained and evaluated on to

improve utilization rates.

Specifically, findings suggest that skill building should emphasize life skills (e.g. cooking, cleaning, paying bills, etc.) and be less focused on social skills. Counseling should include mental health and substance abuse treatments but should also incorporate family mediation services. Programs must focus on developing extensive community networks in order to provide customized services. These services should be concrete, useful, and customized to meet the individual needs of youth. Additionally, activities should be an integral part of any RHY program model.

Yet, how these services are provided are, perhaps, even more critical than the actual service being provided. Because of this, current policies and models that dictate youth goals and/or focus on changes in youth behavior are resulting in lower utilization rates among RHY. A program's environment and the manner in which staff implement program rules and regulations will also influence utilization rates. Additionally, program attributes must include services delivered in ways that support youth autonomy; doing otherwise has been shown to be rejected by youth and demonstrated in lower utilization rates.

Finally, the findings from this study propose that staff who are resourceful, model healthy behavior, develop personal connections with the youth, are non-judgmental, and have knowledge (both experiential and from formal education) of youth issues will provide youth with the best possible chance at success. Moreover, youth reported their preference for staff who offer what youth perceive as useful help while at the same time respecting youths' autonomy.

Recommendations

With regards to RHY practice, staff need to insure they are providing the right services using the appropriate methods. This study found that **how practices are conducted is as important as *what* is provided**. Because of this, training modules on effective relationship building and power sharing with RHY need to be developed and emphasized. Moreover, and at a minimum, **formerly homeless young people should be included** in the development of these training modules and compensated for their work. Additionally, any youth worker certification should emphasize training on structural barriers that RHY must deal with and **move away from pathologizing** these young people.

With regards to programming, RHY programs need to provide the right services using the appropriate methods are being offered to youth. The primary way programs can ensure this is by **incorporating RHY in every aspect of programming**. Additionally, with training and support youth should be actively engaged in the process of program evaluation and compensated for their work. This study has demonstrated that youth are exceptionally capable to carry out interviews or focus groups with current or past program participants including question development, strategies for sampling, and data analysis. Moreover, youth are best suited to evaluate why other youth may not be utilizing available services. **It is paramount that youth participation be meaningful**, which means programs and staff will have to listen to youth, create avenues for them to have influence, and share power. Additionally, partnering with youth, programs should conduct a review of their internal policies and procedures to identify those that are creating barriers. For example, because adolescent development is anything but a linear process and

because of this study's recommendation for patience in service delivery, any policy that dictates limitations on service time should be scrutinized.

Regardless of size, all RHY programs have the same basic needs for staffing. Whether that is interfacing with the public by answering phones or participating in community meetings, writing up reports, or data entry and analysis, **programs offer a variety of opportunities for youth to acquire valuable job skills**. If employment is the means to independent living, then youth need to obtain those skills and be compensated. Who better to provide an environment of learning, where the individual needs of the youth are the goal, than RHY programs?

With regards to RHY policy, critical to the issue of RHY is that policy, practice, and research are not well linked. Currently, it appears that federal policy dictates practice and then relies on research methods to "prove" their effectiveness. To successfully create programs that engage and work for RHY, this relationship needs to be fundamentally altered. With the confusion surrounding

definitions, inaccuracies in census data, limitations around intervention effectiveness studies, and poor utilization rates, it seems prudent to call for a **White House Conference on Better Futures for Homeless Youth**. With a focus on bottom-up system redesign, this conference would invite youth, researchers, and practitioners to explore new ways of thinking about and responding to the needs of RHY. For example, as other scholars have advocated, the populations of youth who are "runaway" and "homeless" should be separated in policy as well as programs and practices and federal RHY policy should be detached from Juvenile Delinquency policy.

Primarily, **federal research policy needs to support expanded research in the area of RHY**. Funding for RHY services and research, both private (philanthropic foundations, United Way, etc.) and public (federal, state, and local government), should mandate the inclusion of youth in services, programing and evaluation.

Introduction ▸

Each year an estimated 1.7 million American youth run away from home, are thrown out of their homes, or otherwise end up homeless[i]. The magnitude of these numbers is better understood when compared with that of the entire U.S. foster care system, which works with approximately 500,000 children each year. As concerning as these vast numbers are, the risks that runaway and homeless youth are exposed to when they find themselves on the street are even more so. Studies have consistently reported that nationally, almost half of the runaways left home to escape abuse, yet running away from home dramatically increases the risk of victimization, both physically and sexually[ii]. Additionally, research has shown that youth living on the streets exhibit much higher health risks including higher rates of substance abuse, suicide attempts, sexually transmitted disease, pregnancy and death[iii]. Because runaway and homeless youth find themselves lacking skills and resources necessary to fully engage in employment, they are left with few legally permissible options for survival[iv].

The literature has addressed many aspects of the lives of runaway and homeless youth: the history, policy, practice and research. The complexities associated with the RHY population such as age, pathways to running away and/or homelessness, mental health, abuse, neglect, etc. make this a challenging field to work in. Yet understanding these complexities and evaluating the interventions used by community social service programs designed to help youth return home, or enter other safe, stable housing, is critical to helping this field develop and improve interventions, programs, and prevention strategies that will actually be used by this uniquely vulnerable population.

Federal Response

In 1974, Congress responded to increased concerns about the risks for RHY by passing legislation titled the *Runaway Youth Act* (RYA) that provided funding for community shelter programs. Although concern for runaways resulted in this legislation, the RYA was part of the *Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act*, keeping delinquency prevention as the premise to the solution. The RYA of 1974, later titled the *Reconnecting Homeless Youth Act* (RHYA) and today administered through the Families and Youth Services Bureau of the Administration for Children and Families is currently the only federal funding source specifically and solely for RHY[v]. In subsequent years Transitional Living Programs (1988) and Street Outreach services (1994) were added to the act.

The RHYA spells out the program models for which it would provide funds. These include the Basic Center Program, which provide a maximum of 3 weeks of shelter access to youth ages 11-17, the Transitional Living Program, which was developed to meet the longer-term (18-24 months) needs of older homeless youth (16-24 years old), and the Street Outreach Program, which focuses on meeting the needs of youth who were living on the streets specifically focused on the prevention of sexual exploitation[vi].

RHY Research

Although services have been provided to RHY for, in some cases, 40 years, the literature reflects significant gaps in our understanding of RHY and the services for them. Because of this, the field is limited in its ability to accurately gauge the scope of the problem, create meaningful policies, and develop effective practices to meet youths' needs. For example, it is unclear how many

incidents of running away go unreported. There are challenges associated with finding RHY and the methods used to gather that census data are problematic. Additionally, older RHY (18-24) are generally excluded from census efforts, available data on RHY is commonly gathered from youth who are in programs excluding the experiences of those who do not utilize services, and the social stigma and legal implications associated with running away inhibit youth from self-identifying. Moreover, understanding the impact of race on this social problem is, in essence, completely absent in the research literature.

Complicating this social problem is that researchers, youth advocates, and many service providers report that the vast majority of runaway and homeless youth reject the services and programs designed to meet their needs and keep them safe[vii]. This dynamic exacerbates an already perilous situation for youth who find themselves on the streets. Service providers, advocates, and policy makers have developed programs and services they feel meet the need of runaway and homeless youth but services will have little effect on this social problem if youth reject them.

Much of the research to date has focused on the pathology of youth and/or their families[viii]. But to concentrate only on these "failings" misses the mark and prevents the field from ever having the opportunity to provide effective services and, perhaps, one day be able to prevent this social problem. Additionally, while understanding how youth *get in* to this situation is important, it is equally important to understand how to help youth *get out*. Social science must continue to identify systemic barriers to full participation in communities by these youth and their families, *especially* when those barriers exist in the programs designed to serve them. As such, what are programs doing that work for RHY? Which services or practices do the youth feel are most important? Is there a way to merge these practices, codify them, and begin to build the evidence base for working effectively with RHY? This study begins this process by asking youth being served in a RHY program, what is it about this program that works for you? Then the researcher hired RHY to analyze those responses. Findings hold the potential to begin filling the chasm that exists in the literature around effective practice with RHY.

Methods ▸

The following study was conducted in two phases. First, 14 focus groups were conducted at seven different federally funded RHY programs. These included Basic Center programs (3), drop-in centers (3), street outreach programs (2), and Transitional Living Programs (6). The programs were located in a range of city populations; small (>25,000), medium (70,000 – 150,000), and a large metropolitan region (>2.2 million). Table 1 below provides an overview of the sample of focus group participants. In these focus groups, 52 youth ages 14 – 21, were asked what they thought programs are doing right with regard to services. The focus groups were audio taped and then transcribed for analysis.

To analyze the focus group data, methods from participatory action research (PAR) were utilized. PAR was chosen because research has been shown it to provide several key advantages over traditional methods. Because PAR includes participants in the process, projects become much more significant and meaningful, which increases likelihood of community utilization of the findings. Moreover, research suggests

that with participants involved in developing measurement tools, implementation processes, sampling strategies, data analysis, etc., projects will likely experience improved viability resulting in fewer quandaries as well as enhanced rigor of the overall project[ix].

Therefore, five youth who were at the time participating in a TLP or drop-in center were hired as research assistants and provided training in the methods of content analysis. The research team met six times over the course of four weeks and at the end of each meeting the research team was provided copies of transcripts for one of the focus group questions. The team would take these transcripts with them and code them using content analysis for major themes. They would then return to the next meeting ready to discuss what they had found and work with other team members to determine which were most meaningful. This process was repeated until all questions were analyzed.

Each meeting began with researchers presenting their individual analysis. During this time, other members could ask clarifying questions but could not comment on any finding. If a subsequent researcher had also found a

Table 1

Focus Group Sample

	# of Focus Groups	n	Large Sized City	Medium Sized City	Small Sized City
Basic Center	3	9	1	2	
Drop-in Center	3	14	1	1	1
Street Outreach	2	5	1	1	
TLP	6	24	4	2	
Total	14	52	7	6	1

previously mentioned finding in their analysis, they would simply make note of that and move on to a new finding not yet reported. Each member was then given the option for additional time to use after each member had presented. After all team members presented their findings, a discussion was facilitated to identify meaning and major themes that emerged from the individual analyses. This process was repeated until all questions were analyzed.

Findings indicate that *how* services are offered is as important as *what* services are offered. Additionally, by privileging youth and providing meaningful participation, youth are exceptionally capable of developing and evaluating services, programs and policy. A more detailed summary of their key findings follows.

> *There is a tremendous difference between knocking on a door to tell somebody of a program that has been devised already and which they are given the choice, at most, to join or else ignore – and, on the other hand, to ask them to assist in the creation of that plan.*
> Jonathon Kozol[1].

Discussion of Key Findings ▶

Findings from the analysis indicates there are three key components to successful RHY service provision; 1) program services – what is offered, 2) program attributes – how it is offered, and 3) staff characteristics and skills. The net result was a model of what youth find helpful in programming across various dimensions.

Program Services – What is Offered

With regard to program services, youth described important services that programs should be prepared to directly offer youth or assist them with accessing in the community. These include *skill building*, *counseling*, *services customized to meet individual needs*, *connection to concrete supports, and youth development activities*.

Findings from this study suggest that youth place a high value on the acquisition of life skills. Focus group youth described the importance of s*kill building* as those skills necessary for daily living such as cooking, cleaning, and managing money. *Skill building* also includes assistance with skills to improve the employability of youth such as resume writing, practice interviewing, and providing opportunities within the program for youth to acquire and practice new skill sets.

Findings also stressed the importance of *counseling* for mental health and substance abuse issues for individual youth as well as family counseling. If program goals

> *Mediation is wonderful. We spend a lot of time talking. The first time we had mediation it was two hours to get us to calm down and be together and okay.*
> (Basic center youth)

include family reunification, as in the case of Basic Centers, *counseling* services should also include mediation for youth and their family to help facilitate the youth returning home and prevent future runaway events.

Services customized to meet individual needs include those items that afford youth full participation educationally, vocationally, socially and in other areas of health and wellness. Examples provided by youth ranged from simple every day needs that one could expect for most RHY such as bus tokens to get around to more personal items such as supplying caps and gowns for high school graduation ceremonies or a health club membership. *Services customized to meet individual needs* also included providing assistance with navigation

> *They helped me with bus tokens. They helped me with paperwork, like the other day they helped me with my taxes.*
> (Drop-in center youth)

through social service bureaucracies, underscoring how complicated these systems can be, and offering youth incentives to reward their successes. The finding of c*onnecting to concrete supports* highlights the importance of RHY programs building extensive networks of community collaborations to assist youth access to these services as well as help youth build their own support networks to sustain independent living.

The finding of youth development a*ctivities* emphasizes the importance of offering recreation and is essential to help youth stay active physically as well as experientially. This confirms the findings of several recent studies that support the importance of providing youth with recreational opportunities. According to focus group youth, *activities* should include a range of activities from

planned as well as spontaneous outings. The findings from this study also highlight the importance of staff participation in those *activities* with youth.

Program Attributes – Services Offered

This study found, as have others, that "how" services and supports are provided (program attributes) is equally, if not more, important than "what" those services and supports are. Focus group youth articulated program attributes they felt were key to successful services. These include the manner in which *engagement and assessment* is performed, *providing choices* to youth, creating a youth focused milieu that includes *safety* and *stability* while simultaneously

> *If they see you're having a problem, the staff will take you aside and say, hey, what's going on? And if you don't want to open up, they don't push the issue. And that is not like a lot of other places I've been.*
> (Drop-in center youth)

cultivating in youth a *sense of belonging*, and being *flexible* with rules and *patient* with youth. Yet, continued involvement in current RHY interventions is often contingent upon some type of behavior change tied to continued participation. Because of this, program goals and youth goals can easily come into conflict with one another, exacerbating poor utilization rates.

This study also found that how a program conducts *engagement and assessment* is critical, confirming findings from other studies. However, findings from this study provide additional details on *how* a program should conduct *engagement and assessment*. Focus

group youth felt it was vital that staff have, and take, time to thoroughly *engage and assess* youth. This provides staff the opportunity to obtain a comprehensive understanding of youth needs so they are able to identify *services customized to individual needs*, i.e. educational, vocational, social, etc. This time also provides youth with the time needed to feel comfortable and develop trust of programs and their staff. Conversely, rushing through this stage will have dire consequences such as staff imposing inappropriate or incompatible goals onto youth with the risk that youth may drop out. Other researchers have found that coercing youth into goals that conflict with their self-interest will actually create more barriers than they remove for youth transitioning off the streets. Some researchers suggest that when youth first run away they find themselves at a critical crossroads. If they encounter programs that are providing services inappropriately, they may be more likely to engage with the street culture to have their needs met, increasing their exposure to a variety of serious risks.

The findings from this study indicate that youth autonomy is a necessary feature of program services. Interrelated with this is the importance youth placed on the value of independence/self-reliance. Other researchers have found that skills acquired by youth to survive on the streets provided them with a sense of pride and garnered respect from others. Their findings also indicated youth felt they would have to give this up in order to access services and, just as anyone would resist giving up their autonomy, youth were reluctant to do so. This helps explain the importance of programs providing choices and including youth when determining

> *In the house, it just seems like options instead of orders.*
> (TLP youth)

youths' needs and goals. Doing so creates an environment of empowerment whereby youth learn about the variety of options available to them, and they begin to use those skills to plan and make decisions for themselves.

This study also found that simply meeting basic needs of youth is not enough to keep them engaged and participating in a program; programs must provide an environment that youth find appealing. Findings from this study suggest many programs had been successful in creating a youth friendly milieu. Focus group youth described an environment suitable for young people as one that includes providing a *relaxed atmosphere*, a sense of *safety* and *stability*, and *flexibility* concerning the implementation of policies and procedures.

This study finds that key components of the environment include being *safe* and *stable*. Having run away or being homeless can be a frightening experience at best and programs must insure youth feel safe when they are participating in services. Additionally, perhaps because family conflict is consistently identified by youth as the primary reason for running away from home, focus group youth were clear that they would not be willing to remain in a program where chaos and conflict exists. The inability of programs to provide *safety* and *stability* will certainly influence youths' willingness to engage in the services.

This study also found that *flexibility* around rules is a

> *It has to be a safe place for everyone.*
> (TLP youth)
>
> *No put-downs, no racism, sexism, nothing like that.*
> (Basic center youth)

critical program feature and confirms other studies that its absence could directly inhibit service utilization. The focus group youth also identified consistent rules as essential for service provision yet they also stressed the need for *flexibility*. It is important that programs understand that when rules are infringed upon, there is an opportunity for youth to learn and grow far more than by simply disciplining or discharging them.

Findings from focus group youth also indicate there is a striking significance to programs providing youth with a *sense of belonging* and many youth referred to the program as their 'family'. However, it is important to note that youth are not looking for new 'parents'. These findings confirm other research findings that indicate youth need to feel connected to a supportive group in

> *I feel like there are people I can count on to listen to me and not judge me. And be there for me when things get bad and help figure out what I should do and they won't be biased in any way.*
> (TLP youth)

order to transition off the streets.

This study also highlights the importance of patience when working with RHY. The daily struggle to survive as well as the time it takes youth to accomplish longer-term goals such as education, employment, life skills, etc. requires programs to be *patient* when expecting change. *Patience* is also required for youth to effectively interact with staff, counselors, caseworker, etc. so they can establish realistic personal goals.

Staff Attributes & Behaviors

Findings from this study indicate that staff who are *resourceful*, *model healthy behavior*, develop *personal connections* with the youth, are *non-judgmental*, and have *knowledge* of youth (both experiential and from formal education) will provide youth and programs with the best possible chance at success.

The focus group youth identified *resourceful* staff as important. The ecological-development perspective explains that homelessness, "results from inadequate resources [and] recognizes the importance of the family system in mediating the resource losses that result or manifest as homelessness"[x]. Therefore, it makes sense

> *Staff will give you a whole bunch of options. If one option doesn't work, they go for the next option. If that one doesn't work they keep going until they find one that does.*
> (Drop-in center youth)

that when youth are separated from a family system, they rely heavily on staff to support them with accessing resources essential for health, safety, and successful independent living. This confirms other's finding that youth need staff who offer, "practical help," while adding detail to the specifics of what a *resourceful* staff looks like. Focus group youth stressed that to be *resourceful* staff must be knowledgeable about the community services, possess a network of community connections and relationships with those services, exhibit inquisitiveness and an enthusiasm to seek out new services, and be persistent in the pursuit of matching the right resource with the individual youth. "How" *resourcefulness* is carried out is essential as well. Obtaining a vital resource is important, but through the

process of acquiring it, staff should make use of the opportunity to teach and model self advocacy skills necessary for independent living. Conversely, simply telling youth about a particular resource is not only a missed opportunity to teach a valuable life skill, it also increases the likelihood of failure.

Moreover, this study highlights the importance of staff developing a *personal connection* with youth. According to focus group youth, a *personal connection* includes interpersonal skills, the ability to recognize each individual youth's strengths, being proactive in assessing skill areas, and being familiar enough with each individual youth to recognize when they are experiencing a particularly difficult day as well as an especially good one. These findings confirm Raleigh-DuRoff's (2004) finding of the need to, "celebrate each small success" and, "help [youth] identify their passions and interests"[xi]. Additionally, a *personal connection* means that staff understand the nuances of each particular youth, are flexible, understand that youth may require different styles of interaction, and have the ability to adapt their own behavior to appropriately interact with youth. A *personal connection* also means staff are aware of and understand what is happening in the lives of the youth outside the program and how those external events could potentially affect youth and their ability to succeed inside the program.

> *Like when you're out there in the world people are judging you constantly, and you constantly have to put up with that, you know, how people are looking at you, you know, and what you've done, and all that. It is a lot of pressure you know, but then you come here and staff doesn't judge you, no one really judges you.*
> (Basic Center youth)

Findings from this study also indicate that youth are watching, and learning from, staff and how they conduct themselves. Modeling behavior has the ability to generate three types of effects on those observing: 1) acquisition of new behaviors, 2) already learned yet inhibited behaviors are moderated, and, 3) modeling behavior. RHY program staff must understand the importance of this dynamic and pay particular attention to what they are teaching youth through their behaviors. For example, because of prior social learning, youth in programs may resort to yelling or other similar behaviors in times of high stress or anxiety. Therefore, it was especially important that staff not respond in a similar fashion.

The overall success of a runaway and homeless youth program will depend heavily on the individual interactions between the youth and the program's staff. Highlighting this importance, Raleigh-DuRoff (2004) found that for every participant in her study with youth who had transitioned from the streets, "there were at least one adult and one organization that helped each of the participants leave the streets"[xii].

Historically RHY have been viewed through the lens of delinquency, resulting in theories that focused on the criminal behavior of youth. Findings from this study suggest this paradigm is still active today and youth are well aware of it. Because of this, it is essential that staff practice with a *nonjudgmental* perspective. This allows staff to effectively engage and assess youth, develop a *personal connection* and an ongoing working relationship with them, as well as create an environment where youth feel comfortable. One way staff can exhibit nonjudgmentalism is to support youth as they learn and grow, understanding that "mistakes" are a normal part of the learning and growing process. Furthermore, in their report on research findings and interventions with RHY, Toro and colleagues (2007) found that many of the examples of family conflict, the chief reason given for running away, were in areas where youth may feel they are being negatively judged on their behavior choices, "sexual activity,...sexual orientation,... and alcohol or drug use"[xiii], all behaviors that, for the most part, are socially acceptable for adults. It could be that family conflict results from this judgment thereby making youth especially sensitive to it.

> *And I just went off. But afterwards I realized how stupid I was because I yelled at her and the whole time she was like, 'I know, I know.' And I thought, 'I'm yelling at you, respond! Yell back at me, something.' They don't hold grudges.*
> (TLP youth)

Recommendations ▸

Based on the literature and the findings of this study, a comprehensive systemic change in the way RHY services are carried out is needed. While well-meaning advocates have developed practices, program models and policies they feel best serve this vulnerable population, utilization rates suggest these models may not be the most effective. Additionally, researchers from both the U.S. and the U.K. suggest that to develop a useful service system the views of RHY are vital[xiv]. Moreover, the voices of youth are available and staff, as well as researchers, need to create opportunities for RHY to give input to improve services. Discussed in more detail below, Table 2 provides an overview of those recommendations.

RHY Practices

Staff need to insure they are providing the right services using the appropriate methods. Doing one without the other will likely result in significant negative impacts on the youth they are attempting to serve. This study found that *how* practices are conducted is as important as *what* is provided. Because of this, training modules on effective relationship building and power sharing with RHY need to be developed and emphasized. For example, the Runaway and Homeless Youth Training and Technical Assistance Center should ensure there is an emphasis on the importance of relationship in any training they develop or sanction. Moreover, and at a minimum, formerly homeless young people should be included in the development of these training modules as well as compensated for their work. Also, findings from this study suggest that programs deemphasize the teaching of social skills and emphasize life skills building (e.g. cooking, cleaning, paying bills, etc.). Additionally, any youth worker certification should emphasize training on structural barriers that RHY must deal with and move away from the pathologizing of RHY. Moreover, partnering with youth in meaningful ways and privileging their voice holds potential to be valid across other youth serving systems.

RHY Programs

Programs also need to ensure that the right services using the appropriate methods are being offered to youth. The primary way programs can do this is by incorporating RHY in every aspect of programming. For example, youth should be sitting on agency boards of directors to help insure that agency wide decisions do not negatively affect youth. Additionally, with training and support youth should be actively engaged in the process of program evaluation and compensated for their work. Youth are exceptionally capable of carrying out interviews or focus groups with current or past program participants including question development, strategies for sampling, and data analysis. Moreover, youth are best suited to evaluate why other youth are not utilizing available services, which is critical information for useful program changes or the development of new services/programs. Youth participation needs to be meaningful, which means programs and staff will have to share power. If programs are contracting with outside evaluators/researchers, they should make sure that youth are utilized in those processes as well. Because this study suggests benefits can be realized along the continuum of participatory methods, programs have the latitude to collaborate with youth even on current or ongoing projects even when youth may not have been involved with their creation.

Additionally, partnering with youth, programs should conduct a review of their internal policies and procedures to identify those that are creating barriers.

Those that are found to create barriers must be modified. For example, because of the conflict between, "*institutional* and *developmental* transitions"[xv], because, "adolescence and adulthood are not tidy developmental categories"[xvi], and because of this study's recommendation for patience in service delivery, any policy that dictates limitations on service time should be scrutinized. Moreover, the activity of policy review should be repeated at regular intervals. Regardless of size, all RHY programs have the same basic needs for staffing. Whether that is interfacing with the public by answering phones or participating in community meetings, writing up reports, or data entry and analysis, programs offer a variety of opportunities for youth to acquire valuable job skills. If employment is the means to independent living, then youth need to obtain those skills. Who better to provide an environment of learning, where the individual needs of the youth are the goal, than RHY programs? Therefore, programs should actively seek out ways to put youth into employment roles and adequately compensate them for their work.

Finally, although programs may establish *what* services can be offered (e.g. skill-building, mental health services, activities, etc.), they need to provide staff the autonomy to decide *how* those services are carried out (e.g. engagement and assessment, provision of choices, flexible, etc.).

RHY Policy

In the field of RHY – policy, practice, and research are not well linked. Currently, it appears that federal policy dictates practice and then relies on research methods to "prove" their effectiveness. To successfully create programs that engage and work for RHY, this relationship needs to be fundamentally modified.

With the confusion surrounding definitions, inaccuracies in census data, limitations around intervention effectiveness studies, and poor utilization rates, it seems prudent to call for a **White House Conference on Better Futures for Homeless Youth**. With a focus on bottom-up system redesign, this conference would invite youth, researchers, and practitioners to develop new ways of thinking about and responding to the needs of RHY. For example, as other scholars have advocated, the populations of youth who are "runaway" and "homeless" should be separated in policy as well as programs and practices, and federal RHY policy should be detached from Juvenile Delinquency policy[xvii]. The outcome, along with required changes needed at the national level, would then be presented to the federal departments currently active in youth services: Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services (including Administration for Children and Families and the Family and Youth Services Bureau), Department of Education, Department of Labor, and the Department of Justice (including the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention).

Primarily, federal research policy needs to support expanded research in the area of RHY. Moreover, funding for RHY services and research, both private (philanthropic foundations, United Way, etc.) and public (federal, state, and local government), should mandate the inclusion of youth.

Table 2		
Recommendations		
RHY practice	RHY Programs	RHY Policy
Continuing education & training in service models that emphasize relationship building	Provide opportunities for meaningful youth inclusion for program development and evaluation	National Conference on Runaway and Homeless Youth
Move away from pathology oriented service models	Review program policies for barriers to services	Support expanded research in area of RHY
Evaluate ethical policies that may inhibit youth work	Provide employment within programs for skill development	Require youth inclusion in research & evaluation, policy development and programming
Provide opportunities for meaningful youth participation in evaluation/research projects	Ensure staff autonomy to utilize appropriate methods	

Conclusion ▶

The chief critique of RHY intervention studies is the limited information about specifics of program services. Those studies that do provide detail seem to focus on the behavioral changes that RHY "need" to make, so they will be "able" to return home or other safe housing. The key voice missing from the development and oversight of RHY programs is that of the youth who utilize these programs. In light of this, it is imperative that youth voice be the centerpiece of program development, improvement, and evaluation.

Many of the findings reported from this study confirm previous research. Yet, because youth analyzed the focus group data, there is added validity to these findings. Findings from this study suggest there are key elements that programs and staff should be focusing on to improve service utilization rates. Additionally, findings from this study begin to provide some of the details of the behaviors staff should be trained and evaluated on to improve utilization rates.

Yet, how these services are provided is perhaps even more critical than the actual service being provided. Because of this, current policies and models that dictate youth goals and/or focus on changes in youth behavior are resulting in lower utilization rates among RHY. A program's environment and the manner in which staff enforce program rules and regulations will also influence utilization rates.

Arguably, runaway and homeless youth are among the most disadvantaged and underserved groups in the United States. While historically, these youth have been viewed as delinquent, troubled, or worse – the fact that most of them run to escape appalling environments, perhaps makes them the most courageous and sensible youth in our communities. Yet, the underutilization of these services by runaway and homeless youth has frustrated providers and signals the need for significant changes in the approaches taken to serve this population. This study suggests that to do this effectively, to create a system that youth will engage in and use, requires youth to be involved in its formation.

Acknowledgements ▸

This project wishes to acknowledge;

Endnotes ▸

[i] Fernandes, A.L. (2007), *Runaway and homeless youth: Demographics, programs, and emerging issues,* No. RL33785, Congressional Research Service;

National Collaboration for Youth. (2006). *Runaway and homeless youth act programs-fact sheet.* Retrieved from http://www.nassembly.org/nydic/policy/breifs/documents/06CollabRHYA.pdf;

National Crime Justice Reference Service (October, 2002). *National incidence studies of missing, abducted, runaway, and throwaway children (NISMART).* Retrieved from http://www.ncjrs.gov/html/ojjdp/nismart/04/ns2.html;

Thompson, S. J., Safyer, A. W., & Pollio, D. E. (2001). Differences and predictors of family reunification among subgroups of runaway youths using shelter services. *Social Work Research, 25*(3), 163-172.

[ii] Fisher, D. G., & Wilson, P. J. (1995). Sexual and drug-taking experiences reported by runaway youth. *Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education, 40*(2), 88.;

Kurtz, P. D., Kurtz, G.L., & Jarvis, S.V. (1991). Problems of Maltreated Runaway Youth. *Adolescence, 26*(103), 543.;

Rew, L. (2008). Caring for and connecting with homeless adolescents. *Family & Community Health, 31*(1), S42-S51.;

Tyler, K. A., Cauce, A. M., & Whitbeck, L. (2004). Family risk factors and prevalence of dissociative symptoms among homeless and runaway youth. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 28*(3), 355-366.

[iii] Fisher, D. G., & Wilson, P. J. (1995). Sexual and drug-taking experiences reported by runaway youth. *Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education, 40*(2), 88.;

Thompson, S. J., Zittel-Palamara, K. M., & Forehand, G. (2005). Risk factors for cigarette, alcohol, and marijuana use among runaway youth utilizing two services sectors. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Substance Abuse, 15*(1), 17-36.;

Yoder, K. A., Whitbeck, L. B., & Hoyt, D. R. (2003). Gang involvement and membership among homeless and runaway youth. *Youth & Society, 34*(4), 441;

Rew, L. (2008). Caring for and connecting with homeless adolescents. *Family & Community Health, 31*(1), S42-S51.;

Stiffman, A. R. (1989). Suicide attempts in runaway youths. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior, 19*(2), 147.;

Roy, E., Haley, N., Leclerc, P., Sochanski, B., Boudreau, J. F., & Boivin, J. F. (2004). Mortality in a cohort of street youth in Montreal. *Jama-Journal of the American Medical Association, 292*(5), 569-574.

[iv] Thompson, S. J., Safyer, A. W., & Pollio, D. E. (2001). Differences and predictors of family reunification among subgroups of runaway youths using shelter services. *Social Work Research, 25*(3), 163-172.

[v] Fernandes, A.L. (2007), *Runaway and homeless youth: Demographics, programs, and emerging issues,* No. RL33785, Congressional Research Service

[vi] Ibid

National Alliance to End Homelessness (n.d.). *Policy focus area: Youth.* Retrieved from http://www.endhomelessness.org/section/policy/focusareas/youth

[vii] Garrett, S.B., Higa, D.H., Phares, M.M., Peterson, P.L., Wells, E.A., & Baer, J.S. (2008). Homeless youths' perception of services and transitions to stable housing. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 31, 436-444.

Slesnick, N., Dashora, P., Letcher, A., Erdem, G., & Serovich, J. (2009). A review of services and interventions for runaway and homeless youth: Moving forward, *Children and Youth Services Review*, doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2009.01.006

viii Ibid

ix Turnbull, A.P., Friesen, B.J., & Ramirez, C. (1998). Participatory action research as a model for conducting family research. *Research and Practices for Persons with Disabilities*, 23(3), 178-188

x Haber, M. G., & Toro, P. A. (2004). Homelessness among families, children, and adolescents: An ecological-developmental perspective. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review, 7*(3), p. 145

xi Raleigh-DuRoff, C. (2004), Factors that influence homeless adolescents to leave or stay living on the street. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal.* 21(6), p. 571.

xii Raleigh-DuRoff, C. (2004), Factors that influence homeless adolescents to leave or stay living on the street. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal.* 21(6), p. 571.

xiii Toro, P. A., Dworsky, A., Fowler, P.J. (2007). *Homeless youth in the United States: Recent research findings and intervention approaches.* Paper presented at the Toward Understanding Homelessness: The 2007 National Symposium on Homelessness Research. Retrieved from http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/homelessness/symposium07/toro/index.htm. p. 6

xiv Beresford, P. (2000). Service users' knowledges and social work theory: Conflict or collaboration? *British Journal of Social Work*, 30, 489-503.
   Beresford, P. & Croft, S. (2001). Services users' knowledges and the social construction of social work. *Journal of Social Work*, 1(3), 295-316.
   Stringer, E.T. (2007). *Action research* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles: Sage Publications
   Pilgram, D. & Waldron, L. (1998). User involvement in mental health service development: How far can it go? *Journal of Mental Health*, 7(1), 95-104

xv Davis, M. (2003). Addressing the needs of youth in transition to adulthood. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health*, 30(6),, p. 496

xvi Scott, E.S. & Steinberg, L. (2008). *Rethinking juvenile justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press., p. 237

xvii Glassman, M., Karno, D. & Erdem, G. (2010). The problems and barriers of the RHYA as social policy. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32, 798-806.