

The (Mis)construction of Youth Homelessness: Historical, Social, and Political Dilemmas

“I don’t want to romanticize what it was like in those days. There was a lot of crack dealing and prostitution and drugs. But it was a street economy. There are an awful lot of young people who grow up in really ravaged environments, who don’t get educated, who get traumatized, who don’t get parented...I don’t want to say any of it is good, but they do it to survive.”

-Kristina Gibson

Homeless Youth, Outreach, and Policing New York’s Streets

Introduction

Street youth have been challenged by the societal image of what it means to be young and homeless. A popular image of youth homelessness can be found in movies, TV shows, and books depicting a young, troubled teenager who leaves their home in order to pursue an unexpected journey. As the famous image continues, this young individual eventually finds their way to the street resorting to drugs and alcohol begging for any spare change. This image is familiar to the general population and it speaks of social norms that [mis]construct youth homeless as delinquent, irresponsible, blameworthy children resorting to the streets in order to survive by their own terms. This delusion promotes the misunderstanding of youth homelessness and indicates the difficulty of overcoming social norms that compose youth homeless as socially deviant and out of place while negating the situations that lead youth to the streets.

The transition into adulthood is a crucial time in any youth’s development but when children encounter the realm of homelessness they become considered the most understudied group of an already understudied homeless population (Napolitano 110). Most researchers define youth homelessness as young people ranging from the age of twelve to twenty four years old living without family support or a stable residence. Homeless youth are one of the fastest growing populations in the United States and constitute about 1.6 to 2 million youth every year (Gibson 7). This statistic of youth homelessness is only growing while national discussions about “ending homelessness” focus on adult homelessness and other related issues such as affordable

housing and poverty (Napolitano 110). Social constructions of youth homelessness ultimately lead to street youth being overlooked in today's society, minimizing the urgency to help those who face youth homelessness. Recognizing the intersections leading to youth homelessness will contribute vital information to ongoing debates about the rights of street youth and the value of outreach programs. Four main themes will be analyzed: (1) the history of youth homelessness represented by major movements recognized in the 1860s to present and how social norms concerning children shape broader ideologies about youth homelessness; (2) the etiological storm youth homeless endure such as violence, abuse, health risks, mental health risks, unemployment, family finances, caring for siblings, caring for others, crime, and suffering (Bernstein & Foster 15; Gattis & Larson 1; Gibson 6; Napolitano 111; Oher 4) (3) the understanding of youth homeless services and whether or not youth homeless really want help in order to survive in today's society; (4) the current state of youth homelessness and programs attempting to "end homelessness". In summary, the paper will argue this diverse population has been invisible to society due to the negative portrayal set by social norms and the goal of this paper is to further understand the rights of youth homeless, the paths youth choose when being forced into homelessness, and the value of service programs in order to make youth homelessness visible for future generations.

Historical Meaning of Youth Homelessness

Media popularized the view that although homelessness in the United States has a past, the homeless population today is "fundamentally different" from that of previous time. "Various experts claimed that the characteristics of homeless people, as well as the causes, have changed" (Napolitano 108-109). I argue historical reviews prove homelessness is not fundamentally different and in many respects remains timeless. The youth homeless population continues to

prevail at a fast rate as children face the same dilemmas that forced youth to the streets many years prior to today's society. Distinct social movements throughout the 1860s to present day have slowly affixed to the term of youth homelessness but continue to explain the same ideological view without understanding that youth homeless are the most economically and socially disadvantaged population. For example, the movements I will be discussing occurred in 1860, 1890, 1968, 1978, 1990 and 2009 (Mayhew 468; Napolitano 108; Riis 1; "Runaway and Homeless Youth Act" 1; "Street Kids—Homeless youth and Runaway Youth" 2). During the 1860s era, Henry Mayhew was known for his investigative journalism capturing London's poor and enabling them to tell their stories. This eye-opening element in literature astonished the Victorian public causing his investigative tactics to take London's media by storm, but the idea of poor youth street-sellers had not been brought to the forefront of London's social construction. A parallel term used in the 1860's to youth homelessness was street-sellers (Mayhew 1). Children street-sellers fall into the same characterization of youth homelessness that we have today; a difference of one hundred and fifty-five years. The volume indicated that the general population understood children street-sellers as low-life, dirty, delinquent, and troubling children. Mayhew organized his book in a way so that children and other London poor were identified as the forefront of civilization in order for the general population to empathize with London's poor. The general population could then understand why children were on the streets selling, gambling, stealing, sleeping, and prostituting. Children had been driven to the street because they had been either been "untaught, mistaught, maltreated, neglected, regularly trained to vice, or fairly turned to streets to shift for themselves" (Mayhew 468). This exemplifies Mayhew's goal in telling the general public this ideological view of the street-sellers was incorrect and here he quotes why street-youth resort to the street, not what the social norm is.

Today, the general population may think that the youth homeless means seeking adventure and relying on drugs and alcohol to survive, but in reality most of these children suffer from neglect, abuse, and family conflict as stated in the 1860s. In the 1890s *Children of the Poor*, written by Jacob Riis, investigated homeless children being challenged by law, education (Ragged Schools), children centers, and charities. Jacob Riis was social reformer who thought it was important to be an advocate for the poor children by explaining the importance of governmental law and how it needed to be enforced. Riis investigated the lives of children forced to work in a sweatshop, assembly line, or cotton mill. As stated in Riis and Gibson, aid to street children in the United States was based on religion and funded through private philanthropy groupings of people. As time passed, movements were made but street children were still controlled by the social stigma associated with homelessness (Gibson 29, Riis 93). “In the relation of the saloon to the child there has been no visible improvement, and the street is still his refuge. It is, then, his opportunities outside that must be improved if relief is to come” (Riis 6-7). This quote exemplifies the struggles to redemption street children encountered when living on the streets and the need for improvement in the future. The “Child Savers” Movement brought attention to the working poor children in industrial cities such as New York according to an article in the New York Times, 1860, stating,

The wretched condition of these poor children, the days and nights of suffering to which they are exposed, the moral contamination is evitable in their present mode of life, and the hope of rescuing them from the doom of criminal, or the death of the vagrant, have stimulated the charitable dispositions of the benevolent, and led to the rescue of thousands from a life of degradation and misery (qtd. in Gibson 31).

After this movement was enacted, Riis admitted in the thirty years between 1860 and 1890 in New York City, “the commitments of girls and women for vagrancy fell off from 5,880 to 1,980, while the commitments of girl thieves fell between 1865 and 1890 from 1 in 743 to 1 in 7,500.

Stealing and vagrancy among boys has decreased too; if not so fast, yet at a gratifying rate” (Riis 7). While rates seemed to decrease in youth homelessness the meaning of homeless and youth remained to have a negative social perception associated to those of child laborers. In fact, street children were often subjects of horrified popular imagination, “depicted as gangs of wily street thieves in novels like Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* (1838) and Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*... (1862)” (Gibson 35).

Although the Child Saver’s Movement strengthened the social boundaries between children and adults with the intent on protecting and altering the treatment of children, the nineteenth century took a turn and focused primarily on controlling youth’s behavior. When classifying children as a delinquent group within the general society, it caused the government to seek ways of controlling youth behavior. The 1968 and 1978 time periods reflect historical Acts that contributed negatively and positively to the youth homeless population signified by the United States Committee on Labor and Human Resources (*Street Kids--Homeless and Runaway Youth* 2-3). 1968 marks the passage of the 1961 Juvenile Delinquency Prevention and Control Act that focused on the underlying sociological factors of deviant behavior among youth (*Street Kids--Homeless and Runaway Youth* 2). Again, the Act reinforced the idea that unaccompanied minors on the street fit the image of troubled, and potentially delinquent youth. This image was continued throughout the 1960’s as the term “delinquency” became a new social phenomenon. For example, Gibson relayed the message that what had changed socially was not the organization of gangs but the middle-class norms viewed youth groupings as “abnormal and deviant and therefore delinquent” (44). As shown, there still lies this negative stereotype of youth homeless, which continued throughout the time period as the media reinforced this delinquent social behavior in *West Side Story* (1961) and S.E Hinton’s *The Outsiders* (1967) (Gibson 45).

Youth started to revolt against this negative portrayal for it cost them opportunities to procure education and a working-class position. Over the next couple years, the media actually changed this negative connotation by publishing influential academic studies of behaviorists and sociologists that began to take interest in the child's point of view. The perceptions and middle-class social norms began to establish a complete countercultural revolution and strayed away from the delinquent term. In response the "runaway" concept was created and depicted runaways as "intelligent, independent, and active" youths (Gibson 47) but still enacted the image of youth homeless being problematic to society. In order to track down and control youth that run away, most becoming part of the homeless youth population, the 1974 Runaway Youth Act was established. Taking a turn for a more positive future, the act was updated to include homeless youth changing its title to the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act in 1978 and is still established today. This act allowed local organizations administered by the U.S department of Health and Human Services to care for youth individuals who were homeless and needed employment, healthcare, transitional housing, family reunification, and independent housing options (Runaway and Homeless Youth Act 1). Even though this Act developed a positive impact for youth homeless, the social norms of youth homeless remained and it seems as if there has been a plateau established among the improvement of youth homeless since then.

In the governmental document from 1990 called *Street Kids—Homeless and Runaway Youth* published by the U.S Committee of Labor and Human Resources, Senator Dodd states, "we also need to better understand who these children are...Popular misconceptions abound and obstruct our ability to seriously confront these problems. Runaways have been romantically portrayed in literature as Tom Sawyers and circus boys and girls...Many in the public presume that "street kids" are solely children of poverty. These stereotypes need to be dispelled" (*Street*

Kids--Homeless and Runaway Youth 2). As shown, even though acts have changed conditions youth homeless confront, there still lies a false understanding of youth homeless to the general population. It is explicitly stated throughout my research that homeless youth has not yet surpassed this social misconception relayed throughout time. In response, it is my further goal of this paper to provide some insight from the perspectives of youth dealing with homelessness in order to adequately portray the youth homelessness population.

The Troubles of Youth Experiencing Homelessness

Youth find themselves homeless for a variety of reasons. “Most homeless youth have left their homes because of family conflict, abuse, violence, neglect, or they have been forced to leave by their parents...and there is substantial evidence that ...homeless youth under the supervision of social services run away from placements or simply aged out of the system”(qtd. in Napolitano 111). The high level of instability in youth’s lives is one of the clearest themes of data that lead youth to homelessness. Youth with the least support, and often the most extreme conditions faced unstable situations such as abuse and neglect from parents, programs, and society (Bernstein & Foster 1). For example, in a study completed by the California Research Bureau, homeless youth were asked how long ago did your housing situation become unstable? About forty percent of youth responded with 1 to 4 years ago prior to being homeless. Then they were asked the broad question of why or how did that happen? The great majority of young individuals responded by saying they were pushed into homelessness due to “deterioration or implosion of personal relationships” (Bernstein & Foster 15). In fact many other articles, books, memoirs, documentaries, and clips I have analyzed expressed the same message of instability from one’s home situation force youth to leave or resort to a life of homelessness.

Furthermore, short videos from *Invisible People* focused on the lives of a few youth individuals who suffered from unstable family situations, which caused them to choose or be forced into homelessness. Cynthia, Scott, Danni, Jonahlisa and many more all spoke about the struggles they have faced when asked about the reasons for being forced from home in an interview for the short video. For example, Cynthia says her parents got in arguments and fights. When their separation ended, they both chose to abandon her completely, leaving her to resort to the streets (*Invisible People: Cynthia*). Another example is Jonahlisa who has been homeless most of her life. Starting at the age of two she had been placed in six different foster homes until the age of sixteen (*Invisible People: Jonahlisa*). Both clips showed home instability caused these two youth individuals to resort to a life of homelessness among many others. The constant instability resulting from parents, social workers, foster care systems, or programs set by the government leave youth ill equipped and unwilling to rely on others for support. Most are unwilling to rely on services due to the instability they've had throughout their life and the fear that they cannot break the cycle of change. Both Cynthia and Jonahlisa explain their plans in continuing to transition from the insecure life they had before.

To further explain my point of instability, a memoir written by Janice Erlbaum explained how she left her mother due to the abusive tendencies of her stepfather and her mother's acceptance of the abuse. She made it known to her mother that she would leave if another incident from the abusive stepfather occurred. The incident occurred and the mother continued to withstand it. As a young girl Janice left and went to an outreach program that could support her. Here is yet another example of how children have been forced into homelessness and, in fact, contrasts the social norm of youth homeless because Janice showed how she can be responsible, non-delinquent, and intelligently plan a path away from family conflict. *Hollywood Homeless:*

Inside Secret America conveys not only the causes that lead youth to homelessness, but also how they withstand homelessness. *Hollywood Homeless* interviewers prepared questions for youth homeless individuals and when interviewing it becomes evident that family crises often propel young people to the streets, where they spend months or years before connecting with services that can help them get off the street. During that time period of attempting to create a more stable environment, it is likely that they encounter new traumatic experiences such as racial or homeless status discrimination, depressive symptoms, and suicidality (Unger et. al.). From the various works of media shown, it is evident that interventions are needed before, at, and after crises that trigger homelessness among youth. Instead of seeing youth as a delinquency to society, there needs to be a reliance on services that help youth grow from the negative societal norms and the conflicts forcing them to homelessness.

Service Programs of Youth Homelessness; Do Youth Homeless Want Help

While youth homeless exhibit an unending belief in themselves and their abilities, they have truly been left without economic and social resources in order to achieve their aspirations. For example the report called “No Place to Call Home” published by the House of Representatives in 1990, met through a series of hearings in order to answer questions about homeless youth services.

These questions were:

1. Are there fewer unnecessary placements of children out of their homes?
2. When children must be placed, are there more effective permanent placements than there were ten years ago?
3. Are children receiving quality services when they are entrusted to the child welfare system?

4. Can troubled children and families rely on human service agencies to help them cope with the host of new and complex problems which threaten their stability (*Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families: No Place to Call Home 1*)?

In answering these questions, the Committee on Children, Youth, and Families focused on a range of services that children and families need in order to survive. These services fall under several different systems known as child welfare, juvenile justice, and mental health. The Committee focused on how children fare in all three of the systems and the findings were “alarming” (*Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families. No Place to Call Home 2*). The entirety of the system failed all three of the categories and Senator Dodd states, “the promises that been made over ten years ago had not been kept, and children are paying the price of this failure” (*Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families. No Place to Call Home 2*). The Committee announces too many services that do exist are “uncoordinated, inefficient, and ultimately ineffective, as administrators attest” (*Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families. No Place to Call Home 2*). The California Research Bureau further proves this claim by stating some of the same failures found in the report. *Voices from the Street- A Survey of Homeless Youth by Their Peers* brought attention to the serious issue of services provided and child welfare by presenting homeless youth’s experiences. The study reports, foster care poses a cause to homelessness as children who “age out” are abruptly on their own and resort to the street or when young flee abusive or neglectful foster care placements (Bernstein & Foster 19, 20). Service providers in the study have also indicated that some youth have never been identified in the child welfare system and as a result are not eligible for services provided by the child welfare system. The question remains, how has the government contested such failure within the system in the present day?

The need for improvement in economical and sociological resources for youth homeless in more recent times is portrayed in *I Beat the Odds*. I decided to answer the four questions explicitly dealing with youth homelessness service stated in the report and compare answers to the 2011 novel by Michael Oher. In *I Beat the Odds*, Michael Oher conveys the struggles he took in order to overcome youth homeless and achieve his goals. Michael struggled with the instability of his family as he moved from place to place with his family starting at the age of four. He states, “I can remember going to five different elementary schools by the time I was in second grade, and I’m probably forgetting a couple” (Oher 22). Throughout Oher’s youth, the only stability he had was caring for his brothers and sisters. Even that failed in his youth when the Department of Child Services separated the family and placed him and others into Foster Care Systems and some of his brothers in the state custody. Although Oher liked living in the foster home with Velma Jones, he searched for a loving family like his brothers and sisters had after being adopted. Oher became known as a runner as he longed to be home and with his mother (his only family), even if she couldn’t provide for him and the other children. He was brought back to different foster care homes repeatedly, moving and joining new schools constantly. Eventually he accepted the fact that he couldn’t outrun the system at a young age so he then found a passion in sports and school. As most know today, Michael Oher achieved his dreams of playing a professional sport, but it did not come easy for him. He faced discrimination, drug abuse, neglect, the juvenile justice system, complications in his education, and health issues throughout his childhood but he persevered. Overall, Oher’s youth homeless services seemed to fail most of the questions in the report as well. Furthermore, he was frequently placed in various foster care systems, lacked education due to moving constantly to different school districts, and he didn’t rely on social services because they took away the only stability he had at a young age.

As Oher looks back now, he is grateful for the services he received. The services provided him with a family that loved him and supported and he was able to accomplish educational and physical goals he never thought he could. Oher states a vital point to youth homeless individuals in his book, “if you are one of those at-risk students and you want out, you have to work for it...the way out starts with you and your determination to become something better than your circumstances” (Oher 13). The novel implicitly made me question not only the quality of youth service resources but also whether or not youth really want since Oher originally had not.

A news article flashed across my phone a few days ago addressing this idea of youth not wanting help from services. To my surprise, it proved some youth don't, which can be one of the main reasons why homeless youth are overlooked in today's society. John Economou, 20, is a homeless youth living in California on Venice Beach. Economou met the famous models Kendal Jenner and Gigi Hadid on the beach one evening and started talking about a possible modeling career. Kendal Jenner introduced John Economou to her manager and asked her manager to help sign Economou to Two Management in Los Angeles. Economou has taken up the offer but still prefers crashing on the beach and at friend's homes, although housing was offered in his contract (Settembre 1). John Economou denies the services, whether these services come from youth homeless programs or job services, he is provided with and continues to choose a life of youth homelessness. I see this article as a fluke because it doesn't speak of the general youth homeless population and doesn't implement any of the real conflicts he had to go through when first becoming homeless. The article focuses mainly on the idea of “rags to riches,” but in this case the boy still chose rags when faced with possible riches. Overall, there becomes the understanding that improvements of homeless youth services need to be established as shown historically, politically, and socially but there seems to be the looming question of why youth

homeless continue to be overlooked and more at risk than the general homeless population. It could be the government, funding, programs set for youth, or the youth themselves but there hasn't been any substantial evidence in proclaiming one of these as the central cause.

The Future of Youth Homelessness

Resources beyond family would seem particularly imperative for this misunderstood population to successfully navigate the path to adulthood and to counteract the incorrect and detrimental societal norms about youth experiencing homelessness. In more recent times, there have been attempts in improving youth homeless conditions and services. As stated in the historical section of the text, the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act of 1974 is still active today and provides foundational support to youth and young adult homelessness. The three fundamental pillars of intervention to youth homeless are Street Outreach, Basic Center, and Transitional Living. “Street Outreach provides education, treatment, counseling, and referrals to vital services. Basic Center provides temporary shelter, counseling, family reunification services, and aftercare services, and Transitional Living provides longer-term housing with supportive services, including Maternal Group Homes” (*Runaway and Homeless Youth Act 1*). Problems still occur when available resources are not meeting the needs of the homeless population. These problems include attaining the actual number of homeless and unaccompanied youth, youth being turned away due to lack of funds, and care for “trafficked, exploited, and youth subpopulations”(*Runaway and Homeless Youth Act 1*) are not being met. In order to counteract these issues President Obama increased the Budget for 2017 in order to meet the various needs of youth homeless.

President Obama's 2017 Budget reflects the urgency to end homelessness. In particular, congress provided investments that will increase communities' capacity to assist youth

homelessness, deepen our understanding of unaccompanied youth and homelessness, and build evidence in order to provide more effective programs in society (*Investing in the End of Homelessness: The President's 2017 Budget* 1). The Budget provides a \$25 million increase in order to provide Housing and Urban Development Homeless Assistant Grants to states in need. It also includes a \$6 million increase to the three fundamental pillars of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Program in order to develop more housing and service interventions for youth. The 2017 Budget will help fund a wide array of services for the youth population but it is questionable as to whether homelessness can really end in today's economic problems.

Conclusion

The negative images and stereotypes of homeless youth that permeate our society such as street youth being damaged, chaotic, and unpredictable people conclude the understanding that youth homelessness are invisible to the general public. In turn, their invisibility to society and instability found throughout most youth homeless lessens their access to social services and denies them the chance of survival. Through access of such archival articles, studies, books, and films of youth homelessness conveyed throughout the text, my hope was to provide a better understanding of youth homelessness for the future. It is important to implement programs and enforcements that care for youth homelessness in order to provide such individuals with their visibility to society.

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