

Homeless youth and parenting

Summary

This contribution investigates the family factors associated with youngsters becoming homeless. Although not all, it turns out that many homeless youngsters come from multi-problem families. Parents of homeless youth often show problematic psychosocial characteristics, such as alcohol abuse, divorce at a young age of the child, and unemployment. In many families of homeless youngsters high incidences of conflicts between family members exist, while the rearing style of many parents is characterized by affectionless control, with the parents often applying harsh punishment techniques, like physical punishment ending in physical injuries. The fact that homelessness is a result of a prolonged process of multiple negative family experiences underscores the need for a comprehensive preventive family approach.

Key-words: Homeless youth, parenting, comprehensive approach, prevention.

In recent years the number of homeless youngsters has increased considerably. For example, barely ten years ago a city like Amsterdam did not have streetchildren at all. Nowadays the Netherlands count nearly 7000 streetchildren. Such increases can also be witnessed in other Western countries such as the United Kingdom and in the USA. Not surprisingly, the phenomenon of homeless youngsters has become an important issue at the child welfare agenda in the various Western countries.

Almost without exception, homeless youngsters come from severely disturbed families showing high levels of child abuse, neglect and family crisis, and where parents often engage in damaging measures in the upbringing of their children. Here lies an important key for the prevention of homelessness among youngsters.

In this contribution we wish to analyze in more detail the family factors associated with youngsters becoming homeless, and propose some suggestions for prevention.

Homelessness

In describing homeless youths, two extreme poles can be distinguished: a broad and a narrow one.

In the broadband approach homeless youths are defined as those young people who have been cast out, abandoned or rejected by their families, they who have no fixed address and find themselves frequently moving from one place to another. The narrow-band approach considers homeless youth as those youngsters who have no roof over their head and sleep every night on the street. In this context we speak of 'streetyouth', 'streetchildren' or 'streetkids'.

In the latter definition the youngsters are supposed to be on the street every night. However, in the West there are few youngsters who sleep continuously, 365 nights a year, on the street. In reality they sometimes stay with friends/acquaintances, sometimes in shelter accommodation, sometimes with family members, sometimes in squats and seldomly on the street. So the same youngsters are sometimes homeless (moving from one address to another) and sometimes streetkids (staying on the street).

Homelessness can be considered as a process that starts with running away from the parental home, a foster family or from a residential center. Most of these runaway youngsters return to their (residential) home. But one out of every ten runaways does not and keeps on moving from friends to strangers, and from squats to shelters, hoping to find a more permanent place. When there is no one to give such youngsters a roof over their head temporarily, they find themselves on the street. This cyclic process - today on the street, tomorrow in the house of a stranger and the day after tomorrow in a shelter - is typical for homeless youths (Van der Ploeg & Scholte, 1997).

Leaving home

What was the nature of the family living conditions of the homeless youngsters when they left their families? What reasons did they have to leave their homes?

As we noted already, most youngsters that run away from their families do not become homeless youths, but return sooner or later to their homes. In this contribution we are focussing on the 10% of the runaway youngsters that stay homeless and end up in the circuit of homeless youths.

This is not to say that it is easy to make a clear distinction between runaways and homeless youths. Much of the literature on this topic uses the terms 'runaway' and 'homeless youth' as interchangeable phenomena. However the terms have distinctive meanings and refer to different situations.

A clear classification is given by Zide & Cherry (1992). They empirically verified the various typologies of runaway youth that have been proposed in the literature. They suggest that the literature about young runaways describes three fairly distinct types:

- '*running to youths*', who are often searching for adventure; they are leaving home not because of dysfunctional family dynamics but rather because they think that a more exciting or rewarding world waits for them down the road; these youths are often considered as 'positive runaways';

- '*running from youths*' who are usually running away from very pathological families; they are unhappy about their lives; running away for them may be a very rational decision because of the potential harm or danger they are exposed to by staying in their homes;
- '*thrown out youths*' who are strongly alienated from their families and have little or no contact with them; they have little motivation to return home and often the family is similarly unmotivated to have their child return home. This situation has been preceded by years of failures within the home, the school system and community.

This typology was recently extended with the category of the *throw away* youth. This term refers to the youngsters that are sent away or thrown out of their homes by their parents. This phenomenon recently gained much attention. In particular in the media and in the area of professional care there are increasingly reports of youngsters that are discarded by their parents. Some idea of how many homeless youngsters became homeless because of running away or of being thrown out of the home can be gleaned from the two Dutch studies on the population of homeless youth by Van der Ploeg et al. (1991) and Thomeer-Bouwens et al. (1996). Table 1 summarizes the findings.

Table 1. *Runaway and throw-away youths among homeless youngsters*

	Van der Ploeg (N=70)	Thomeer-Bouwens (N=108)
never	1%	9%
runaway	46%	39%
throwaway	11%	7%
both	42%	45%

As the table shows, the percentage of thrown-away youths is relatively small. However, running away and being thrown out are closely related. The outcome can be seen as a result of a process of conflicting interests both on the side of the youngster and the parents. On the one hand, the youngster tries to escape from family circumstances he perceives as stressful, while parents try to get rid of a child they perceive as difficult, erratic or problematic.

Table 2 (next page) gives the results of the Thomeer-Bouwens et al study (1996). The figures relate to the runaway action that ended of in the state of homelessness.

The table shows that the reasons for leaving home without returning in many cases are rooted in a serious conflict with the parents. It is interesting that, 'maltreatment' is not more permanently cited as a reason for leaving home. Given the symbolic and real significance of the home as source of emotional and social identity for the child, running away can be seen as the serious indication of alienation and insecure attachment that it is.

Table 2. *Triggering reasons for running away from home*

conflict with parents about friends	19%
conflicts about school	18%
conflicts about everything	67%
maltreatment	20%
deprivation	19%
independence/adventure	14%
addiction/criminality	22%
parent with new partner	18%
other reasons	19%

Broken homes and changing situations

It is now generally known that problem children often come from broken homes. For example, in studies of youngsters in residential centers it is found that more than half of the children have experienced broken homes (Van der Ploeg & Scholte, 1996). However, among homeless youth this percentage is even higher. In the studies of Van der Ploeg et al. (1991) among 70 homeless youngsters living in big cities throughout the Netherlands 66% came from broken homes. A comparable percentage of 68% was reported by Thomeer-Bouwens et al. (1996), who investigated a random sample 108 homeless youngsters in the Netherlands.

Both studies also focused on the age of the youngsters at the moment their parents divorced. Their mean age was relatively low. Van der Ploeg et al. (1991) reported a mean age of 7.5 years, while the homeless youngsters in the Thomeer-Bouwens et al study (1996) experienced divorce at a mean age of 6.9 years.

Many homeless youngsters thus were already confronted with a stressful change in family composition at a very young age. However, often this was not the only change in family relationships, as after the divorce almost all mothers and 60% of the fathers remarried, thus confronting the child with new partners of both parents (Van der Ploeg et al., 1991). The study also found that the changes in the family composition often do not stop by one divorce followed by one remarriage, as almost half of the parents of the homeless youngsters had 2, 3, 4 or more different partners.

Considering the fact that many of the homeless youngsters were also placed in foster families more than once or in residential centres for the upbringing of youngsters with psychosocial problems leads to the conclusion that homeless youngsters often experienced high level of instability in family structure and composition.

Arguing that instability in the upbringing has the largest impact when children are young, Van der Ploeg et al. (1991) analyzed the number of different rearing situations the homeless youngsters had before the age of 12. Table 3 presents his findings.

Table 3. *Number of changes in primary (parental) upbringing before the age of 12 (N=70)*

<i>Changes</i>	
0	17%
1 - 2	22%
3 - 4	35%
5 - 6	13%
7 - 15	13%

As the table shows, about a quarter of the youngsters experienced five or more different rearing environments before the age of 12. Given the fact that changes in primary environment have a serious impact on all human beings, it is clear that many of the homeless youngsters were already confronted with severely stressful family circumstances as very young children.

Maltreatment and abuse

Many studies of homeless youths report many instances of maltreatment and abuse among these children, with percentages varying from 40 to 75% (Farber et al., 1984, Maurin et al., 1989, Feitel et al., 1992, Kufeldt et al., 1992). The connection between homelessness and child maltreatment was also identified in the study by Powers et al. (1990). They focused more specifically on the nature of maltreatment of runaway and homeless youth. They investigated a sample including 223 adolescents who sought services from runaway and homeless youth programs in New York State. Their subjects were selected with the assistance of the program staff who identified those with a history of either physical abuse, sexual abuse, or neglect. The researchers compared this sample with two other more general samples of runaway and homeless youth who sought services from the same programs. One sample had data drawn from New York State (N=2,026) while the other sample comprised data on young people served by all federally funded programmers throughout the United States (N=39,817). It was thus possible to examine in what ways the sample identified as being maltreated differed from general runaway and homeless youth population at both state and federal levels. Table 4 summarizes their findings.

Table 4. *Frequency of maltreatment*

<i>Type of problem</i>	<i>local sample</i>	<i>federal sample</i>	<i>national sample</i>
sexual abuse by parent	13%	5%	6%
physical abuse by parent	42%	19%	18%
parent neglect	43%	24%	19%

As the table shows, the numbers reporting maltreatment in the sample of Powers et al. were significantly higher across all three categories.

Exploring the nature of the maltreatment yielded much informative detail. The physical abuse the homeless youngsters had to suffer in their families involved long and severe beatings with objects (e.g. extension cords, chains, belt buckles, broom sticks), being kicked, slapped, punched and generally beaten up. The neglect typically involved inadequate care and protection, abandonment, lack of supervision, or failure to provide adequate food, clothing and medical care. A particular form of active abandonment, being 'pushed out', was common in Powers' sample. Significant proportions of these forms of maltreatment were chronic: 55% of the cases of neglect, 48% of the sexual abuse cases and 42% of the cases involving physical abuse. Powers et al. also reported important differences between the sexes. In all three samples adolescent girls were the predominant victims; in the maltreatment sample 61% were female and 39% male. It also appeared that the girls in all three samples were significantly more often victims of sexual abuse. The biological mothers of the victims were the most frequently cited perpetrators of maltreatment (63%), directly followed by the biological father (45%).

Problems of parents

As often is the case when we deal with problematic families, the parents of homeless youngsters themselves turned out to have many problems related to their personal. Homeless youngsters in the Van der Ploeg et al. (1991) sample reported the items in figure 5.

Table 5. *Family problems related to parents according to homeless youngsters (N=70)*

illness	62%
unemployment	45%
alcohol abuse	48%
psychiatric treatment	32%
detention of one or both parents	22%

Homeless youngsters also reported that alcohol abuse by parents was experienced as extremely stressful in particular, because this was usually accompanied with parental aggression, conflicts and sudden changes in temper. The fact that in comparable groups of youngsters in residential centres 'only' 19% of the parents abused alcohol, and 'only' 13% was in detention, suggests that the homeless youngsters had to cope with difficult parents far more often (Van der Ploeg & Scholte, 1996).

Van der Ploeg et al. also asked the opinion of a large group of mental health professionals (N=70) working with homeless children and their families what problems they perceived among the parents as set out in Table 6.

Table 6. *Family problems related to parents according to mental health professionals (N=70)*

Alcohol abuse by one or both parents	45%
Unemployment	38%
Illness of one or both parents	33%
Criminal activity	26%
Suicide attempt	24%
Prostitution	22%
Drug addiction	16%

An in depth analysis showed that in particular alcohol abuse by fathers related to severe family problems, like frequent serious arguments and divorce, while alcohol abuse by mothers more often resulted in increased contact with mental health services.

The findings related to both the youngsters and the mental health professionals therefore show that parental alcohol abuse is a particularly negative parenting indication that increases family conflict and the risk of homelessness of the child considerably. Such elevated use of alcohol and its damaging consequences is associated with a wide range of other adverse parenting practices, as might be seen below.

Parenting

Research on child-rearing practices reveals two basic dimensions that define the rearing influences of the parents on the development of children (Rollins & Thomas, 1979). The first dimension is the *affectionate bonding* between parents and children. This dimension has two poles: *acceptance and rejection*. The concept of acceptance involves parents handling their children in a loving and child-centered way, while rejection refers to parents emotionally neglecting, abusing or assaulting their children.

The second dimension is the *behavioral guidance* that children get from their parents, and here the two poles are: *autonomy and control*. Autonomy refers to a situation in which parents allow their children to explore the world, while control describes the approach of parents who subject their children to harsh discipline.

Combining these two dimensions four basic child rearing practices can be distinguished:

- optimal parenting (much affectionate bonding and less control);
- affectionate constraint (much affectionate bonding and much control);
- neglectful parenting (less affectionate bonding and less control);
- affectionless control (less affectionate bonding and much control).

In the Dutch study of Thomeer-Bouwens et al., (1996), 108 homeless youngsters were asked to assess their parents as for the above rearing styles. To this end the authors used the Parental Bonding Instrument (Parker et al., 1979), a questionnaire containing 25 questions referring to

the parental role of the father and mother. The assessments made by homeless youngsters were categorized according to the four basic rearing practices. Table 8 presents the findings of this study.

Table 8. *Parental rearing practices perceived by homeless youngsters*

	<i>mother</i>	<i>father</i>
optimal parenting	40%	27%
affectionate constraint	8%	7%
neglectful parenting	7%	18%
affectionless control	45%	48%

As the table shows, the practice of affectionless control was the prevailing style of parental rearing perceived by the homeless youngsters. However, it is also surprising that many homeless youngsters assessed the mothers' rearing practices as being the optimal style. This raises the issue why in a liberal community such as the Netherlands, mothers could not exert enough influence to prevent their children's departure.

A much less positive picture is found when mental health professionals are asked to assess the rearing practices of the parents. For this purpose, Van der Ploeg et al. (1991) used the Dutch version of the Family Environment Scale (Moos, 1974).

Using this scale the following five dimensions of the family climate were assessed by 108 mental health professionals assessing families of 70 homeless youngsters:

- cohesion (reflects the degree to which family members participate and are mutually involved with each other);
- expression (the extent to which the family members express themselves freely and openly);
- conflict (the extent to which family members fight, get angry and hit each other);
- control (reflects the degree to which there are rules and following rules is emphasized);
- structure (the extent to which family life is organized and structured).

Table 9 (next page) presents the mean score mental health professionals (N=108) gave families of homeless youth on these five dimensions. The assessments were made on four-point scales ranging from 1 - negative (no cohesion, many conflicts, no structure) to 4 - positive (much cohesion, no conflicts, much structure).

The table shows that mental health professionals were most negative about the provision of structure in the families of the homeless youngsters. But other dimensions were also seen to be problematic, as they all fall under the scale mean of 2.5.

Table 9. *Mean scores on dimensions of family climate of families of homeless youngsters assessed by mental health professionals*

cohesion	1.89
expression	1.79
conflict	2.04
control	2.20
structure	1.68

Conflicts and punishment

Since control is a major issue in parenting (Baumrind (1991) it is worth considering how parents of homeless youngsters react when the children behave badly and disobey rules. Van der Ploeg et al. (1991) investigated the opinions of both the parents and homeless youngsters in this respect. Table 10 presents their findings.

Table 10. *Frequency of family conflicts according to the homeless youngsters and their parents*

	<i>Youngsters (N=66)</i>	<i>Parents (N=29)</i>
Daily	59%	66%
Weekly	27%	24%
Monthly	7%	3%
Hardly ever	6%	7%

Parents and youngsters turned out to agree largely in their views regarding the frequency of family conflicts. In about 90% of the cases conflicts took place on a daily or weekly basis. The conflicts were not only between the youngsters and the parents, but also between the parents. According to the youngsters the conflicts were mostly about rules (29%) and behavioral problems like truancy, stealing and drugs abuse (19%). Family conflicts were also often related to personal problems of the parents (26%), in particular alcohol abuse, financial difficulties and serious quarrels between the parents.

The study also considered parental techniques used to correct misbehavior of the youngsters. More than three quarters of the youngsters reported that they were corrected by their parents when they had disobeyed rules or done something wrong (77%). This correction was mostly executed by the father. Table 11 presents the techniques the fathers used when the youngsters were corrected.

Table 11. *Techniques of correction/punishment applied by the parents of homeless youngsters*

	<i># of cases</i>	<i>percentage</i>
Given task as penance	5	8%
Yelling/shouting	6	10%
Home curfew / 'gating'	18	30%
Mild physical assault	20	32%
Severe physical assault	12	20%

The table shows that only a few youngsters reported a mild form of retribution. About a fifth of the youngster reported being severely beaten by the parents, often ending up in physical injuries. Compared with the youngsters, parents reported that they used less severe measures of punishment, although still 25% reported that they used physical methods to control their children.

Conclusions

Evaluating the above research findings we reach the conclusion that the family backgrounds and parenting processes of homeless youth are often severely problematic. This is not only reflected in the characteristics of parents, such as parental alcohol abuse, divorce at a young age of the child, and unemployment. These are also associated with damaging family interactions and the style of parenting. High incidences of conflicts between family members (both between parents and between parent and child) were reported, which often were the reason that the homeless youngsters ran away from home. Many homeless youngsters characterized the rearing style of their parents as affectionless control. Moreover, the family climate often was low on cohesion, and the parents of homeless youngsters often applied harsh punishment techniques, like physical punishment ending in physical injuries.

The preceding overview of problematic factors in the family histories of homeless youngsters makes clear that there is a variety of different family factors that result in youngsters ending up as homeless youth. Tracing one unique common family factor that causes homelessness among youngsters is thus not possible. The family background and parenting of homeless youngsters must therefore be characterized as 'multi-problematic'. Various aversive family factors at different levels (social-structural, interactional and parenting) intertwine and mutually reinforce each other.

However, our research findings also indicate that not all homeless youngsters come from multi-problem families. An important question is whether these youngsters have a better developmental prognosis than those stemming from multi-problem families. To answer this question Van der Ploeg et al. (1991) followed two these two groups. He found that of the two groups the developmental prognosis of youngsters coming from multi-problem families was indeed the worse. Many were arrested by the police more than once, used hard drugs and

were socially isolated. In the long term these youngsters did not reintegrate into society at all but ended up in a state of enduring homelessness.

This finding suggests that as the numbers of family problems increases, the risk that the children in such troubled families get into trouble even more in their later life is heightened considerably and leaves some of them without a social network or a home. This concurs with the suggestion that the accumulation of family risk-factors enhance the risk that children get into serious trouble in their later lives considerably (Rutter, 1990).

Homelessness therefore is the outcome of an ongoing developmental process of multiple aversive experiences of children. For many youngsters in the streets, these experiences often started at early childhood. They were reinforced during the childhood and adolescent years by more aversive experiences in the family, and multiplied their problems due to negative socialization experiences at school and in the peer group (Van der Ploeg & Scholte, 1997).

The fact that homelessness is a result of a prolonged process of multiple negative family experiences underscores the need for a comprehensive preventive family approach. The aim of such a preventive approach is to prevent family difficulties spiraling out of control and resulting in homelessness and its attendant difficulties.

However, any call for prevention should start by stressing the critical importance of that minimal set of social conditions, without which no human being can successfully bring up children. To raise children in a decent and humane way, families must have access to basic income, housing, education, health care, employment and public safety. Without these basic provisions, any effort to prevent severe family and child problems will be doomed to failure.

Besides this basic social minimum, most western societies also provide fortunately a set of general preventive measures that specifically aim to enhance the developmental chances of children and juveniles raised in families (e.g. GAO-report, 1995). The goals of such general preventive measures are to increase the strength and stability of families, to teach parents practices of effective or 'good enough parenting', to create a stable family environment or otherwise to enhance child development. Program measures under this objective usually reach out to all members of society raising children. They are directed towards the adults that are important for the development of children, most likely parents and grand parents and now also, communities.

Yet for potentially homeless youngsters prevention directed at the general population will not be enough. These children often come from multi-problem families, and such families are usually not susceptible to general preventive initiatives, since many of them drop out of these programs (Van der Ploeg & Scholte, 1997). For families 'at multiple risk' more intensive, outreaching methods of early intervention are needed to redirect practices of 'bad parenting'. The aim of preventive early intervention is to contact families 'at risk for multiple-problems' when the first problems become apparent, to resolve these problems as soon as possible in order to build trust, and to use this entry in the families as a starting point to teach practices of effective family management and good parenting afterwards.

Such early intervention efforts could be directed towards populations 'at multiple risk'. For example, programs can target populations of school children in high-risk or low socioeconomic neighborhoods, at teenage mothers or at children who have contact with the police

(Scholte, 1992). There is good evidence that such early intervention methods are fairly effective (Dryfoos, 1990; Blythe, Salley & Jayaratne, 1994).

References

- Blythe, B.J., M.P. Salley & Jayaratne, S. (1994) A review of intensive family preservation services research. *Social Work Research*, 18, pp.223-224.
- Dryfoos, J.G. (1990) *Adolescents 'at risk'*. New-York: Oxford University Press.
- Farber, E.D., Kinast, C., McCoard, D.W. & Falkner, D. (1984). Violence in families of adolescent run-aways. *Child abuse and neglect*, 8, 295-299.
- Feitel, B., Margetson, N., Chames, J. & Lipman, C. (1992). Psychosocial background and behavioral and emotional disorders of homeless and runaway youth. *Hospital and Community Psychiatry*, 43, 155-159.
- GAO-report (1995), *Child welfare: Opportunities to further enhance family preservation and support activities*. Washington D.C.: U.S. General Accounting Office, pp. 95-112.
- Kuffeldt, K., Durieux, M. & Nimmo, M. (1992). Providing shelter for street youth. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 16, 178-199.
- Moos, R.H. (1974). *Family Environment Scale*. Palo Alto: Consulting Psychologists Press.
- Maurin, J.T., Russell, I. & Memmott, R.J. (1989). An exploration of gender differences among the homeless. *Research in Nursing and Health*, 12, 315-321.
- Parker, C., Tubling, H. & Brown, L.B. (1997). A parental bonding instrument. *British Journal of Psychology*, 52, 1-10.
- Ploeg J.D. van der, Gaemers, J. & Hoogendam, P.H. (1991). *Zwervende jongeren*. Leiden: DSWO Press
- Ploeg, J.D. van der & Scholte, E.M. (1996). *Vraag- en aanbod-analyse*. Amsterdam: Nippon.
- Ploeg, J.D. van der & Scholte, E.M. (1997). *Homeless Youth*. London: Sage Publications.
- Powers, J.L., Eckenrode, J. & Jaklitch, B. (1990). Maltreatment among runaway and homeless youth. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 14, 87-98.
- Rollins, B.C. & Thomas, D.L. (1979). Parental support, power and control techniques in the socialization of children. In: W.R. Bunn, R. Hill, F.I. Nye & J.L. Reiss (Eds.), *Contemporary Theories about the Family*, Vol. 1. New York: Free Press.
- Rutter, M. (1990). Psychosocial resilience and protective mechanism. In: Rolf, J., Masten, A.S., Cicchetti, D., Nuechterlein, K.H. & Weintraub, S. (Eds.), *Risk and protective factors in the development of psychopathology* (pp. 181-214). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Scholte, E.M. (1992) Identification of Children at Risk at the Police Station and the Prevention of Delinquency. *Psychiatry*, Vol. 55, pp. 354-269.
- Thomeer-Bouwens, M.A.E., Tavecchio, L.W.C. & Meeuws, W.H.J. (1996). *Zonder thuis - zonder toekomst?* Utrecht: NIZW.
- Zide, M.R. & Cherry, A.L. (1992). A typology of runaway youth: an empirical based definition. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 9, 155-168.