Homeless Youth and Intimate Partner Abuse
Hollywood Homeless Youth Partnership

Policy Brief

Homeless street youth are part of the landscape in most large American cities. Though the prevalence of youth homelessness is difficult to measure, researchers estimate that between 1 million to 1.6 million youth per year experience homelessness\(^1\). The 2007 Homeless Census conducted by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority estimated that there were over 13,000 homeless youth ages 12 – 24 in the County\(^2\).

It is well understood that runaway and homeless youth are a population at high risk for victimization. Even so, the runaway and homeless youth service community and the domestic violence prevention and treatment community have been slow to recognize and respond to the prevalence of intimate partner abuse among runaway and homeless youth. To-date, there has been limited planning and coordination between runaway and homeless youth (RHY) and domestic violence (DV) agencies, and limited understanding of the unique needs of runaway and homeless youth by DV service providers. This brief reflects a strong commitment to educate providers and policy makers about intimate partner abuse (IPA) among runaway and homeless youth, and to mobilize public and private agencies and key stakeholders to more effectively address the needs of this population.

Runaway and Homeless Youth and Intimate Partner Abuse

In surveys of homeless youth conducted by Childrens Hospital Los Angeles (CHLA) for the Hollywood Homeless Youth Partnership, 22% to 32% of youth reported involvement in abusive relationships\(^3,4\). Their vulnerability to intimate partner abuse results from two primary factors. First, a significant number of youth leave home because of family conflict or family violence, and they may have experienced or witnessed abuse and domestic violence in the home.\(^5\) In the 2007 survey of homeless youth conducted by CHLA, 69% reported they were victims of child abuse and/or neglect, and 59% had witnessed domestic violence in the home.\(^6\) This experience can leave youth without role models of healthy relationships, disrupts early attachments that are important for healthy development, and deprives youth of opportunities for learning positive problem-solving and coping skills. In addition, without means of support, many youth turn to prostitution, drug dealing, or other illegal activity to survive on the streets, which increases their vulnerability to exploitive relationships and partner abuse.

Unique Needs and Concerns of RHY

While homeless youth involved in abusive relationships face similar risks to their health and safety as adults and their non-homeless peers, their status both as youth and as homeless individuals presents unique challenges to service delivery. Most significantly, for many homeless youth the intimate partner abuse that they are experiencing is part of a complex and chronic history of abuse and violence at the hands of caregivers, peers, partners, or strangers. These experiences require comprehensive interventions that go beyond addressing the current abusive relationship with a partner. Additionally, a youth development approach, including opportunities for young people to develop a sense of competency, usefulness, empowerment, and connection, must be incorporated into domestic violence services.
Trauma Informed Prevention and Treatment Services

- **Need for prevention services**: Historically, schools and after-school programs have been the target of efforts to increase the number of youth receiving intimate partner abuse prevention. However, most homeless youth do not attend traditional schools and therefore do not receive these services. Prevention programs targeted at broad youth populations also do not address the problem of intimate partner abuse from the unique perspective of homeless youth, and do not teach appropriate skills or provide appropriate tools.

- **Concurrent substance abuse and mental health issues**: Given these youth’s extensive experience with trauma and their life on the street, it is common for them to use drugs and alcohol, and many youth have significant mental health issues. Residential or service programs that require sobriety will exclude a significant number of youth. Similarly, residential programs that do not provide access to mental health services may not be able to help youth achieve the stability they need to live independently.

- **Dependence on street relationships**: Many homeless youth, abused by their parents or caregivers or pushed-out of their homes as teens, create new families on the street. Even when their relationships with other homeless youth or adults are exploitative or abusive, they may be reluctant to use services that require them to sever ties with the only “family” that they have and with the individuals that have protected them or provided for them.

- **Dependence on street culture**: Homeless youth quickly become acculturated to the street environment. Many youth are deeply affected by their traumatic histories and experiences and living on the streets may serve as a distraction from dealing with their problems and pain. These young people may experience significant difficulty adjusting to living in a DV shelter or housing program that is governed by rules and responsibilities.

- **GLBTQ youth**: Existing domestic violence prevention and intervention services are largely designed for heterosexual women. However, there is growing recognition that partner abuse also occurs in gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender relationships. In the 2007 survey of homeless youth, 39% reported that they were gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning their sexuality. Another 6% reported that they were transgender⁹. Homeless GLBTQ youth need access to sensitive and appropriate prevention and intervention services.

Shelter and Safety Planning

- **Traditional safety planning is not responsive to youths’ needs and experiences**: Current approaches to safety planning are based on a victim profile that is often not reflective of homeless youth. Traditional safety planning recommendations rely heavily on the use of domestic violence shelters and restraining orders, which for the reasons discussed in this brief, may not be available to or appropriate for homeless youth. Few of the existing safety planning options offer any real protection to homeless youth.

- **Access to shelter for minor youth**: Due to California law and licensing requirements governing shelters, DV shelters are prohibited from housing unaccompanied minors. As a result, homeless minors do not have access to the safety and confidentiality provided by DV shelters.

- **Discomfort in adult facilities but few youth-specific alternatives**: Many homeless youth, even if they are 18 or older, are uncomfortable in service settings with older adults. However there are no youth-specific DV shelters, and existing adult services are not developmentally appropriate for transition-age youth and are not perceived by youth as “youth-friendly.” While there are limited emergency shelters and transitional living programs for youth, these programs are not designed to offer the safety and confidentiality provided in domestic violence shelters.

- **Past negative history with DV shelters**: A significant number of homeless youth stayed in domestic violence shelters with their mothers when they were children, and have unpleasant memories of that experience and negative associations with DV agencies. These past experiences make them reluctant to consider a DV shelter for confidential housing or other services when they are in an abusive relationship.
Public Service Systems

- **Diminishing resources and the fraying safety net:** Los Angeles is faced with a burgeoning homeless population, inadequate housing resources, and limited public benefits. One of the keys to reducing homeless youth vulnerability to intimate partner abuse is to find them safe and secure housing. However, the lack of affordable housing and limited availability of transitional housing programs leave homeless youth vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

- **Inadequate education and employment preparation:** Homeless youth have often experienced significant disruptions with school and many lack the basic education and skills needed to obtain and maintain employment. This leaves these youth with few options for supporting themselves independently, increasing their dependence on abusive partners and limiting their opportunities to successfully transition from the streets.

- **Involvement with multiple and competing service systems:** Homeless youth are likely to be served by multiple public service systems in Los Angeles County because of their age and family history. The Departments of Children and Family Services, Mental Health, Public Health, Probation, and Social Services, as well as law enforcement agencies, may all simultaneously interact with homeless youth, but there are inadequate mechanisms for service coordination across these agencies.

Legal and Law Enforcement Issues

- **Concerns about warrants and reluctance to engage law enforcement:** In order to survive on the street, many homeless youth engage in illegal activities and may have had significant negative experiences with law enforcement and the juvenile or criminal justice systems. As a result, they may be extremely reluctant to report abusive relationships or assault to law enforcement. Many of them also have outstanding warrants, further contributing to their reluctance to file a restraining order or police report.

- **Involvement in prostitution:** Many homeless youth are forced into prostitution in order to survive, or may turn to prostitution as a result of prior victimization, current exploitation, or intimate partner abuse. Arresting these youth for prostitution only serves to punish these victims and further pushes them away from law enforcement agencies and support services.

- **Domestic violence laws often exclude homeless youth from protection:** Many civil and criminal laws have been enacted in California to uniquely protect victims of domestic violence. Because of their homelessness, age, or the nature of their relationships, many homeless youth do not qualify for these special protections. For example, despite California's progressive inclusion of “dating” relationships as a basis for civil restraining orders, many homeless youth have relationships with abusive partners that may not qualify as dating under this law. Because domestic violence laws were not enacted with homeless youth in mind, few legal options are available to homeless youth or relevant to their experiences.

- **Child Abuse Reporting Laws:** Many homeless minors have had negative experiences with the foster care system, and are very wary of involvement with agencies and professionals who are required to make mandatory child abuse reports. Concern about reporting requirements prevents many youth from disclosing intimate partner abuse or seeking safety through an agency, preventing them from getting the help that they need.
Recommendations for Improving IPA Services for Homeless Youth

Each service sector has a responsibility to understand the serious abuse and victimization of homeless youth, and an obligation to increase their own capacity to provide developmentally appropriate assessment and intervention services. It is only through the recognition of our shared responsibility and our commitment to integrated planning and service delivery that we will be able to successfully support homeless youth in achieving safe, supportive, living situations free of abuse and exploitation.

1. Homeless youth-serving and domestic violence agencies must work together to increase their capacity to assess and address intimate partner abuse in homeless youth by training staff on partner abuse and trauma in homeless youth, and developing screening tools and service policies and procedures for responding to intimate partner abuse in this population.

2. Domestic violence and homeless youth serving agencies must work with the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, City and County DV planning bodies, and other public and private agencies to increase housing options for both homeless minors and transitional age homeless youth (ages 18 to 25) across the housing continuum, and collaborate to develop a new housing model for confidentially housing homeless youth who are involved in abusive relationships.

3. The City- and County-designated DV Planning Bodies (Domestic Violence Task Force and Domestic Violence Council) must develop youth-specific subcommittee(s) to advance intimate partner abuse prevention and intervention with youth, including those who are homeless.

4. Every County department working with children, youth, and families needs to increase their capacity to assess and intervene in the area of intimate partner abuse and develop appropriate policies and procedures, including staff training, to improve the standard of care and the implementation of trauma-informed services.

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References


