

# RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH AND RELATIONSHIP VIOLENCE

## Research Summary

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Runaway and homeless youth (RHY) is a term that applies to a diverse group of youth and young adults that includes homeless and near homeless families, runaway, and system-based (foster care and probation) youth as well as those marginalized due to gender identity and sexual orientation. As a whole then, the term RHY encompasses individuals with varied life trajectories and reasons for finding their way to RHY programs and shelters. Thus, intake assessments for RHY should ensure that the diversity of experiences and identities are included (including trans-gender youth) and should be 'trauma-informed.' Trauma-informed care refers to an approach in service delivery that recognizes histories of trauma and how such experiences can influence both emotions and behaviors among RHY.

For RHY, there is ample evidence that **multi-complex trauma** is more often the norm, meaning multiple histories of trauma. These histories include: family violence; parental neglect; parental mental illness; childhood sexual and physical abuse; sexual exploitation, rape, sexual assault; survival sex; gang violence; intimate partner violence. The relationship violence that RHY experience may be from steady partners (same sex and opposite sex) as well as in the context of survival sex and other 'hook ups.' Thus, the language of 'teen dating abuse' or 'dating violence' should be modified to be inclusive of this range of intimate relationships experienced by RHY that may be coercive and violent. Studies also document resiliencies and strengths among RHY that serve as important protective factors in light of high levels of violence exposure.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Exposure to violence and sexual victimization***

In one study of surveyed homeless youth, 70% had experienced some form of violence; of those experiencing violence, 32% had been sexually assaulted, 15% after being on the streets.<sup>2</sup> 29% of all sexual perpetrators of young men were female.<sup>2</sup> In another study, 60% of female homeless youth and 25% of males reported having been sexually assaulted prior to leaving home.<sup>3</sup> The earlier one's age is of leaving home the higher the risk for sexual exploitation and sexual victimization by a stranger.<sup>4</sup>

The role of family violence, child maltreatment and neglect, as well as parental psychiatric disorders as significant risk factors for leaving one's home are well documented.<sup>5-9</sup> These multiple traumas and child maltreatment are also associated with higher rates of complex mental health problems including post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, conduct disorder, and substance abuse.<sup>10, 11</sup>

### ***Clustering with other risk behaviors***

Most of the studies of homeless and runaway youth are cross-sectional, meaning that the studies show associations between different behaviors and experiences, but it is difficult to draw causal inferences. For example, higher levels of substance abuse are found among youth who have also experienced higher rates of sexual victimization, but it is unclear whether the sexual victimization results in greater substance use or vice versa.<sup>4, 8</sup> Sexual behaviors that increase

risk for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections such as condom non-use, multiple partners, survival sex (trading sex for basic needs such as food and housing) are common among RHY<sup>12-15</sup> and appear to be associated with early childhood sexual abuse.<sup>3, 12</sup>

### ***Sexual orientation and gender identity increase risk for victimization***

For LGBTQ youth, males who identify as gay or bisexual are five times more likely to be victimized by friend/acquaintance.<sup>4</sup> LGBTQ youth are more likely to leave home as result of physical abuse and conflict with family.<sup>16</sup> Substance abuse, depressive symptoms, suicidality are more frequent among gay and lesbian-identified youth than non-LGBTQ youth.<sup>17, 18</sup>

### ***Relationship violence***

High exposure to violence, childhood trauma, clustering of other risk behaviors that increase risk for sexual exploitation, as well as the added stigmas associated with being sexual minority youth, all complicate the assessment of and intervention for partner abuse among RHY. How youth define 'intimate partners' and 'dating relationships' varies significantly. In addition, RHY who are more often on the streets in comparison to youth utilizing shelter services appear to be at greater risk for more exploitative relationships including approximately 3 fold greater chances of engaging in survival sex.<sup>19</sup> Studies of partner violence among homeless youth and young adults indicate high levels of physical violence exposure in their relationships (70% in one study of both male and female transition age shelter-based youth),<sup>20</sup> with youth reporting both physical violence perpetration and victimization in their relationships as well as violence in more than one relationship.<sup>20, 21</sup> In addition to coercive and exploitative sexual relationships resulting in increased sexual risk among RHY as noted above, pregnancy experiences in the context of abusive relationships are not uncommon.<sup>22-24</sup>

## **ENDNOTES**

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