"We're Locking The Door":
Family Histories in a Sample of Homeless Youth

Shahid Alvi, Hannah Scott, and Wendy Stanyon
University of Ontario Institute of Technology, Ontario, Canada

It is well known that the pathways to homelessness for young people are embedded in often ongoing negative childhood experiences. Many of these experiences are rooted in multiple and intersecting problems including, but not limited to: family conflict, abuse, addictions, and mental health issues. The authors draw upon qualitative interviews conducted with 15 homeless male and female youth between the ages of 16 and 24 in a suburban area of Southern Ontario, Canada. We describe these young people's perceptions of family experiences and find support for Elliott Currie's (2004) proposition that a broader ethos of individualism and intolerant parenting underpins many youth experiences in contemporary society. Key Words: Homeless Youth, Family Histories, and Intolerant Parenting

Introduction

Research has shown that homeless young people suffer many negative experiences that are directly correlated with living on the street, in shelters, or engaging in couch surfing (living with various friends). These youth may experience chronic, cyclical, or temporary homelessness, and may also engage in a range of negative behaviours, including sex work, drug use, and crime (Baron & Hartnagel, 2002; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Kidd & Kral, 2002; MacDonald, Fisher, Wells, Doherty, & Bowie, 1994;). Many suffer a range of maladies including depression, anxiety, malnutrition, anemia, respiratory ailments, alcohol and drug addiction, and other physical and psychological problems (Bearsley & Cummins, 1999; Davey, 1998; Frankish, Hwang, & Quantz, 2005).

Although these are well known outcomes of becoming and living without a home, researchers also generally agree that familial and structural factors play an important antecedent role in youth homelessness. Along with poverty, and inadequate or inaccessible social services, among the most widely cited set of factors have to do with young people's relationships with parents and other family members, particularly experiences of violence and aggression (Anooshian, 2005; Bao, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2000; Ensign & Bell, 2004; Martijn & Sharpe, 2006; Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Ackley, 1997). In addition, increasing evidence is mounting suggesting that abusive experiences in the family need not be confined to physical abuse or overaggressive parenting. Moreover, as Hyde (2005) points out, very little research has examined strained familial relationships from the perspectives of homeless youth. In this paper we describe the family experiences of 15 homeless male and female youth between the ages of 16 and 24 in a suburban area of Southern Ontario, Canada.

Theoretical Framework

Throwaway Youth and the Sink or Swim Family

Scholars have suggested that one of the primary challenges in dealing with homelessness is overcoming the pervasive public belief that the homeless are responsible for their own situations, a belief reflected in the persistent notion of the homeless as the "undeserving poor" (Amster, 2003; Daly, 1996; Pellegrini, Queirolo, Monarrez, & Valenzuela, 1997). Part of this perception is the idea that understanding how individuals find their way to the street is unworthy of our increasingly precious resources. Accordingly, when resources are directed to this issue, explaining what places individuals at risk for homelessness becomes the focus with less attention paid to the social and economic contexts in which this vulnerable population lives. Yet it is well known that an understanding of the structural causes of homelessness is one of the key precursory actions when seeking to mitigate this problem (Varney & van Vliet, 2008).

The emphasis on individual responsibility, most recently crystallized in the academic and helping professions by the emphasis on individual "risk factors," ignores the role of structural forces in conditioning and shaping the lives of vulnerable populations generally, and the homeless in particular (Rosenthal & Rotheram-Borus, 2005; Zerger, Strehlow, & Gundlapalli, 2008). Thus, rather than focusing attention on individual pathologies and personality traits as the potential causes of homelessness among youth, some scholars have examined the role of negative family relationships (Whitbeck et al., 1997), social capital (Bantchevska, Bartle-Haring, Dashora, Glebova, & Slesnick, 2008), negative peer social networks (Bao et al., 2000; Rice, Stein, & Milburn, 2008), social support (Torquati & Gamble, 2001) and other structural variables that both cause and perpetuate homelessness.

While individual pathologies and behaviors are important aspects of homelessness, here we draw attention to the importance of social-structural and cultural forces in understanding homeless youths lives, particularly in relation to the centrality of supportive and functional family life. The recent arguments of Elliott Currie (2004) are particularly germane here. Currie's work adds to a growing body of literature (see for example, France, 2007; Muncie, 2006) that aims to contextualize youth experiences of social control today, a period that many scholars are referring to as "late modernity." For these scholars, late modernity is characterized by an ethos of risk management and the attempt to "responsibilize" youth for their conduct by de-emphasizing rehabilitation and social responsibility for individual welfare—both aspects of an allegedly "failed" and "liberal" welfare state that was perceived by policy makers and the general public to be too lenient with indulged children (Kelly, 2001). In contrast, in *The Road to Whatever*, Currie makes the argument that modern culture in America has had a fateful impact on children and adolescents. Briefly, he lists four related and intertwined aspects of culture that impact on young people today; the inversion of responsibility, the problem of contingent worth, the intolerance of transgression, and the rejection of nurturance.

Essentially, Currie's (2004) arguments reject the popular perceptions that youth today are subject to the increasing spread of liberal values, receive less discipline, are indulged more, and are more likely to assert their rights over their responsibilities. Instead, he argues that parents are more likely to sever ties to their children when they do

not conform to familial regulations, often exercising little tolerance for non-normative behaviour. As a result, youth are finding that they are increasingly responsible for their own life trajectories, rather than existing in a more traditional supportive and insulating family unit. This increasingly rigid response-set to deviance is compounded by further restrictions on evaluation standards, most commonly found in scholastic, athletic, and social performance. Parental approval in these areas is limited, given that these are highly competitive and conditional environments.

In this highly rigid and competitive environment, youth are set up to fail more than succeed. Youth must cope with being perpetual losers and adopt alternative strategies, such as ceasing to care and looking outside these rigid structures where they may find themselves in desperate circumstances. These behavioural restrictions are accompanied by increasingly strict moral standards. Transgressions, often minor, are sanctioned severely. Currie (2004) posits that youth then become less wary of more serious deviations, given the harsh punishments of minor infractions.

The reflexive reactions of the family is then to reject or neglect the youth's needs, spinning them out into non-familial spheres which often perpetuate these feelings, even though many institutional responses are designed to alleviate these very problems.

In reference to middle class children and youth, Currie locates this nexus of cultural attributes within Merton's strain theory, arguing that the inner culture of many families embodies "a harsh and neglectful individualism," (2004, p. 46) which in turn reflects a broader set of values around achievement of material success at the expense of "personal worth and social prestige" (p. 69). For Currie, the consequences associated with failing to achieve are potentially worse for middle class youth compared to their lower class counterparts, because in the "high demand, low support" environments in which these youth live:

> …. there are fewer external barriers they can point to as explanations or justifications for their inability to make it to the highest rungs of a narrow ladder of social performance. (p. 69)

In the context of a society that has increasingly witnessed shrinking opportunities for social advancement for both lower and middle class families, the problem of coping with losing, of not "measuring up," has become increasingly pervasive. He suggests that coping with this sense of failure can take two forms; to simply not care as a way of blocking out the humiliation of feeling you are a failure in the eyes of people who matter, or turning to a different frame of reference by looking to others for approval and respect which can in turn lead young people to dangerous behaviours and relationships (Currie, 2004, p. 70).

Although Currie's (2004) focus is on middle class youth in the United States, there is no reason to believe that Canadian children are not facing many of the same issues. As with other Western societies, Canada's economic system has come under tremendous pressure in recent years. The demise of manufacturing jobs, an increase in dead-end, low paying and precarious service sector jobs, and increasing class polarization have all been hallmarks of the Canadian experience. At the same time, these material transformations have gone hand-in-glove with cultural shifts characterized by

individualization, responsibilization, and concomitant political strategies of managerialism and risk management (Muncie, 2006).

Thus, many Canadian youth must cope with extraordinarily difficult social circumstances. For instance, alongside high unemployment rates, and despite political promises to eliminate child poverty by the year 2000, today nearly one in six children in Canada live in poverty (Campaign, 2005, 2006). Additionally youth suicide rates have risen during this time frame (BC, 2006) and there is good evidence to suggest that a large majority of homeless youth suffer with mental health problems (Martijn & Sharpe, 2006; Odgers, Burnette, Chauhan, Moretti, & Reppucci, 2005). A compounding factor is the cultural context in which many youth now grow up in. Canadian culture tends to be shifting in the direction where "success" and "failure" form a mutually exclusive binary of ostensible "choices" manifesting within many families as well as the broader cultural context. In this milieu, as Currie points out, punitive, rejecting sanctions both within and outside the family have come to be seen as "acceptable and even laudable ways of dealing with those who fail or break the rules (2004, p. 97).

Thus, children in many contemporary Western societies, including Canada, are subject to the logics and regulations of the market (Taylor, 1999), underpinned by discourses of individual responsibility and "free choice," resulting in a culture in which young people must "function independently of the old collective supports that once provided clearer pathways to adulthood" (Côté & Allahar, 2006, p. 10). In this paper we answer the call of Hyde (2005) to examine strained familial relationships as relayed from homeless youth within the context of the perspective put forth by Currie (2004). Specifically, the purpose of this study is to better understand homeless youth perceptions of the role of parenting and family dynamics in creating or perpetuating their homelessness, and to assess the degree to which Currie's arguments can provide insight into these young people's experiences.

Shahid Alvi and Hannah Scott are sociologists with research interests in homelessness, violence against women and youth, and applied sociology. Wendy Stanyon is a nurse whose interests lie in vulnerable population advocacy, patient care and education. The work reported here stems from our long term commitment to, and appreciation of the importance of evidence based policy in relation to vulnerable populations. Specifically, this paper reports the results of a larger quantitative and qualitative project undertaken to understand the experiences and needs of homeless people in a large urban setting.

Methodology

Participants in this study were interviewed by the research team as part of a larger project consisting of a capture-recapture (two phase) census of homeless individuals in a region of Southern Ontario. The purpose of this census was to determine the prevalence and nature of homelessness in this community. Prior to entering the field, the research was approved by the University of Ontario Institute of Technology's Research Ethics Board. During the first census, researchers presented respondents with a flyer informing them that over the next few weeks they would have the opportunity to participate in an in-depth qualitative interview phase. Respondents were assured that the interviews would be confidential and completely voluntary. Open-ended interviews were conducted

with homeless individuals at various shelters (which provided accommodation for either male or female clientele) and agency outreach locations. Our rationale for choosing this approach was based on the difficulty of locating homeless people (given the transience of homelessness), and was suggested to us by agency personnel serving the homeless in the region. These personnel had a very good understanding of the daily movement patterns of this population, and were able to assist us in the task of being in the right place at the right time. In addition, time and resource limitations meant that other field methods such as ethnographic techniques or observational studies would have been very difficult, if not impossible to conduct. Accordingly, we felt that in-depth interviews would provide us with the most useful information in relation to our research questions.

Additional interviews were also conducted in a small rural community to capture the unique issues facing the rural homeless population. The interviews lasted approximately one hour and interviewees were provided with a $30 voucher for a local retailer. The interviews addressed questions regarding the individual's personal struggles, circumstances that led to becoming homeless, reasons for current homelessness, and information on what resources were needed to become self-sustainable again.

The interviews were conducted by nursing students, specifically trained for conducting qualitative interviews. The students were divided into teams of two and each team was assigned to a specific interview location. One team member was required to conduct the interview while the other took detailed notes which were used to record nonverbal impressions, to help frame the analysis, and acted as a backup in case the interviewee did not wish to be taped. A digital recording device was used to tape the interview, with permission of the respondent, to ensure that the information gathered from the interview was both accurate and complete. In total, 64 interviews were conducted. The names of all participants were changed to protect their identity.

The instrument template we used for our qualitative interviews was derived from a large study carried out carried out by Kraus and Graves (2002). The Research Project on Homelessness in Greater Vancouver offered a qualitative research instrument that they reported to be very successful. Of particular appeal to researchers on this project was the use of common language and intuitive nature of the instrument. The resulting questionnaire was six pages long comprised of eight sections for a total of 35 questions. Some demographic data were also elicited as prelude to the actual interview. Since we are interested in the experiences of homeless youth, the subsample investigated here consists only of the 15 homeless people we felt could be characterized as "young," ten males and five females between the ages of 16 and 24. Most of the participants described themselves as Caucasian, accounting for 73.3% of the responses. Only 20% described themselves as aboriginal and 6.7% chose not to identify their ethnic background.

Key Themes

Our analytical strategy involved verbatim transcription of the taped interviews (all respondents agreed to be taped). Each of the authors independently reviewed interview transcripts and coded themes emerging from the interview data. These themes were then compared to assess concordance. In what follows, we report the results of the research as they emerged from a detailed consideration of transcript themes. While lack of

affordable housing, drug addiction, involvement in both expressive and instrumental crime, and mental and physical health problems were themes that emerged consistently across the interviews, here we focus on the nature of the relationships between our respondents and their parents or caregivers. All the respondents provided information on their familial experiences in terms of quality of relationships, parenting and discipline styles. Here, we focus on the parental figure(s) response to transgressions against what their parents considered normative behaviour, and the living environment preceding the move to the streets. Two key themes emerged from this analysis: (a) the intolerance of transgression and, (b) familial and interpersonal violence.

The Intolerance of Transgression

As noted earlier, negative relationships between parents or caregivers, and youth are significant and consistent predictors of youth homelessness (Janus, Archambault, Brown, & Welsh, 1995; Robert, Fournier, & Pauze, 2003; Tyler, 2006). In our data, we found this to be true generally, but also found that parental authoritarianism was prevalent in the lives of the youth we interviewed. Briefly, scholars of parenting have argued that authoritarian parenting is characterized by high and often unrealistic expectations of children with respect to performance on a range of behaviours and corresponding intolerant responses to children's failings, when the latter fail to live up to those expectations. This type of parenting, at least in Western societies, often leads to negative psycho-social outcomes (Bronte-Tinkew, Moore, & Carrano, 2006; Dwairy, 2008; Thompson, Hollis, & Richards, 2003).

Much of the behaviour exhibited by these youth followed similar patterns, as illustrated by the experiences of Dylan. Dylan became homeless due to a difficult childhood and recurring conflict with family members. Dylan's conflict with his parents stemmed from his own mental health problems, criminal behaviour, and substance abuse. When he was 13 his father placed him under the care of the Children's Aid Society (CAS) believing he was a "problem child." When asked to describe his childhood experiences leading up to that point Dylan explained:

> Well I was brought home by the cops. Let's see. Been charged a few times. Hospitalized my brother once. We got in a fist fight. Other than that, I was just a really big hassle. Not going to school. Selling drugs. All kinds of stuff.

Our data indicate that often the responses to this behaviour by family members eventually became absolute. For example, in response to a question on why she left her home, Elizabeth responded:

> They get mad and they say that if you walk out the door those are locked or whatever or if you don't come home at this time; the doors are locked to you and you can't come home. So the first couple of times it was me just up and going and then the last time it was… I had called to tell them I was going to be late. A friend of mine had just had her baby and she wanted to flush or whatever. So her boyfriend took my bike to go to the

> store and he didn't come back. So I was five minutes late for curfew and they called my cell phone and they said you're not welcome back in our home and we're locking the doors. But they still deny it. Like I have my boyfriend sitting there with the phone on speaker phone hearing the whole conversation and they'll still deny it to this day that they never kicked me out.

Later in the conversation, the same young woman told interviewers that:

> The first time I got kicked out it was over stupid things like rules….we were getting [into] more arguments, they would tell me that I was acting like a retard and tell me that I was doing this. And I would be like I don't even know what I did wrong half the time. You know, or like no matter what I did I never felt good enough. You know, like I'd come home with a Report Card that had three A's on it or whatever or three over 80 and they would sit there and remark on the stuff that was lower. They would never say oh you did a good job in these subjects. It was always well what happened here? There was never….[anything] positive….

Here we see clearly that this youth experienced what she perceived to be an "intolerance of transgression" effect, in which the parents express "little tolerance for legitimate mistakes" (Currie, 2004, p. 88). These behaviours ranged from problematic to essentially typical teenage behavior within a context in which the bar for success was contingent on what Elizabeth perceived to be very narrow parameters. Of course, we recognize that the veracity of these perceptions (and those of our other respondents) might be challenged by parents. However, we had no opportunity to corroborate these stories with caregivers themselves. We also would argue that the perceptions reported here are "real" for these individuals and that the fact that there is consistency across stories suggests that we are tapping into the same underlying phenomena.

When asked whether she voluntarily left her parent's home, another young woman, Joanne, put the matter this way:

> I got in a fight with my Mom and she asked me to leave. We were fighting all the time. We didn't get along. She asked me to and then I went to leave and she said "If you leave, don't come back…." my Dad, my Dad would kick me out (this happened five or six times)….sometimes I'd ask to come back and other times they'd ask me.

Paradoxically, in the context of this "push-pull" environment, respondents reported to us the short-sightedness of this intolerant approach. One youth who had been kicked out of her home stated that her parents were very critical of welfare recipients and insisted she find a job. This same respondent noted this with the understanding that her parents did not grasp the obstacles to obtaining a living-wage job facing a 17 year-old, who has not completed high school.

Elizabeth, who had been living without stable housing for about three years, was another participant who felt that a strained family life and lack of positive reinforcement

from her parents was a primary cause of her homelessness. The conflict with her family started when her older brother was taken away by the police and placed into a group home. When she was 14 she began to ask questions about what happened to him and this caused several arguments between Elizabeth and her parents:

> We weren't really getting along at all. Because I wanted to know about my brother and I couldn't really forgive them for that. You know, I didn't understand and they wouldn't tell me. And so of course I got angry and hostile towards them and after that it all just fell apart.

The first time Elizabeth left her house was at age 14; at that time she ran away to her friend's house because she was sick of arguing with her parents. She eventually decided to move back in with her parents but the hostility and arguments only intensified. Elizabeth explains her reasons for finally leaving:

> We got into some really bad arguments. There was still a lot of hostility toward each other and everything and I couldn't handle it. It was bringing my marks down and bringing my stress level up. I had gotten suicidal and I decided nah I'm not going to deal with the…you know, you can build a relationship without me being in the house.

Elizabeth spoke about her parents' high expectations, stating that "the youth now are expected to do a lot more than what our parents were expected to do. Like we're now expected to have all of this college stuff ready by the time we leave and by the time we've done high school or whatever like." Katie, who had struggled with depression and anxiety since the fifth grade and had turned to cocaine as a way of coping with her problems, also highlighted her experiences of abuse and intolerant parenting at the hands of her mother:

> She's physically and verbally abusive….She changed the locks on the door….I went to rehab …. I went there on my own to get clean. They (the parents) said if I got clean I could come home. So I was there from February 18 until March 10. I got clean, it felt great. I went home on the Friday and she… just dropped off some of my stuff and they said how are you and I said I was fine. Then I was going to stay at my boyfriend's house for the night. And then they said that was OK. I said I'll be home tomorrow and when I came home on the Saturday the locks were changed and they said they didn't want me anymore. They said they didn't consider me a part of their family.

In this instance, even though Katie felt that she had made a serious effort to correct her transgressions, she also perceived that her family did not recognize the effort, choosing instead to punish the offending behaviour. When Katie was asked if there was anything that could have been done to help her stay at home she discussed the importance of positive parent-child relationships; "if my parents were more supportive and praised

me for the good I did instead of putting me down for the bad…I think that could help in a lot of ways. I think parents have a big…they play a big role."

These youth also told us that in many cases their parents expected them to take care of themselves or were faced with pressure to take care of their own parents as the latter also faced a myriad of personal problems. This "inversion of responsibility" is best illustrated by Jake, who explained that his mother left his brother and him alone and in charge "for months at a time," without food or even a fridge:

> Kind of crazy, but it's true. My brother would teach me to steal and rob cars across the street and go steal at the corner store and go steal at Zellers, and go steal at whatever store we had. That was the thing, and my sister got that trait. She used to go into stores and touch everything. She used to get beat. She used to have to hold her hands and…She was too busy at bars and she had too much time or too much extra money or whatever you want to call it from being around certain groups of people that just basically tore her life apart, you know what I mean? But she didn't really give a fuck because she was drinking and smoking and doing all types of….like, regular people nowadays-they think that's the bomb you know? But really that wasn't the bomb for me because I'm there…I see my mom two months later and I'm like hanging onto her leg, 'I don't want you to leave'. And then the briefcases [men] come in, and boom, the next thing you know the man's taking her out, or the man is fucking her in the bed or the man is beating her up or the man is torturing us, you know what I mean? So it's like always shit….

Finally, although these young people told us stories of parental neglect and rejection, they were also telling us that in the absence of familial supports there were often few alternatives for shelter, care and support on the street. Not surprisingly, in the absence of these social supports, the youth in this study often turned to their peers on the street for support. Katie expressed her concern regarding the lack of shelters for young people while at the same time highlighting the lack of support from her parents and the concomitant need to turn to her (somewhat reluctant) grandparents:

> I think that there should be shelters for people who are under 16 because I know when I got kicked out when I was under 16, I didn't have a place to go. There was nowhere for me…I had to go live with my grandparents, but they weren't 100% willing. They just didn't want me out on the street. That's where I would've ended up.

Elizabeth also described the dangers of turning to other street kids for social support:

> When you have a circle of friends around you that are trying to build themselves up to you, you all kind of lean on each other towards support and that kind of brings you up a little bit higher. But then again if you get into the wrong negative crowd it's very easy to fall back [relapse].

Talking more broadly about his perception of kids on the street, Ethan also pointed out that turning to peers for survival is often dangerous, particularly for girls:

> You know, their parents kicked them out, they don't know what to do, and the young girls are going out sleeping with the guys and their boyfriends, and they have a place to stay, so they don't give a fuck what they do. And there's a lot of that in this town, there's a lot of young girls, I know girls that I grew up with and I see them with these guys, and I know what these guys do, you know what I mean? It makes me mad right. They need to have more youth and more things for girls, especially more women shelters.

Elizabeth told us that her step-mother had only recently revealed to her that she was not her biological mother. Referring to her friend's parents, she continued:

> They (her friend's parents) had asked me what was going on. She was a friend of mine for quite some time, she knew that the way that my parents were. She knew that it was them that were putting me into the position, so her family and all that becomes very close to them. Like I call her Mom, Mom and her Dad, Dad. Like and her little brother is awesome. All three of them are just whatever, I can walk in their house and their dog won't bite my head off. Right, like, you know I can like – We're very close so like her family knows what's going on. When I attempted suicide and actually ended up in the hospital for it; it was her and her mom that came to visit me at the hospital. My mother didn't. So that kind of opens your eyes….

It is also not the case that homeless youth turn away completely from their parents when they need help. However, in the context of the intolerant mentality, that help is often not forthcoming. When Robert was asked if there was anyone he could have turned to for help, he replied:

> I asked my mother, I don't know. She doesn't relate to my problems, or whatever, she thinks like, because she had a rough life, she's been out since she was fifteen, working and everything, I don't know. She thinks that it's not so bad as I make it sound to her sometimes. Kind of like, suck it up type thing.

And Ethan reported that when he was 15:

> I got out of jail and my stepmom and me don't have too much, you know what I mean? And then she didn't want me to live back in the house, so I came back into the house and she asked me to move out so, I just decided to stay out. [I stayed out] Uh, probably a couple of months, then went back to jail, got out.

Brian told us that his mother "gave him the boot" when he was15 because he was stealing from her. But later in the conversation, he clarified the family context:

> Well I was going to high school just starting to get into drugs and stuff, you know, and starting to break the law. Well I was mad at my mother because I found out, like I realized she was dealing drugs….so I kind of hated her so I was just disrespecting her, I mean, as we lived so I was getting myself into trouble at the same time.
>
> Yeah. My whole life I've heard drugs are bad but if I actually clued in and I actually saw what happened and took a look at the people around me, I don't think I would want to end up like that, right? I'd be doing things different but I didn't so now I have habits. I still see these people and what they look like and what I could look like in the future but it doesn't really do anything to me because I'm already into it, you know?

He then went on to recommend:

> Yeah well being on the street for a while, I think they should teach kids in school before they end up like acting the way I did before they have to experience it. I think they should be taught about how it is and you know… Of course people say drugs are bad and you know, you don't want to be homeless and you don't want to be a bum or whatever but people don't really… some… I think kids should learn about how it really is, you know?

Familial and Interpersonal Violence

A second theme that was apparent in our interviews was that of family violence experienced prior to the youth leaving or being kicked out of the home, and after, as part of the experience of homelessness. Violence is a form of controlling and absolutist behaviour, and therefore dovetails nicely with the ideas set forth by Currie (2004), in that violence can be considered a form (albeit extreme) of rejection of nurturance (Anooshian, 2005; Menke, 2000). Those who use violence, do so to physically force victims into compliance with the viewpoint of the abuser. Alternatively, violence is often used to punish various forms of perceived transgressions perceived by the abuser (Johnson, 2006; Sampson & Laub, 1994). Jake told us that he and his mother had been in a battered women's shelter to get away from a string of abusive boyfriends.

> Well, with my mom…we were in a shelter at one point in time because her boyfriends were kicking the shit out of her and we couldn't get away from them. We had a hard life, you know?

In some cases respondents identified that, although their parents or parental models were not violent, they often were not protected from violence in the home. In

essence, the youth was neglected even though there was a keen awareness by the heads of household that violence was being carried out on one of it's members by another. Luke told us about an abusive older brother, who "beat on me quite a bit."

> And then, uh, when I turned fifteen he came over to my house and kicked me out of the house while my parents were sitting there. My parents were, like, we can't do anything about it or he'll smash us too. And, uh, him and I had a rough life growing up together. Um, he's cut me, stabbed me, burnt me, you name it, I've basically got beaten by him. I was too small and too young to even know what fighting back really was until I was around … fourteen or thirteen.

> I think that's the reason I got kicked out was because I began to fight back.

Luke went on to elaborate on the reasoning his brother used upon deciding to force him out of his home:

> He said, um, because I was having problems with school and stuff like that, and I was refusing to go to school, like I'd take the bus to town and I'd take off from school, go [somewhere with] my friends, smoke drugs and because I've been rebellious against my parents and all that at the time that he came over and started "no you can't live here anymore, you got to go, pack your stuff, you got one bag, take it, all your clothes and that's all you get."

Finally, Crystal's remarks echo the findings of numerous studies showing that physical, emotional and sexual abuse are common experiences among homeless females (Baker, Cook, & Norris, 2003; Bassuk, Weinreb, Buckner, Browne, Salomon, & Bassuk, 1996; Styron, Janoff-Bulman, & Davidson, 2000). When asked whether there was anything that anyone could have done to help keep her in her former residence, a public housing apartment that she told us had "probably about 15 crack dealers in one building." She said:

> Probably put my boyfriend in jail a long time ago….I don't want to be a rat and don't want to get beat up for calling the cops. He was violent towards everybody. I think everybody in there was violent in some way or another.

Discussion

There is good evidence from the literature suggesting that parental substance abuse, mental health issues and physical and mental abuse are often present in the families of homeless children (Ryan, Kilmer, Cauce, Watanabe, & Hoyt, 2000; Tyler, Cauce, & Whitbeck, 2004). This paper focuses on the theme of authoritarian parenting, neglect, and punishment by parents and other caregivers: a causal factor identified by homeless youth in our study to their progression to being homeless. Our findings lend

support to the conclusions of studies such as those of Wolfe and her colleagues (1999), who report that homeless youth are more likely to report mistreatment at the hands of parents, less parental love and cohesion and more family conflict than their housed counterparts. Our interpretation of these findings, however, are situated within the framework offered by Currie, who urges us to consider the structural roots of negative parenting culture in contemporary society.

As Klodawsky, Aubry, and Farrell (2006) point out, such neglect needs to be understood within the context of the underpinnings of neo-liberal society, namely, the ideology that individuals are responsible for themselves and that homeless youth are unwilling to engage in paid work to resolve their situations. Our interpretation of the themes uncovered in this research stems primarily from an interest in situating these themes within the broader social and cultural context of caregiving in contemporary Western societies. In this concluding section we wish to draw attention to the effects of problematic parenting and caregiving in a society that emphasizes personal success, high, but often unrealistic standards of behaviour and achievement, and intolerance when young people fail to measure up to those standards.

Our research reinforces many of the themes articulated by Currie (2004). What is especially clear in our interviews is the prevalence of our respondents who reported being held to high standards of behavior, in often dysfunctional circumstances, which essentially set them up for failure. Currie (p. 46) points out that within the ongoing conversation about the alleged "breakdown" of the family in modern society, a relatively recent development revolves around the argument that "parents have lost the upper hand—that we have become a society that is too lenient and indulgent with children." As discussed earlier, in part, this kind of mentality is one of the roots of what Muncie (2008) refers to as the "punitive turn" as expressed in various social and criminal justice policies. As our research suggests, although many of these youth had serious behavioral problems, their homelessness was less a case of lenient or indulgent parenting as it was punitive and heedless parenting (Currie, p. 46). Parents, in this study, often resorted to forcing their child to leave the family home, effectively "throwing away" their problems with the child as well as their responsibilities to them.

Our research also adds to a body of literature suggesting that the majority of homeless youth in both Canada and the United States have come from homes with high levels of conflict, abuse and family disruption (Buckner & Bassuk, 1997; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997). However, our research also demonstrates that even when youth were trying to achieve rather narrowly focused goals in academic, social, or athletic spheres, or attempting to make amends for transgressions, conflict between the youth and parents would arise. Youth reported that the conflict would increase in frequency and/or in intensity, eventually leading to the abandonment of the child by kicking them out of the family unit.

As stated earlier, we have no way of knowing parental perspectives on our respondent's stories, and this constitutes one limitation of our study. In addition, we cannot make the assumption that our findings are generalizable to all homeless youth. However, as Luker (2008, p. 48) points out, we are not claiming here to be estimating the distribution of a population across categories. Rather, we are interested in the nature of the categories that emerged in the analysis of these young people's experiences. Another limitation of the findings stems from the somewhat unique nature of the study setting,

which, in contrast to most studies of homeless youth, was not a large urban area, but a suburban area. Although the experiences of inner city homeless youth may be different in some respects to those of our sample, our focus on youth in a suburban area adds some insight into the role of parenting and violence in an otherwise unexamined group.

 To this end, what appears to be missing in many of our cases is familial support and nurturance so needed by all family members. Thus, one policy recommendation would be to intervene with families to help mediate and resolve ongoing difficulties. Another is to help families reunite after the youth has become homeless, or to provide counseling after the child has returned home (Milburn, Rotheram-Borus, Batterham, Brumback, Rosenthal, & Mallet, 2005), providing the child is not being abused by family members. Furthermore, as other researchers have suggested (Finkelhor, Hotaling, & Sedlak, 1990) homeless youth are not a homogenous population and do not become homeless for the same reasons. Accordingly, our data suggest that service providers need to gather information on histories of family discord and rejection so they can provide services tailored specifically to this group (Ringwalt, Greene, & Robertson, 1998).

 Finally, we have tried to draw attention to the idea that the contours of such family discord and disruption need to be understood in broader social context. Policy makers, researchers, service providers, and other stakeholders need to understand that underlying issues of poverty, social exclusion, employment, and family violence must be confronted. Unless these issues are, in turn, contextualized within the broader culture of social exclusion and "disposable youth" (Giroux, 2003), facing "sink or swim" ultimatums put forth by family members in North American society, there is little likelihood of eliminating homelessness via the provision of post hoc services alone.

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Author's Note

Dr. Shahid Alvi received his BA and Masters degrees in Sociology from the University of Saskatchewan and a Ph.D. in Sociology from Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario. Currently, he is analyzing data from another recently completed project on immigrant women's quality of life and in particular, their experiences of racism. He is also the 2002 recipient of the Critical Criminologist of the Year award from the American Society of Criminology's Critical Criminology Division. Correspondences regarding this article should be addressed to: Dr. Shahid Alvi, University of Ontario Institute of Technology, Faculty of Criminology, Justice and Policy Studies, 2000 Simcoe Street North Oshawa, ON L1H 7K4; Telephone: 905-721-8668, ext. 3412; E-mail: shahid.alvi@uoit.ca

Dr. Hannah Scott is a founding faculty member of UOIT. She received her undergraduate degrees (Psychology and Sociology) from McMaster University and her Masters (Sociology) from the University of Guelph. Her doctorate is from the University of Alberta (Sociology) and her specializations include victimology, statistics, and homicide, crime prevention through environmental design, and is a leading authority on serial murder. She has worked in the US and Canada on several inter-agency initiatives. Dr. Scott also serves as the current Vice-President of the UOIT Faculty Association until 2010. E-mail: hannah.scott@uoit.ca

Wendy Stanyon received her BN at McGill University and her MA Ed. from Central Michigan University. She then earned her Ed.D. at the University of Toronto in 2003. Before entering her current role as an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Health Sciences at UOIT, Wendy worked for many years as a Professor in the Department of Health and Human Studies at Durham College of Applied Arts and Technology. Other previous experiences include being a Public Health Nurse for the City of North York, and a Professor in the Nursing Department of John Abbott CEJEP in Quebec. Wendy Stanyon currently conducts research related to vulnerable populations and advocacy as well as in education. E-mail: wendy.stanyon@uoit.ca

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