Exploring the Relationship Between Resilience and Help-Seeking in Homeless Youth*

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This paper reports on a component of Rachel Oldfield’s Psychology Honours research project, and is a follow-up to her article published in Parity in 2015 titled The Role of Resilience in a Homeless Youth Population. It was completed in 2015 at Swinburne University, supervised by Monica Thielking in conjunction with The Cost of Youth Homelessness in Australia research team, and her final report was successfully submitted in October 2015.

Background
Trauma in one’s lifetime is virtually universal in homeless populations. Research on the background of homeless young people suggests that their lives are often characterised by family dysfunction, abuse, maltreatment and neglect, overcrowding in the family home and personal turmoil preceding their first incidence of homelessness. Considering this, a number of studies detail the links between youth homelessness and poor psychological health outcomes, with the most severe outcome being a high risk of suicide or attempted suicide. Exploring approaches that can help to reduce the high rates of psychological distress in this group of vulnerable young people should be an important focus of research.

Fortunately, there is an emerging body of literature examining protective factors in homeless youth; specifically, how possessing certain characteristics can protect homeless young people from negative psychological outcomes. One identified protective factor is resilience. International research has found that resilience in a homeless youth sample correlates with lower levels of psychological distress, suicide ideation, violent behaviour and substance abuse. However, recent research also reveals that access to mental health services for this group is low, limiting an ability of support organisations to recognise and cultivate resilience in homeless youth.

The Current Study
The current study used data from ‘The Cost of Youth Homelessness in Australia Study’, an Australian Research Council Linkage project that partnered with Mission Australia, Anglicare and The Salvation Army. This study utilised a mixed-methods approach to examine the importance of resilience in the life trajectories of an Australian homeless youth sample. The quantitative component of the study consisted of 288 homeless young people and explored the relationship between resilience, suicide and self-harm. The qualitative element of the study involved interviewing ten young people experiencing homelessness and sought to explore their perceptions of resilience and their personal narratives of help-seeking behaviour.

Key Quantitative Findings
One of the most important findings was that higher levels of resilience was associated with a significantly decreased likelihood of homeless young people attempting suicide or self-harm (X2 (1, N = 288) = 19.47, p = <.001 and (X2 (1, N = 288) = 11.40, p = <.01). This was consistent with previous research and suggests that resilience can be an important moderating factor to risks faced by homeless youth.
The results of studies such as this indicate there is a quality within highly resilient youth that allows them to adapt and cope without engaging in life-threatening behaviours. This is encouraging as it demonstrates hope for young people being able to protect themselves despite negotiating a critical stage of life in conditions characterised by trauma and upheaval.12

Key Qualitative Findings
Five key themes were uncovered from the interviews with homeless youth. These were self-reliance, low trust in others, choosing to accept help, perseverance, and fear of judgement.

Self-reliance
‘I think self-reliance is extremely important. You can’t go through life thinking that somebody else is going to help you and save your problems and make it all better.’

Consistent with existing research, self-reliance was a dominant theme within the interviews.13, 14, 15, 16, 17 Almost all participants revealed that they preferred to rely on themselves for support before consulting external sources. The young people in the current study declared they preferred to be self-reliant because they trusted that they knew what was best for them over and above other people. Additionally, the participants appeared to discuss self-reliance as something they expected from themselves, almost as if it were a requirement for life as a homeless youth. It is plausible to suggest that this assumed self-reliance is indicative of past experiences. Research has established that the majority of homeless individuals originate from conflict-laden upbringings where they often had to fend for themselves; hence it appears logical for individuals to default to relying on themselves when this is all they have ever done.18

Low Trust in Others
‘If you’ve had people stuff you over, why would you want to go through that again when you know you’re not going to stuff yourself over.’

Low trust in others was another central theme in the interviews. This is congruent with previous research identifying mistrust as a key theme present in homeless youth narratives.19, 20 It was clear from the participant’s accounts that lack of trust was a pervasive barrier to help-seeking activity.

Many participants identified a negative experience where they were let down by someone as a precursor to not trusting people in the future. The literature suggests that a lack of trust based on past experiences of exploitation or mistreatment is a common experience in homeless youth.21

Choosing to Trust Others
‘I attempted to do it on my own and couch-surfed for as long as possible before I rang my parents and said “Okay I need some help”’.

Despite lacking trust, many young people in the sample acknowledged that there were times when they needed to seek outside assistance. There was an overwhelming sense that young people desired autonomy in seeking help, meaning they wanted to be able to ask for help from others without losing their independence. Samuels and Pryce22 have previously suggested that homeless young people consciously weigh up the amount of help they accept to ensure it does not encroach on their own autonomy.23 This notion appeared to be similar to views expressed in the current study as many participants revealed they would choose to seek help from others but only when they were sure they could not solve the problem on their own first.

Fear of Judgment
‘When you are living on the streets you don’t really want to admit it to anyone. You don’t want to say that, hey, I went out there and I failed kind of thing.’

Homeless youth in the sample identified a fear of judgment as a barrier to help-seeking behaviour. This was a common theme in participants’ accounts and was characterised by embarrassment and a fear of appearing like a failure to others because they were homeless. This notion is worth exploring further as it demonstrates a belief held by many homeless young people that they shouldn’t need to ask for help, or that talking to someone about their problems will result in being judged, thus attaching a stigma to help-seeking.

Perseverance
‘It’s always good to keep your head up and never like dwell on all the bad stuff that is going on.’

A theme of perseverance and to keep going when times were tough, was common throughout all participants’ discussions of resilience. It was clear from the respondent accounts that persevering and remaining stoic throughout hard times was viewed as a highly desirable characteristic for navigating life without a home.

Implications for Service Provision
The results of the current study have important implications for theoretical understandings of help-seeking in young homeless cohorts and for service delivery and interventions. Theoretically, this study offers support for studies citing the important role of resilience in homeless youth, expanding this research to an Australian population for the first time.24, 25, 26 Beyond the realm of research, recognising that resilience can protect homeless youth from life-threatening behaviours provides an avenue for service providers to incorporate this into their practice, encouraging providers to foster resilience in vulnerable youth through strength-based approaches.

Interviews with homeless youth demonstrated that the most important factors in seeking help from others were feeling as if they could trust others and not feeling judged. For those who professionally support homeless youth, such as psychologists, counsellors, youth workers and case managers, this suggests that investing in the therapeutic relationship (building trust, respect and autonomy) with a young homeless client is crucial to their future wellbeing and ability to seek help. Similarly, it suggests that service providers should be especially cognisant of ethical principles guiding their practice when working with homeless youth. In particular, research suggests that service providers’ duty to reassure clients of confidentiality and respect their rights to autonomy are key in encouraging service utilisation.27
Conclusion
This study suggests the more we can discover about resilience, self-reliance and help-seeking behaviour in this group, the better equipped the homelessness and mental health sectors will be to implement effective practices that can counter the incidences of suicide, self-harm and psychological distress in homeless young people. Ultimately, it is hoped that encouraging better psychological outcomes in this demographic will contribute to breaking the cycle of homelessness permanently.

Endnotes
2. ibid.
7. ibid.
23. Ibid.