

# Feasibility Study of the Social Enterprise Intervention with Homeless Youth

## What you need to know

Homeless youth often engage in high-risk survival behaviours such as prostitution, theft and drug dealing to meet their basic needs. They often have histories of depression, low self-esteem, trauma, self-harm, substance abuse, and physical and sexual abuse. However, due to inadequate and non-existing treatment options directed at homeless youth, they tend to have limited service utilization. Low service utilization combined with high-risk behaviours puts homeless youth at risk of developing new mental illnesses, as well as chronic homelessness and social exclusion.



### What is this research about?

This research is about using a Social Enterprise Intervention (SEI) training program for homeless youth to enhance their mental health status, pro-social behaviours, social support and service utilization. The underlying philosophy of the SEI is that one's employment affects all other aspects of one's personal well-being. It highlights the benefits of adopting interventions for homeless youth that replace street survival skills with marketable job skills, address their mental health issues and engage them in social services.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Kristin M. Ferguson**, PhD is an Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Southern California. Her research interests include homeless and street-living youth, social development, and employment interventions with street youth that combine vocational and clinical services.

#### VISIT

[www.homelesshub.ca](http://www.homelesshub.ca)  
for more information

#### KEYWORDS

*mental health, youth, social support, Social Enterprise Intervention (SEI)*

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## WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?

- The participants' educational level, mental health status, and overall interest in learning the skills offered by the training influenced the level of participation of the youth involved in the program.
- Homeless youth tended to rely on social support from their peers to overcome daily stressors and cope with mental health problems such as depression.
- Youth who participated in the SEI showed an improvement in life satisfaction, family contact, peer social support and depressive symptoms compared to the control group.
- With respect to high-risk behaviours, the control group showed a greater decrease in sexual partners. One explanation for this unexpected outcome is that the improved self-confidence gained from learning employable skills and increased access to legitimate financial opportunities of the SEI group contributed to their increased sexual activity.

## What did the researchers do?

The researchers recruited 16 homeless youth (aged 18 to 24) from a youth drop-in centre in Los Angeles. The youth had to have attended the agency two or more times a week in the month prior to the study. The participants received **4 months of vocational training, 3 months of business training**, and participated in a **vocational cooperative for the final 3 months** of the project.

Throughout the project, clinical mentors met weekly with the participants to identify and assess their mental health needs, and to initiate and monitor referrals. Baseline and follow-up interviews were conducted by researchers to assess the youths' mental and physical health status, high-risk behaviours, social support, service utilization, homelessness history and trauma history. A control group of 12 youth was formed in the agency that received regular agency services and agreed to participate in the baseline and follow-up interviews.

## HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

This research can be used to improve vocational interventions to better engage homeless youth in employment training and mental health services. It provides clear examples of the benefits of using a holistic approach that includes both academics and practitioners to address the needs of homeless youth. Homeless youth who do not regularly engage in social services would benefit from SEI programs that integrate mental health, social services and vocational training all in one location.