

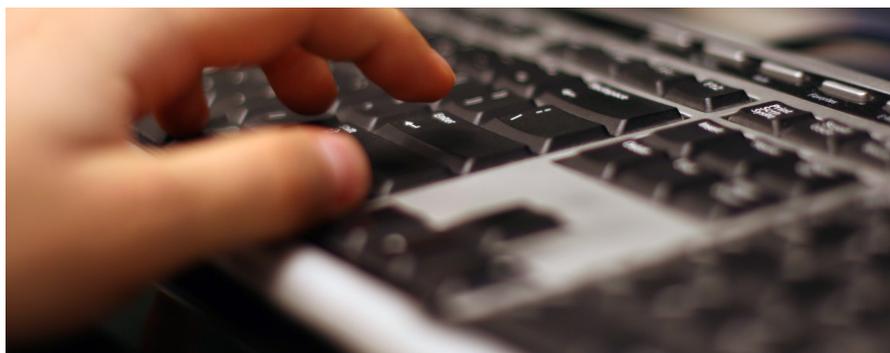
WHY DON'T YOU JUST GET A JOB?

HOMELESS YOUTH, SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND EMPLOYMENT TRAINING

Stephen GAETZ & Bill O'GRADY

What do we need to know?

Young people who are homeless face considerable barriers to obtaining and maintaining employment. These barriers are best understood through the concept of social exclusion, or the degree to which individual experiences and histories overlap with certain social, political and economic conditions such as poverty, unemployment, inadequate housing, sexism, racism and homophobia. These factors can restrict young people's access to spaces, institutions, and practices that increase opportunities and reduce risk. People who are stably housed experience distinct and significant advantages when moving into the labour force, advantages that many of us take for granted, such as having a home address, adult support to transition into adulthood, and access to food, recreation and transportation.



WHAT IS THIS CHAPTER ABOUT?

In this chapter the authors inquire about the role of employment training programs in helping young people move off the streets. Based on findings from three major research studies (conducted in 1999, 2002, 2009), as well as other research on street youth and employment, the authors contend that if employment really does have the potential to contribute to solutions to youth homelessness, then we need to understand what factors enhance the success of efforts to obtain and maintain work, and which factors might make it difficult. This chapter explores the key dimensions of social exclusion faced by homeless youth, and concludes with a framework for developing effective employment and training supports for homeless youth.

ARTICLE SOURCE

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What did the researchers find?

The authors' research has consistently found multiple factors that contribute to the social exclusion of young people who are homeless, and ultimately their ability to obtain and maintain employment: 1) Housing provides the foundation necessary to maintain employment including a place to rest and recover from each work day and illness, maintain hygiene and work clothing, eat and store food, and remain relatively safe from victimization; 2) Receiving sufficient income allows one to pay for housing, transportation to and from work, and purchase food, clothing and hygiene products; 3) Becoming homeless frequently leads to a disengagement from formal education (often because basic survival becomes a priority), which

directly impacts their ability to compete in the labour market; 4) Research has consistently demonstrated that homelessness has a negative impact on health and well-being, with homeless youth experiencing greater incidence of physical and mental illness, inadequate nutrition, and high rates of addiction - all of which make working each day extremely challenging; 5) Young people who are homeless often have weakened ties to family and their communities of origin, and often lack support in the form of love, guidance, encouragement, and models of adult behaviour; 6) The experience of homelessness typically shuts young people out of the normal process of adolescent development considered essential for healthy transition

to adulthood as youth are thrust into adult roles and responsibilities almost immediately. The researchers found that many street youth have survived through a variety of "informal" economic activities that are highly flexible such as 'under the table' jobs or illegal/quasi-legal activities, including the sex trade, panhandling, squeegeeing, and criminal acts such as theft and drug dealing. Around 80% of males and females indicated they do not like doing this work, and stated that they do desire paid employment. Many youth have records of employment, but this employment has typically been precarious, consisting of part-time, low-wage, dead-end jobs at the margins of the economy that rarely provide a living wage.

How can you use this research?

This research demonstrates that while employment training is certainly important, it must be considered in a broader context, and respond to the social exclusionary factors that undermine homeless youth's ability to work. A framework for employment training is provided, which has implications for service providers and policy makers. There are four key elements to this framework which must be in place for youth to succeed in employment training. First is the program philosophy, where fidelity to three principles is required: having services designed to support the developing needs of an adolescent, addressing social exclusionary factors, and the need for youth to leave the program with access to better jobs. The second component is structural supports which include stable housing, income, and access to appropriate health care and social supports. The third component consists of program elements, which ideally should focus on the development of marketable skills, client driven case management, support for special needs, such as health and mental health, mentoring and job shadowing, and opportunities for educational advancement. The final component pertains to institutional aspects, including ensuring that programs have ongoing core funding, strategic partnerships, a commitment to ongoing program evaluation, and strong corporate engagement.



About the researchers

STEPHEN GAETZ is a Professor and Associate Dean of Research and Field Development in the Faculty of Education at York University. He is also the Director of the Canadian Homelessness Research Network and the Homeless Hub.

BILL O'GRADY works as a Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Guelph. He has longstanding research and teaching interests in the area of marginalized youth and homelessness.

This free e-book is available at:

www.homelesshub.ca/youthhomelessness