

HOMELESS YOUTH, NUTRITIONAL VULNERABILITY, AND COMMUNITY FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

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What do you need to know?

Adolescence is an important developmental period associated with a need for increased nutritional requirements to foster growth and development. Chronically poor nutrition during adolescence can have negative health impacts over the lifespan and is associated with an increased risk of infections. Poor nutrition can also worsen conditions such as depression, substance abuse and sexually transmitted diseases. Homeless youth face extreme nutritional vulnerability due to chronic food deprivation and poor nutritional quality of food. Failure to facilitate more adequate food access for youth experiencing homelessness can not only impact their nutritional health, but also their social, psychological, and emotional well-being.

What did the researchers do?

This chapter reports on data collected from research conducted with homeless youth in Toronto, as well as a telephone survey with program directors from charitable food programs in five Canadian cities. It also draws from the dietary intake assessment, which is an analysis of the level of nutrition in a diet. First, 261 youth participants from Toronto participated in two survey interviews spaced approximately three days apart. In both interviews youth were asked to report on their current living circumstances as well as what

they ate in the past 24 hours. Twenty-five youth then participated in in-depth interviews designed to explore the social and symbolic meanings of food, as well as the strategies used for getting food. Second, a comprehensive list of charitable food services in five cities (Victoria, Edmonton, Toronto, Quebec City and Halifax) was created and telephone surveys were conducted with 517 program directors to chart each city's capacity to recognize and respond to local problems of unmet food needs.

WHAT IS THIS CHAPTER ABOUT?



This chapter begins by exploring the nutritional vulnerability of homeless youth as well as the strategies they use to satisfy their basic food needs. The meaning of food is explored for youth who are homeless and unable to choose food they prefer. Finally, data from an inventory of charitable food services in five cities (Victoria, Edmonton, Toronto, Quebec City and Halifax) is used to discuss the various food assistance options available for homeless youth.

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What did the researchers find?

Most of the youth interviewed were failing to meet their basic requirements for vitamins and minerals, and most were not getting enough food to provide energy. While the preferred method of obtaining food was personal purchases, the vast majority of youth had to rely on other means in order to meet their basic food needs, such as charitable meal and snack programs and receiving food from other people (such as friends and passers-by). More frequent use of charitable meal programs did not protect youth from food deprivation and hunger, and had minimal impact on the nutritional quality of their diets. While the youth interviewed expressed appreciation at the presence of charitable food programs, they also expressed frustration at the unreliable and limited schedules of programs (for instance very few are open on weekends) and food of varying quality. Youth articulated a clear preference for programs that allowed a degree of choice in what foods they were able to eat, such as making their own sandwiches and self-service buffet style programs. They also expressed a preference for programs that allowed them to address multiple needs at once (such as laundry and shower) rather than food exclusively. The survey with program directors revealed that there are very few programs that cater to youth exclusively, and that many struggled with limited resources. While most were able to afford a few paid staff and some purchased food, most had to rely on both volunteers and donated food to survive. This made it difficult for programs to stick to particular meal plans, and the demand for food often exceeded agency capacity and resources.

What can we do with this research?

Three policy and program implications are clear from this research. First, food needs to be an integral part of any program for homeless youth, as nutritional needs are not easily separated from the physical, social and psychological needs they have. Second, there is a need for programs to serve nutritionally adequate food and to better coordinate the scheduling of services so that

homeless youth are able to eat three square meals a day and meet their vitamin, mineral and energy requirements. Third, there is a need for food programs to consider client participation, or allow for a degree of individual choice and preference. Homeless youth would also benefit from expanded programming that provides spaces for them to store and prepare food.

About the researchers

NAOMI DACHNER is a Study Coordinator in the Department of Nutritional Sciences at the University of Toronto. Since her MSc – an ethnographic study of food access among homeless “squeegee kids” in Toronto – Naomi has continued research in the area of food insecurity where she has coordinated a variety of community-based research projects, often taking a leadership role in the qualitative dimensions of these projects.

VALERIE TARASUK is Professor in the Department of Nutritional Sciences at the University of Toronto. Her research includes studies of food banks and food bank users, homeless youth and community responses to the food needs of homeless and under-housed individuals, a study of housing, neighbourhood characteristics and food access among low-income Toronto families.

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