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DOI: 10.1016/j.chidyouth.2010.01.017 · Source: RePEc

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## The problems and barriers of RHYA as social policy

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 19 October 2009

Received in revised form 18 January 2010

Accepted 26 January 2010

Available online 1 February 2010

#### Keywords:

Homeless youth

Runaway and Homeless Youth Act

### ABSTRACT

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) has been the dominant social policy for homeless youth in the United States since 1974. The Act has actually gone through a number of incarnations over the last three plus decades creating a complex and confusing guide in understanding and solving the problems of the various populations that fall under RHYA's umbrella. In this paper, first we trace our society's attitudes towards homeless youth, from the "Whole Child" movement of the early 20th century, through the Social Security Act, and the emergence of and changes in RHYA. Second, we suggest that part of the difficulties RHYA has in serving homeless youth lay in the differing perspectives of childhood and youth over the course of the twentieth century and our discordant view of youth populations that live their lives outside of mainstream society. Part of the reasons the United States has such difficulties in helping, and sometimes even recognizing homeless youths involve the definitions and social discourse we have developed for these populations — especially when compared to international definitions. Given the barriers RHYA as social policy, we suggest broader policy level solutions that involve more inclusive definitions of homeless youth, and acknowledge them as 'citizens of the world'.

Published by Elsevier Ltd.

### 1. Introduction

The idea of homeless youth is something of a misnomer. There is no such objectified state as homeless youth — it does not really represent a population or a category or even a definition. The fluidity and heterogeneity of what it means to be a homeless youth can be understood from the number of questions and contradictions that arise when discussing the population in the United States. Are youth homeless if they are still with their family? Is a youth homeless if there is a family dwelling they can safely return to? What is the definition of youth in this phrase, or the definition of home? How do you determine if a youth is without a home? Do we define home as a dwelling, as a permanent dwelling, as a semi-permanent dwelling, as a dwelling that includes a family or some state sanctioned facsimile of a family? Even if we are able to define the specific qualities of a homeless youth does that still give us too little information? What are the reasons the youth is homeless? How long has the youth been homeless? What type of interventions would work to alleviate the difficulties that come with homelessness?

We ask so many questions because this broad category of homeless youth presents our society with a wide array of social and ethical problems that go far beyond simple definitions of homelessness. For the most part, homelessness has been defined as an economic problem — or

more specifically a housing problem (Toro & Warren, 1999; Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2004). Homeless adults are often considered victims of the state or victims of their own behavior. The way to repair the problem is to offer social programs that speak to their failings, or work to put the adult in some permanent or semi-permanent housing. The problems of homelessness are very different for youth — not least because of the roles of family and stability in development — and cannot be simply narrowed to the issue of shelter. Youth who do not have a permanent dwelling are very often youth in crisis along a number of social, emotional and cognitive dimensions. In our current social policy approach they are not treated as victims, but as delinquents, maladaptive to mainstream society, and if their problems persist as invisible.

The manifestation of the "invisible homeless youth", as with so many other issues, can be found in the social policy that addresses the needs of these youth. In many ways federal policy serves as a guiding force that helps determine resource allocations and definitions at the state and local levels. Federal policy, in the case of homeless youth is shaped by historical antecedents, but also helps to shape historical understandings. The federal policy that has the greatest impact on issues involving homeless youth is the Runaway and Homeless Youth (and Missing Children's) Act (RHYA). Even the name, a conglomeration of different, sometimes very different, human circumstance, suggests that homeless youth are thought of as part of a melting pot of youth whose difficulties can be solved through just a few general initiatives.

In this paper we explore RHYA from three perspectives. 1) The history of the act, which starts long before the actual legislation was

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passed in 1974 – suggesting that RHYA is both a product of and a captive to the changing meanings of childhood over the course of the 20th century. 2) RHYA as social policy, the populations it serves well, the populations it serves poorly, and the populations it does not serve at all. 3) The specific definitions of homeless youth that emerge and become dominant because of RHYA and the populations it looks to serve (and not serve). We argue that the definitions of homeless youth prevalent in United States government and social discourse differ in important and dramatic fashion from international definitions.

### 1.1. RHYA and social history of at-risk youth in the United States

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) is a single bill that has gone through numerous incarnations for more than three decades, most recently in 2008 under the title Reconnecting Homeless Youth Act of 2008. Regardless of the title variations covering multiple reauthorizations, the Act remains commonly referred to as the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act. RHYA is the manifestation of our society's desire/obligation to meet the need of one of the most marginalized, depressed segments of our population. RHYA is the social tool that defines and disseminates the primary interventions meant to reintegrate homeless youth into mainstream and society and reclaim positive trajectories for their lives. Because of the power and omnipresence of RHYA in homeless youth interventions, in many ways it also defines the concept of homeless youth in general. There are some secondary Federal initiatives that recognize the issue of youth homelessness such as McKinney Vento and No Child Left Behind, but they are limited in scope and abilities to deal with the difficult problems of the majority of homeless youth, especially those who have suffered the greatest marginalization.

RHYA includes under its aegis all categories of runaways, homeless youth, and missing children. In spite of a number of add-ons we argue that this bill has not changed in basic structure or perspective over the last three decades – and is restricted by its mission to serve so many different populations with different types of problems. The bill has three major components for interventions to help the disparate populations mentioned above. There is the BCP or Basic Centers Program, which offers short term shelter and family reunification strategies for youth under the age of eighteen who come to their door. There is the TLP or the Transitional Living Program which puts youth between sixteen and twenty-one into a single living quarter (apartment) for up to 540 days with a possible extension of 95 days (if the youth is not yet eighteen). And there is the Street Outreach Program, which attempts to reach out to youth on the streets who are in danger of being sexually exploited. A Street Outreach Program can be combined with a Basic Services Center program, serving as the only sanctioned outreach for a Basic Services Center. This can be counter-productive though because at least some of the youth who are in life trajectories that make them susceptible to sexual exploitation do not want to be reunified with the family.

### 1.2. Family, youth and homelessness

The idea that society has an obligation to take care of its children, even those that are indigent, delinquent, or “victims of society” can be traced back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when a number of social and economic forces came together. The seminal force in seeing the quality of the child's life as a critical social issue within the social fabric of the United States may have been the Settlement House movement led by Jane Addams and her compatriots. Addams first came into contact with a religious based Settlement House while touring London in the late nineteenth century (Lin, 2001). These houses in London were community-focused organizations that aimed to serve the urban poor by providing food, shelter and higher education. The movement connected universities and students with the local people of slum and ghetto

areas and was concerned about improving their life conditions. Consequently, the Settlement House (e.g., Chicago's Hull House), as it was fashioned by Addams in the poorest immigrant sections of Chicago in 1889, served as an all purpose social services and aid center established in the community itself – devoted to the needs of families and children in distress.

The Settlement House Movement had two major elements that would have an influence on national policy: 1) an emphasis on dealing with difficult issues within the community itself and 2) maintaining the integrity of the family, especially if there was some type of break between parent and child (Polikoff, 1999). The principle solution was mending the rift. There was a third important component of the Settlement House issue that was originally integrated into child welfare but eventually lost – viewing with the problems of individuals as social based problems, and solutions to those problems as being based on the “whole” individual, rather than specific, elemental deficits – a pathway leading to the “whole child” movement of the early part of the twentieth century (Lindenmeyer, 1997).

The settlement house movement was strongly aided by changing economic forces. Up until the twentieth century women were tied to immediate family work and needs, tending to the children and the hearth. Shifts in incomes and urbanization created a class where women did not suffer from the same constant responsibilities, but were also given few rights, privileges, or even freedom of movement in the larger society (Ladd-Taylor, 1994). These women were from families that had gained power, but also recognized the pain and difficulties faced by poorer women (they were not that far removed) and began to see the importance of developing social/public policy for women, and especially their young children, who found themselves in dire circumstance (Ladd-Taylor, 1994). This led to formation of a number of organizations dedicated to the social welfare of children.

The lobbying efforts of the women in these organizations were instrumental in the creation of the Children's Bureau in 1912 and the implementation of the Social Security Act in 1935, especially its focus on children. In fact, representatives from the Children's Bureau were actively involved in crafting the Social Security Act. The emphasis of the child focused section of the Social Security Act was both on the whole child (probably the influence of the Children's Bureau) and of children in crisis being victims of a society in extreme economic distress. The Great Depression impacted America both in the depth and breadth as it reached into all levels of society setting into motion a paradigm shift away from the competition and individualism of the 1920s toward one more holistic in nature and polity based. The idea that society needed to understand and care for the particular needs of children in crisis, and that such children should be viewed as the responsibility of society rather than a danger to society led to innovations such as family courts, family like group homes, and community organized playground based activity, and was deeply ingrained in the Social Security Act (Social Security Bill, 1935).

### 1.3. A change in attitudes: The 1935 Social Security Act to the 1961 Control Act

The Social Security Act of 1935 emphasized the giving of societal based aid across a diverse range of populations including the elderly, unemployed, the blind and children who were impacted by economic uncertainty. The depression was felt by so many within society that it allowed for a broadening scope of public policy. The Social Security Act was referred by The Committee on Finance to provide general welfare to a variety of disadvantaged groups that were thrown into extreme economic distress – including financially dependent aged people, the unemployed and/or handicapped adults, and single mothers. The legislation specifically gave the Children's Bureau responsibility over public-welfare services (together with state welfare agencies) dividing at-risk children into four basic types: “homeless, neglected, dependent and those in danger of becoming

delinquent” (*Social Security, 1935*, p.10). This inclusive and broad social policy specified aiding children whose extended families were experiencing economic insecurity. The Social Security Act was very much a product of the socio-cultural period in which it was written, reflecting dynamic changes in the larger social context emerging out of the depression (e.g. changes in belief systems about government based aid to the poor). Aid to children was focused on single parent households that had no paternal support due to divorce, widowhood or desertion. The act acknowledged these children and their families as “unfortunate” victims of economic distress who are in need of protection and of (newly developed) social institutions that services “to repair their damaged and impaired lives.” (*Social Security, 1935*, p.19). There was no assumption that the woman would go out into the workforce. Delinquency, which becomes the focus of later legislation, is mentioned and the need for child-care services is identified but they are not the focus of the law (*Social Security Bill, 1935*).

This bill served as the basis of public welfare for minors extending into the 1950s. There were some changes; in 1950 welfare funds could be used to return a runaway under the age of 16 – in 1958 that was extended to age 18 (*Fernandes, 2007*). This change is important because it hints that social policy was moving away from seeing children in crisis as victims of society and more as individual actors responsible for their own circumstance.

#### 1.4. From childhood innocence to fear of youth

During the years after WWII until the *Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Offences Control Act of 1961*, a fundamental transformation occurred in how at-risk youth were viewed. One of the first signs that times were changing occurred in the 1950 Social Security Act which eliminated references to the Children’s Bureau and the Chief of Children’s Bureau and assigned “Administrator” as the referent (*Social Security, 1950*). This usage of the more impersonal designation of administrator occurred throughout the Social Security Bill for all referents. As it related to the sections on minors, this change signified the systematic dismemberment of the Children’s Bureau. Jane Addams and the generation of social activists that were forged from the Settlement House movement were disappearing as a force in policy concerning youth, replaced by actual congressional committees that were less concerned with the concept of the whole child and social responsibility for children (*Lindenmeyer, 1997*).

This change to a reliance on congressional committees showed concrete evidence of a new trajectory for youth policy in 1955 when the Senate Judiciary Committee investigated juvenile delinquency. This investigation, which did not directly result in any legislation, identified the influences leading to the increase in delinquency as: education, public school conditions, motion pictures, obscene and pornographic literature, comic books, television and juvenile employment (*Juvenile Delinquency, 1955–1956*). This list is illuminating because it reflects subtle and not so subtle changes within American culture related to what we call “the ideology of childhood” (the ideas a group or society has about the way childhood *should* manifest itself in everyday life). In the 1950s the U.S. saw a huge increase of children being born, the generation that became known as the baby boomers, and the adult population was increasingly becoming concerned with what they viewed as juvenile mischief and youth as out of control bad actors. This delinquency was especially worrisome because it affected middle-class youths who according to their parents were adopting the values of the lower classes. These new attitudes of the middle-class youth were seen as anti-social and sometimes outright illegal (*Loss, 1999*). Delinquency had spread to the suburbs. This new mind set of youths as dangerous was reflected in the mass medium identified by the Senate Judiciary Committee through the emergence of rock-n-roll movies like *The Wild One*, *Blackboard Jungle* and *Rebel Without a Cause*, focusing on the dress of the youth, the way they spoke, and their nihilistic rebelliousness. There was both a demographic shift and a

cultural shift and it concerned the adults. The public policy that emanated from the congressional committees began to reflect this anxiety and fear of youth culture by focusing more on delinquency and the need to control youth, and less on the rehabilitation and reintegration of youth in crisis into society. Troubled youth moved from being lost innocents to being dangerous provocateurs.

The growing anxiety in the 1950s over the threats youth posed to a stable society culminated in the *Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Offenses Control Act of 1961*. This act centered its attention on “juvenile delinquency and youth offenses” which had been steadily increasing in the past twelve years, paralleling the development of the baby boomers. Juvenile delinquency was presented as a social problem to the nation and the act had a serious concern to promote a “concentrated effort to prevent and combat” this problem (*JDYOCA, 1961*, p. 2). Those youth identified as most likely to be delinquent were unemployed youths who had dropped out of school giving them nothing to do and too much time on their hands. Since juvenile delinquency was recognized as a consequence of youth’s suspension from school and current unemployment, prevention and intervention efforts included attempts to reconnect youth to the system through paid work. Youths from deprived family situations were also mentioned, but what was meant by deprived was unclear.

During this post-war period youth were portrayed as delinquent individuals and threats to the society, rather than victims of the current economic situation. Unlike the Social Security Act of 1935, there is no mention of youth homelessness or any problems associated with being homeless (*JDYOCA, 1961*). Perhaps it is because society did not recognize that anyone other than single men could be or were homeless. This same lack of recognition of homelessness surfaced again in the *Juvenile Delinquency Prevention and Control Act of 1967*. Here, policy focuses specifically on criminality signaled by the emphasis on Control in the title. Subsequently the act aims to guide juvenile justice and juvenile aid systems such as correctional facilities. Delinquency is not only viewed as a national problem but one destined to become ominous in the next decade (PL 90-445, 1967) unless government agencies took some type of control. There would be no mention of youth homelessness until the 1974 Runaway Youth Act was passed and then under certain assumptions as to what constituted homelessness.

#### 1.5. The emergence of RHYA

Post-war America marked a period where there was increasing saliency in the role delinquency played in national youth policy, overtaking and to some extent dominating the idea of children as victims of social circumstance. There was less emphasis placed on how to reintegrate marginalized youth into society, and greater adherence to the idea that either youth were a direct threat to society, or there must be interventions to ensure they did not take on characteristics that reduced their worth, or even made them more dangerous for civil society (e.g. unemployed, cut off from the family, spreading STDs).

RHYA was passed in 1974 as Title III, the Runaway Youth Act, of the *Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (PL 93-415, 1974)*.<sup>1</sup> The basis of the act was that over one million youth left home each year without parental permission, and the focus of the legislation was on family reunification. Up until this point runaways had been treated

<sup>1</sup> The reason for the sudden change in 1974 may have been less about policy and more about tabloid journalism. Birch Bayh had been working on a runaway youth act for over a year, but it seemed to be going nowhere in committee and funding seemed doubtful. However just as the Juvenile Justice bill it was attached to came up for appropriation the case of Don Corll the Candyman murderer who killed twenty-seven youth, many of them runaways, came to light. The reaction to the murders served as impetus for the runaway youth act (*Legislative History, 1974*). This explains why the early legislation was geared not only to runaway youth, but a specific type of runaway youth (e.g. middle class).

primarily as delinquents and/or status offenders (which means that youth under eighteen are constantly under the threat of going to jail). Government agencies offered states funding for dealing with runaways, especially if they established programs working towards reunification with the family, if they took away offender status and provided them with emergency services that included shelter, food and counseling outside of the normal social service agencies such as child welfare or the criminal justice system. The primary (in many ways only) education components are family counseling and reintegration into the traditional school system — accomplished through strengthening linkages between family and school. These emergency programs were referred to as the Basic Center Program (BCP). Two issues were occurring simultaneously with the advent of this legislation. The first is that the legislators maintained the aspect of early nineteenth century childhood advocacy that focused almost exclusively on the needs of the traditional family. But at the same time this legislation rejected the idea that delinquent youth was a product of an uncaring and/or harsh social system by putting the blame on the youth themselves, and to a lesser extent the dysfunctional nature of the family unit that led the child to delinquency. Society's major responsibility is to fix the child and to fix the family.

The homeless aspect of Title III was actually an add-on three years later in 1977. The Transitional Living Programs (TLP) designed to aid older homeless youth transition into mainstream society was added in 1988 during the JJDP reauthorization within the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988. The Street Outreach Program was a product not of the JJDP, but rather the Violence Against Women section of the [Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994](#). The intent of the Street Outreach was “to reduce sexual abuse of runaway, homeless and street youth” (p. 1922). The actual text and the legislative history of these amendments suggest two ideas: a) that homeless youth were considered an extension of the runaway population—runaways who had somehow failed to reintegrate into their family structure, and b) the two greatest threats were that they were involved in criminal activity and were a threat to the larger society and/or that they were at risk for sexual exploitation. The possibility that homeless youth were not a homogeneous group was introduced during a hearing held in Chicago by Senator Simon in 1988 ([Homeless Youth, 1988](#)) which were instrumental in the creation of the TLP. In these hearing homeless youth were considered primarily as individuals who are unique, and vulnerable, because they have been separated from the primary micro-system of the family ([Bronfenbrenner, 1979](#)).

RHYA was reauthorized again in 2004, renamed the [Runaway, Homeless and Missing Children Protection Act \(PL 108-98, 2004\)](#). As the title suggests, a missing child component was added, as well as a funding structure to help homeless pregnant mothers. The fact that RHYA is the result of multiple additions and add-ons (rather than separate or new bills that attempt to deal with newly emerging or recognized social problems<sup>2</sup>) might be understood in at least two interdependent manners. First, it suggests that the federal government is responsive to the problem to some extent and follows the growing problem and the needs/risks of homeless youth (e.g. STDs), but at the same time have difficulty differentiating circumstances leading to youth in distress (reinforcing the idea that a youth's problems are individual and self or family generated). Second, because the revisions only involve some additions to the original document there is little focus on changing the ‘delinquency’ or stigmatizing language.

The single model of the RHYA bill going through numerous revisions may suggest that the federal government (and state

government as well) is experiencing difficulty because once the street youth who are identified as a separate category—what do you do with them? Since the youth are minors as young as 12, 13 or maybe even younger, the differentiation between aggressive homeless youth who are threats to society and vulnerable youth who become homeless and hopeless leads to difficulties in developing coherent policies. The concept of homeless youth is so diverse, and so far outside the mainstream no one knows what to do, so the easiest thing is to ignore them. This might be why the Street Outreach Program (SOP) was created for sexually exploited youth, because that is an issue that can be understood by the lawmakers on a personal/visceral level and can in some ways be measured (e.g. reduction in the spread of STDs). The idea of young teens who can't return home is a lot more difficult for lawmakers to identify with and/or sell to their constituents.

Two RHYA reauthorizations were introduced during the 110th Congress. H.R. 3409, short title of A Place to Call Home Act, folded several issues previously either not addressed by RHYA or addressed in a brief manner ([H.R. 3409, 2007](#)). H.R. 3409 embodied a change in the scope and some of the assumptions previously included in RHYA legislation. One of the most significant is a section addressing congressional intent to allow minors to sign contracts with an encouragement to states to pass statutes allowing this to be done. Two other sections open up the availability of housing: a) the John H. Chaffee Foster Care Independence Program (from the Social Security Act), funds transitional housing for street youth (but remains targeted to victims of sexual exploitation) and b) Section Eight rental assistance is made available. In the area of education not only are the more traditional elementary and secondary levels mentioned, but post-secondary education is emphasized ([H.R. 3409, 2007](#)). Also several additional sections include health care and workforce development. The issue of missing and exploited children has been removed and a section on unaccompanied immigrant youth added. There remains a section on juvenile status offenders and substance abuse in families ([H.R. 3409, 2007](#)). This is a major piece of legislation that is over 200 pages long. Although introduced in the House of Representatives first and assigned a committee, it is not the version which continued onto the Senate.

The second version, Reconnecting Homeless Youth Act of 2008, PL 110-378, was reauthorized and signed into law, with changes including the length of stay and a mandate for performance standards as well as a bi-annual study of the numbers of homeless youth in the US. ([PL 110-378, 2008](#)). This legislation was originally introduced in the House on March 4, 2008 ([H.R. 5524, 2008](#)). It makes some changes regarding age requirements (i.e. not more than a certain age, to less than....), requires periodic updates to congressional leadership on the number of runaways between 13 and 25 years of age, allows longer BCP stays (up to 21 days) if state law allows it and TLP stays (up to 635 days). The legislation specifically defines a runaway youth as “an individual who is less than 18 years of age and who absents himself or herself from home or place of legal residence without the permission of parents or legal guardians” ([H.R. 5524, 2008](#), p. 10). The amendment is limited to revising specific sections of PL 108-09 and does not attempt to broaden the existing law in the same manner as H.R. 3409.

H.R. 3409 and HR 5524 reflect the historic divisions within RHYA legislation. Yes, the federal government is aware of the growing problems of homeless youth. Unfortunately the opportunity to pragmatically address the risks and problems faced by these youth are being lost by choosing to continue the existing policy history of RHYA with S. 2982. The chance to actually tackle the real problems of homelessness like finding and obtaining independent housing, development of a trajectory that would lead to safe and productive independent living, basic health services (physical and emotional), and safety broadly defined, is being legislated out of policy and therefore restricting interventions. Federal money has been and will almost certainly continue to be the dominant source of support for homeless youth. State and local monies tend to follow the lead of the

<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that all legal bills follow a logical course. As has often been stated, “watching laws being made is like watching sausage being made.” But the conflation of runaways, homeless and missing children, without even recognition of how the meanings of these terms may change over time and with social circumstance suggests that there may be issues at work beyond the simple vagaries of law-making.

federal government (there are some notable exceptions such as *Urban Peak* in Colorado).

## 2. The ongoing structure of Homeless Youth programs supported by RHYA

RHYA has three major components – the Basic Center Program, the Transitional Living Program and the Street Outreach Program. All three programs are critical and have had some success, but they also serve very different populations and in some cases are more geared to middle-class values than to the more marginalized populations in desperate need of services and support. Federal legislation plays the major role in the focus and structures of each of these initiatives, but day to day operations can have a strong state influence. This is because Basic Center Programs and Transitional Living Programs must be licensed by the state. Much like child-care minimum licensing standards can create disparities (at times extreme) between states (e.g., training of staff, health and safety codes, notification laws).

### 2.1. The Basic Center Program and its limitations

Of the two basic RHYA programs, the Basic Center Program is intended for teens under eighteen years of age, while the Transitional Living Program is for youth between sixteen and twenty-one years of age. The BCP is a short term program (the maximum length of stay is often considered to be 21 days per most recent legislation), where the primary focus is to reunite the youth with their families, promote the resolution of family problems through counseling, reinforce family connections, and help to establish a stable home life family reunification is the primary focus, but if a BCP determines that reunification is impossible, or not in the best interests of the youth, then it can pursue other solutions. However these other solutions are limited and often revolve around placing the youth in a de facto family situation (e.g. foster care). There are few alternatives if the youth have had a bad experience in foster care already and do not want to return. Therefore, the BCP, which is the means of reaching out to homeless youth under the age of 18, continues to be treated as if most homeless youth are simply runaways who need to be reunited with their families and reintegrated into their traditional school environment under almost all conditions. Homeless advocates are granted minimal flexibility, because they must contact families and gear all activities towards family reunification (the constitution has been interpreted as parents having a right to privacy in raising their children demanding that parents be contacted as to the whereabouts and circumstances of their children.)

A fundamental issue with RHYA as it is currently construed suggests that youth are homeless because of their own choices – that they are active agents in the development of their lifestyle. If youth are homeless it is because they have decided to leave their family system for some reason. This approach takes into account that the family system is dysfunctional (why else would the youth leave), but the homeless condition is based on an individual decision of disassociation. This volitional perspective precludes the very real possibility that homeless youth are victims who have been marginalized by society (RHYA implicitly includes the concept of throwaway) – but that is defined simply as a youth who leaves home with parental consent (Hammer, Finkelhor & Sedlak 2002), and that their homelessness is the result of an inevitable progression of social activities.

In reality, many homeless youth have not chosen to marginalize themselves from mainstream society based on personal needs, but have actually been abandoned by social institutions. Reasons could include dissolution of family system due to loss of economic viability (and the myriad of problems this can lead to), the disintegration of a neighborhood (for reasons such as gentrification or gang activity), or structural poverty. In other words many youth are homeless for many of the same reasons adults are homeless on at least a macro-system level (e.g. inability of society to recognize that homelessness is a

problem in a wealthy society) and an exo-system level (e.g. abandonment by social institutions) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The youth of course are different from homeless adults in their relationship to work and housing and their developmental relationships with significant others in their lives, leading to very different everyday needs – and it would be a mistake to use similar programs to meet these divergent needs. While in the earlier part of the century we believed it would have been easier to change the trajectory of a homeless youth precisely because they were young and more malleable, we now simply have fewer programs and less recognition of these youth.

Many homeless youth need long term interventions that address issues beyond immediate reintegration with their families (or family facsimiles), giving them necessary capabilities (Sen, 1999) to re-establish linkages with social activity settings, which will allow them basic functioning (health care, shelter) and, in turn, foster critical capabilities (primarily formal education that will allow youth to get a job and break out of poverty). The longer and more structurally based the lifestyle circumstances, the more sustained, more flexible, and more education-based (broadly construed) the intervention needs to be. One possible answer to the constitutionality of a family's right to privacy as opposed to a troubled youth's immediate needs might be to use the first few days at a Basic Services Program as a form of social and emotional triage. The staff will work with the youth and family (if possible) to determine the youth's immediate needs. The youth can then be placed in either short term programs focusing on reunification, mid-term programs focusing on family therapy along with social and economic support for the family, or long terms programs where the youth is prepared for independent living, perhaps with transitions into a TLP program.

### 2.2. The Transitional Living Program and its limitations

The second major program established by RHYA is the Transitional Living Program (TLP). While the Transitional Living Program is better suited to meet the needs of long term, structurally based homeless youth it also has flaws, some of which are tied to its being treated as an add-on to RHYA. The biggest difficulty with TLP is age related. Youth are eligible for a TLP program if they are between 16 and 21 years of age. However many programs only accept youth eighteen and older because housing contracts for minors are considered unenforceable (i.e. creating a situation where there is no right to contract). Also, in many states it is illegal to have minors housed in the same structures as individuals over eighteen (the idea that the age of eighteen has some magical power is itself problematic). Thus for a number of programs the actual age range is 18 to 21. Also in many communities the TLP programs are run by the same organizations that run Basic Center Programs. The middle-class ethos of BCP cannot help but seep into the prerequisites and demands of TLP programs. The demands on the youth are rule and organization oriented and may fall outside of organizational/activity structure of youth who have lived on the street for extended periods. Finally the TLP has by far the highest demands and lowest funding of the RHYA programs and the program provides relatively few beds. This leads to a situation where there is often competition for beds, causing programs to choose candidates will be most successful (and reducing a social program to a neoclassical business paradigm). While on one level the desire for success is understandable (and often necessary for continued funding) youth who have the best chance of succeeding are often those who are closest in temperament and world view to a middle-class value system, leaving the more marginalized youth to become even more marginalized.

The structure of the TLP in many ways offers the greatest chance for success when dealing with homeless youth, especially those who have spent significant time on the streets, because it is geared towards independent, responsible living. However it is important that TLP

programs be both flexible and aware of the difficulties involved in reintegrating youth who have become alienated from mainstream society and/or easily become disoriented or frustrated with rules and expectations. Ties to a stronger Basic Centers Program that has a component focused on reintegration of alienated youth that reintroduces social rule system in a non-threatening, positive manner (e.g. based on positive reinforcement principles rather than punishment) is a possible addendum to this program. Making sure that TLP settings are in safe, well managed communities with well run well lit, well traveled social sanctuaries such as coffee shops, green grocer markets, affordable restaurants and cafes might both help keep these youth away from their street lifestyles and introduce youth to the positive aspects of stable living and a positive life trajectory. Of course most important are increased numbers of beds and available support systems.

### 2.3. The Street Outreach Program and its limitations

The third general program support by RHYA is the Street Outreach Program (SOP). What is perhaps most important about this program is that even though it is intended for homeless youth it does not have a housing component (although it can be – and often times is tied to a Basic Services Program – though this can lead to troubles because the two programs often serve very different populations with very different needs). The motivation in establishing SOPs is to counteract sexual exploitation of minors. It is the only program that emphasizes going out into the streets where many homeless youth live and learn to survive. The primary goal of the outreach is to reduce sex based dangers for youth – which is often translated into condom distribution, sexual counseling where possible, and in some cases mobile medical units to test for STDs. SOPs also have a component for drop-in centers where the youth can come and attain services. But the times when outreach programs have their greatest worth and efficacy (late night, very early morning) is at variance with the hours kept by most drop-in centers (usually during the day) – at least partially because of local laws limiting the ability to house youths late at night without a parent's permission (e.g. curfew, contributing to the delinquency of a minor).

### 3. The different meanings of youth homelessness in RHYA

The meanings of youth homelessness are, in some ways, controlled by the governmental programs that deal with homeless youth – in particular the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act that sets the parameters for funding of these programs.

Homelessness as a structurally based social issue (Elliot & Krivo, 1991) had little to do with the origination of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA), as originally passed as Title III of the *Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP)*. RHYA was initially meant to deal primarily with runaways (Cooper, 2006). The basis of the act was that over one million youth left home each year without parental permission, and the focus of the legislation was on family reunification. This leads to the almost schizophrenic – and we would argue inefficient – ways in which homeless youth are defined by our society. More important, homeless youth who do not fall into one of these predefined categories become invisible to the point where groups can make claims that they don't exist in any meaningful numbers. To put it another way, in order for homeless youth under eighteen years of age to exist they must be willing to return to a family, or a foster care system in order to receive help, or even recognition. If a youth under eighteen does not wish to, or cannot return to their traditional family or a state sanctioned organization such as Child Protective Service they, for all intents and purposes, have no real meaning or definition in our society.

There is a second difficult aspect to homeless youth and that is age. One of the most difficult aspects in defining homeless youth is the age range in which they are considered “youth.” Eighteen is an arbitrary

cut off for youth in both directions. Many unaccompanied minors under eighteen have little or no opportunity to be reunited with a legal guardian for any period of time and are suspicious of foster care.

At the other end of the age spectrum, many youth actually become homeless at eighteen as they are mustered out of the foster care system, and in spite of some programs meant to aid in the transition wind up on the streets or in shelters, less able to take care of themselves than youth who avoided foster care. There are some programs for those graduating out of foster care such as transitions into independent living separate from the TLP (e.g. the John H. Chaffee Foster Care Independence Program) and payment of college tuition. However many of these programs are suited for youth who have had the most successful foster care experiences. In general though, former foster care youth most in need of services often find themselves immediately saddled with not only housing difficulties, but other social difficulties associated with homeless youth (e.g. health, education, employment) (Patel & Greydanus, 2002). Many times, because of their age, the only alternative are adult based shelters with populations and threats to well-being these “youth” are not prepared for.

The confusion about how to define a homeless youth even in the single RHYA becomes even more chaotic when other laws, including other federal, state and local laws are integrated into the definition. For instance McKinney Vento does not explicitly concern itself with age (McKinney Vento, 2001), but because it is directly tied to and concerned with school issues, homeless youth are implicitly defined through ages applicable to K-12. States often times have their own sets of laws, some tied to RHYA (where they do not get direct federal funding) and some tied to McKinney Vento (where they can get direct federal funding). Local laws can often times be decades old and tied to issues that are no longer relevant such as truancy.

### 3.1. U.S. definitions of youth homeless vs. international definitions

There are real and obvious differences in the way homeless youth are defined within the United States as opposed to the definition used by the United Nations and in Europe. The definition of homeless youth in many ways helps to frame both the problem and the policy approach (Lakoff, 2004). Legislation defines the population and sets the parameters for funding of the programs. Accordingly, the definitions of homelessness in general, and homeless youth in particular are crucial in the sense that they determine the actual recipients of a variety of social services through federal and state funding, and the way these individuals are treated and understood on an everyday basis. We believe this framing is both directly and indirectly informed by both RHYA and McKinney Vento. It is important to recognize that the definition is tied to particular programs.

RHYA (PL 108-98, 2004) defines *homeless youth* as,

“...not more than 21 years of age for whom it is not possible to live in a safe environment with a relative and who has no other safe alternative living arrangement.”

Even though homeless youth are defined up to 21 years of age, *runaway youth* in RHYA are defined as,

“A youth who is under 18 years of age who absents himself or herself from home or place of legal residence without the permission of parents or legal guardians”

*Street youth* are defined as individuals who

- o run away or
- o are indefinitely or intermittently homeless
- o and spend a significant amount of time on the street or in other areas that increase their risk for sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, prostitution, or drug abuse.

In the [McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act of 2001](#) homeless children and youth are Individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. The term includes children and youth who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason (sometimes referred to as *doubled-up*);

- o Children and youth who are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to lack of alternative adequate accommodations; living in emergency or transitional shelters; abandoned in hospitals; or awaiting foster care placement.
- o Children and youth who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings;
- o Children and youth who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings;
- o And migratory children who qualify as homeless because they are living in circumstances described above.

In general, official definitions of homeless youth make references to an absence of an adequate shelter in a technical sense, and definitions focus solely on youth's age and/or youth's degree of contact with the family. There are a couple of issues that we believe are critical in these definitions. For instance, the definitions are too restrictive and limited to capture heterogeneity of homeless youth and their experiences. That is, homeless youth are defined in terms of discrete, static categories rather than along any type of continuum of homelessness. Homeless are portrayed in terms of "who they are" rather than "what they are experiencing." So homeless youth "are" children who have runaway or spend time in areas where they are at risk for exploitation. Homeless youth "are" children who do not have stable sleeping arrangement. These definitions suggest that homelessness is a stable personal characteristic of "delinquent" youth, or as part of a "deficit" model where the youth (and in some cases their family) as missing a critical commodity that is part of cohesive living conditions. The emphasis is on what the youths do not have rather than on what they are experiencing. Homelessness is seen as a commodity deficit that must somehow be addressed within an economic/business model rather than as a human right.

Another flaw is that the categories overlap or contradict each other in important ways. For example, a street youth is by definition not only absent from home but additionally a victim of sexual exploitation. There is often no way to know if this absence is with the parents or legal guardian's permission (if indeed they care enough to give permission). A street youth is also defined as a runaway, assuming that youth has voluntarily 'absented himself or herself from home'. In that case, definition of a street youth overlaps with the definition of a runaway, while other potential sub-categories of a street 'living' youth such as throwaways or unaccompanied youth remain contradictory to the general definition. Another important issue is that definitions suggest arbitrary distinctions between categories. For instance, homeless youth are defined by age, but a runaway is defined up to eighteen while a street youth is defined up to twenty-one — again suggesting that when the youth is under eighteen, the primary resource and guardian must still be considered the family or the foster care system, and that there is some qualitative difference based on an arbitrary marker such as eighteen years of age.

In addition, none of the categories mention social and/or structural causes of homelessness. The homeless youth are "unaccompanied minors" who are away from home, putting either the youth or the youth's family at fault. The homeless youth are found as "potential" problems to the society. As stated in RHYA, they are "at risk of developing serious health, behavioral and emotional problems... thereby endangering themselves and creating a substantial law enforcement problem for communities". However, there is no mention of social inequality/deprivation, issues of poverty, housing policies, employment, or obstructions to educational opportunities. One of the outcomes of this

perspective is the disproportionate amount of homeless youth who are jailed as status offenders as a result of their living situation ([Nessel & Ryan, 1994](#)). Judges incarcerate youth because they have broken some ongoing law specific to being minor (e.g. truancy), claiming the need for some type of adult supervision. It is the criminalization of homelessness.

The disparate, individualized, static but contradictory definitions of homeless youth create difficulties and confusion when attempting to coordinate local and federal policies to help these youth. Definitions of homeless youth vary by age, causing a lot of confusion for service providers and practitioners. In one circumstance a homeless youth is up to eighteen, in another circumstance a homeless youth is up to twenty-one, in a third circumstance a homeless person might be considered a youth up to age twenty-four. Given that definitions also focus on a youth's degree of contact with the parents/legal guardians, family reunification is suggested as the primary goal. However, for some homeless youth reintegration with the family might be paramount, while for other homeless youth it might not be an issue or even desirable.

It is important to note that contradictory definitions in RHYA lead to paradoxical implications in intervention efforts. For instance, RHYA puts the blame of youth homelessness on the youth and the family, emphasizing their "dysfunctionality". But the primary goal of the basic intervention efforts for the minors is to achieve reconnecting youth to the family and maintain the relationship, rather than develop a plan for positive transition to independent living. The many gaps in official definitions leave many homeless youth completely invisible to the very social systems that can serve as their last refuge and line of defense.

### 3.2. International definitions of homelessness

At least some international definitions of homeless youth take a broader and a more inclusive perspective. [UNICEF \(1986\)](#) defines *street children* as...

1. *Candidates for the street*: working children and youth who live with their poor families.
2. *Children on the street* (child workers on the street): working children and youth who maintain some family connections, but receive inadequate and/or sporadic support.
3. *Children of the street*: working children and youth who have been abandoned or have been sent away by their families and consequently live without family support.

[UNICEF \(1998\)](#) later defined general category of *street child* as "any child who live and/or work on the street and who are deprived of their family environment".

[UNESCO \(1995\)](#) describes *street child* in the following manner,

"Street child is any boy or girl for whom the street in the widest sense of the word and has become his or her habitual abode and/or source of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected, supervised, or directed by responsible adults."

There are important differences between definitions of United Nations and United States in terms of their approach in conceptualizing the problem. First, United Nations definitions are broader and more inclusive in terms of their scope. For instance, there are no actual age markers for "street children", allowing localities to establish their unique definitions based on their own circumstances. Second, the definitions, particularly the one provided by UNICEF, are more of a continuum as opposed to categories, where it is possible to envision youth moving in both directions, based on circumstances. That is, the degree of familial contact, connection and support vary for a street youth, whose experiences on the street depend on particular situations. Finally, one telling difference is the role that the children play in the definitions. The youth, instead of being at cause in their

own homelessness, who voluntarily “absents himself or herself from home,” or even the slightly more neutral “spend a significant amount of time on the street” are described by the phrases “abandoned or sent away by their families” and “receive inadequate or sporadic support.” Although the role of family is still emphasized in UN definitions, being a street child is not defined through a personal or volitional attempt or activity, but a continuum of poverty and an inevitable need for child labor.

Another issue is that UN reports argue that the problem of street children is a serious concern since it is a violation of citizenship rights and universal human rights. The overarching theme behind this conceptualization comes from the article 25 of *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)*, which states that “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.” So, it is the social, humanitarian and citizenship right of these youth to have access to “adequate shelter” as a basic need. They are not defined as ‘victims’ or ‘delinquents’ but as ‘citizens’ who are being denied their basic rights by an uncaring society. It is actually the social system that is considered delinquent rather than the youth.

This macro-system concerns with human rights then helps to fashion institutional level solutions that reflect human rights sentiments. UNICEF, as opposed to the US, implements this humanitarian approach at a variety of levels. At the macro-system level, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child ensures that every child, regardless of the socio-political context of the country, has the right to have access to adequate food, shelter, education, health and participation rights (UN, 1989). This overarching theme covers children in poverty as well as the ones who struggle with homelessness. As of November 2009, the Convention is signed and ratified by 194 countries, which include all countries in the United Nations except for The United States and Somalia (which literally lacks a stable government to ratify it).<sup>3</sup> In other words, the UN, and particularly UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, monitors the extent to which these regulations are implemented in industrialized and developing countries – not surprisingly the United States is exempt from this process due to its lack of legal and political commitment to the Convention.

The Convention translates into reforms in law and/or transformations in social policy in a given country with the supervision of UNICEF. One particular case example comes from the implementation of the Convention in Canada (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2009). After the convention came into force in Canada in 1991, the government took practical steps for the benefit of children. These reforms included, but were not limited to, a) a series of reforms of federal and provincial legislations to ensure that they comply with the Convention and other international normative standards, b) establishing a national children's commissioner to promote children's best interests as a public policy, c) establishing a budget specifically for children to provide social resources for children to meet their basic needs, and finally developing public reports to monitor the implementation of the legislation in a territorial level. The reforms also acknowledge the issue of child poverty and homelessness as a target out of many areas of intervention.

Another macro level intervention is the international conventions the United Nations holds where children delegates of member countries find an opportunity to raise their concerns and offer solutions to their own problems. For instance, children from 150 countries participated in a United Nations General Assembly Special Session for Children in 2002 emphasized specific issues in their countries. This special session became an original source for the regional UNICEF offices to re-organize

their action plans, priorities, and budgets to meet the needs of the children in their area.

In addition, UNICEF supports epidemiological studies across countries to assess the needs of the children and estimate where each country falls into in terms of child poverty. One extensive research project on epidemiology of child poverty and homelessness was conducted by a consortium of researchers from industrialized countries, funded by UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre. One of the most striking findings is that the US is ranked second to the bottom of 21 countries in terms of child material well-being, health/safety, educational well-being, risk taking behaviors, and subjective well-being (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2007).

Taken together, we suggest that how the United Nations defines street children problem as a part of a larger problem of child poverty reveals itself in legislation, social policy, research, and participation right of the children. It is important to note that this humanitarian, rather than labeling approach, assumes a full understanding of children as ‘citizens’ and legitimizes any political action taken for their best interests.

#### 4. Policy level solutions in Homeless Youth Policy in the United States

We suggest a number of broad policy solutions from the macro-system to the micro-system level. At the macro-system level, we suggest that United States policy adopt the United Nations definitions of homeless youth as well as universal treaties associated with rights of the children and youth. Most important, we believe, the US is required to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Children and hold accountable for the struggles of children in poverty, particularly homeless youth. Accordingly, stable, permanent housing not be portrayed as a simple commodity (on par with other commodities) but as a basic human right, and homelessness of youth not be considered a deficit of those youth, or their families, but if at all, as a deficit of the society that allows them to remain homeless. We also believe that homeless youth, in particular, should be redefined away from any type of delinquent model and/or static categories, and more along the lines of a continuum. The United Nations definitions will allow for homeless youth to be more defined by their experience rather than by specific living conditions. This may not be as large and difficult a challenge as seems at first glance. The United Nations definitions in many ways mirror the “whole child” movement in the first part of the 20th century. The idea of the “whole child” still exists in our society as a secondary, social structure for how we understand and organize childhood and adolescence.

At an institutional level legislation should be developed that is geared more specifically for the experiences of homeless youth. One particular way of ensuring that legislation corresponds and meets the needs of the homeless youth is to include the youth themselves in the decision-making process and to hear their voices. The United Nations Special Sessions set a standard for this type of democratic and participatory attempt.

In addition, implementation of United Nations Convention in Canada provides an exemplar of how the universal acts can be translated into legislation in a federal state. The US can adapt these policies and reform legislation at federal and state levels. However, we believe that the US has taken some steps to develop more responsive interventions. The original “Place to Call Home Act” mentioned earlier in this paper indicates a good start in that fashion. But the problem may run deeper than developing good legislation – because even the best intentioned initiative become muddled as they move towards political legitimization. It may be necessary to change definitions in order to change legislation and attitudes. This is why it would be so important to adopt the United Nations definitions for homeless and street youth and ratify the United Nations Convention. Adopting these definitions and regulations would represent a macro-system solution that could then filter down through policy and local services (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> During the revision of this paper, US has signed the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict and the Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography – both fail to cover the rights the children and youth fully.

Whether this type of solution would be possible without some type of redefining event such as the depression is hard to know.

Legislation specifically for runaways should be separated out from legislation for homeless and street youth, and actual intervention strategies should be based on two completely separate funding streams. It is true that many homeless youth are initially runaway youth, but the needs of short term runaways who are looking for cooling off periods from their families are very different from chronic homeless youth who cannot or will not return to their families of origin. Legislation should also integrate needs of homeless youth with education legislation and foster care legislation. McKinney Vento has worked well for a number of homeless youth, its disconnection from RHYA has in some cases made reintegration of homeless/street youth back into educational institutions more, rather than less, difficult. There also needs to be recognitions of where foster care laws do not meet, or stop meeting, the needs of youth, so that they prevent rather than add to homeless youth populations. In the end we must recognize “homeless youth” as an umbrella term, and treat all those who live under that umbrella as individual “citizens of the world.”

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