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Survival Outside Home: Sexual Behaviour of Homeless and Runaway Young Adults in Ghana

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Abstract

Although homeless young adults are often seen on the streets of Ghana, little research had examined the nature of sexual behaviour among these homeless and runaway young adults. Due to the culturally sensitive nature of such studies in the Ghanaian setting, only fifty (50) respondents agreed to participate in the study. A thirty-five (35) item questionnaire, comprising of twenty-eight (28) closed-ended and seven (7) open-ended questions was used for data collection. The findings indicated poverty, inability of parents to cater for the young adult's needs, peer pressure and lack of parental acceptance as the main causes of homelessness. Consequently, the findings also showed a trend of school dropout, teenage pregnancy and use of illicit drugs as effects of homelessness. These findings have implications for future studies, policy reform and care for homeless young adult.

Keywords: Sexual Exploitation; Homeless Young Adults; Runaway Young Adults; Teenage Pregnancy; Rape; Poverty; Parenting; Ghana.

Introduction

The world is changing with many variations in global market trends. This transition has brought on board several challenges especially in socioeconomic trends. Among those extremely affected by this transition is the young adult. Homeless young adults are prone to various hazards with a higher tendency for violence, diseases, risky behaviours and death (Clatts, & Davis, 1996). The arguments concerning the causes and consequences surrounding homelessness can be complex. This may occur from the interplay of several factors beginning from disrupted personal backgrounds, socioeconomic difficulties, increased housing problems and squatting with various forms of unstable housing options (Fitzpatrick, 1998; 2000).

Homelessness is currently growing on the streets of most developing countries just like other developed nations. In Canada for example, a study over two decades ago showed that homeless young adults were drawn from all backgrounds (O'Reilly-Fleming, 1993). Though there is no consistent statistics about the actual global magnitude and distribution of homeless people, a projected figure of 3.5 million unaccompanied young American adults experience homelessness.

This concept is sometimes called the “runaway young adult”. These individuals account for a population ranging from 575,000 to 1.6 million annually with ages between 16 to 22 years old (Clatts, & Davis, 1996).

Homeless young adults are at a high risk to be exploited sexually or to engage in risky sexual behaviours than their peers who are housed (Rotheram-Borus et al., 1992; Tyler et al., 2000a; Tyler et al., 2000b). These young adults are also prone to high rates of sexually transmitted infections and diseases (Goodman, & Berecochea, 1994; Halcon, & Lifson, 2004). Similarly, past sexual abuse history prior to leaving home makes homeless young adults vulnerable to exploitation and other unsafe sexual practices (Tyler et al., 2000a). In addition to these, other risky lifestyles like substance or illicit drug use had been noted among them (Chen, Tyler, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2004; Klee, & Reid, 1998). Nonetheless, the presence of a family support in the network of homeless young adults tends to reduce these sexual and drug related behaviours (Tyler, 2008).

Although several studies have been done among homeless young adults, little has been done among West African populations. The present study aimed at describing the existing sexual behaviour patterns among homeless and runaway young adults in Ghana.

Method

Participants

The research was carried out on the streets and slums in the Greater Accra Region where these homeless young adults reside to engage in menial jobs. A sample size of 50 participants, comprising of 41 (82%) females and 9 (18%) males was selected for the study using both convenience and snowball techniques. Majority 34 (68%) of the respondents were between the ages of 20-25 years. Another 13 (26%) of them were between the ages 16-19 years with 3 (6%) between the ages of 11-15 years.

The educational level of the respondents showed that 16 (32%) of these homeless young adults were school drop outs. This was followed by 9 (18%) respondents who have had formal education up to the senior high school level. Eight (16%) of them also had formal education up to kindergarten level while 6 (12%) had other forms of non-formal education like carpentry and dress making. However, minority 4 (8%) of them had their highest education up to primary school.

Religion played an essential support among the homeless as Christians formed the majority with 38 (76%) respondents while the remaining 12 (24%) worshipped as Muslims.

In addition, majority of the respondents, 27 (54%) had been homeless for less than 6 months during the time of data collection. Twelve (24%) had also been homeless between 7 to 12 months. Another 6 (12%) of them had been homeless between 13 to 16 months while 5 (10%) had been homeless for more than 16 months.

Instrument

A self-administered questionnaire was used for data collection. The questionnaire was made up of 35 questions. Twenty-eight questions were closed-ended with 7 open-ended questions. The questionnaire was made up of 3 sections. Section A of the questionnaire constituted the biographic data of participants. The Section B also focused on the causes of homelessness with the Section C describing their sexual behaviour and other consequences of homelessness.

Procedure

The study used the cross-sectional survey design for data collection. Observing all necessary ethical considerations needed for human research, the data collection took place among scattered homeless people in the metropolitan streets and slums in Accra. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic under study, not many participants willingly showed up for the study.

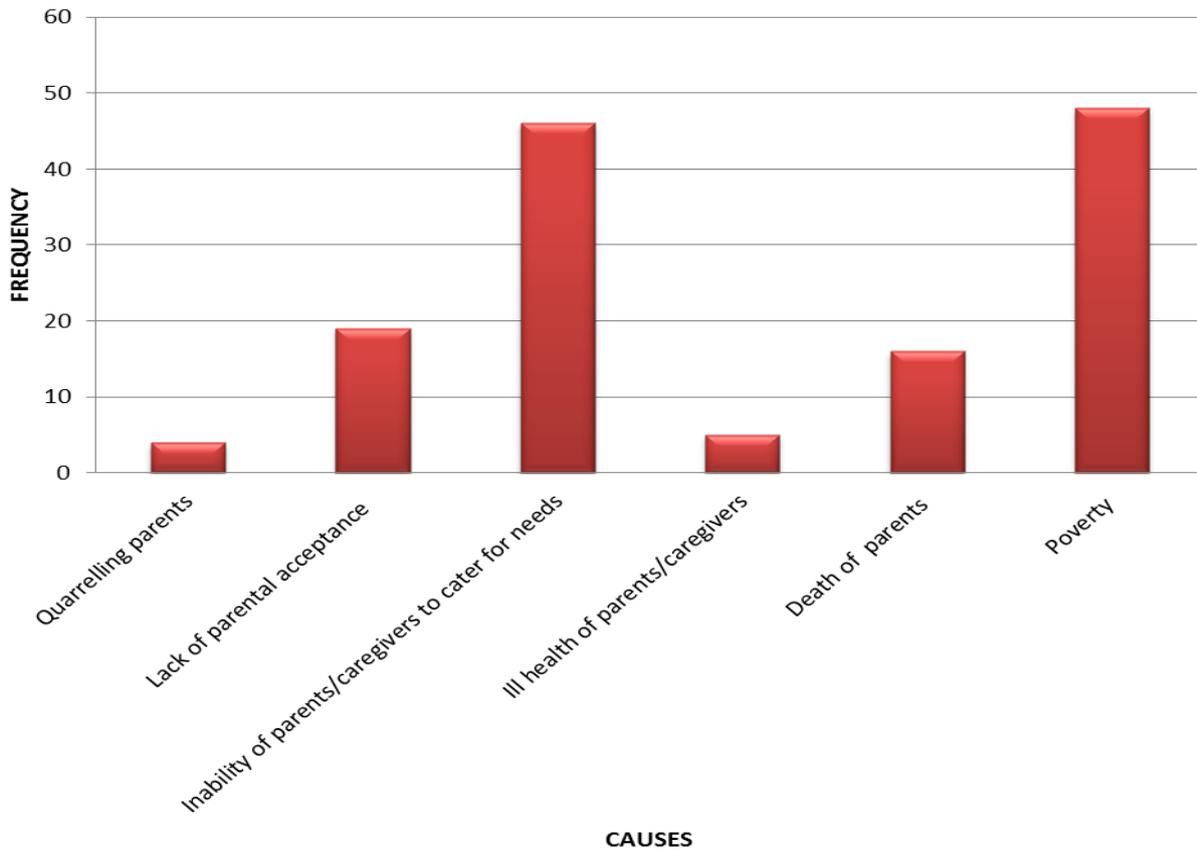
Results

Causes of Homelessness

Figure 1 described the main causes of homelessness among the respondents. Respondents were allowed to answer by ticking from a multiple rated set of answers in order to indicate the causes of homelessness. Forty-eight (96%) of the respondents forming the majority claimed that poverty was the chief cause of their homelessness. This was followed by poor family or parental

support which was rated by 46 (92%) of the respondents. Lack of family/parental acceptance or neglect also accounted for the third cause with ratings from 19 (38%) homeless respondents.

Figure 1: Specific Main Causes of Homelessness



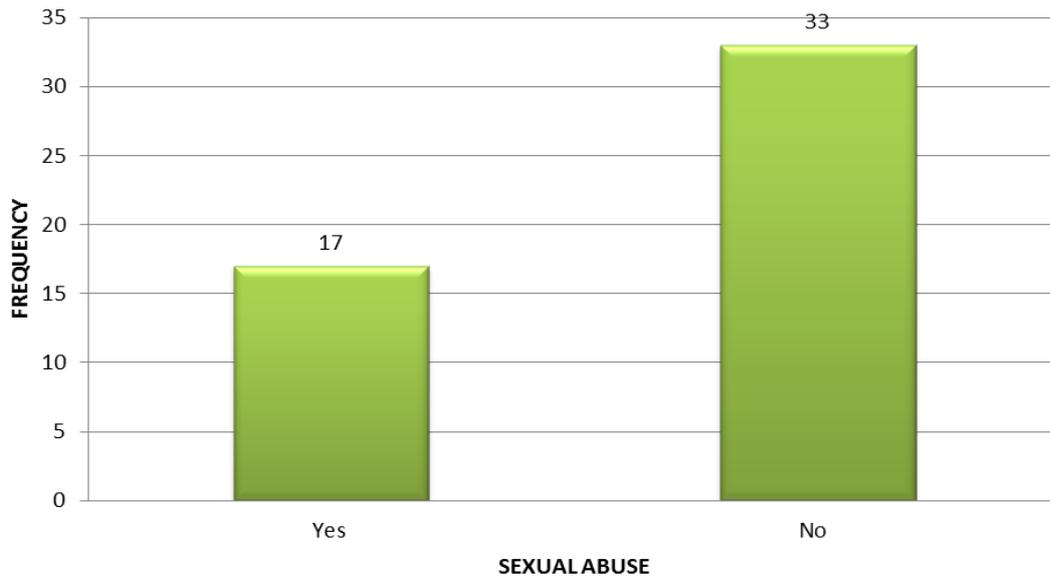
The fourth cause was rated by 16 (32%) of the respondents, attributing it to the death of one or both parents. The fifth cause of homelessness was related to the ill health of parents or significant others by 5 (10%) of the respondents. Four (8%) of the respondents however attributed their homelessness to quarrelling parents which have led to divorce or separation.

Notwithstanding these main issues, respondents also attributed other enabling influence as a motivation to leave home or to remain on the streets. Forty-three (86%) of the respondents denoted that their peers influenced their choice to leave home aside their own personal challenges at home while the rest declined. Likewise, 24 (48%) of the respondents have ever had a parent or both parents having a history of homelessness. Thus, it served as some form of unseen motivation, giving them the hope to survive somehow “outside a home”.

Sexual history and behaviour patterns of homeless young adults

Figure 2 described the sexual abuse history of respondents. Seventeen (44%) of them had been sexually abused [*this figure is disturbing considering the small sample size and high number of females*]. Nonetheless, 13 (26%) of the respondents did not know about the existence of Domestic Violence and Victim Support Units (DOVVSU) in Ghana where they could seek help.

Figure 2: History of Sexual Abuse



Reasons for engaging in risky sexual activities

Observing from Figure 3, homeless young adults engaged in risky sexual behaviours for numerous reasons. Since respondents were allowed to opt for more than one reason, the classification for a particular motivation is based on the number of responses.

According to 84% of the respondents, they engaged in risky sexual activities for their personal pleasure. The next option, which was mainly for socioeconomic survival [*the use of sex as a trade for money*] was selected by 58% of the participants. Again, 50% of the respondents added that they engaged in sexual activity for partner satisfaction [*these individuals had some form of sexual partners in their network*]. Nevertheless, 44% of the respondents engaged in sex for procreation notwithstanding the fact that they were homeless. Strangely, 33% of the male respondents only, however used sexual activity as a means of punishing other homeless females in their network [*mostly in the form of rape*].

Figure 3: Reasons for engaging in a sexual behaviour



Consequences of homelessness

From the data, all the respondents had experienced some forms of physical and verbal abuse. In addition, all the respondents were unemployed with 62% of them indulging in alcohol abuse. Moreover, 24% respondents abused illicit drugs like marijuana and cocaine with 30% of them engaging in cigarette smoking. Due to the nature economic hardship, 26% worked illegally as prostitutes with 30% of the females having a history of teenage pregnancy.

Notwithstanding their fears related to sexually transmitted infections and diseases, 24 (48%) of the respondents did not always use contraceptives during their sexual activities. Also, 16 (32%) of the respondents had never used any form of contraceptives in their sexual activities while 10 (20%) of them however always used some form of contraceptives.

Discussion

Findings from the study showed that poverty and lack of family or parental support were the highest causes of homelessness. As a result, these homeless young adults depended on their peers as their immediate social network rather than their family (Fitzpatrick, 1998; 2000; Tyler, 2008). This breakdown of support is very crucial in putting the life choices of the young adult into the hands of their peers (Rice, Milburn, & Rotheram-Borus, 2007).

Again, the results revealed that 48% of the respondents had a history of parental homelessness. It is possible that these homeless young adults might have been motivated to some degree by their parents (Fitzpatrick, 2000). Likewise, similar findings were noted by Dickens and Woodfield (2004) who attributed homelessness to some form of disability in the family system. Another area of concern is that, 10% of the respondents mentioned ill health of parents or caregivers as their reason for leaving the home. Looking at the high cost of living in developing countries like Ghana, these young adults were forced by their state of penury to take up the challenging job of survival.

Homelessness comes with a lot of challenges. These include risky sexual behaviour and substance abuse. Among the homeless young adults who took part in the study, 44% of them reported to have been sexually abused by people or peers in their network. Tyler (2008) however noted a more reduced trend once the homeless young adult has a family member in his or her network.

One important consequence noted in this study was the fact that homelessness may decrease a person's tendency to care for personal health and safety issues. Although majority of the respondents knew about the existence of Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit (DOVVSU), they all failed to report any form of abuse. A similar pattern was observed among their complete refusal or less use of contraceptives during their sexual activities. These serious challenges have been noted in a study by Rotheram-Borus and Koopman (1991). Other illegal activities like the use of illicit drugs and prostitution may have serious impacts on their health and further impair national development (Chen et al., 2004; Klee, & Reid, 1998; Tyler, 2008).

It is noteworthy that homelessness is occurring in Ghana with many challenges. There ought to be national reforms to curb the situation by the government and other stakeholders. Future studies must explore the current health and socioeconomic status of these homeless young adults in Ghana.

Limitations

The gender bias observed from the sampling frame was only determined by the available and willing respondents, who were mostly females. Thus, the data ought to be interpreted within this scope. Since this study sought to only describe the existing situation, the results can serve as a good picture for future studies.

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Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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