



UNDERSTANDING HOMELESSNESS AMONG RUNAWAY AND HOMELESS YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

No one wants to be homeless by choice – it is the perception of the situation which forces them to take the step of leaving their permanent residency. The study was undertaken to understand the impact of childhood maltreatment in the development of emotional and behavioral difficulties among 30 runaway youth aged 12-17 years from government run NGO's of Ahmedabad. Tools used include Socio demographic sheet, Childhood trauma questionnaire (CTQ), Child Behavior Checklist Youth Self-Report (CBCL-YSR) and The Adolescent Alcohol drug involvement scale (AADIS). Findings indicated disruptive home environment with presence of parental fights and disputes, arguments relating to parental alcohol/substance intake. Among youth, higher incidence of Emotional neglect, Physical neglect, Emotional abuse reported with greater incidence of Anxiety, Depression, Somatic complaint and Thought problem. Runaway youth engaged in a variety of substance such as alcohol, inhalants, marijuana, and hashish. There lies significant correlation between childhood maltreatment and emotional/behavioral issues.

Keywords: Runaway youth, maltreatment, Abuse.

Introduction

“People who are homeless are not social inadequates. They are people without homes.”

(Dame Sheila McKechnie)

The street life is not a state of utopia for the youth, but carries its own hardships. Running away is a declaration by the youth that the situation at home has become so unbearable and the conflict so great that living at home is no longer possible. Despite, the exact data on the incidence of runaway youth, it appears that the issue of runaway is at a mounting stage with multifaceted dimensions to it.

"Runaway youth", means an individual who is less than 18 years of age and who absents himself or herself from home or a place of legal residence without the permission of a parent or legal guardian (The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, 2008). The terms "runaway youth" or "homeless youth" will be used interchangeably in the study, since there is no single definition to the groups. However, one of the common characteristic shared by both the groups is that they face the risk of not having adequate shelter and other provisions, and may get involved in harmful behaviors while away from a permanent residential home (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2013). According to a report published by Mission Newswire in 2015, UNICEF data indicates that more than 40,000 children are reported missing every year in India. Out of which, close to 11,000 remain untraced. The most common reason that young people leave home is due to disruptive family relationships or family breakdown (Reeg, 2003). This may include poor family functioning, unstable home environments, socioeconomic disadvantage, and separation from parents or caregivers. (Shelton, Taylor, Bonner & Van den Bree, 2009). Research indicates that the runaway youth population is at risk for multiple health and behavioral problems. Exposure to the stress and strain of street life in conjunction with physically or sexually abusive family home environments predisposes these youth to additional experiences of trauma and trauma symptomology (Tyler, Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Johnson, 2003).

Adolescence/Youth is a unique biological, psychological, social, and cognitive developmental phase where there is transition from childhood to adulthood. The adolescence stage opens the risk of greater victimization of violence for the runaway and homeless population (Coates, McKenzie-Mohr, 2010). Youth experience high rates of physical and sexual abuse by family members prior to becoming homeless; many continue to be victimized subsequent to becoming homeless, just by different perpetrators. (Whitbeck, Hoyt, 1999). Certain precursors for the women running away from their home indicates their inability to assume greater control over their lives, limited access to education and employment opportunities, (Bari, 2000) patriarchal structures and gender roles (Taylor, 2001). In one study, researchers found that physical and psychological abuse predicted running away, which then predicted higher likelihood of delinquent behavior and victimization (Kim, Tajima, Herrankohl, & Huang, 2009). Youngsters experiencing homelessness have typically been exposed to a range of risk factors and conditions prior to their homelessness, particularly reflecting trauma and poverty-related adversity. Many youth experiencing homelessness have been the target of abuse, witnessed domestic violence, or been exposed to community violence (Anooshian, 2005). The family's structural (e.g., poverty, single-parent families) and functional (dysfunctional parent-adolescent relationships) characteristics set the stage for leaving home (Forehand, Biggar, & Kotchick, 1998; Matjasko, Grunden, & Ernst, 2007). The family structure that sets the stage for leaving home usually includes parental divorce, single parenting, or remarriage and financial insecurity. The other important factors include familial involvement in substance abuse and illegitimate activities.

Methodology

The study attempted to understand the impact of childhood maltreatment, traumatic life events and substance use in the development of emotional and behavioral difficulties among runaway youths. It was an exploratory study. Subjects were selected through purposive sampling comprising of 30 runaway-homeless youth within the age group of 12-17 years residing in three different institutes of Ahmedabad under child welfare committee. Permission was obtained from the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment before contacting the children bought by Child Line and local police to the NGO's. Questionnaires were translated into Hindi and participants

who consented for the study knowing its rationale were included. Children who have been staying in the institute for less than 1 year with IQ above 70 and knowledge of Hindi were included in the study. Children who have medical/neurological disease and who have been staying in the institution for more than 1 year were excluded from the study. After the selection of the participants of the study, their socio demographic details were taken and psychological assessments were carried out. The psychological assessment included Childhood Maltreatment Questionnaire, Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) and The Adolescent Alcohol Drug Involvement Scale (AADIS). Data was analysed using SPSS version 20. Descriptive statistics and inferential statistics were used for the study. Percentages were used to express the relative frequency of the responses obtained. Product Moment Correlation was used to find the relationship between the different variables.

Results:

As seen from table 1, **Demographic details** indicates that among homeless/ runaway youth (N=30), male comprise of 63.3% and female comprise of 36.7% of the total population, The mean and standard deviation for age among homeless youth was found to be 161.20 and 19.30 respectively,

In case of educational qualification, among runaway & homeless youth 43.3 % have education up to I-V standard and 16.7% have never been to school. Regional diversity of the population varied mostly hailing from states as Bihar, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh and least from West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Bangladesh and Nepal. Religion diversity indicated that 90% of the population was Hindu and 10% was Muslim. Family type indicated 80% belonging to nuclear household, 13.3% from a Joint family. Occupation of the head of the household was majorly agricultural activity (36.7%) and unskilled manual work (33.7%) It was indicated that in 40% of the youth both their parents were alive, 26.7% reported that one of the parent died and 16.7% reported that both the parents have died and they have a step parent.

Table 1: Frequency, mean and standard deviation (SD) of socio demographic details among runaway youth

Variable	Group	Homeless Youth(N=30)			
		Categories	F/ (%)	Mean	SD
Sex	Male		19 (63.3)	–	–
	Female		11 (36.7)		
Age(in months)	–		–	161.20	19.30
Educational Qualification	Never been to school		5(16.7)		
	Never been to school but attended Non formal education		1(3.3)	–	–
	Class I-V		13(43.3)		
	Class VI-VIII		8(26.7)		
	Class IX-XII		3(10)		
State	Gujarat		12(40)		
	Bihar		7(23.3)		
	Maharashtra		3(10)		
	Rajasthan		2(6.7)	–	–
	Uttar Pradesh		2(6.7)		
	Others		1(3.3)		
Religion	Hindu		27(90)	–	–
	Muslim		3(10)		
Family type	Nuclear		24(80)		
	Joint		4(13.3)	–	–
	Extended		2(6.7)		

Variable	Group	Homeless Youth(N=30)
		F/ (%)
No. of family members	1-4 members	15(50)
	5-8 members	12(40)
	9 and more	3(10)
Occupation of household head	Agricultural worker/farmer	11(36.7)
	Unskilled manual worker	10(33.3)
	Skilled worker	2(6.7)
	Self employed	5(16.7)
	Unemployed	2(6.7)
	Middle SES	8(26.7)
Parents living status	Both the parents were alive	12(40)
	One of the parent died	8(26.7)
	Both the parent died	5(16.7)
	Have a step parent	5(16.7)

Figure 1: Figure depicting comparison of parental and youth substance intake

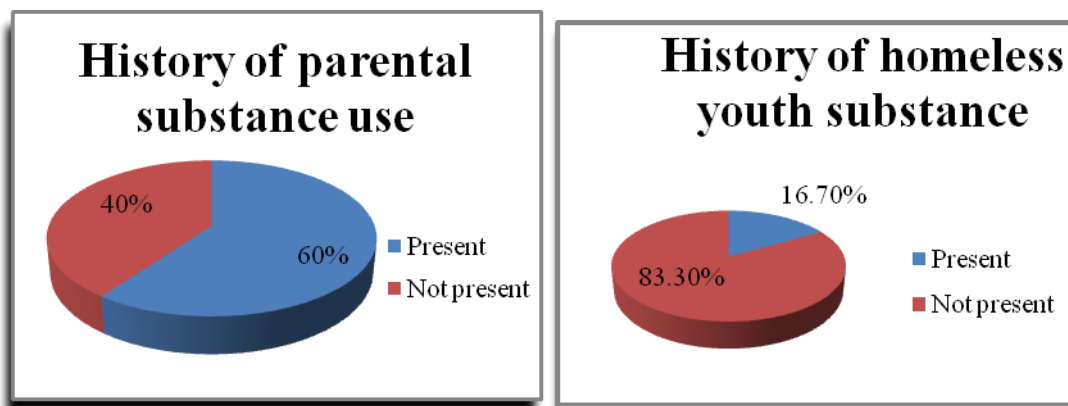


Figure 2: Figure depicting nature of maltreatment prevalent among Runaway youth

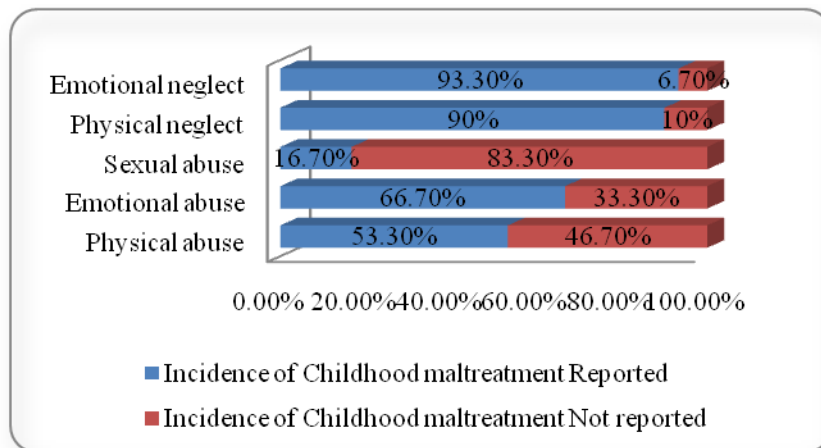


Figure 3: Figure depicting incidence of emotional/behavioral issues among runaway youth

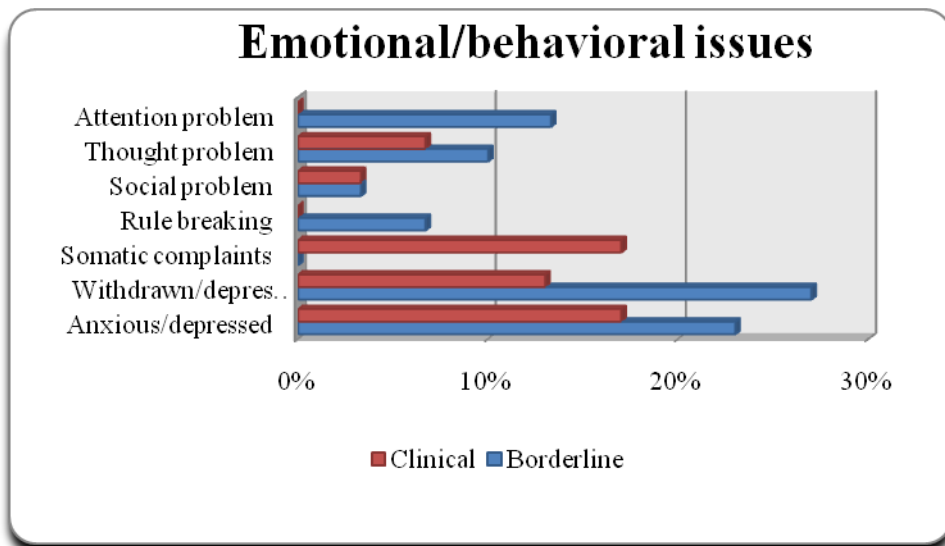


Table 2: Correlation between childhood maltreatment, alcohol/substance use and behavioral/emotional issues among runaway youth

Dimensions		Withdrawn /depressed	Somatic complaints	Rule breaking	Aggressive beh.	Thought problem	AADIS
Physical abuse	r value		.476**	.465**	.398*		.372*
	p value		.00	.01	.02		.04
Physical neglect	r value		.503**		.384*		.428*
	p value		.00		.03		.01
Emotional abuse	r value					.388*	
	p value					.03	
Emotional neglect	r value	.375*					
	p value	.04					

As seen from Figure 1 and 2, **Home environmental conditions** indicated a disruptive environment with 43 % reported presence of parental fights and disputes, 60% with history of parental alcohol/substance intake. 17% of the youth reported usage of substance such as Cigarette, Alcohol, Marijuana/hashish, Inhalants and Guthka.

As seen from Figure 3, **Childhood Maltreatment** that youth experienced mostly while in their home was Emotional neglect (93%), Physical neglect (90%), Emotional abuse (67%), Physical Abuse (53%) and Sexual Abuse (17%).

As seen from Figure 4, Major **Behavioral/emotional issues** found in the clinically significant level are Anxious/depressed, Withdrawn/depressed, Somatic complaint, Thought problem. A minimal portion of it lies in the borderline category indicating vulnerability for the symptoms to exacerbate with internal and external triggers. The remaining portion of it falls in the normal range with no significant problem reported.

As seen from table 5, in **Physical abuse** there lies a positive correlation between somatic complaints ($p=.476^{**}$), rule breaking behavior ($p=.465^{**}$), aggressive behavior ($p=.398^*$) and incidence of substance/alcohol use ($p=.372^*$). In **Physical neglect** there lies a positive correlation between somatic complaints ($p=.503^{**}$), aggressive behavior ($p=.384^*$) and incidence of substance/alcohol use ($p=.428^*$). In **Emotional abuse** there lies a positive correlation between thought problem ($p=.388^*$). In **Emotional neglect** there lies a positive correlation between withdrawn/depressed ($p=.375^*$)

Discussion

As the study indicated that a vast majority of homeless youth appear to be age 13 or older. Studies by SAMHSA Office of Applied Studies, (2004) identified that Approximately 1.6 million youths are within the ages of 12 to 17 who run away from home and slept on the street in the past 12 months. Nearly two-thirds of this sample was male in the study which is consistent with literature that found that the number of males living on the streets was higher than the number of females (Cauce et al., 2000a; Hwang, 2001).

Majority of the homeless population are from Bihar and west Bengal which may be supported by the fact that as according to a Census survey, 4.3 crore families in rural India do not have a house, with West Bengal leading the table followed by Bihar which is another reason for eastern region backwardness. According to Census, 2011, Bengal has as many as 35 lakh houseless families while Bihar has 34 lakh. Madhya Pradesh occupies the third slot with 32 lakh houseless families. Uttar Pradesh, the country's most populous state, has 25 lakh families without houses. As the rural houses in Bihar are “Kutchha houses” and people in search of shelter even stay in the outskirts areas and forest area, often forced by their family members to engage in agricultural work or sent to search for job in the nearby city.

Education levels among this sample seem to mirror other studies that depict low levels of education, as well as youth who drop out of school (Ayerst, 1999; Cumella, Grattan, & Vostanis, 1998; Slesnick et al., 2008; Thompson et al., 2003). In several studies, 25 to 35 percent of youth report being held back a year in school (Clark & Robertson, 1996; Robertson, 1989; Upshur, 1986; Young, Godfrey, Matthew, & Adams, 1983). Educational detachment and academic

difficulties can also be a contributing factor to conflicts in the home, potentially contributing to reasons why the youth is leaving home (Toro et al., 2007). Additionally, these problems may have manifested from attention-deficit disorders (Cauce et al., 2000a) or other learning disabilities which usually gets unnoticed (Barwick & Siegel, 1996; Sullivan & Knutson, 2000).

A narrative quoted by a runaway youth from the present study aged 12yrs named Master V., hailing from Bihar, describing the atrocities he had to face in his village:

“People in my village tell my father to tie me up...I was taken to a tantric who beat me up with a broom until I fainted....so I ran away from home to meet “Balveer” (a factitious character from a television serial known for helping the needy) who is in Mumbai and who would help me but I was caught in Ratlam and the institution people beat me for 2 months, then I ran from there” (sobbing and fearful)

Almost 35% of the runaway youth population reported loss of both their parents and having a step parent with majority of parents engaging in substance intake contributing to familial disputes. Family contextual factors associated with homeless youth and delinquent behavior include past history of inter-parental violence and an underlying psychiatric disorder makes the parents inadequate for child-rearing , and more likely to exhibit inconsistent or erratic parenting practices. (Akers, 1998; Bao, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2000).

As the study findings indicate higher incidence of emotional neglect and physical neglect followed by emotional abuse as the types of abuse witnessed. Research supports that families with the authoritarian (rigid) and permissive (disorganized) characteristics contribute to dysfunctional behavior of runaways (Martin & Martin, 2000). Factors were pointed as parental oppressive behaviour, dispute and disagreements with the parents, mandatory marriage, and lack of affection (Hassan, 1998; Kermani & Rajabzadeh, 2011; Welchman & Hossain, 2005). Often coercive/abusive families lead to antisocial behaviors. Harsh, inconsistent disciplinary practices elicit aggressive responses in children and further impulsive acts of leaving home. The way parents typically responds to the aggressive behavior in turn, creates coercive interaction “chains” that often escalate to the use of physical force (Patterson, 1982).

Elaborating on the model proposed by Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Yoder in 1999 which assumes that early negative experiences such as child sexual or physical abuse and parental drug problems increases the likelihood of negative chain of events that are related with more time spent on the street, which further increases one's risk for various forms of victimization and subsequently greater frequency of substance use. Family maltreatment such as physical and/or sexual abuse was predicted to increase the total time the adolescent has spent in unsupervised environment away from homes. Further, an abusive family background was predicted to increase the likelihood of deviant peer associations indicating social problem as indicated in the findings (Kufeldt & Nimmo, 1987; Whitbeck & Simons, 1990)

A narrative by a runaway youth named Master N., aged 12 years old, from the present sample explaining the family environment

“My father used to come home drunk everyday and beat my mother, so she left us and married again seeing which father bought home another lady from the factory who used to drink, smoke and beat us every day. All my siblings are scattered, one in my Mama's place, next one with mother, and other one is working somewhere and so I left home being left alone”.

A narrative by a runaway female youth aged 17 years recollecting incidence of sexual abuse, Ms.S,

“After my parents' divorce 8 years back it was hard for me to accept the fact when everything was perfect. But it was worse when my step father was sexually abusing me since past 8 months and threatening me to harm if I speak about it. But finally when I took the courage to reveal it to the society I thought everybody would be supporting me but here I am alone...All by myself...With nothing by my side other than my will power to stand on my feet and show it to the world that girl like me can also survive....”

Post homelessness the youth undergoes high rates of emotional distress and demoralization due to which they indulge in alcohol/substance use which increases the likelihood for emotional/behavioral issues (Morse & Calsyn, 1986; Mowbray, Solarz, Johnson, Phillips-Smith,

& Combs, 1986; Sosin, Colson, & Grossman, 1988). Studies noted that among runaway youth in the Midwest, 75% drank beer and 66% reported drinking spirits (Whitbeck & Hoyt, 2002). Some of the risk factors for substance use by adolescents identified include poor parenting styles, family stress and child victimisation (Epstein, Gilbert, Diaz & Schinke, 1995).

Consistent with the study findings, previous reports also stated higher proportion of homeless children experienced mental disorders with impairment such as disruptive behavior disorders, social phobia, and major depression, as compared to their low-income housed counterparts (Anooshian, 2005; Buckner, Bassuk, Weinreb & Brooks; 1999). Often substance use is perceived as “self medication” as a support to deal with mental illness, as a social connection to peers and as a coping strategy when living on the streets (Christiani, Hudson, Nyamathi, Mutere, & Sweat, 2008).

It has been suggested that the parents must be involved in intervention strategies aimed at halting the progression of negative interactions and learn strategies to improve relationships once the young person returns to the family. Unexplained changes in the environment from where the youth ran away typically leads to continued familial problems and repeated episodes of runaway (Baker et al., 2003; Whitbeck et al., 1997).

As shelter homes are viewed as a gateway and relief centre for youth to escape from the atrocities and access other services (De Rosa et al., 1999), government should formulate child welfare services to meet the long-term needs of these young people and their families (Ross et al., 2002) and to determine whether returning the adolescent to their family is in the best interest of the youngster. Intervention approaches should aim at improving coping strategies aimed at Independent Living Programmes (ILP), as they provide life skills and employment skills training, educational assistance, counselling and peer support to young people who are exiting foster care or cannot return to parental homes (Kinard, 2002). For young people who have run away repeatedly from group homes, foster care or other institutionalised settings, transitional housing that assists young people to develop independent living skills may be the most successful long-term strategy. Future research and treatment with this high-risk youth population must rely on child welfare and other youth service systems to engage families and young people together. Longitudinal research is needed to follow runaway youth recidivism in order to identify

key factors contributing to or impeding positive outcomes over time. Also, Recommendation for community based programs and funding to link these youth back to school, housing and employment (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2004) is said to be helpful. Thus, Integration into the mainstream is especially important as health risks and poor health outcomes increase with the duration of homelessness.

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