

YOUTH AT THE CROSSROADS: PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH WITH  
HOMELESS RURAL YOUTH

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HOMELESS RURAL YOUTH

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## ABSTRACT

This combined thesis/project focuses on youth homelessness, particularly in rural areas of the United States. Recent research in California has focused on the unique needs of homeless youth (Foster and Bernstein 2008), and additional research that focuses on youth in rural areas is needed (Robertson and Toro 1998). In addition to exploring and analyzing the literature on homelessness, homeless youth, and homelessness in rural areas, I present the recommendations and implementations in policy and legislation that have come out of the recent research, along with the results of a survey and focus group with homeless youth in Humboldt County, California.

This thesis is presented in combination with the project component of the Practicing Sociology track. The project provides an exploration of the accessibility and availability of social services to homeless youth in Humboldt County. I look at the relationship between youth's experiences with the social services community and their willingness to seek out services. I also seek to pinpoint the specific structural barriers to accessing social services among homeless youth in Humboldt County. I explore these questions through a youth-designed, program evaluation of Youth Service Bureau's (YSB) RAVEN Project. RAVEN Project is a non-profit organization located in Eureka that serves runaway, homeless, low-income, and at-risk youth. The study uses mixed methodologies, including survey and focus group.

This work is intended to be informative and useful for providers in Humboldt County and beyond that serve homeless populations, and runaway, homeless, and low-

income youth in particular. I provide a comprehensive conceptual model of intersectional factors that I recommend should be considered by organizations and communities seeking to provide assistance to homeless populations. This model is meant to serve as a conceptual roadmap for developing successful programs that serve diverse homeless populations. I present these recommendations alongside my work with RAVEN Project through a participatory action and youth empowerment framework which highlights the strengths of homeless communities.

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

### Main Issues and Structure of Thesis/Project

In the introduction of this thesis/project I present a brief overview of current issues and demographics around homelessness, followed by an extensive literature review of both traditional and contemporary theories of homelessness. I also include a review of the research literature on rural homelessness, and youth homelessness, in particular. Chapter 2 summarizes the causes of homelessness from structural, individual, and activist perspectives, and the corresponding policy implications of these theoretical frameworks. Chapter 3 covers writings which stress how those who are homeless manage social processes related to identity, stigmatization, criminality and deviance. Finally, Chapter 4 brings together the vast body of research documented on homeless populations in general, and zooms in on how the factors already discussed apply to homeless youth, and homeless youth policy.

The extensive literature review that I provide in chapters 1-4 supports and contextualizes my study of homeless youth at RAVEN Project in Humboldt County. Chapter 5 contains a brief discussion of RAVEN Project as an organization, and catalogues my methods. My work with RAVEN Project was aimed at an evaluation of organizational services for homeless rural youth, and explored client satisfaction with services and needs assessment. In Chapter 6, I present the results of this study, including

survey and focus group data analysis and interpretation. Chapter 7 contains recommendations to RAVEN Project as an organization based on both the data we collected in our study, and my review of the literature.

The final chapter (Chapter 8) consists of my own theoretical reframing. I emphasize the importance of understanding demographics and structural barriers in access to services, interpersonal factors related to homelessness that effect the availability and accessibility of services, and the ability and willingness of homeless individuals to seek assistance. I stress the importance of taking these considerations into account based on my reading of the literature, and on the findings of my research with homeless youth. In this chapter I provide a conceptual model depicting how communities can work towards developing and implementing intersectional, comprehensive, and empowering approaches to homeless services, using my research with RAVEN Project as an example.

In the rest of this introductory chapter, I briefly discuss recent demographics of homelessness in the United States, followed by a discussion of the various ways researchers and policy-makers have grappled with how to define homelessness. Within this discussion, I highlight how difficulties in counting hidden populations and restrictions in defining who is homeless can become problematic, especially when access to funding rests precariously in the balance. I finish the section with a discussion of rural homelessness as a prime example of how the invisibility of homelessness and definitional restrictions may inhibit communities' access to assistance funds or reduce individuals' eligibility for programs.

## Demographics

The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty (2008) reports that roughly three million people in the US are homeless, 1.3 million of whom are under the age of 18. However, this may be an underestimation, considering that in 1987 the National Network of Runaway and Youth Services estimated that three million teenagers were currently “wandering across the nation looking for a safe place to stay” (Vissing 1996:22).

Although the demographics vary widely depending on location, 42 percent of the homeless population in the United States are African American, 39 percent are White, 13 percent Hispanic, 4 percent Native American, and 2 percent Asian. Veterans make up 13 percent of the national population, and 19 percent of all homeless individuals are survivors of domestic violence (U.S. Conference of Mayors 2008). The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD 2009) has reported that 23 percent of its homeless clients are veterans, and according the National Alliance to End Homelessness, an estimated 45 percent of the homeless veteran population is African American (Moriarty 2009), and approximately 90,000 Native families are considered homeless or “under-housed” (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 2003). In Humboldt County California, where my study takes place, 1,497 adults and 416 children were found to be homelessness in a recent point-in-time study on January 27, 2009 (Walters 2009).

## Definitions

### Homeless

The numbers reported above are startling as they indicate relatively high numbers of people who have no home, in a land of supposed plenty. However, the numbers also beg the question of definition. What does it mean to be homeless? The answer is that there is a general lack of agreement in terms of how to define who should be considered homeless (Barak 1991:26), which results in potentially spurious estimations as evidenced by the two drastically different estimates of the number of homeless youth reported above.

Social science researchers often use differing definitions of the term “homeless,” depending on the context of their study. Dispute exists as to whether the term should only be used to refer to the “literal homeless,” contacted through snapshot, streets-based studies, therefore guarding against any misunderstandings or inconsistencies in research; or if “almost homeless” populations, whose access to shelter is temporary, inadequate, and/or unstable should also be counted as homeless (Barak 1991, Vissing 1996). The legal definition in the U.S., found in Title 42, Chapter 119 Subchapter 11032 of the US Code Collection states:

“(a) In general

For purposes of this chapter, the term “homeless” or “homeless individual or homeless person” <sup>11</sup> includes—

(1) an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and

- (2) an individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is—
- (A) a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations (including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill);
  - (B) an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or
  - (C) a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.

The federal government uses this definition in order to determine who is eligible for homeless assistance funds. Through what used to be the Stuart B. McKinney Act, now known as the McKinney-Vento Act, Congress is responsible for providing assistance to individuals who are homeless. Originally passed in 1987 (Rossi 1989) this legislation was brought about after homeless activists and advocates staged a series of direct action efforts, involving protest activities, mass media, and forging organizational alliances to raise political and social awareness about the magnitude of problems facing the homeless in the US (Barak 1991). The McKinney-Vento Act fostered legislation aimed at overcoming structural barriers to housing, instigating such measures as “rent control,” regulation against “unfit transient facilities,” and allotting grant monies for programs serving the diverse social and environmental needs of homeless individuals (U.S. Code Collection 2009).

Through the McKinney-Vento Act, funds were and are channeled through existing agencies, in the form of subsidies for shelters, rehabs and vocational training programs, medical care, and mental healthcare (Rossi 1989). Moreover, under

McKinney-Vento, public schools were required both to provide special assistance to homeless students (Foster and Bernstein 2008, Robertson and Toro 1998). Individuals, organizations, and communities are eligible to receive federal funding for homeless programs and services only if they can be categorized as homeless according to the legal definition. Additionally, the following requirements must also be met:

(b) Income eligibility

(1) In general

A homeless individual shall be eligible for assistance under any program provided by this chapter, only if the individual complies with the income eligibility requirements otherwise applicable to such program.

(2) Exception

Notwithstanding paragraph (1), a homeless individual shall be eligible for assistance under title I of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 [[29](#) U.S.C. [2801](#) et seq.].

(c) Exclusion

For purposes of this chapter, the term “homeless” or “homeless individual” does not include any individual imprisoned or otherwise detained pursuant to an Act of the Congress or a State law.”

In sum these legal premises dictate the accessibility of funds for homeless support services to individuals, organizations, and communities. Recent research has called for the McKinney-Vento Act to be held accountable to support and provide funding for programs assisting homeless youth (Foster and Bernstein 2008), especially through educational supports (Wong Elliot, Reed, Ross, McGuirk, Tallarita and Chouinard 2009).

## Youth

The population referenced by the category “youth” also tends to vary by studies and by social services programs. However, “youth” more generally refers to the transitional period between childhood and adulthood. Research on homeless youth typically includes participants between the ages of 18 and 24, sometimes up to age 26, as well as youth under 18, potentially including youth as young as 13, or even 10. The federal government recognizes runaway and homeless youth as being of age 22 and under at the time of leaving a shelter or service center (Govtrack.US 2008).

Homeless youth and their peers may be received by service providers as either (or neither) adult or child, depending on the requirements and restrictions of organizations, programs, and funders. While the cutoff for federally funded homeless youth services is age 22, most reported statistics of homeless populations do not include a category that specifically refers to youth; rather they report homeless children being under age 18, and adults, 18 and over. In studies where homeless and/or runaway youth respondents are contacted through organizations, participant ages are likely to range widely, including both under 18, and 18 and over populations<sup>1</sup>. All of this suggests that while considerable overlap in youth’s needs for services may exist, the needs of homeless youth as a population are likely to be distinct from those of older homeless adults and younger homeless children.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Leeuwen *et al.* 2004. This scenario also holds true for my research with RAVEN Project.

The well-documented and undisputed heterogeneity of homeless populations in general (Barak 1991, Hoch 1989, Rossi 1989), combined with ambiguity over who is homeless, and who is youth, makes generating policies that address the needs of the entire population challenging. Grouping the homeless in terms of either child or adult further obscures the number of youths who are in the transition period between childhood and adulthood. It is important for communities to have accurate estimates of the number of homeless, as well as their age distribution and other demographic information, as this data is relevant in applications for federal funding of homeless assistance programs. However, numerous difficulties in counting ‘hidden populations’ of homeless citizens often result in considerable underrepresentation of the population as a whole. Because of these difficulties in counting, comprehensive estimates of how many homeless people there are in the U.S. remains relatively uncertain (Barak 1991, Rossi 1989), and the task of counting homeless youth, and homeless populations in rural areas poses even more challenges.

### Rural Poverty and Homelessness

#### Definitions and visibility in rural communities

The structural conditions of homelessness in rural areas communities differs somewhat from conditions found in cities. In rural areas, homelessness is characterized by low availability of services, and an overall invisibility of homeless populations. Although they are not as visible on the streets or in shelters, rural homeless people can be found living in vehicles, campers, or “doubled-up” in sub-standard housing arrangements

(Vissing 1996, National Coalition for the Homeless 2009). Moreover, rural communities have higher rates homelessness in families and among married couples, and twice the number of homeless women, compared to cities (Barak 1991). This low visibility of the homeless or 'under-housed' in rural areas may contribute to the overall lack of attention paid to rural poverty in the research on homelessness (Vissing 1996).

Studies of rural homelessness (Fisher 2005, Vissing 1996) and documentation of the homeless within rural settings (Barak 1991) explain how the conditions of rural poverty structure the relative invisibility of homelessness in rural areas. For instance, studies have found that rural communities tend to offer fewer homeless resources such as shelters and free meals (Barak 1991). Lack of public transportation in rural communities has also been identified as a barrier which affects the accessibility of services (Vissing 1996). Further research has claimed that rural people are less likely to seek out services, and instead attempt to provide for themselves with their own limited resources (Barak 1991, Vissing 1996). These structural characteristics make counting the number of homeless people in rural areas prone to further error and under-estimation (Vissing 1996).

#### Structural factors of rural homelessness

Incidences of rural homelessness have increased significantly over time, especially during the 1980's. By the 1990's it was estimated that 10-20 percent of the total homeless population were located in rural environments (Barak 1991). Likewise, non-metropolitan counties experience poverty at rates 20 percent higher than metropolitan

counties (Fisher 2005). The pervasiveness of homelessness and poverty in rural areas may be related to the phenomenon of “welfare disadvantage,” whereby conditions of low-wage/unskilled jobs and low levels of education, combined with high unemployment and inadequate social services in transportation, child-care, and job training all contribute to elevated poverty levels (Fisher 2005). Yet even with its growing prevalence, homelessness in rural communities has received much less attention compared to urban populations (Vissing 1996).

Despite these differences, many similarities do exist between the conditions of rural poverty and the literal homelessness most often associated with urban areas. For instance, like the urban homeless, people living in rural poverty often experience chronic housing instability, and repeated displacement of children and families (Vissing 1996). Likewise, the interpersonal challenges that arise from homelessness are similar in nature to the experiences of very low-income, marginally housed populations characteristic of rural areas. Studies also point to similarities in developmental and psychological challenges faced by homeless and low-income housed children (Rafferty and Shinn 1991).

In response to the housing challenges facing rural communities, The National Coalition for the Homeless (2009) has recommended that a more flexible interpretation of the legal definition of homelessness be applied to rural areas. They argue that under a more flexible interpretation of the law, rural communities that would otherwise be ineligible for assistance through the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, would benefit (National Coalition for the Homeless 2009). The underlying assumption in this

recommendation is that difficulties in discerning who is eligible to be counted as homeless leads to inadequate funding for provision of social services, especially in rural communities where the visibility of homelessness is low, and the legal definition is more difficult to apply.

## CHAPTER 2 THEORIES OF HOMELESSNESS

There are a number of theories operating both within the existing research literature on homelessness, as well as through the philosophies, missions, and purposes of social services programs. This chapter explores some of those major theories regarding the causes of homelessness, in terms of both structural and individualized explanations. Within this chapter, I discuss urban renewal and deinstitutionalization as structural shifts which shaped the conceptual and social terrain of what has been referred to as “new”, and “old” homelessness. I also include a brief comparative analysis of homelessness in the U.S. and other parts of the world. In the final section I look specifically at individualistic theories of ‘work ethic’ and ‘mental illness,’ and end by presenting critiques of the use of psychological models in studies of homeless populations. This chapter is intended to provide an overview of the extensive body of knowledge within social sciences disciplines regarding homelessness, as well as to introduce and draw out connections between these theoretical arguments and the social processes that play out between the homeless and services providers, policy makers, and the homed.

### Causes of Homelessness

Homelessness may be typologized as being either ‘chronic or episodic,’ and has historically been described as resulting from, and further contributing to economic lack of

resources, disaffiliation,<sup>2</sup> and alienation from social network structures (Barak 1991, Rossi 1989). Traditional research identifies causes of homelessness as including the structuring of work opportunities around seasonal/temporary labor markets, the presence of a physical handicap (preventing employment), and racial/ethnic discrimination in housing and employment markets (Barak 1991, Hoch 1989), as well as “personality defects” and “wanderlust” (Barak 1991:23). Recent research builds on this spectrum of causes to include criminal history, depression, chronic mental illness, alcoholism and drug abuse, and deinstitutionalization (Rossi 1989).

Generally, all theories of homelessness follow or to some extent acknowledge these explanations of causation. Overall, theories of homelessness can be grouped into three overlapping and intersecting frames: the structural, the individualistic, and emerging more recently, the activist/collectivist. These three theoretical paradigms shape social perceptions and guide social services and research on homelessness.

### Structural Theories of Homelessness

Structurally based studies of homelessness identify characteristics of social institutions that contribute to the prevalence of homelessness. Traditionally, structural theories of homelessness are focused on shifting conditions and policies in housing and employment markets, public welfare policy, and the deinstitutionalization of state mental hospitals followed by the subsequent failure of the “community health movement” (Barak 1991). Structural causes of homelessness are political, social and economic in

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<sup>2</sup> As defined by Rossi (1989: 43), “being without supportive ties to family and kin.”

nature, and have intersecting and overlapping effects on housing, employment, and welfare policy (Shlay and Rossi 1992). Likewise, in areas of the U.S. where the rates of homelessness are high, underlying structural causes include lack of low-cost housing, high poverty rates, poor economic conditions, and lack of community healthcare facilities (Elliot and Krivo 1991). These specific social conditions have multiple negative effects, all of which contribute to increased rates of homelessness (Elliot and Krivo 1991). In understanding the depth of these shifts which have structured the conditions of homelessness in the U.S., we begin with a look at how changes in social and political activities have affected economics and housing.

#### Economics and housing

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the infrastructural backbone of low-cost housing was the Single Room Occupancy (SRO) motel/hotel unit. Used mainly by temporary, transient laborers, many of whom were young, single, and male (Rossi 1989), the SRO system emerged in close vicinity to temporary jobs in industrializing cities, and around large-scale development projects in the fields of agriculture, timber, and railroads. The co-occurrence between the development of the SRO neighborhood and a temporary/transient labor pool can be understood as the first ‘institutionalization and segregation’ of homelessness in America (Rossi 1989:20). The neighborhoods that supported transient worker populations became known as “Skid Row” districts (Rossi 1989), and housed both middle and working class laborers, as well as ‘hoboes,’ ‘street

beggars,' and individuals who could not seem to hold down a regular job, or were between jobs (Hoch 1989).

By 1940 the need for temporary human labor had declined drastically due to technological innovations especially in heavy machinery, and the population of SRO inhabitants declined sharply as well, especially between 1950 and 1970 (Rossi 1989). Just as the period of industrialization had changed the layout of urban cities, providing neighborhoods for a temporary and transient work-force, the subsequent period of “urban renewal” structurally reorganized America’s downtowns through aggressive social and political campaigns. These campaigns strategized to relocate the residences of the working poor, transients, and otherwise, homeless residents (Hoch 1989).

Overtime, SRO’s and transient “flop-houses” were demolished with the expectation that they would be replaced by “scattered subsidized housing” (Rossi 1989). The political agenda of urban renewal was backed by the ideology that downtown revival (requiring the forced relocation of poor residents and the demolition their neighborhoods and dwellings), would bring about an improvement in the quality of life for the poor residents of Skid Row (Rossi 1989). What in fact came about was much less an improvement in services than a heightened visibility of the literal homeless, sleeping in doorways, vestibules, boxes, and cars (Rossi 1989:34).

The legacy of these structural trends involving deindustrialization and demolition of Skid Row neighborhoods carry over into the present, whereby the main factors contributing to homelessness presently have been identified as “rising housing costs, lack of affordable housing, and fall in real wages” (Wong *et al.* 2009). However, these

structural underpinnings of present-day homelessness should not be understood through the lens of deindustrialization and Skid Row demolition alone, as these were not isolated social events; an investigation of legislative trends over time is also necessary in uncovering the foundation of homelessness today.

### Urban renewal

Important political and legislative activities directly linked to both deindustrialization and urban renewal contradicted the ideological rationale for disbanding and disrupting the housing status of America's urban poor. Political activities that contributed to the urban housing crisis that followed deindustrialization can be attributed to two extended legislative practices: 1) The overall withdrawal of federal regulation and support for public housing, and 2) Urban "revitalization," with financial social gains limited to wealthy investors (Barak 1991).

These practices were manifested largely through tax reform, especially during the 1980's. Instead of providing federal assistance for public housing, SRO's were demolished simultaneously as tax-based incentives to provide low-income housing were removed and investment in condominiums and urban renewal became profitable (Barak 1991). The Reagan administration then cut funds for food stamps, elderly and disabled populations, and suspended social security payments, rendering a large number of people either homeless or very 'precariously' housed, with "an estimated 2.5 million persons displaced from their homes annually" during the first half of the 1980's (Barak 1991:69).

The end results of these economic and correlated shifts in housing structures during the first half of the twentieth century constituted a fundamental transformation in the social phenomenon of homelessness in the U.S. These changes produced a school of thought which distinguished between the “old” homeless who lived during the period of industrialization and traveled between cities looking for work; and the “new” homeless, whose livelihoods were and continue to be characterized most apparently by lack of shelter and social exclusion (Barak 1991, Rossi 1989).

According to theorists, important qualitative differences exist between the old and new homeless (Barak 1991, Rossi 1989). Although both groups were and are heterogeneous, the new homeless are made up of a growing number of single women and families. They are also younger, with an overall median age that appears to be dropping (Rossi 1989). Moreover, while the old homeless were believed to be predominately white, the new homeless are comprised of a much larger and growing percentage of minorities (Barak 1991, Rossi 1989). Since the wide-scale demolition of SRO’s, the new homeless tend not to be concentrated in Skid Row housing, but still show up in downtown areas, visibly without shelter (Rossi 1989).

As a population, the new homeless experience more economic hardship, unemployment, and for those who do work, substantially lower incomes than the old homeless (Rossi 1989). Because of the social upheaval caused by urban renewal, the social support networks of the homeless and poor in Skid Row neighborhoods were weakened or destroyed, rendering the new homeless less autonomous and more dependent on organizations and social institutions to meet their basic needs (Hoch 1989).

Characteristics of the new homeless are documented in the research literature as consisting of disaffiliation, alcoholism, helpless vulnerability, as well as mental/physical disabilities (Hoch 1989, Rossi 1989, Tucker 1990). Despite the differences in social, political, and economic climates, both the new and old homeless were (and are) heterogeneous, and comprised of poor migrants and transient laborers. Moreover, both populations experience(d) elevated degrees of social isolation, family problems/disaffiliation, alcoholism (and more recently drug addiction), as well as physical and mental disabilities and elevated death rates (Rossi 1989). Considering these overwhelmingly negative characterizations of homelessness today, new homelessness has can be seen as embodying elements of the historical stigma of Skid Row, even after periods of urban renewal (Hoch 1989). A strong indicator of this persistent stigma is the widespread social perception of severe mental illness among the homeless, especially within discussions over deinstitutionalization of state mental hospitals, which we will turn to next.

### Deinstitutionalization

Although homeless populations have always had mentally ill persons among them, mental illness among the new homeless is more pronounced (Barak 1991, Rossi 1989). This is due in part to the abandonment of the SRO system, as well as the deinstitutionalization of federally funded state mental hospitals (Rossi 1989). Deregulation of public housing, and the continued process of demolition of SRO's and Skid Rows in the name of urban renewal occurred just after the deinstitutionalization of

public mental health services during the 1960's through the 1970's. Traditionally, the theory of deinstitutionalization claims that the release of mental hospital patients, beginning in the 1960's, is responsible for increasing the number of visible homeless, and in particular, the number of homeless with apparent, chronic mental illness (Rossi 1989).

Similar to the notion that the residents of Skid Row would be better off in subsidized housing, deinstitutionalization occurred through an ideology of good-will for vulnerable and victimized institutionalized mental patients. A popular faith in a new community health movement supported deinstitutionalization (Barak 1991).

Unfortunately, the reality was that mental patients were released into communities with retrograde policies of the Reagan administration looming large on the horizon (Hoch 1989). Following deinstitutionalization, "instead of rural asylums that isolated the mentally ill in the countryside...zones of dependence" emerged (Hoch 1989:206), which rendered many of the released patients homeless, or isolated in low-income and sub-standard housing units.

Both deinstitutionalization and its ideological brainchild "the community health movement" peaked during the 1970's (Barak 1991, Snow *et al.* 1986), and the portion of the population suffering from mental illness, came further under heightened visibility. In spite of the popular belief that *deinstitutionalization itself* turned the streets into asylums, during the 1980's an incompatible combination of recent deinstitutionalization with 'economic restructuring' and cuts to social welfare during the Reagan administration accelerated and exacerbated the widespread health and human services crisis, that was literally spilling over into America's streets. Moreover, Reagan's policies *themselves*

have been identified as contributing to the increase of literal homelessness since the 1990's, in so much as while de-funding food programs and deregulating low-income housing, federal funds were diverted into programs offering temporary/emergency shelter, which supported a growing "nonprofit welfare bureaucracy" (Hoch 1989:211).

The combination of these social and legislative policies drastically reduced the capacity for communities to provide public mental health services to the chronically mentally ill, particularly after the closures of federally funded state mental institutions. Although deinstitutionalization initially occurred in tandem with increased funding for welfare programs, this came at the expense of decreased financial support for public mental health facilities. Also in the 1980's, responsibility for providing mental health services was delegated to individual states; meanwhile public welfare and social services benefits were cut (Mechanic and Rochefort 1990). Shifting ideologies and practices regarding the treatment of mental illness had also been evolving through initial breakthroughs in pharmaceutical therapies for psychiatric treatment, and slowly the availability of residential public mental health services in the U.S. became obsolete (Mechanic and Rochefort 1990). Unfortunately these devastating trends in underfunding public health and basic social services in the United States is not an anomaly on the global scene, as many similarities are seen to exist in both the social conditions of homelessness, and the legislative policies underpinning those structural conditions worldwide.

## Global structures of homelessness

Although most research focuses on problems and solutions specific to homelessness in the United States, certain similarities exist globally. Trends in globalization and social polarization of wealth, and the related shifts in economics, low-cost housing availability, rising unemployment, and lowered welfare spending have been identified as contributing to homelessness in the U.S. and Europe (Miraftab 2000, Shlay and Rossi 1992). Economic and political conditions at the global level also place women and minorities at a particularly serious risk of homelessness, as they historically experience discrimination in all institutions of society at elevated rates, and have access to fewer resources, capital, and mobility (Better 2002).

Although similarities between the causes and consequences of homelessness in the U.S. and other parts of the world can sometimes seem ambiguous, taken together they reveal the common link between social class polarization, spatial stratification, and legislative policy. For example, increasing rates of homelessness in the U.S. are believed to be related to the economic and social challenges caused by ‘urban renewal,’ deindustrialization, and deurbanization; whereas in countries of the Global South, rising homelessness has been attributed to the displacement of peoples and livelihoods through explosive urbanization. (Shlay and Rossi 1992). On the other hand, rising rates of homelessness and obstacles in access to shelter in Africa, South Africa, and Latin America are exacerbated by the tendency for governments to lend increasing support in housing and home-ownership to communities on the peripheries of cities (Miraftab 2000). Within this scenario, women are among the most vulnerable: they typically cannot

afford to relocate and remain in cities with declining support service infrastructures (Miraftab 2000). In addition to this breadth of structural causes and contributors to homelessness both domestically and worldwide, much research focuses specifically on individuals in seeking to better understand and find solutions to homelessness as a social problem.

### Individualistic Theories of Homelessness

Research that takes an individualistic approach to homelessness emphasizes personal defects, nonconformity, and deviance (Barak 1991). Individualistic research highlights the behavior of individuals in dealing with mental illness, drug addiction, and family and institutional disaffiliation (Piliavin, Sosin, Westerfelt, Matseuda 1993). It operates under the assumption that these factors push people into homelessness, where they are likely to remain because of associational ties especially with “homeless careers” (Piliavin *et al.* 1993). I explore this ‘discourse of personal choice’ that seeks to understand chronic homelessness (to varying degrees) as based on individual lifestyle choices in greater detail in Chapter 3, which takes an interactive approach to looking at homeless identity formation/stigmatization, structural opportunities, and outcomes. What follows now is an overview of how individualistic and medicalized perspectives of homelessness manifest in research and policy.

#### Mental illness

The theory of deinstitutionalization walks a thin line between structural and individualistic theories of homelessness. It has traditionally been identified as a

predominant factor contributing to homelessness, and can be seen in the number of homeless obviously coping with severe mental illness (Barak 1991, Hoch 1989, Rossi 1989). Recent statistics attest to structural conditions related to mental illness among the homeless, as the Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress (2008) estimates that 26 percent of sheltered homeless persons have a severe mental illness, in comparison to six percent of the general population (U.S. Conference of Mayors 2008). Furthermore, state expenditure on mental healthcare has been identified as the strongest predictor of homelessness in metropolitan cities across the U.S, along with lack of low-cost housing (Elliot and Krivo 1991).

Based on these statistics and documentation related to deinstitutionalization, disproportionately high levels of mental illness among homeless populations, and mental healthcare spending, my placement of mental illness within individualistic theories seems counterintuitive. Based on my own reading of the research literature, mental illness seems to fit better within a discussion of structural factors, including deinstitutionalization, underfunding of public mental healthcare, and more generally, institutional barriers in access to safe and permanent housing. However, studies of mental illness in homeless populations focus heavily on the behavior and psychology of homeless individuals.

This practice has been critiqued heavily by researchers who point out that high estimates of severe mental illness among the visible homeless may be overestimated due to inaccurate and/or inappropriate measurement instruments (Snow, Baker, Anderson and Martin 1986), and overlook the social and environmental effects of extreme poverty on mental health (Snow *et al.* 1986). The result of this discrepancy is a potentially spurious

and/or overstated causal link between individual mental illness and homelessness (Barak 1991, Snow *et al.* 1986).

Common psychological problems analyzed in research on homeless populations include “inappropriate affect and appearance, depressed mood, sleeping and eating difficulties, agitation, and unresponsiveness” (Snow *et al.* 1986:421). Depression constitutes an apparent precursor and consequence of homelessness (Rossi 1989), and post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic personal histories including experiences of domestic violence, sexual, physical, and emotional abuse, parent/child role-reversals, as well as substance abuse histories are all overrepresented in homeless populations (Doyle 1999, Boydell, Goering, Morell-Bellai 2000, Mallet, Rosenthal, Keys 2005, O’Conner 2003, Wagner 1993). Moreover, studies have identified psychotic thought patterns, defined as “paranoid delusions, auditory and visual distortions, and extremely illogical reasoning” (Rossi 1989:152), as well as demoralization consisting of “hopelessness and despair concerning one’s prospects” (Rossi 1989:148) at significantly high levels among groups of homeless.

Although a combination of abuse histories and barriers to accessing social support resources may play into the likelihood of developing a mental illness preceding and leading to homelessness, constant vulnerability to environmental stressors and continuous denial of shelter also create a harsh social and physical environment that negatively affects mental health. Within this context, meeting basic subsistence needs becomes challenging, often necessitating engagement in social deviance (Anderson, Snow, and Cress 1994, Fischer, Shinn, Shrout, and Tsemberis 2008, Snow *et al.* 1986).

Measurements of mental illness based on a scale of what is considered normal in homed populations do not necessarily generalize to homeless populations, simply because the everyday conditions of ‘life on the street’ differ so drastically from life in a stable, fixed home environment (Snow *et al.* 1986). Despite this, medical/psychological measurement instruments have been used repeatedly in homeless research.

Research that highlights the environmental impact of extreme poverty on mental health over time attests that as time on the street accumulates, alcoholism and substance abuse are also likely to advance (Cohen and Wagner 1992, Fischer *et al.* 2008, Vissing 1996). Moreover, considering the extent that high instances of negative social and psychological affects continue to be found among homeless populations, the act of deinstitutionalization and/or the presence of a severe mental illness alone cannot account for the extraordinarily high percentages of homeless study participants who are found to display symptoms of mental illness (Snow *et al.* 1986). Instead we must acknowledge the power of the trauma and difficulty of living on the street for those who are homeless and their displays of mental health and/or what housed people consider “normal” behaviors.

#### Work ethic

From the individualistic perspective, the supposed pathologies of the homeless become subsumed into programs that require participation in therapeutic treatment or life-skills and job training, even as these programs are upheld against structured economic and housing inequality. Causal theories of work-ethic overlook the fact that industrialized capitalist societies structure the conditions of an economically poor-class,

both to maintain a workforce that can support the flexible needs of economic development and to maintain social class hierarchies as status quo (Wagner 1993). An example of a work-ethic perspective is seen when organizations, after failed attempts to assist homeless individuals in finding and keeping employment, conclude that the homeless possess a damaged or maladapted work ethic (Siedman 1998). Likewise, when the homeless turn down work, favor temporary positions and day labor, or support themselves in underground economies, starkly individualistic analyses denounce and reify the notion that the poor and homeless require training in life skills and behavioral or psychological therapy (Siedman 1998, Wagner 1993).

Although individual homeless people may suffer from mental health or substance abuse challenges, or may lack certain skills or display behaviors that make finding or holding a job difficult, structural barriers are also in place. In treating homeless populations indiscriminately as in need of therapy and life skills training, social services risk mistakenly applying a degrading and unproductive approach to helping those who do not suffer these problems. This generalized individualization of homeless social services has been criticized heavily for a number of years by social sciences researchers.

#### Individualization within services

Instead of illuminating connections between systemic influences and individual actions, individualist theories locate the cause and solution to homelessness within homeless individuals. Recommendations based on this approach lead to solutions aimed at modifying behaviors, activities, or psychological states of individuals. The “troubled

people industries” (Gusfield 1989:432) concomitantly arise to fix the individual pathologies of homeless people in order to fix the social problems caused by homelessness. Also known as the “within-person” treatment perspective, which is based on a “re-integrationist ideology,” this paradigm aims to remedy the problems of homelessness through behavioral therapy, on the basis that social norms, rather than structural barriers, are primarily what separate the homeless from the homed (Fischer *et al.* 2008).

By promoting individualistic or medically/psychologically based perspectives of homelessness, social service entities and organizations may inadvertently reinforce stigmatizing stereotypes of homeless people, or excuse and ignore existing structural inequalities at the institutional level that prevent access to housing. Hence, social service programs that identify individual attributes as responsible for causing homelessness risk contributing to the process of alienation already experienced by homeless communities by portraying them as deviant and in need of both moral and spiritual help (Gusfield 1989). Social programs based entirely on within-person theories of psychological and social rehabilitation, that “pose as the arbiters of standards,” risk becoming “an accompaniment to social control” (Gusfield 1989:438). If working solely from an individualistic perspective, organizations hold homeless individuals responsible for their own self-improvement without providing the ways or means to generate structural opportunities.

## Homeless Policy

### Structuralism and individualism revisited

Overall, the policy recommendations that are found at the end of research reports and monographs can be traced back to theoretical perspectives that underlie the research. Program and research designs and philosophies generally are built upon individualistic, structural, or collaborative perspectives. Those policies that are informed by the “within-person” individualistic perspective (Fischer *et al.* 2008) operate under the assumption that deficiencies in social skills or individual abnormalities are the primary cause of differences between the homeless and the housed. It follows that this perspective proposes behavioral and psychological therapy as the foremost solution to solving problems related to homelessness.

Unfortunately, an unintended consequence of widespread medicalization and individualization of homelessness in research and policy has created an inert status quo, whereby legislation to address structural deficiencies in housing are confounded by emphasis on behavioral therapy. The complexity of issues at stake has created a stagnant situation, whereby social and legislative responsibility for addressing the range of institutions contributing to the reproduction of homelessness is both undermined and unclear (Ellickson 1996, Lee *et al.* 1992). Similarly, while portrayal of the homeless “emphasizing their visible physical and social handicaps may relieve [them] of moral responsibility of their condition...it also casts them as passive and dependent subjects of

care” (Hoch 1989:208), rendering homeless communities dependent on an inadequate and politicized legislative system of services and assistance.

An alternative to medicalization of homelessness is the ‘Housing First’ model, which focuses on offering structural solutions to the problems of homelessness. As their name suggests, ‘Housing-First’ program models attest that the best way to solve problems of homelessness is through establishing more low-income housing options or transitional living programs. They recommend that housing is required in order for substance abuse or mental health treatment to be successful, and before individuals can find steady employment. Housing-First models are supported by research that shows when homeless individuals are provided with housing they also have positive outcomes in terms of substance abuse and mental health (Tsemberis, Gulcur, and Nakate 2004).

Public perception of homelessness can be influenced by policies that portray homelessness as either an individual or systemic problem. In political terms, the widespread attribution to structure can sometimes become self-defeating (Ellickson 1996:1219) because research has shown that “within virtually every segment of the population, more Americans attribute homelessness to structural forces rather than internal deficiencies” (Lee, Lewis, & Jones 1992:547). However, although the general public is better informed about the structural inequalities sustaining homelessness, social, political, and legislative forces continue to reproduce inequality. For example, Business Improvement Districts and private citizens, acting on the belief that *another* social entity or specified social welfare institution should be responsible to provide homeless services, may respond with stricter exclusionary measures and anti-homeless policies (Ellickson

1996). These may include policies that monitor, criminalize and sanction the everyday subsistence activities of poor and homeless people, enforce strict private property rights favoring businesses, and regulate (based largely on appearance) who is allowed to be seen in, and use, public spaces (Herbert 2008).

Still other perspectives emphasize more inclusive and collaborative approaches to homelessness that provide a range of services through a wrap-around style program. For instance, a recent study in Oregon used this model to provide housing, childcare and parenting classes, skills-based employment training, mental health and substance abuse services, to homeless study participants. Although the study and program provided a range of support structures, and had the support of labor unions and government funding, its success was still relatively limited to the single, white male demographic (Goetz and Shmiege 1996).

In the Oregon study, the researchers postulated that fewer women applied because the job-training program was in construction (seemingly a good fit for a homeless assistance program, but in a very male-dominated field). Non-English speaking applicants were turned away and were instead referred to English language classes, with the reason being that neither the research program nor the local construction industry could support the language and translation needs of non-English speaking participants. Finally, of those who were eligible and participated in the study, homeless families had the most difficult time functioning in the multiple-family temporary living arrangement, which affected their overall success in completing the program (Goetz and Shmiege 1996).

This example points to the need for services in homeless assistance to be tailored to diverse populations in order to address their specific needs. In the following chapter, I elaborate on the unique qualities and characteristics of youth homelessness, and set the stage for my analysis and evaluation of the services provided for homeless rural youth by RAVEN Project. In addition to theoretical models which focus on structural or individual level causes of homelessness, there are studies and theories which focus on more social-psychological components of homelessness. In the following section we explore these dimensions in depth, by considering the social and psychological implications of having a “homeless identity” and uncovering what type of ‘self’ is implied in being homeless.

## CHAPTER 3 STUDIES OF HOMELESSNESS

This chapter provides studies of homelessness that use the concept of a homeless identity to understand how homeless communities and cultural norms are shaped. These studies are aimed at uncovering how social processes operate both within homeless communities and between the homeless and the homed. In particular, this chapter explores how processes of identity work and social or collective action may perpetuate or effect change in homeless peoples' relative experiences of homelessness in their lives.

### Homeless Identities

Studies of identity, stigma, and coping mechanisms employed by the homeless account for a large theoretical body of research. Observations of homeless populations analyzed through a social psychological lens draw on theories of identity and stigma that often isolate and explain interactions both within homeless social networks and between the homeless and the homed. Both Goffman's (1963) theory of impression management (Anderson *et al* 1994, Boydell *et al.* 2000, Bunis, Yancik, and Snow 1996, Schwalbe, Godwin, Holden, Schrock, Thompson, and Wolkomir 2000), and Garfinkle's (1956) insights into shame, processes of social stratification, and individuation (Schwalbe *et al* 2000) have been applied to many studies of homelessness.

Researchers who apply a social psychological framework to the study of homelessness attempt to understand the range of behaviors and activities that allow

homeless individuals to preserve a positive sense of self. These studies look at the impact of stressful environmental and physical conditions, social isolation and alienation, and prolonged stigmatization on homeless individuals and their social networks. In the following section, I identify tactics of identity work that researchers have observed among homeless individuals, which are aimed at restoring a positive sense of self in socially and psychologically degrading circumstances.

### Stigmatization

Homeless individuals experience prolonged and repeated stigmatization by dominant society (Anderson *et al* 1994, Boydell *et al.* 2000, Bunis *et al* 1996, Schwalbe *et al* 2000, Wardhaugh 1999). Stigmatization contributes to and deepens fragmentation of their identities. One outcome of this ‘disintegration of the self’ is that homeless individuals may “cling to selves situated in the past or create selves oriented to the future” (Boydell *et al* 2000:30). In essence, their past, present, and futures “blend into one another [...] for a number of reasons related to their biographies” (Boydell *et al* 2000:30).

The generalized delusion and disconnect with reality among homeless populations, often characterized as mental illness by psychological models, has been responded to by researchers who directly address stigma as a primary factor (Anderson *et al* 1994, Boydell *et al* 2000). These researchers explain that it is normal for individuals to feel shame in the context of socially stigmatizing situations. They also point out that a positive sense of self may actually be preserved by drawing on memories of past

accomplishments in times of social degradation or humiliation (Anderson *et al* 1994, Boydell *et al* 2000). Hence, the behaviors that are commonly associated with ‘personality disorders’ are better understood as socially constructed, predictable behavioral responses to challenging social environments, characterized by exclusion, alienation, and stigmatization (Anderson *et al* 1994). The tactics used by the homeless to preserve their identities occur through processes of identity work.

### Identity work

The interactive processes of identity construction involve evaluation and comparison. In this process, individuals determine whether a particular identity is evaluated positively or negatively, by drawing on “culturally shared fundamental meanings that we associate with social labels” (Robinson & Smith-Lovin 2006:140). Identities are constructed interactively, and “identity work revolves around responding to behavioral norms and the meanings they inscribe” (Howard 2000:372). Analyses of interviews with homeless individuals on the topic of their identity and association with homelessness reveal both the presence of continual stigmatization, and responses that serve to actively preserve or recreate a positive identity (Boydell *et al.* 2000).

Due to stereotypes, stigmatization, and the relative lack of power and resources experienced by homeless communities, the label “homeless” may be ascribed to individuals who do not self-identify with the term (Anderson *et al* 1994, Cohen and Wagner 1992 Wardhaugh 1999). Simply owning the label “homeless” can bring about feelings of public humiliation and personal disgrace, as the terminology alone can invoke

overwhelmingly negative associations. Not surprisingly, self-avowal of the homeless identity is likely to be avoided (Snow and Anderson 1987).

Given their low access to resources, identity work among the homeless can actually result in even greater exposure to stigmatization and shame (Anderson *et al* 1994). Among homeless communities, positive identity preservation is believed to occur primarily through talk, although behavioral tactics of passing, covering, defiance, and collective action have also been identified as positive identify-affirming activities (Anderson *et al* 1994).

Covering refers to homeless individuals' use of stereotypical aspects of the 'homeless appearance' to their advantage, by using 'props' to interact with domiciled citizens, which 'covers' the negative impact of stigmatization (Anderson *et al* 1994). Passing involves not revealing one's homeless status, and attempting to pass as a domiciled resident to avoid stigmatization by homed persons and by authorities. Collective action, including involvement in homeless activist networks, has been linked to positive identity affirmation, as well as to long-term beneficial outcomes with regard to housing (Cohen and Wagner 1992).

Cohen and Wagner's (1992) study of identity and political action among the homeless is useful in conceptualizing how collective action forms a beneficial aspect of street networks for intervention in homelessness. I elaborate more on this, and on the concepts of role-embracing or role-distancing (Snow and Anderson 1987) later in this chapter, within in a discussion of collective action and activism. However, before considering collective action, let us first turn to identity talk.

## Identity talk

Most likely because it does not require extensive material resources, identity talk has been observed at length in homeless communities as a key strategy to building cohesion and empathy among peers, and affirming narratives of personal strength and human dignity (Anderson *et al* 1994, Cohen and Wagner 1992, Wardhaugh 1999).

Identity talk refers to communication patterns within and between social groups that hold meaning to group members and that serve to create a greater bond, or to distance and divide (Howard 2000). Identity talk allows individuals to define their relationship to a social identity (Howard 2000). From the perspective of identity talk, homeless people may choose to distance or embrace the identity of homelessness, depending on their evaluation of the term ‘homeless,’ the perception of homelessness held within their own social networks, and the stereotypes associated with homelessness held by the larger domiciled community with whom they interact.

Tactics such as identity talk form in-group cohesion among homeless peers. Snow and Anderson *et al* (1994) defined identity talk among the homeless in the communities they studied in Austin, Texas, where homeless friends shared positive and supportive affirmations. The classic example from this study is found in the common testimonial between homeless folks of just being “down on their luck.” By sharing sentiments that located the source of suffering in homelessness as being outside of the self (such as “luck”), homeless friends were able to cope with exceedingly difficult circumstances.

While in-group identity enhancing tactics may strengthen the bond between the members of street networks, they may have the reverse effect on relations with their

domiciled neighbors (Anderson *et al* 1994). For example, a homeless individual who has minimal social or material power may “act out” in order to feel more in control over their situation or circumstances. However, this defiance may inadvertently reinforce negative stereotypes of homelessness, held by the domiciled public. This effect is likely to worsen the situation and the stigmatization (1994).

Negative stereotypes and stigmatization create an unfriendly social atmosphere, over which the homeless have limited control as a result of their low social capital and status. However, through efforts to reclaim personal autonomy and control over their identity, homeless individuals who mobilize around political action can build empowerment and a supportive community within homeless street networks. Researchers have described mobilization of homeless communities’ social networks as both collective withdrawal and collective action.

#### Collective withdrawal

In some instances, the constant imposition of stigmatization results in intentional collective withdrawal of homeless communities from domiciled society (Boydell *et al.* 2000, Cohen and Wagner 1992). Collective withdrawal enhances solidarity with an alternative in-group, and usually results in a positive impact on one’s sense of self and social identity (Hegtvedt 2006). It has also been linked to self-empowerment among activist groups with few material resources (Cohen and Wagner 1992, Cress 1997). Likewise, a homeless community provides solidarity, belongingness, trust, and commitment to otherwise alienated and stigmatized homeless people (Boydell *et al.*

2000, Cohen and Wagner 1992). Cohesive homeless social networks offer emotional and psychological shelter for their members (Boydell *et. al* 2000), and provide a foundation from which to mobilize for social change. In addition to providing an outlet for direct action aimed at social change, collective action or ‘homelessness as a social movement’ (Blau 1992) counteracts political and social perceptions of homelessness as “bare life” (Feldman 2004), and instead favors a grassroots empowerment framework.

### Collective action

In their longitudinal study of affiliation and activism Cohen and Wagner (1992) trace the underpinnings of homelessness as a social movement to the historical association between ‘tramping’ and radical political action. Their study participants were homeless and formerly homeless participants in a tent city protest that occurred three years prior to the study. In their interviews they found that many tent city protest participants were no longer homeless three years later, and that the majority had been able to find more permanent housing and continued to work as activists and advocates for the homeless.

Cohen and Wagner’s (1992) study also identified whether or not participants displayed strong associational ties to a homeless identity, and explored the factors that played into this dynamic. They found that “militants,” or individuals who had strongly embraced a homeless identity, had also taken a strong political position on homelessness as a structural issue. Militants were also passionate about their political participation and activism for social change. On the other hand, “individualists” distanced themselves from

the homeless identity by blaming the homeless (and one would think, consequently themselves) for their dire circumstances. This group was qualitatively different from the militants, and “incrementalists<sup>3</sup>,” in that they were generally older, experienced more severe alcoholism, and had come from families with higher socioeconomic standing (Cohen and Wagner 1992).

These findings speak to the importance of noticing the nuances within homeless individuals’ self-avowal of their identity. They point to identity work as a catalyst for social change, and provide insight into the ways in which identity shapes and influences one’s propensity to take steps towards becoming housed. Overall, Cohen and Wagner’s (1992) findings suggest that even with limited access to material resources the choice to become involved in activism represented a substantial strength in adversity that seemed to have later paid off in terms of finding and securing greater stability in housing. Collective action among the homeless has been found to increase their potential for both self and community empowerment. Therefore, the processes of identity work that influence activist behavior should not be overlooked or discounted, especially by service providers and homeless advocates. Moreover, processes related to identity work and collective action can be further understood by looking at how homeless individuals define their relationship to homelessness, referred to here as ‘the discourse of choice.’

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<sup>3</sup> Participants who displayed “categorical associational distancing” (Wagner 1992: 35).

## The discourse of choice

Social psychology tells us that through the transformation of shamefulness to pride, a positive sense of self may be restored (Lawler 2006). The choice of role-embracing or role-distancing by homeless individuals becomes fundamentally important to the construction of their identities, depending on the value that they ascribe to the experience and meaning of 'homelessness.' Similarly, by taking active involvement in either distancing themselves from the homeless identity or embracing it, individuals are empowered to "choose their own location within the home-to-homeless continuum" (Wardhaugh 1999:105). From this perspective, individuals who assert that they choose homelessness may also be attempting to regain control over difficult life circumstances, acting within the opportunity structures available to them. Also, the experiences of stigma and shame documented in interviews with homeless people reveal their strength and resilience (Wardhaugh 1999, Zufferey and Kerr 2004), and imply a well-earned sense of pride that is directly related to homelessness. However, when taken from the perspective of domiciled public, the suggestion that homelessness is a matter of choice generally has a distinct two-fold function.

On the one hand, it serves as both "right-wing rhetoric" (Doyle 1999:243) to justify inadequate developments in public assistance and policy, and undermines the every-day struggles of homelessness by identifying them as "better than the fled home" (Doyle 1999:243). It subjects homeless individuals' sense of agency and capacity for self-direction to skepticism and blame, and assumes they have chosen to follow a lifestyle of social degradation and misfortune. From the perspective of the domiciled public, the

discourse of choice highlights the “bare-life” qualities of homelessness, which portrays all homeless individuals as having lived and experienced the same life (Feldman 2004).

Understanding the discourse of choice has implications for policy. Within the framework of collective action, identity sheds light onto individual experiences with homelessness, and impacts their entrances and exits from it. For this reason, perhaps the most relevant of all places to address the discourse of choice is in the context of youth homelessness, as the term “youth” itself implies transition and opportunity to choose one’s path in life. We will explore elements of homeless youth identity in greater detail in Chapter 4, and again refer to the discourse of choice in Chapters 5 and 6, which cover the work I have done with RAVEN Project youth. But first I will take you through a brief overview of the research on youth homelessness, synthesizing these elements of structure, individualism, identity and policy related to homeless youth populations.

## CHAPTER 4 STUDIES OF HOMELESS YOUTH

### How Youth Are Portrayed

Studies of youth homelessness are similar to those of adult populations in their use of individualized perspectives both in recommendations for services provision as well as analysis of identity and experiences with social stigma. Studies of homeless youth also focus on personal and family histories as precursors to homelessness, especially for runaway youth. Many also take issues of educational assistance and other policies aimed specifically at helping homeless youth reintegrate into society as their main focus. In this chapter, we'll first look at studies which focus on homeless youth histories as they are presented in the literature, before we move into a discussion of how stigmatization and social networks operate in youth populations, briefly touching on salient cross-cultural differences. We will finish with a section on how researchers have highlighted, and how services providers can capitalize on, homeless youth social network capabilities, their strengths, and resiliency.

#### Histories of violence and abuse

Similar to adult homeless populations (O'Conner 2003), homeless youth have experienced, and are at greater risk of experiencing, multiple forms of abuse at substantially higher rates than their homed peers (Bernstein and Foster 2008, Ferguson 2009, Leeuwen *et al.* 2004, Nolan 2006, Whitbeck, Hoyt and Bao 2000). They are also at

a greater risk for “multitype maltreatment”<sup>4</sup> (Ferguson 2009). Role reversal may also be common in the families of homeless youth, whereby children are called upon to console or care for depressed parents in times of crisis (Lindsey 1998, Vissing 1996).

In studies with homeless adults, social exclusion via stigmatization, and chronic instability in housing and in their relationships with services providers, were likely to exacerbate feelings of alienation and distrust of society. This instability and social alienation in turn triggered memories traumatic childhood experiences (O’Conner 2003). Similarly, research has shown that homeless youth mental health is likely to deteriorate further after leaving an abusive home environment and becoming homeless (Martijn and Sharpe 2006, Whitbeck, *et al.* 2000), whereby “harsh or abusive parenting [are] accentuated by the trauma of homelessness,” and result in “co-occurring disorders or the exacerbation of comorbid conditions” (2000:729).

Through (re)experiencing patterned violent or disturbing experiences since leaving the home of origin and encountering exposure to victimization and abuse in homelessness, youth are exposed to compounded vulnerabilities, made worse by continued marginalization, stigmatization, isolation, and neglect. Moreover, the effects of these traumatic events on homeless youth appear to be stratified by gender, a finding that may be useful for social services in addressing individual youth needs in assistance<sup>5</sup>. For example, girls have been found to be more likely than boys to report symptoms of Post-

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<sup>4</sup> Multitype maltreatment refers to “the coexistence of one or more types of abuse, including physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse/neglect, psychological abuse, verbal abuse, and witnessing familial abuse” (Ferguson 2001: 1876).

<sup>5</sup> For example, RAVEN Project offers a “girl’s space” weekly support group for homeless young women.

Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) related to physical, emotional, and sexual trauma, both in childhood and in more recent life experiences. Studies have also found that homeless girls were more likely to report symptoms of depression and anxiety, along with symptoms of PTSD (Gwadz, Viorst, Nish, Leonard and Strauss 2007). Knowing this, organizations might provide support services specifically for girls that work to address some of these issues. Other considerations by services providers include factors related to geographic location, sexual orientation, and ties to family.

### Intersections of Families, Identities, and Place

Causes of homelessness in youth have been linked to early or prior experiences of drug/alcohol abuse, traumatic experiences, and family problems (Martijn and Sharpe 2006), and these early experiences have been linked to increased risk for violence, drug/alcohol abuse, traumatization, victimization, depression, and criminality, while on the streets (Whitbeck *et al.* 2000). However, regardless of an individual youth's path to homelessness or their prior family history, research finds exposure to criminality and risk experienced in homelessness effects youth from all backgrounds.

Research in both the United States and Australia overwhelmingly points to experiences of domestic abuse, physical and emotional neglect, and generalized trauma, as precursors to youth homelessness (Martijn and Sharpe 2006, Whitbeck, *et al.* 2000). In this same regard, research based on a number of international studies of homeless youth finds "pathways to and experiences of homelessness [as] strikingly similar across cultures" (Thompson, Kim, McManus, Flynn, and Kim 2007:783).

On the other hand, a study of run-away Hmong immigrant girls in Minnesota found that children left for reasons other than the high rates of intra-familial abuse. Rather, Hmong girls left home because of cultural conflict, in particular, gender role expectations (Saewyc, Solsvig, and Edinburgh 2007). Nonetheless, like their American counterparts, Hmong runaways experienced the risks associated with homelessness including sexual exploitation and victimization on the streets at very high rates (Saewyc *et al.* 2007, Thompson *et al.* 2007). These findings raise the question of what factors contribute to the amount of risk that homeless youth experience.

#### Situational deviance, criminality, risk

The basic circumstances of homelessness create a social environment characterized by situational delinquency for homeless youth. Studies have found both hunger and shelter to be significantly related to theft and criminality among homeless youth (McCarthy and Hagan 1992). Gender has also been found to channel youth into types of delinquency: homeless females are more likely to engage in prostitution (or survival sex), and males more likely to steal food or commit theft. Furthermore, younger homeless youth have been found to be more likely to steal food, and youth from lower class backgrounds, more likely to engage in serious theft (McCarthy and Hagan 1992).

The criminality of homeless youth is heightened by their vulnerability to commit crimes related to survival. It is also compounded by law enforcement and social policies that inconsistently sanction subsistence behaviors engaged in by homeless youths.

Panhandling, loitering, and trespassing ordinances are but a few examples of such

policies that increase situational delinquency. These policies cause frustration and confusion among homeless youth in dealing with shifting rules and expectations by authorities, and lead youth to resist and/or avoid law enforcement personnel (Miles and Okamoto 2008). This further contributes to the overall vulnerability that they experience in the streets (Foster and Bernstein 2008).

The role that families take during spells of homelessness has been found to impact youth involvement in risky behaviors. Among youth who used social services in the Denver study mentioned previously, those who reported currently living with family were significantly less likely than their homeless peers to abuse substances (Leuwen *et al.* 2004). Homelessness, in this case, was defined as couch surfing, living with friends or other family, squatting, sleeping on the street, in a shelter, or “other,” and homeless status was found to increase youth’s propensity for substance abuse (Leuwen *et al.* 2004).

Although this particular study did not explore the impact of entire family homelessness on risk (for example, youth who lived with their families in shelter or on the streets), it did find that among youth who were contacted on the streets, living with family provided a protective defense against substance abuse. Whereas this snapshot study explored the role of family for metropolitan youth, the experiences of homeless youth in rural areas may be impacted by other structural factors as well. Moreover, studies of rural youth in particular have found that the population was comprised of young people from many different living circumstances and backgrounds. The population included youth who became homeless “in order to be safe;” youth who were ‘pushed’ or

“kicked out” of their homes; “those who can’t go home;” “those for whom homelessness is normal;” and “those who had previously lived in foster care” (Vissing 1996:20).

Although research has indicated that during spells of homelessness, both urban and rural youth experience increased health risks and problems, alcohol abuse, family violence, and educational problems (Vissing 1996:30). Further research specifically in rural areas finds that “these conditions are exacerbated for children in areas where there are fewer services, not as many professionals, and a paucity of recourses with which to address problems” (1996:30). The impact of these problems is therefore likely to be worse in geographic locations such as rural environments where easy access to support services is limited (Barak 1991, Fisher 2005, Vissing 1996). Additionally, just as geographic location can create obstacles for addressing issues of homelessness, youth in the foster care system face multiple hardships in receiving support services even in locations where they do exist.

Problems of substance abuse and domestic violence histories are found among homeless youth at higher rates than in the general population, and foster youth and former foster youth are overrepresented among homeless populations. Furthermore, the multiple problems that foster youth face are often directly related to their experience with the foster care system. (Vissing 1996). Researchers estimate each year 20,000 youth exit foster care “with the expectation that they will be able to live self-sufficiently” (U.S. General Accounting Office 1999:1). However, many of these youths experience problems of homelessness, chronic unemployment or employment instability, early pregnancy, and incarceration after exiting the system (U.S. General Accounting Office 1999).

Despite indications that homeless and foster youth may experience very similar life circumstances, both resulting in serious interpersonal, structural, and psychological challenges, legislation intended to provide social service assistance specifically to ‘homeless youth’ problematically disqualifies ‘foster youth’ from these programs (Vissing 1996). Foster youth are not considered legally homeless, because federal funds are already being paid into services on their behalf for ‘placements.’ However, the placements are all too often difficult experiences, especially for older adolescents, who are “shuffled from one home to another, often experiencing a variety of abuses along the way” (Vissing 1996:29). As a result of the multiple hardships experienced in the foster care system and beyond, foster youth are thirty percent more likely to abuse substances, and fifty percent more likely to have a history of domestic violence than the homeless youth population as a whole (Vissing 1996:28).

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, questioning (LGBTQ) youth make up another sub-category among homeless youth who face multiple challenges both contributing to and impacting their experiences of homelessness. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) estimates between twenty and forty percent of the homeless youth population identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force 2007), and that twenty-six percent of all queer teens are kicked out of otherwise financially stable homes after ‘coming out’ to their parents.

Research in program evaluation for LGBTQ homeless youth services report that this population requires positive role models, particularly by adults who accept them and celebrate their sexualities and gender identities unconditionally. Additionally, for youth

who become homeless suddenly, services should provide role models who can teach youth to survive on their own and help them to acquire skills related to shopping, budgeting, employment, and communication (Nolan 2007). According to one LGBTQ homeless youth advocate, “ a safe place for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth can be a major factor in keeping some disenfranchised youth from becoming homeless adults” (Nolan 2007:387).

Further research on homeless LGBTQ youth specifically has addressed how their exposure to risks inherent in street-based subsistence work is likely to intensify with problems of homophobia and transphobia. These issues effect youth on an individual as well as institutional level, as they may experience homophobia, discrimination and hate crimes (Cochran, Steward, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002).

LGBT Homeless youth populations face an array of health risks, including increased risk of HIV, STD's and pregnancy (Cochran *et al.* 2002, Nolan 2007). Survival crimes, such as sex work, robbery, and drug selling place homeless youth at high risk for arrest, and LGBT youth who engage in these activities do so at an even greater risk for arrest because of discrimination and homophobia (Nolan 2007). Transgender youth who do sex work on the street are the most at risk because of transphobia from both customers and police officers (Nolan 2007:389). However, stigmatization of homeless youth by domiciled citizens, and by social and public services is not limited to the LGBT population.

## Stigmatization

Homeless youth have been said to be “dually stigmatized” (Miles and Okamoto 2008:428), because of the compounding factors of age, and homeless status. Other variables believed to influence experiences of stigma and self-blame include self-esteem, loneliness, suicidal ideation, involvement in sex-work and panhandling, time on the streets, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation (Kidd 2007). Self-blame and stigmatization also function in different ways according race and gender, as do subsistence activities of panhandling or sex work, such that minorities and youth involved in sex work experience greater stigmatization related to these social statuses, rather than their homeless status. Despite differences, the general population of homeless youths suffer significantly high levels of self-blame and stigmatization (Kidd 2007).

Similar to identity work strategies found among adult populations (Anderson *et al* 1994) homeless youth may “cover” their homeless status, or attempt to “pass,” when negotiating interaction with the general homed public (Roschelle and Kaufman 2004). Youth may also further distance themselves from the general public by making themselves appear threatening, intimidating, or powerful through physical and sexual posturing. Physical posturing could include certain in-group manners of speaking, verbally denigrating out-groups to make homeless youth feel superior, or dressing and walking a certain way. Sexual posturing, identified as evidence of exaggerated or inappropriate sexual maturity, has been understood as attempts by homeless youth to “use sexuality to validate themselves” (Roschelle and Kaufman 2004:39).

Like studies of adult homeless identity construction (Anderson *et al* 1994, Cohen and Wagner 1992, Wardhaugh 1999), studies of homeless youth identity indicate that cognitive or social association with the status of homelessness poses challenges to their identity (Roschelle, Kaufman 2004). Although stigmatization of the homeless identity may be drawn from interactions with the general population, as well as from interactions with law enforcement and social services providers (Roschelle and Kaufman 2004), homeless youth still find ways to preserve or (re)create positive social and personal identities. In-group identity enhancing strategies might include building friendships with service providers and adult role models who are not currently homeless, or spending time with a peer group of homeless youth in a supportive environment, such as a service center (Roschelle and Kaufman 2004). In this way these youth work to find positive ways to frame their identification as homeless youth, even as the larger society frames this identity in a solely negative manner.

#### Peer networks

Homeless youth rely on supportive social networks for positive identity verification (Roschelle and Kaufman 2004), protection, companionship, inspiration and motivation, and for sharing and locating resources (Bender *et al.* 2007, Thompson *et al.* 2007). A recent study of street youth in Korea found that youth were able to “recognize each other by appearance and demeanor” (Thompson *et al.* 2007:787), and that they helped each other by sharing information, such as where to find food and shelter.

Not all homeless youth associate with a close network of homeless peers, and research on street youth in the Denver Metropolitan area found that youth with no social network at all were at higher risk of engaging in survival sex (Ennet *et al.* 1999). In street networks that included drug or heavy alcohol users, or if pressure to engage in prostitution existed, youth were also found to be more likely to use drugs than those whose networks did not include heavy drug and alcohol users and/or sex workers. As an exception to this overall finding, Black youth were less likely than Hispanic or White youth to have a network; yet they were also less likely to report substance abuse, multiple sex partners, and survival sex (1999:68). Still, in spite of the prevalence of findings that suggest a negative impact, social networks remain, overall, a necessary support system for homeless youth (Ennet *et al.* 1999) because they provide information on housing, food, and also can provide safety, and social support.

Like the positive function of supportive peer networks, maintaining close ties to family members has been linked to a reduction in risk for youth on the street (Leuwen *et al.* 2004). However, also like the benefits of social networks, the positive role of family is conditional, depending on the family's drug use behaviors (Ennett, *et al.* 1999). Moreover, because of the prevalence of domestic abuse histories, reunification with family, although often portrayed as the ultimate success in providing services to homeless and runaway young people, may not necessarily be a beneficial or viable intervention strategy (Ennet *et al.* 1999, Thompson, Kost, and Pollio 2003).

## Strength and resilience

Despite the prevalence of research on mental illness, stigma, and abuse experiences, a few studies point to the experiences of homeless individuals as evidence of exceptional strength in adversity. These studies suggest that resiliency is one positive attribute of a homeless identity (Wardhaugh 1999, Zufferey and Kerr 2004). An alternative to the heavy emphasis in the research on abuse histories, criminality, and stigmatization of homeless youth, is a social program and research paradigm which adopts a “strengths-based perspective” to identify the various aspects of fortitude that allow youth to survive and succeed in homeless lifestyles” (Bender, Thompson, McManus, Lantry, and Flynn 2007:38).

Homeless youth possess street smarts, skills to avoid danger, locate resources, and earn money, and substantial internal strengths related to coping, motivation, attitudes, and spirituality. They have well developed coping mechanisms including the ability to form exceptionally supportive and diverse peer networks. Their ability to access resources through various community members and organizations shows that homeless youth have tremendous survival skills (Bender *et al.* 2007:30). Interestingly, their interpersonal relationships, including those with their pets, may serve as a source of motivation and inspiration, motivating them to “be responsible and avoid situations that [are] likely to lead to separation from or harm to their pets” (Bender *et al.* 2007:38). All of these factors of homeless youth identity and experience should be taken into account when developing social services that will meet youth needs, particularly their strengths and capacity for self and community empowerment.

## Homeless Youth Policy

Like programs serving adult homeless populations, youth-based programs may operate under approaches of individualism, structuralism, and collective action. Youth-based research that takes a psychological and individualized approach tends to recommend policies related to best practices in treatment of mental illness or substance abuse. For example, after a point-in-time study of Denver street youth, Leeuwen *et al* (2004) suggest that understanding the relationship between drug use and demographic background may assist service providers in designing age/gender appropriate programs.

Similarly, Ferguson's (2009) study, which indicated the prevalence of 'multitype maltreatment'<sup>6</sup> in homeless youth populations, recommended that organizations consider mental health and abuse histories when providing services for youth. Due to such high incidences of multiple forms of abuse in her study population, youth who admit to having one past experience should be expected to have experienced abuse in other forms, as well. Her study concluded with recommendations to homeless youth service providers that the likelihood for multitype maltreatment should be taken into consideration, especially through the provision of mental health services. In addition to considering the impact of family history, social service providers stand to benefit from utilizing comprehensive approaches that include addressing structural inequalities related to access to housing and employment. Programs such as these provide ways for youth to gain the

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<sup>6</sup> See page 49 for definition of term.

resources or skills necessary to enter or re-enter, and remain, in these institutions of society.

#### Youth empowerment models and intervention

Many recent studies call for approaches to homeless youth services that emphasize youth empowerment (Bender *et al.* 2007, Bridgeman 2001, Ennet *et al.* 1999, Foster and Bernstein 2008, Karabanow 2008). One such example is the “Eva’s Phoenix” project in Toronto, which incorporated a structural approach, and recruited and trained youth in construction, while at the same time provided life-skills training. In this venture, the overall mission was to facilitate youth ownership and empowerment over a community project designed to benefit street youth populations (Bridgeman 2001).

Programs that highlight and make use of homeless youth strengths, and employ solutions-based approaches, are recommended as best practices in services (Bender *et al.* 2007). One way to capitalize on youth strengths is by recognizing and utilizing the positive role that social networks provide for homeless youth (Ennet *et al.* 1999). This could be done through implementing a “buddy-system” that pairs a homeless young person with a positive role model in the community, thus providing a protective and encouraging positive relationship (Ennet *et al.* 1999). Programs that involve entire social networks in outreach intervention may also have beneficial and positive outcomes (Ennet *et al.* 1999).

It follows that “intervention programs should focus on early and persistent efforts to provide safe houses and transitional living programs that will offer safe environments

and reduce the risk of street victimization” (Whitbeck *et al.* 2000:730). Moreover, within shelters and transitional living programs, it is important to structure goals, and assist in creating comprehensive, life-skills building plans for youth clients that ensure their success upon program completion (Nolan 2006).

Although parental relationships and family reunification have been identified as a primary goal for intervention in youth homelessness (Thompson *et al.* 2003), when this is not possible, or when it is not in the best interest of the youth due to domestic violence or abuse, community-wide support and development of comprehensive services are required (Miles and Okamoto 2008). This strategy may entail inclusive intervention projects fostering collaboration between law enforcement, concerned residents, parent and activists, public health nurses, schools, and social sciences researchers (Saweyc *et al.* 2007).

Much research that takes policy analysis and recommendations as its focus also emphasizes the need for multi-faceted, community responses to youth homelessness (Foster and Bernstein 2008, Karabanow and Clement 2004, Karabanow 2008, McKay and Hughes 1994, Robertson and Toro 1998). The best practices in social service provision will consider all elements presented in the research on homeless youth, including abuse histories, structural impediments for re-entering society, the impact of situational criminalization and deviance, and victimization while on the streets, as well as demographic variables such as geographic location, age, race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality. Recent research that focuses on developing beneficial and viable policy further

recommends drawing upon the opinions and suggestions of homeless youth themselves to inform successful policy directions (Foster and Bernstein 2008, Karabanow 2008).

This vast body of literature that I have reviewed and presented here on theories and studies of homelessness, homeless policy, homeless youth and homelessness in rural areas brings us to the next chapter of this thesis/project: my work with RAVEN Project. Not surprisingly, certain qualities and characteristics of this literature were apparent in my study. Past research on homeless youth and homelessness in rural areas was very useful in understanding the dynamics that shaped the experiences of the youth populations who I worked with at RAVEN Project, as were findings regarding best practices in programming and intervention for homeless youth. The works that spoke to me the deepest in my review of the literature were studies of homeless communities who engaged in collective action. I drew heavily on this body of theoretical knowledge in both my research design and analysis.

## CHAPTER 5 METHODS

### Working with RAVEN Project

Over the course of the past year, I worked collaboratively with Youth Service Bureau's RAVEN Project to design and implement a youth-directed research project. This research project focused on program evaluation and client needs assessment in services for runaway and homeless youth in Humboldt County. This research took place through Humboldt State University's Masters Degree Program in Practicing Sociology, which requires students to engage in 240 hours of research-related fieldwork with a local community organization. This chapter catalogues my activities during that time, including how I became affiliated with the organization and my roles in working with them. In this chapter, I also recount how this study project came into being, and provide an ongoing narration of the processes involved in this collaborative and participatory study.

#### The setting

RAVEN Project is a drop-in center for homeless, runaway, and at-risk youth age 21 and under, in Eureka, California. It constitutes the outreach branch of the Youth Service Bureau (YSB), a non-profit organization providing both emergency shelter and transitional living programs for youth age 21 and under. RAVEN Project provides basic services for homeless youth including free showers, laundry, meals and clothes, as well as assistance and referrals in other areas, depending on the need and interest of the client.

At the time of my placement, the organizational staff consisted of volunteers, HSU social work interns, two paid supervisors, and two paid youth educators who were hired out of RAVEN Project's target population: homeless youth and their peers. Youth educators and staff members conduct street outreach several times per week in Eureka and Arcata, and twice per month in more remote parts of Humboldt County.

All drop-in services are restricted to the homeless population who are age 21 and under. However, supplies carried during street outreach, including safer sex supplies (condoms and lube) and bleach kits (with instructions for cleaning needles, referrals to social services, and locations for needle exchange programs), are distributed to the older homeless population, as well. RAVEN Project receives weekly donations of day-old pastries from a local Starbucks chain and gives these out during outreach, as well as youth-made zines, referrals, informational flyers, hygiene supplies and fresh socks. Also, when available, a local grain and feed store donates bags of dog food, which are also given out both during outreach and at drop-in.

RAVEN Project is located in a historical house in Eureka with a large backyard that youth clients and staff have converted into a successful organic garden, lovingly named "The Garden of Eatin'." During drop-in hours youth hang out, browse for clothes, eat, drink, watch movies, play video and board games, do homework, practice guitar or drums, work on art projects, and go online. Weekly support groups for youth are hosted at RAVEN Project, and include Youth Garden Group, Drum Circle, Queer Coffee House, Girl's Space, and Art Workshop. These groups are open to, and are attended by youth in

the local community who are not homeless, as well as regular drop-in clients.

Planned Parenthood conducts outreach at RAVEN Project once a month, at which time homeless youth have easy access to free/confidential STD testing, safer sex supplies, and reproductive health education. RAVEN Project also provides assistance in getting identification cards such as birth certificates and social security cards, and emancipation to youth who seek out these services. The staff attends and facilitates mandatory weekly trainings on issues facing homeless youth, such as challenges to mental and physical health, and risk for STD's and sexual/physical violence, and become educated on local resources and referral sources. RAVEN Project operates under a harm-reduction philosophy, meaning that they do not require clients to make lifestyle or living situation changes, or participate in additional programming in order to receive services. However, the staff works to educate youth on making healthy life choices, and assists youth in their areas of need and interest.

RAVEN Project serves a relatively small population, and staff informally collects and records basic demographic information from all clients on regular basis as a part of their funding requirements. In 2009, for example, RAVEN Project served 195 youth, 119 of whom were male, 76 female. Additionally, 149 were white, 19 Native American, seven African American, three Asian, two Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander and 15 "racially mixed," according to Redwood Community Action Agency's Youth Service Bureau brochure, "YSB Services Utilized in 2009."

I first became acquainted with RAVEN Project in April of 2007, while serving as AmeriCorps VISTA with Youth Service Bureau. During this research project I spoke

with many youth who I had known for three years; others I met for the first time. A large proportion of RAVEN Project clients are regulars, or ‘duplicate contacts’ meaning that they access services fairly regularly—usually at least weekly—and many have been coming for years. Therefore, in the interest of confidentiality within our research we decided not to collect any demographic information on our study participants, nor keep any official record of who was asked or had participated. However, to my knowledge, not more than a total of about 5 or 6 clients refused.

### Shifting membership roles

When I first came to Humboldt County with AmeriCorps my job was to raise funds by developing fundraisers and assisting in grant writing, and to provide support for YSB programs. I continued to volunteer with RAVEN Project after ending my AmeriCorps service, and facilitated weekly Youth Garden Groups during 2007 and 2008. Prior to coming to Humboldt County, I lived in rural northern Vermont for five years where I experienced first-hand chronic housing instability, rural homelessness, and poverty. Here in Humboldt County I experienced homelessness and housing instability as well. Before I started the practicing sociology program in Fall 2008 I had not been housed in a fixed location, nor lived consistently with running water or other amenities for six years, and the longest I had remained in ‘one place’ was around three months.

Since my first staff meeting at RAVEN Project as AmeriCorps VISTA, I formed lasting relationships and close friendships with both staff and youth, including the former program coordinator, who had recently moved on to other work at the start of this

research project. Since then RAVEN Project has helped me immensely, and the supportive social networks that I found in the staff have been invaluable. Because of my history and experiences both with homelessness and with RAVEN Project, I believe very strongly in the mission and purpose of serving the diverse needs of homeless youth. I took on this research project out of my strong dedication to supporting homeless youth at the RAVEN Project.

When I had initially expressed to the former program coordinator interest in doing my practicing sociology 'placement' with RAVEN Project, she was hesitant to take on another project due to the time/budget constraints already weighing heavily on the non-profit organization and small staff. Therefore, at the start of this project I had actually begun working with another local organization serving homeless populations. However in the first few weeks after I started the other placement I continued to volunteer in the RAVEN Project garden. At this same time, the former program coordinator left the organization, and was replaced by a new program coordinator, Krista.

During this period of transition in management, I was also negotiating a new place for myself within the organization, according to the new program coordinator's leadership and management style. One afternoon while I was hanging tomatoes, Krista came down to the garden and mentioned her interest in doing a survey on client needs assessment and satisfaction with program services. She had just returned from Washington DC, where she had been reviewing federal grants for programs serving homeless youth, and she thought that statistical/scientific data would help boost RAVEN Project's credibility in competing for funding. I wasn't sure if she proposed this idea to

me because she knew I was a researcher (we had talked previously about my requirements to do a placement), or if she was just ‘thinking out loud.’ However, when she brought up her interest in doing a research project I said, “Now that’s something I could do!” I notified the other organization that an opportunity had come up to work with RAVEN Project, an organization which was much ‘closer to my heart,’ shifted gears, and started planning our research project.

Krista and I agreed that it would be best to include the RAVEN youth-educators, staff, and clients throughout the entire survey project. We knew that participatory action research (PAR) (Berg 2009, Stringer 2007) could be an empowering experience for the entire RAVEN Project organization. PAR practices structure a collaborative, reflective and experiential research process that aligns with nonviolent and democratic ideals, adopting an inclusive, ecological systems perspective of analysis that values group ability for self-direction (Berg 2009).

Before getting into the details of the project, I should mention how my position as a member of RAVEN Project prior to starting this study has played into my role as a researcher. Adler and Adler (1987:8) conceptualize membership roles in research as following “a continuum of roles ranging from empathetic but less involved participant who establishes a peripheral membership role within the group, to the fully committed convert or prior participant.” This continuum proved useful for me, as I have been able to locate myself in my relationship to RAVEN Project between what the authors term “active membership” (51) and “opportunistic” or “complete membership” (67).

In reflecting on this continuum of researcher positionality, I found that my past relationship with RAVEN Project, as well as my deep familiarity with issues facing homeless youth in rural areas, gave me considerable leeway in navigating the field. I was already comfortable with the population and with the organization. However, considering the frequent changes of staff, clients and management at RAVEN Project especially at the start of this study, I felt tensions mount between my new role as a researcher, and my previous role as a complete member.

I say that I am between the markers on the continuum for active and complete membership, because in order to enact my researcher role, I had to take a step back and operate more as an ‘active member,’ and less as ‘complete member.’ I did spend much time working directly with RAVEN Project, especially through our use of a participatory action approach. However, I retreated from the field for long periods of time, especially in developing and synthesizing group input to create the material study instruments, and in doing the analysis and writing the results. I also spent many hours away from RAVEN Project while preparing and presenting my study for approval by the University’s Institutional Review Board.

#### Navigating ethics and consent in youth research

I submitted my application for my research to be approved by HSU’s Human Subject’s Institutional Review Board in November of 2010, and a full Institutional Review Board Hearing was held, because many institutions are troubled in cases where researchers are proposing to work with those under the age of 18. In my case, I was also

proposing that I not gain parental consent, and that I only use implied consent from the youth themselves. I was aware that IRB's across the country have been split on how they have handled the case of such applications for research and so I knew it might be a difficult issue.

In January 2010, after a full institutional board review, I was granted permission from HSU to survey RAVEN Project youth clients. I was not required to provide written parental consent for participants under age 18 on the grounds that they were clients of the RAVEN Project and the executive director of YSB had approved my research<sup>7</sup>. The research also drew participants from a population base where parents were often either absent, or abusive/neglectful. According to well-documented literature on homeless youth, gaining signed consent forms from all parents in such a situation is often not feasible (Mead and Slesnick 2002; Mertens 2009). I also was not asking youth to answer questions about sex, religion, or family life<sup>8</sup> (Mertens 2009:223), but rather to provide feedback about their experiences with, and needs for services provided by RAVEN Project, and my research therefore involved minimal risk to youth participants.

As I considered what it meant to not collect parental consent on homeless youth participants, I grappled with my knowledge of homelessness in rural areas, specifically the high instances of entire family homelessness, as well as the large numbers of youth who are homeless due to domestic violence, abuse, or neglect (Vissing1996). I wanted to

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<sup>7</sup> See official letter from Peter Lavallee, Executive Director Youth Service Bureau (Appendix A).

<sup>8</sup> Other than family life as it directly pertained to program evaluation and client needs assessment at RAVEN Project.

protect the interests and privacy of homeless youth and their families from all of these sub-populations. However, working with a population of youth who potentially had very difficult circumstances related to their ability to produce informed consent made acquiring informed consent problematic; I could not assume that any of my participants would be able to provide it.

Essentially, to respect the right of homeless families to provide informed consent for their children, I would need to ask each youth individually if they were able to provide informed consent. I did not necessarily know, and did not want to assume, who of my sample population was literally homeless and ‘unaccompanied,’ and who was living with family. Similarly, I did not know who (if any) among either category was able to provide consent regardless of their current living situation. Since the intention of my study was not to uncover or expose the personal family histories of homeless youth, but rather to assess their experiences with services, the decision by the IRB to allow my research to go forward without informed consent was a relief. Finally, having received approval from the IRB, we launched forward with plans to do a comprehensive and participatory program evaluation of RAVEN Project.

### Participatory Action Youth Research

Researchers who identify as action researchers engage in varying levels of collaborative work. My action research with RAVEN Project was a mix between Berg’s (2009) practical/collaborative mode, and an empowering/critical mode. Our overall goals were to both conduct concrete needs assessment and program evaluation, as well as

empower youth participants through the process. Ideally action researchers work with all organization members or interested parties. In designing this research project, I followed Berg's (2009:252) phases of action research with RAVEN Project: identifying research questions, gathering information, analyzing and interpreting and sharing the results.

In addition to drawing on general PAR methods, I specifically involved members in a grounded theory approach to both data collection and analysis (Charmaz 2002). Krista had started out with the general question as to how well RAVEN Project was meeting the needs of its target population. But it was not until after meeting with staff and youth educators both during training and in one-on-one meetings that I began to understand the specific areas of need. I asked open-ended questions consistently throughout the process, in order to uncover the topics that the participants themselves raised as salient issues. I kept detailed notes of my conversations with youth educators and staff so that I was able draw on them in creating the survey instruments and focus group interview guide.

Identifying the research questions:  
informal meetings, agency, and focus groups

I proposed the tentative plans for a research project to the whole staff during a regular training. This meeting was our first group planning session, and to start us off, I posed the general question of "how" we would assess client needs and satisfaction with services? The staff conversed over this while I took notes, and before long we had established three areas for research focus 1) evaluating strengths and weaknesses of the program, 2) understanding barriers to program participation, and 3) identifying what

image RAVEN Project has among homeless and non-homeless youth. Initially the staff displayed interest in reaching a broader youth population than drop-in and outreach clients, however working solely with a ‘convenience sample’ proved much more feasible considering our constraints of time and funding.

In this first meeting, staff expressed concerns about privacy, as well as bias in research, and we discussed ways to collect data without invading clients’ comfort zones, or forcing them to “fit inside the box” of a survey questionnaire. I suggested to the staff that we could significantly reduce these problems by taking an approach through which youth educators and clients would participate heavily in the survey instrument design. They liked this idea but were also concerned about the budgeting of staff time to conduct research. Someone suggested that conducting surveys (especially during outreach) might require the help of an extra outreach worker. Later, when the time came to collect data, I became that ‘extra worker’ whenever my schedule allowed.

We also discussed dissemination of results, and without awareness of PAR methods, staff said it was important to them that RAVEN Project youth see something useful come out of the project. To meet this desired outcome, we included survey questions that gauged youth willingness and ability to participate in an expressive/activist project, based off of a set of questions specifically asking “what message” they would bring to the broader community if they had the opportunity. At the end of my formal placement, we were still in the process of planning and designing such a project.

My next meeting was with Nicole, the street outreach worker and Jim, a youth educator who I had known as a client of YSB since I had started working with the

organization. We found time to meet and brainstorm survey questions during “queer coffee house” since the group had not been well attended for a few weeks. I brought Jim a bag of candy and a box of “Cheez-Its,” as he had requested when I asked him what he wanted in return for his help in the survey. He was surprised when I showed up with the incentives, and the three of us sat for about an hour working on the survey.

The questions on the final survey instrument (Appendix B) were almost entirely derived from this session. Jim provided the original language of the questions and advised that we include as many open-ended questions as possible. Although the original wording changed considerably after stages of group editing and refining the study focus over time, the general outline and question categories that came from this meeting are reflected in the final instrument.

In that same meeting with Nicole and Jim, we developed the plan for gathering focus group data on a few specific topics. RAVEN Project was struggling to meet federal requirements that linked funding to outcome data on shelter referrals, job placements, and client assistance with acquiring I.D. cards. Everyone agreed that understanding the nuances of those processes and potential changes really required qualitative data that could address the complexity of both structural and individual barriers to these federally mandated outcomes.

We agreed that focus groups would be a good method to reach our goals on these issues. Focus groups are a recommended practice in action research as a way to share information and results throughout the research process (Berg 2009). They are also a highly appropriate method for collecting information from youth populations. Focus

groups mitigate the unequal power relationship between an adult researcher and youth participants: they emphasize the process of dialogue, interactive group meaning making, and the potential safety created by being with peers (Eder and Fingerson 2002).

Nearly ten weeks passed before I again met with RAVEN Project. By early November most of the faces at RAVEN Project were all new. Youth hired through the summer “Step-Up” program had finished their assignments, and positions for youth educators (which are temporary, lasting a period of 6-months) were also going through a new hiring cycle. New volunteers through the HSU social work program had started their internships, and Nicole, the street outreach worker who had been with the organization when we started the research project, had left and was replaced by Theo, another long-term employee of YSB. This near complete staff-turnover posed methodological as well as logistical challenges, as I had to reestablish legitimacy and trust. However, my long-term affiliation and insider knowledge of RAVEN Project allowed me to keep the process moving forward without too much delay.

At this meeting, I reintroduced myself to staff, volunteers and youth educators as both an HSU student researcher, and a long-term volunteer with RAVEN Project, and briefly brought everyone up to speed on what had already been done on the research project in terms of purpose and study design. We talked briefly about what still needed to be done, namely data collection, interpretation, and analysis, and we again brainstormed over logistics: how to distribute the surveys, what kind of incentives to provide, and how to recruit youth for the focus group.

I also showed a video on homeless youth research and policy<sup>9</sup> during this meeting, to give everyone an idea of the kind of research that had been done recently in California. I used the video as a way to facilitate a discussion about how RAVEN Project would like to design, implement, analyze and share the results of their own study, based on what they liked/disliked about the video. I wanted them to see an example of a relevant study, hoping that their critiques would help direct our process.

Over the course of the rest of the study period, I worked closely with RAVEN Project staff. Their continuous involvement guided the direction of the study. Although staff and youth educators played a role in all phases of study design and data collection, their most crucial contribution to the study was their willingness to share well-informed and critical perspectives on youth homelessness, which essentially guided our study. In particular, RAVEN Project staff (especially youth educators), recognized homeless youth as being more than their relative homelessness, individual circumstances, and needs. Instead, they emphasized their attributes of independence and resilience, and this transformed the central focus of our project away from the all-encompassing needs assessment that we had originally set out to do, to an opportunity to recognize and illuminate the undeniable and amazing strength of character and resourcefulness of homeless youth.

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<sup>9</sup> “Voices from the Street: Homeless Youth Speak Out on State Policy”

## Survey development and distribution

Before dissemination of the surveys, RAVEN Project staff and youth educators had previewed the survey and provided feedback at least three times: once after the initial list of questions was generated, again after I incorporated their input, as well as suggestions from my colleagues and faculty in the HSU sociology department, and one last time to approve the final instrument. The survey results were analyzed using SPSS statistical, or Atlas t.i. qualitative data analysis software, depending on if the question was closed or open-ended. I entered survey responses to multiple response category questions by treating each response category as a single variable with a yes/no response.

I grouped and recoded the responses for the largest multiple response category question according to types, in order to simplify our analysis and to more succinctly conceptualize uses for the data in terms of program development based on needs. I brought preliminary findings to staff meetings during the initial phases of analysis, which initiated conversations as to what to “do” with the data, and what issues still needed to be addressed. I used the input that I gathered from these sessions in steering future analysis, and planning for the dissemination of our findings.

These early results sharing sessions also provided a framework for refining topics of discussion for the focus group. Keeping with my grounded theory approach to PAR, I used the focus group itself as a way to interpret survey results according to youth’s perspectives. I brought visuals (charts and graphs) of the results for several questions. I asked participants to elaborate on the meaning of the categories represented on the charts, and used probing questions to encourage them to speak to the more subjective elements

of their experiences, couched within their initial responses. I entered my notes from the focus group into Atlas.t.i., and coded for themes.

After plans were in place for data collection, and study instruments were prepared and approved, for three weeks prior to collecting data I worked at drop-in, went on outreach, and attended trainings to re-familiarize myself with the staff and clients. This was opportune timing for me to take on regular responsibilities of a staff member, as RAVEN Project was once again in the process of hiring new youth educators, and shifts were open that needed to be filled. It also added to the balancing of reciprocity between my interests as a researcher and a graduate student, and theirs as a non-profit organization that relies on volunteer help. At our final meeting before data collection I asked, again, “what do we want to provide for an incentive?” Theo spoke, “Candy and soda,” because RAVEN doesn’t get that at the food bank and the kids always want it! I purchased the participation incentives at Grocery Outlet, and together with staff, we collected a total of 49 drop-in surveys and 9 outreach surveys in the weeks between February 5<sup>th</sup> and March 15, 2010.

Initially we had planned to have youth educators distribute surveys, but because staff time was already stretched thin, most surveys were collected by me except on days when my schedule did not allow me to be at RAVEN Project. During survey data collection, RAVEN Project was again in the midst of hiring another youth educator, so I accompanied a staff member on outreach to collect surveys until a youth was hired. Since the outreach survey was much shorter than the drop-in survey, taking less than 5 minutes

to complete, when the new youth educator was hired, I stopped going on outreach which allowed the staff to collect the rest of the outreach surveys.

The short length of time allowed for data collection was mainly due to constraints of time and funding both on RAVEN Project staff as well as on me, and this was a major drawback of the outreach portion of the survey project as a whole. The low number of outreach surveys collected was a direct result of these limitations. However, it can also be attributed in part to the fact that February and early March are particularly slow times of year for street outreach in this area. While on outreach trips with staff, we speculated as to “where are all the kids?” and why winter was such a slow time of year, usually concluding that ‘traveling’ youth would return (possibly from warmer climates and/or temporary winter housing arrangements) in early April, when the weather improves and sleeping outdoors was not as detrimental. There was a popular belief in Humboldt County that the opportunity for seasonal work in the marijuana economy attracted some homeless and/or traveling youth in early spring, as well.

#### Focus groups

In late March, I gathered seven clients during drop-in to discuss the preliminary results of the survey. Three females and four males ranging in age from 14 – 21 years old participated. The focus group gave youth participants the opportunity to take a more active role in the research project, and to clarify or elaborate on any of their survey responses. I advertized the meeting one-week prior to the event with flyers posted around

RAVEN Project, which read, “Focus on RAVEN, focus on social change, and focus on you,” and also informed youth that free pizza and soda would be provided (Appendix C).

I had initially planned to co-facilitate the group with Janice, a youth educator who had expressed much interest in doing research, but she had been injured over the weekend and was not able to make it. I had wanted a homeless youth to co-facilitate in order to move the conversation along naturally and ask questions grounded in the shared realities of youth homelessness. Having a peer youth facilitator would have been more consistent with the youth empowerment and ownership of research framework we were working to establish through PAR, and also would have reduced the researcher/researched power imbalance between the group and me. However, since the group was small, and there was no peer youth educator available, I decided to facilitate myself.

The meeting lasted about one-hour. Two participants told me that they came because they had seen the flyers, and another was recruited to participate by one of these youth. I managed to recruit three more, by asking around among youth who had come to drop-in, and Krista found one more youth willing to participate. RAVEN Project is a small and tightly knit organization, so to honor the confidentiality of our group I do not identify youth participants (by name or age) in this report, nor in my use of quotes or in summaries of our group discussion.

A neighborhood restaurant donated pizza and I bought a bottle of soda for the group. I set up the drop-in room with graphs and pie charts from survey results and a flip chart with some markers. I covered the floor with clean sheets for us to sit on. The eight

of us sat on the floor eating pizza, and I opened our group with some basic ground rules<sup>10</sup>, which I wrote on the flip chart. I offered them the option of using a recorder, but after we talked about the benefits (how it can be a big help remembering important things), and the drawbacks (how they can make people feel uncomfortable, inhibited, or even paranoid) we agreed not to use it. As one youth put it, if something comes up that's really important, "chances are you're going to remember it!"

In our staff meeting discussion of how to run the focus group, the possibility of using a tape recorder was also met with some resistance, so I was not surprised when youth in the focus group were averse to using one. I had already prepared to facilitate by taking notes on a flip-chart, to make the process as open and transparent as possible, so that participants could critique my ongoing, inductive coding of their responses. I used my interview guide as a prompt (Appendix D), and followed a flexible agenda (Appendix E), to keep to our one-hour time limit and accommodate the interests of the participants and the direction of our conversation as it unfolded. As the staff and I expected, some youth were more talkative than others, and one youth barely spoke at all. However, we were able to discuss most of the topics we set out to cover, and I was able to facilitate feedback from quieter participants by reminding [the more talkative participants] that everyone had an important perspective to share. I used the data collected in this group to support and understand the survey findings, both of which are reported in Chapter 6.

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<sup>10</sup> Ground Rules: 1) Speak one at a time, 2) Listen, 3) No Rude/Offensive Language/No Hate Speech, 4) Confidentiality

## CHAPTER 6 DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

### Survey Findings

This chapter contains the results of the survey and focus group data analysis. The format in which I present these results begins with survey data analysis, including frequencies of both closed and open-ended responses, followed by chi-square comparative analyses, and findings of the focus group. I include throughout my analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data discussion and interpretation of salient issues, as needed, to understand the depth of these findings. The next chapter (7) then outlines a more general discussion of the findings and theoretical implications of the study, followed by a series of recommendations for RAVEN Project according to the results and the relevant literature.

#### Satisfaction with services

Overall, clients were very satisfied with RAVEN Project services. As can be seen in Table 1, 80 percent ( $n=39$ ) of respondents were always or almost always satisfied with RAVEN Project services. Clients also reported that they used services regularly; between 50-56 percent of respondents indicated that they used drop-in services on each day. Drop-in hours were convenient for 85 percent ( $n=40$ ) of respondents. Half of the respondents reported that drop-in hours would be better utilized if they were scheduled when there was public transportation available (see Table 1). Survey respondents noted difficulties

getting to or from RAVEN Project specifically when county busses were not running, and also asked for more drop-in hours on weekends and when school was not in session in particular. One respondent also requested “more consistent” hours, suggesting that some youth had difficulty remembering when RAVEN Project was open for drop-in and on what days.

Youth were also asked the open-ended question “what do you get at RAVEN Project that is helpful for you?” They were asked to give up to four answers, which were later entered into Atlas.ti, coded, and grouped by theme. Forty-three youth responded to this question and the six most frequent responses were: food ( $n=36$ ); clothes ( $n=32$ ); supplies, including hygiene supplies ( $n=23$ ); friendship/supportive relationships ( $n=19$ ); shower ( $n=12$ ); and a place to be ( $n=11$ ). These results are also found in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Client Perceptions of RAVEN Project Services

<b>Client Needs are Met</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>
1, Always	61%	30
2	19	9
3	6	3
4	6	3
5	2	1
6	2	1
7, Never	4	2
Total	100	49
<b>How Drop-in Hours Could be More Convenient</b>		
<i>Inconvenient when bus isn't running</i>	50	6
<i>Be open more hours</i>	42	5
<i>More consistent hours</i>	2	1
<b>RAVEN Project Services that are Helpful</b>		
Food	84	36
Clothes	74	32
Supplies	53	23
Positive Relationships	36	19
Shower	28	12
A Place to Be	26	11

Almost all the respondents (97%,  $n=37$ ) felt that the hours for RAVEN Project's support groups were convenient. The most popular groups that respondents either participated, or were interested in, were Drum Circle (53%) and Art Workshop (52%). Both of these well-attended groups met on weekends, directly after drop-in hours, which is consistent with the previous finding that RAVEN Project youth find drop-in hours on weekends most convenient. Most respondents did not answer the follow-up question, "which groups would you like to see at RAVEN Project, but among those who did (39%,  $n=13$ ), five wrote in that they wanted a Boy's Group, or "Dude's Space," and two wanted a dance group (15%). Other interests that youth suggested were "skill trade circles, sewing circle, environmental awareness, mechanics, street theater, juggling, and group skating."

Youth believe the community has a negative perception of them. When asked how they believed they were perceived by the community, slightly more than half (51%,  $n=23$ ) of those who answered the question ( $n=45$ ) provided negative characterizations. This question was asked to gauge the level of stigmatization and what types of experiences homeless youth had with the broader community in Humboldt County.

These coded responses corresponded to the expected evaluations made by domiciled residents, not necessarily by their homeless peers. Negative evaluations included the following:

- different when I have my backpack
- crazy
- dirty
- I pollute their air

- marijuana
- of little help to the local economy
- on drugs
- piece of crap
- piece of shit
- pot head
- punk
- scary and crazy
- stoner
- strange
- transient

Only 22 percent of those who answered this question provided positive evaluations.

These included:

- friendly
- good
- good person
- gypsy
- involved
- jesterishly intoxicated
- nice
- nice person
- outgoing

Four youth (9%) said that they did not care how they were perceived<sup>11</sup>.

Other open-ended questions were included to provide youth with the opportunity to take ownership of the research project, and asked them to think of a statement or an issue they would like to express as a message to the broader community. Youth were also asked if they would like to participate in a creative/expressive project that would

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<sup>11</sup> Like other elements of the survey, the coded responses did not correspond to mutually exclusive categories (meaning *n* may be greater than the total number surveyed) especially where youth indicated both positive and negative perceptions, such as in the example: “As a traveling bum...but a good person.”

communicate their message, what they would like to see such a project involve, and what they would need in order to participate. The vast majority of youth were interested (59% n=27) or maybe interested (37% n=17) in participating in a creative/expressive project.

General themes coded from the youth responses included:

1) *Activism* (n=15) around issues of crime and deviance in their communities, “doing good,” interests in environmental activism, resistance to capitalism, social justice, and youth empowerment and awareness;

2) *Greetings, gratitude and appreciation* (n=15) including “anything is possible, beauty, hi, I love this place, love you, peaceful lifestyle, thank you, and the best county;”

3) Two responses were coded as “leave me alone.”

The types of assistance youth expected they would need in order to launch a project included peer support (n=18), and supplies (n=12), ideas/purpose (n=3), time (n=2), adult guidance (n=1), and time/money (n=1). The most frequent ideas for presentation of their message included performance art (45%, n=14) (street theater, acting, singing, dancing, and ‘flash-mobs’), political/activist participation (19%, n= 6) (such as organizing awareness raising events, public speaking/writing, direct participation in policy development), and painting a mural (19%, n= 6).

#### Client needs assessment

Further data analysis explored youth living situation, transportation, and interests in assistance. I looked at these areas as part of our program evaluation and needs assessment, particularly focusing on youth interest in services compared to the responses given when they reflected on the services that had already helped them. This strategy

helped to identify gaps in service provision to homeless youth, and barriers in meeting those needs.

Table 2 reports youth interest in assistance based on responses to a 22-item multiple response question. These responses should be seen as representing the top priorities in assistance sought by drop-in clients, as youth were asked to select and rate their top five interests in assistance. Because many youth selected more or less than five, and even more did not rate their responses, I treated all selected responses as top five interests in assistance, and each response category within the question as a yes/no variable. The top seven most frequently selected services were food ( $n=28$ ), clothes ( $n=21$ ), help finding a job ( $n=19$ ), shower ( $n=17$ ), laundry ( $n=17$ ), safer sex supplies ( $n=14$ ) and help with college applications ( $n=14$ ). Interests in assistance after the original variables were collapsed and recoded are also reported below, in Table 3.

*Table 2: Youth Identified Service Priorities*

<b>Service Area</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>
Food	60	28
Clothes	45	21
Help Finding a Job	40	19
Laundry	36	17
Shower	36	17
Safer Sex Supplies	30	14
Help with College Applications	30	14
Hygiene Supplies	28	13
Change of Living Situation	21	10
Sleeping Bag	21	10
Tent	21	10
STD Testing	21	10
Medical Care	17	8
Dental Care	17	8
Counseling	17	8
Help with Homework	17	8
Bus Tickets	15	7
Social Security Card/Birth Certificate	15	7
Help getting GED	9	4
Resume Building	9	4
Emancipation Assistance	4	2
Voter Registration	4	2

*Table 3: Categorized and Recoded Priorities in Services*

<b>Interest in Assistance</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>
Basic Supplies <i>Food, Laundry, Shower, Hygiene Supplies, Clothes</i>	75	35
Health <i>Counseling, Dental Care, Medical Care, STD Testing, Safer Sex Supplies</i>	62	29
Work <i>Resume Building, Help Finding a Job</i>	39	19
School <i>College Application, GED, Help with Homework</i>	39	19
Transition Resources <i>Bus Tickets, Social Security Card/Birth Certificate, Change Living Situation</i>	34	16
Camping Gear <i>Sleeping Bag, Tent</i>	26	12
Civic Empowerment <i>Voter Registration, Emancipation</i>	6	3

Drop-in clients were asked to identify the three places where they spent the most time during the month prior to data collection (January-February 2010). As seen in Table 4, most youth reported that they were currently living with friends (40%), traveling (35%), and/or sleeping outside (25%).

Youth were also asked to provide information on how long they had been in Humboldt County, and their responses were grouped into three categories, found in Table 4 below. Half ( $n=17$ ) had been in Humboldt County for less than one year, while 35 percent ( $n=17$ ) had been here for more than five years, and only 15 percent ( $n=7$ ) indicated between one and five years.

As stated earlier, the very small number of outreach surveys collected ( $n=9$ ) precluded meaningful analysis. However, certain frequencies are reported below, because they display considerable similarities to drop-in clients in terms of living situation and mode of transportation, yet also show important differences concerning access to RAVEN Project services via transportation (Table 4). Although the proportions of outreach and drop-in clients within respective living situations was drastically different (38 percent of drop-in clients reported traveling, compared to 88 percent of outreach clients), youth who were traveling and/or sleeping outside made up a very large portion of the study sample in both populations.

Both drop-in and outreach clients' most used modes of transportation to RAVEN Project were walking, hitchhiking, and a friend who drives. However, as seen in the table below, 78 percent of outreach clients said transportation kept them from accessing services, while only 39 percent of drop-in clients did. What this suggests is that in order

to access services at drop-in, most youth must overcome a considerable barrier in lack of transportation.

Table 4: RAVEN Project Client Characteristics

	Drop-in Clients		Outreach Clients	
	%	N	%	N
<b>Living Arrangements</b>				
Friends	40	19	--	--
Traveling	35	17	88	7
Outside	25	12	38	3
Vehicle	23	11	--	--
Parents	17	8	--	--
Other Family	17	8	--	--
Shelter/Trans.	15	7	--	--
Couch Surfing	10	5	--	--
House/Apt.	8	4	13	1
<b>Time in Humboldt</b>			--	--
Less than One Year	50	24	67	4
One to Five Years	15	7	33	2
More than Five Years	35	17	--	--
<b>Mode of Transportation</b>			--	--
Walk	66	31	44	4
Hitchhike	29	14	44	4
Friend Drives	23	11	44	4
Bike	21	10	--	--
Bus	21	10	22	2
Own Vehicle	19	9	--	--
Skateboard	8	4	--	--
Parent Drives	4	2	--	--
YSB Staff Drives	2	1	--	--
<b>Lack of Transport. Prevents Services</b>	39	17	78	7

Further comparative analysis was also done for drop-in clients to assess whether any statistically significant relationships existed between living situation and interest in assistance. Participants chose multiple responses to questions of living situation, transportation, and interest in assistance. Therefore, to assess whether relationships existed either within or between question response categories, I ran a series of chi-square statistical analyses in SPSS.

The chi-square test statistic indicates how different results are from what would be expected if no relationship existed between variables, and the accuracy of this statistic increases with sample size. Due to the small sample sizes in this study, the assumption of the chi-square test was not met<sup>12</sup> in many of the tests performed. In these instances, I looked to Fisher's Exact to determine the exact probability of the chi-square statistic for my small sample (Field 2009:690). Also because of the small sample size, I did not conduct chi-square analyses for any of the outreach surveys. In the sections below I report the significant findings of chi-square analyses on drop-in survey results.

#### Living situation

The results of chi-square analysis of youth living situations (reported in Table 5) revealed the condition of homelessness, from literally to marginally housed, experienced by RAVEN Project drop-in clients. Youth who slept outside were also most likely to be traveling ( $X^2(1)=6.831, p<.05$ ). In fact, 67 percent of youth who were sleeping outside

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<sup>12</sup> One assumption of the chi-square test is that expected cell sizes must be greater than five (Field 2005).

were also traveling. This finding was not surprising, considering that the literal homelessness of many youth who accessed drop-in services was well known to RAVEN Project staff, as well as to me. Additionally, the large proportion of the sample who indicated sleeping outside and/or traveling on their survey suggested a great deal of overlap between these living situations.

Although this test found that many youth were both living outside and traveling, subsequent tests suggested that important differences still existed between these populations. Specifically, traveling youth (and not necessarily youth who slept outside) were significantly less likely to live with parents ( $X^2(1)=5.265$   $p<.05$ ,  $f=.038$ ), or in transitional living/shelter ( $X^2(1)=4.494$ ,  $p<.05$ ,  $f=.041$ ). This relationship was not present for youth who did not self-identify as travelers but who did sleep outside. No other significant relationships were found to exist between living outside and/or traveling and any other living situation. However, the number of youth who selected living with friends (which comprised the majority of all respondents), approached significance in relation to youth who were couch surfing  $X^2(1)=3.812$   $p=.051$ ,  $f=.072$ ).

Table 5: Patterns in Youth Living Arrangements

		Living Arrangements								
		Friends (N=19)	Traveling (N=17)	Outside (N=12)	Vehicle (N=11)	Parents (N=8)	Other Family (N=8)	Shelter/Trans. (N=7)	Couch Surfing (N=5)	House/ Apartment (N=4)
Living Arrangements	Friends	--	29.4%	25.0%	45.5%	50.0%	50.0%	14.3%	80%	75%
	Traveling		--	66.7%*	54.5%	0.0%*	12.5%	0.0%*	20.0%	25.0%
	Outside			--	18.2%	0.0%	12.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
	Vehicle				--	0.0%	12.5%	0.0%	40.0%	25.0%
	Parents					--	37.5%	0.0%	0.0%	25.0%
	Other Family						--	14.3%	20.0%	0.0%
	Shelter/Trans.							--	0.0%	0.0%
	Couch Surfing								--	25.0%
	House/Apart.									--

Fishers Exact Test: \*p<.05, \*\*p<.001

While further data collection and analysis would be necessary to explore the differences between youth who slept outside and youth who were “traveling,” the research literature on homelessness in rural areas becomes particularly useful in postulating the differences between these sub-populations of homeless rural youth.

Documentation of high levels of housing instability and entire family homelessness in rural areas (Barak 1991, Vissing 1996) partially explains why no significant relationship was apparent between youth who slept outside and youth who lived with parents, while a significant relationship was present for youth who were traveling. Also suggested here was that disaffiliation with family may be more common among youth who identify as travelers. Of course, another possibility was that since more youth selected traveling than sleeping outside alone, their proportionate number was enough to indicate a negative relationship to living with parents or living in transitional living/shelter; with the underlying assumption being that if more youth were surveyed perhaps the findings would change.

#### Length of time in Humboldt County

The next round of chi-square analysis further explored differences between participants by looking at how long they had been in Humboldt County and their current living situation. These tests did not meet the assumption of chi-square, and Fisher’s Exact Probability Ratio did not apply<sup>13</sup>, so the observed relationships cannot be assumed to represent a broader pattern given the very small cell sizes. However, I report the

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<sup>13</sup> Fisher’s Exact Probability Ratio applies only to 2X2 tables.

percentages in Table 6 below, because the results supported previous findings: mainly that greater disaffiliation from family may have existed for traveling youth, and to a lesser extent youth who slept outside, than for other groups.

Seventy-five percent ( $n=6$ ,  $p<.05$ ) of youth who had spent time living with parents also had lived in Humboldt County for more than five years; and of youth who were not living with parents, 60 percent had been in Humboldt County for less than one year. Overall, these findings suggested that youth who lived with parents, or who were couch, surfing, living in houses/apartments, with friends, and/or with other family were also more local than the other sub-groups.

On the other hand, 75 percent of traveling youth had been in Humboldt County for less than one year ( $n=12$ ,  $p<.05$ ), and no significant relationship was found between youth who slept outside and their length of time in Humboldt County. However, the majority of those who slept outside had been in Humboldt County for less than one year (63%,  $n=7$ ), and roughly 90% ( $n=3$ ) for five years or less. Youth contacted during outreach had been in Humboldt County for the shortest periods of time.

*Table 6: How Long Youth have been in Humboldt County  
by Living Arrangements*

		<b>Living Arrangements</b>								
		Friends (N=19)	Traveling (N=16)	Outside (N=12)	Vehicle (N=11)	Parents (N=8)	Family (N=8)	Shelter/Trans. (N=7)	Couch (N=5)	House/Apt (N=4)
<b>Time in Humboldt County</b>	Less Than One Year	47.4%	75.0%	63.6%	81.8%	12.5%	37.5%	42.9%	20.0%	25.0%
	One to Five Years	10.5%	12.5%	27.3%	9.1%	12.5%	0.0%	28.6%	0.0%	0.0%
	More than Five Years	42.1%	12.5%	9.1	9.1%	75.0%	62.5%	28.6%	80.0%	75.0%

In addition to highlighting interesting qualitative differences between sub-groups of homeless youth at RAVEN Project, these findings suggest a progression, by which homeless youth may cease to identify as traveling after spending an extended length of time more sleeping outside in one geographic place

Other research that I have done in this area supports the finding that the visceral reality of homelessness, and the ‘feeling’ of homelessness may be two different experiences. Furthermore, individuals’ experiences of literal homelessness and/or feeling homeless are likely to change or progress over time. The findings reported above from the survey imply that youth who lived in Humboldt County for longer periods of time also lived in relatively less housing marginalization. In order to understand the nuances of this progressive experience of homelessness, I provide a quote below from an interview that I did with a formerly homeless activist in this area. She explained what she believed were the differences between feeling “at home” and feeling “home-less,” as she described her experience of traveling, and becoming homeless.

*“In this area in particular I was desiring a place, like indoors, four walls, that kind of thing, and it was really hard to find. Hard to find work so I could support that and everything. So I over time learned what I think the difference is between being somebody who is on the road or who has...kind of feels at home wherever as opposed to somebody who kind of feels like home-less. Like, there is no room for you and everything is kind of telling you that.”*

The implications of traveling, and the experiences of homeless youth who remain homeless in one place for an extended period of time, could be expanded in further research. The existing literature on old homelessness suggests that moving or roaming

nomadically between towns to find work in temporary labor economies may be a potential draw for poor, working, or even middle-class young people to travel (Hoch 1989) Moreover, research specifically on youth homelessness finds that young people leave home, or run away, due to familial neglect or abuses, and this further explains the high instances of familial disaffiliation among the traveling and homeless youth population as a whole. As the quote above points out, an important difference between ‘traveling’ and being ‘homeless’ has to do with an individual’s frame of mind as well as their ability to work within the opportunity structure that is available to them.

Following these initial chi-square analyses which showed interesting complexities within the respective living situations of homeless youth, I then looked to comparisons between living situations and modes of transportation to RAVEN Project as a way to understand how barriers in accessibility of services affected these sub-groups.

#### Transportation resources

The next round of tests looked for patterns in mode of transportation to RAVEN Project. These tests revealed that youth who took the bus were also more likely to be driven to RAVEN Project by a parent ( $X^2(1) = 7.930, p = .005, f = .04$ ), and youth who were brought by a friend were also more likely to hitchhike ( $X^2(1) = 4.449, p < .05, f = .058$ ). Interestingly, no significant relationships existed between walking to RAVEN Project and any other variable, suggesting youth in all living situations were equally likely to walk.

The results of these tests are important because they point out how access to transportation, and subsequently access to services varies among youth depending on their living situation. More specifically, they illustrate that access to transportation is related to family and/or peer networks. For example, although all youth walked, those who had a parent who was able to drive them also had used public transit. Both of these modes of transportation presumably exposed youth to lesser risk and potentially greater reliability in commuting to RAVEN Project than those who hitchhiked. The last set of chi-square analyses compared responses across questions, and specifically looked at how living situations impacted access to transportation, and interests or needs in services.

#### Intersections of living situation and interests in assistance

Before I conducted chi-square analysis between variables from different questions, I grouped and recoded responses for interest in assistance based on intuitive categories (regrouped categories reported earlier in Table 3). Despite the statistically significant relationships between certain living situations (particularly living outside and traveling, living with friends and couch surfing, and living with parents and other family), I decided not to regroup these categories so that the meaningful distinctions between them would not be lost. The results of chi-square comparisons between youth living situations and interests in assistance are reported in Table 7 below.

Table 7: Needs for Services by Living Arrangements

		Living Arrangements								
		Friends (N=19)	Traveling (N=16)	Outside (N=11)	Vehicle (N=11)	Parents (N=7)	Family (N=7)	Shelter/ Trans. (N=7)	Couch (N=5)	House/Apt (N=4)
Need for Services	Basic Assistance	72.2%	81.3%	100%*	90.9%	28.6%*	42.9%	57.1%	100.0%	75.0%
	Health	72.2%	50.0%	63.6%	54.5%	71.4%*	57.1%	85.7%**	40.0%	75.0%
	Work	55.6%	37.5%	18.2%	72.7%*	57.1%	57.1%	42.9%	40.0%	50.0%
	School	55.6%	31.3%	0.0%**	63.6%	14.3%	42.9%	71.4%	80.0%	50.0%
	Transition	55.6%*	31.3%	9.1%	45.5%	14.3%	14.3%	57.1%	80.0%*	25.0%
	Camping Gear	5.6%*	37.5%	45.5%	27.3%	0.0%	42.9%	42.9%	0.0%	0.0%
	Civic Empowerment	11.1%	18.8%*	0.0%	9.1%	0.0%	14.3%	0.0%	20.0%	0.0%

Fishers Exact Test: \*p&lt;.05, \*\*p&lt;.005

Youth who were sleeping outside were significantly more interested in receiving basic assistance than those not living outside ( $X^2(1)=5.103, p<.05$ ). However, this same group was also found to be significantly uninterested in assistance with school ( $X^2(1)=10.174, p<.005$ ). A substantial majority of traveling youth displayed interest in basic assistance (80%) yet no relationship was found to their interest in school or in work. On the other hand, traveling youth displayed more interest than any other group in civic empowerment (voter registration and emancipation assistance)  $X^2(1)=6.017, p<.05$ . This was consistent with the analysis that the ‘traveler identity’ reflected a strong sense of individual freedom and values of personal choice.

Youth who were living with parents ( $X^2(1)=8.803, p<.005$ ) were found to be significantly *no more interested* in receiving basic assistance than those not living with parents. Those living with other family appeared to be somewhat more likely to desire basic assistance than those not living with other family ( $X^2(1) 4.130, p<.05$ , Fisher’s Exact Probability Ratio=.064). Furthermore, neither youth living with parents or with other family displayed a significant interest in assistance for any other category, suggesting that more research is needed to evaluate and support the needs of services using homeless or marginally housed youth in rural areas who live primarily with their families.

Overall, youth who lived with friends, in vehicles, couch-surfing, and/or in shelter/transitional living facilities showed the most interest in school, work, and transition resources. As seen in Table 15, youth who were living in vehicles were significantly interested in work ( $X^2(1)=5.888, p<.05$ ) and approached significance in their

interest in school ( $X^2(1) = 2.974, p = .085$ ). Likewise, youth who were couch-surfing were significantly interested in transition resources ( $X^2(1) = 5.056, p < .05$ ), and approached significance in their interest in school ( $X^2(1) = 3.465, p = .063$ ). Additionally, youth who were couch-surfing and/or living in a vehicle selected interest in some form of basic assistance 100% of the time. Finally, youth in shelter or transitional living also approached significance in their interest in school ( $X^2(1) = 3.090, p = .079$ ), and made up the highest percentage of youth who were interested in healthcare (86%).

These results seemed to follow a progression of need based on housing status. Youth who were the most literally homeless (those who were sleeping outside) were the most likely to need basic assistance, and those who were very marginally housed (living in vehicles and/or couch-surfing, and traveling) were also represented as having high interests in basic assistance.

In general, these findings regarding youth interest in assistance were not surprising, considering the survey asked participants to select up to five types of assistance that they were interested in receiving. These interests in assistance moved progressively away from the need for basic assistance toward resources that allowed for greater re-integration into society as primary housing status moved away from literal homelessness. The data suggested that as youth needs for basic assistance were more consistently met 'at home' this opened up space for them to consider other areas of need as priorities.

Analysis of living situation and transportation also yielded interesting results especially concerning youth who were traveling and/or sleeping outside, as seen in Table

8, below. Youth who slept outside were significantly more likely to hitchhike to RAVEN Project compared to those who don't sleep outside ( $\chi^2(1) = 0.891$   $p = .001$ ). Traveling youth were somewhat more likely more likely to hitchhike to RAVEN, though the relationship was not statistically significant. These findings suggested that of the youth who were the most literally homeless, they also had the least access to reliable, safe transportation in seeking out services. Issues around transportation to RAVEN Project among homeless youth as well as other experiences of rural homelessness in Humboldt County were explored in greater detail in the focus group.

Table 8: Mode of Transportation by Living Arrangements

		Living Arrangements								
		Friends (N=19)	Traveling (N=17)	Outside (N=12)	Vehicle (N=11)	Parents (N=8)	Family (N=7)	Shelter/ Trans. (N=7)	Couch (N=5)	House/Apt. (N=4)
Mode of Transportation	Walk	72.2%	47.1%	41.7%*	54.5%	75.0%	100%*	85.7%	80.0%	50.0%
	Hitchhike	21.1%	47.1%	66.7%*	36.4%	0.0%	12.5%	0.0%	60.0%	25.0%
	Friend	31.6%	29.4%	41.7%	27.3%	12.5%	37.5%	14.3%	20.0%	25.0%
	Bike	36.8%*	11.8%	8.3%	18.2%	37.5%	50.0%*	0.0%	20.0%	25.0%
	Bus	21.1%	5.9%	8.3%	9.1%	37.5%	37.5%	42.9%	20.0%	0.0%
	Own Vehicle	21.1%	29.4%	25%	54.5%**	12.5%	12.5%	0.0%	0.0%	25.0%
	Skateboard	21.1%*	17.6%	8.3%	9.1%	12.5%	25.0%	0.0%	20.0%	0.0%
	Parent	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	25.0%*	12.5%	0.0%	0.0%
	YSB Staff	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	14.3%	0.0%	0.0%

Fishers Exact Test: \*p&lt;.05, \*\*p&lt;.005

## Focus Group Findings

### Satisfaction with services

Youth who attended the focus group elaborated on their satisfaction with services, particularly RAVEN Project's role in allowing them to meet their basic needs such as hygiene and temporary, daytime shelter. The group discussion brought out more specific meanings related to youth's experiences of friendship and safety at RAVEN Project provided, and provided an atmosphere for youth to talk more about *what it's like* to be homeless, young, and traveling, and to seek out services that met one's basic needs.

“What do you get at RAVEN?” was the first question I asked the youth in the focus group. The responses this question generated ranged from a safe space to hang out, a low-stress environment, a drug-free zone, safety from risks on the streets, time indoors, shelter, and the fulfillment of basic needs. Overall, youth expressed appreciation and gratitude for having a place where they could relax, or as one respondent stated, “relax and free your mind.”

Youth stated their frustration with the levels of stress that they identified with their lives on the street by the expression, “fuck drama.” I wrote this on the flip-chart (which made them laugh...), and checked for verification as to what was meant by this. The group agreed that the social or relationship drama that they thought sometimes followed them to RAVEN Project, was not the same as the drama “out there,” meaning the streets. At RAVEN Project, youth felt safe from the stressors they encountered on the

street, including drugs, people, and cops. They felt relieved that RAVEN Project was both a drug-free zone, as well as a no-hate zone, where “people don’t poke at people’s differences.”

For the focus group participants, RAVEN Project gave them a space of refuge from the streets, where they didn’t “have to be outside.” Likewise, in addition to meeting the basic need of shelter from the outdoors, as one youth put it, “RAVEN makes it so I don’t have to smell like cat piss, and I think that’s pretty cool.”

### Transportation

I posed the questions to the focus group, “Can you think of any reasons why people don’t come to RAVEN?” and “Do you have friends who don’t come here, and if so do you know why?” The first participant to speak plainly stated, “transportation,” and went on to say that everyone he knew in Arcata had to walk or hitchhike everywhere they went, and also that transportation was the number one reason why *he* did not come to drop-in more often<sup>14</sup>. When I checked this theme over with the rest of the group, the youth agreed that they each had friends or peers who would be interested in services, but who did not come due to lack of transportation.

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<sup>14</sup> Although the surveys specifically asked if transportation prevented respondents from accessing services, it should be noted that the group participant who spoke first about transportation had not taken the survey, as he had not been to drop-in during the month of survey collection.

### Long distances

Another theme closely related to transportation that came up early in this discussion was the long distances between towns and communities in Humboldt County. One participant suggested that having drop-in facilities in Arcata and in McKinleyville would make services more available to people; another suggested that the current location was ideal because it was located along highway 101, which made it accessible to travelers and hitchhikers. Although these youth disagreed slightly as to where services should be located, both of these responses revealed that youth with few resources in access to transportation must make a journey of around seven to ten miles either on foot or by hitchhiking in order to access basic services and daytime shelter.

### Age limit

Still on the topic of barriers in access to services, one youth mentioned (and others agreed) that the age limit (21 years) kept many of their homeless peers from accessing services. However, as our discussion moved into barriers related to the social stigma of homelessness, and recalling the idea of RAVEN as a safe space for homeless youth, the importance of setting an age limit on services for youth was apparent.

### Homeless stigma and RAVEN Project

In addition to barriers in access to services related to traveling long distances and lack of transportation, focus group participants spoke about stigmatization of homelessness, and more particularly the stigmatization of RAVEN Project (as an organization serving homeless youth) within the community at large. One respondent

shared that her mother had been advised by other parents not to let her go to RAVEN, because of the perception that in going she would be exposed to drugs and other risks. However, she elaborated that once her mother realized that if not at RAVEN Project she would be spending time on the streets, her mother agreed to let her come.

Within this conversation of RAVEN Project's reputation, another youth insightfully suggested that the fear of drugs and other risks associated with RAVEN was actually a reflection of the stigmatization of homelessness, and more specifically the "scapegoating" (his words) of the homeless, meaning blaming a marginalized group of people for social problems that they themselves did not create. Our discussion of stigmatization and scapegoating then carried over into youth's perceptions of self and community. As one participant shared, he believed that when people looked at him, they thought, "there's a homeless kid, he probably got kicked out of his house and deserves to be there." He also thought that for this reason people would decide not give him money or help him, because they thought "[he] doesn't need help;" and this assumption made him angry.

Linking these comments back to the topic of barriers in access to services, the same participant who expressed anger and resentment at domiciled residents who treated him as deserving of homelessness and not fit for help, also asserted that "the government should help younger people if they want to get a job or go to school, or even if they wanted to travel," adding that "it doesn't cost much to travel."

## Interests, opportunities and services

Our next focus group topic explored the differences between responses that survey respondents gave as their top areas of interests in services, and those which they already received and believed were most helpful. I supplemented this question by showing the group colorful graphs of preliminary frequency analyses from the surveys. I asked youth to explain to me why top areas of interest in services differed slightly from the services youth already found helpful.

Two distinct responses were generated from this question:

- 1) Youth came to RAVEN Project *because* there were no strict requirements (to do homework, specifically), but also for the opportunity to relax, ‘forget,’ and feel the weight of responsibilities and stressors of life lifted.
- 2) Youth came for the opportunity to access services and resources that helped them in their pursuit of various interests, goals, and needs.

The second reason for coming was clarified by a few poignant comments. As one youth shared, ‘the other day’ a staff member had helped him create a resume, and referred him to The Job Market, a local resource for employment assistance. He shared that although he had not found a job yet, he now had “a pretty nice resume.”

At this point, another participant suggested that RAVEN Project sponsor a series of job skills building workshops, for those who were interested. She also expressed interest in working at RAVEN, herself, and that out of her interest to take on more responsibilities and leadership, she had recently started volunteering.

## Perspectives on living situations

I also showed two graphs depicting the distribution of survey responses to the questions of current living situation and future plans, and asked the group, “Where do you see yourself in five years?” Their responses to these questions allowed me to further understand both the survey data as well as the backgrounds of focus group participants, as even smaller sample of the study population. They also brought some clarity to the question as to differences in perspectives between traveling and homelessness among the group participants.

According to one focus group participant, her reason for leaving home was “to start life over and see the world through my own eyes.” Yet having to recycle and “spange”<sup>15</sup> for money and dumpster dive for food were struggles that made her “not like being homeless.” In our group we did not discuss reasons for leaving home, however this individual’s experiences suggested a progression: from the notion of youth empowerment and independence first associated with traveling, to angst over the day-to-day struggles of homelessness.

Another group participant steadfastly expressed, “in 5 years, I will be working,” and another believed that she would “probably be finishing up school.” However, not everyone in the group identified with work and school as future plans. In fact, two were decidedly against working or going to school, and instead believed that they “would probably be doing what [they were] doing now,” which, they admitted was “traveling.”

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<sup>15</sup> Asking folks on the street if they can “spare any change.”

I questioned them on these claims, briefly, because the survey data showed that most of the youth participants had selected the answer category “living with friends,” yet nobody had spoken about this in the focus group. One participant replied, “I think most people who come here are sleeping outside,” to which I responded with the question “So, when you sleep outside is that with friends?” It turned out that all but two focus group members were living outside, and *not with friends*. The only participant who primarily lived with friends also lived with family, *a friend’s family*, which she described as “like family,” yet she had only been living in Humboldt County for a little over a month at the time of the interview.

Overall, the discussion of living situations for homeless youth, and their experiences both with services at RAVEN Project and with the broader community helped to further understand, and supported survey results. In the next chapter, I briefly discuss the importance of these findings overall, both for RAVEN Project and for other organizations and communities who seek to provide services for homeless youth. Then in Chapter 8, I provide an example of how successful services provision for homeless populations and sub-populations can be achieved, using a conceptual model that depicts aspects of identity and social network, personal history, demographic variables, as well as homeless populations’ relationships to intersecting institutions of society, and services providers.

## CHAPTER 7 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

This study was shaped by a recognition and validation of youth's abilities for self-direction, as evidenced by their well-developed survival skills in challenging living situations. This was as much a result of adopting a participatory approach and a youth empowerment perspective in my research, as it was a result of RAVEN Project's policies in providing services to the diverse needs of rural homeless youth. Youth empowerment and choice, living situation, and the relative accessibility of services were important themes throughout.

The needs assessment and program evaluation component of this research highlights RAVEN Project's flexibility and ability to meet clients' needs as they arise. The results of the surveys and focus group indicate that it is through this strategy that RAVEN Project has become established among homeless youth populations a beneficial and viable resource available to them, provided that they can get there. Findings related to satisfaction with services, homeless youth identity, and willingness to participate in creative/activist projects revealed both successful service provisions by RAVEN Project, as well as valuable and inspiring interpersonal qualities of clients.

Overall, the findings revealed that youth with the fewest resources and the least consistent shelter were the most interested in basic assistance. The needs in assistance among RAVEN Project clients followed a progression according to living situation. In general, youth who slept outside were most likely to need basic services. Youth who

lived in marginalized situations, with friends, and in vehicles also needed basic assistance, as did youth who were traveling. However, travelers were more interested in ways of attaining greater civic empowerment than other groups; and youth who were couch surfing, in shelters, and in vehicles showed interest in avenues of social reintegration such as finding a job and going to school, as well as transition resources and access to healthcare. Although youth in all groups walked to RAVEN Project, the accessibility of services was related to mode of transportation according to living situation.

In this chapter, I elaborate on the importance of understanding the qualitative differences among homeless rural youth populations, as it relates to living situations. I present RAVEN Project's approach to assistance as 'best practices' in services provision for homeless rural youth. I have adopted an analysis of the discourse of choice as a way to frame the prioritization of homeless youth needs as a way to meet those needs in ways that work best for them, for travelers and youth who were sleeping outside in particular.

Before moving on, I should note that my analysis of travelers versus youth who slept outside is not to suggest that these groups or their issues should be seen as mutually exclusive, as the data indeed showed that youth who were traveling and youth who were sleeping outside experienced similar barriers in access to services, and that they experienced similar circumstances and hardships in meeting their basic needs. Nor am I chalking their responses to their current living situation (particularly between travelers and youth who slept outside) up to mere identity politics, suggesting that the relative choice to live on the street is a matter of spiritual or moral deficiency or superiority, in

either direction. Rather, I see this analytical framework as a tool for empowerment of homeless rural youth, which calls on services providers to respect youth choices, acknowledges their right to self-direction, and support them in their needs and interests in ways that work best for them.

### Traveling and Sleeping Outside

The range of living situations homeless youth reported, and their differences in needs for assistance, exemplified how an understanding the spectrum of homelessness from “homeless to homed” (Wardaugh 1999) can be useful for services providers. The differences between youth who self-identified as ‘traveling’ and ‘sleeping outside’ were somewhat unexpected, considering the substantial overlap among these sub-populations. These finding created some uncertainty over the depth and nature of differences between youth needs as they moved from literally homeless to domiciled and well-integrated citizens. For RAVEN Project youth in particular, their discourse of choice illuminated the salience of identity and peer group interaction. The ‘traveler’ identity stood as both a literal way of life for ‘unattached and unaccompanied’ youth and as a more figurative self-identification that accompanied feelings of independence and freedom.

Large numbers of RAVEN Project youth were both traveling and sleeping outside, and more travelers than other youth expressed interest civic empowerment. Furthermore, many youth wanted to take part in an expressive project, with an activist theme. This connection between youth identity, activism, and the discourse of choice among RAVEN Project youth is supported Cohen and Wagner’s (1992) work on

collective action in homeless communities. They found that the homeless activist identity had been held mostly by individuals who embraced the homeless social identity, and peer network, and also that this identification had positive outcomes in terms of housing.

The high percentages of RAVEN Project youth who had a traveler identity suggested that RAVEN Project clients possessed strong inclinations toward activism. Drawing on the work of Cohen and Wagner (1992), this quality of homeless ‘travelers’ is beneficial, as youth may pursue collective action, and build social support. Moreover, assuming that the population of homeless activists in Cohen and Wagner’s (1992) study did not represent an anomaly, we might also expect that both identification with homeless activism and strong associational ties to a homeless community help individuals move from homelessness to homed, both literally and metaphorically. To assess the outcomes of street network activism among homeless youth, additional longitudinal research would be needed, as would community support for projects that facilitate this type of critical mobilization. Additionally, my findings revealed that greater support for homeless rural youth is needed in transportation, so that youth are able to access services more regularly.

#### Access to Services at RAVEN Project

Along with a progressive decline in need for basic assistance as housing marginalization improved, the accessibility of services through transportation also seemed to increase as youth living situation moved further away from literal homelessness. Youth who were living with parents and family did not have any positive associations to interests in services, and they were also the least likely to hitchhike to

RAVEN Project. This access to transportation resources declined progressively with lack of shelter, whereby youth who were sleeping outside and/or traveling were also the most likely to hitchhike. This suggested that youth who lived with parents had easier access to safe transportation. It also raised the question as to whether the most literally homeless youth also lived the furthest from drop-in services, which would create their need to hitchhike or find a ride with a friend.

The idea that contact with family and involvement in peer networks lessens risky behavior among homeless youth is supported by research on street youth in Denver, where both the family and peers served as a protective barrier against substance abuse and survival sex<sup>16</sup>, except in social networks where these activities were normative (Leuwen *et al.* 2004). Future research on youth homelessness in rural areas, therefore, should look at the relationship between access to safe and affordable transportation, and ties to family as a potential mediator between experiencing risk and exposure to violence in the street while commuting across long distances in order to seek services. Furthermore, based on the relationship between commuting with friends and hitchhiking, and the positive role of peer networks found in the literature, future research might also explore the role of peers in the likelihood of accessing, and the accessibility of services for rural homeless youth.

The high numbers of youth were traveling and/or sleeping outside *and* hitchhiking suggested that this sub-population was made up of many ‘regular’ drop-in clients, who

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<sup>16</sup> In this study, youth were found to be at lesser risk for survival sex and substance abuse, except in peer networks where other members engaged in these activities.

overcame immense structural barriers on a consistent basis in seeking out services. Unfortunately, since these multiple and differential experiences in barriers to services were mediated by living situation, it can be assumed that these carried over into the relative accessibility of attending school and finding work<sup>17</sup> for homeless youth. Therefore, lack of transportation in rural areas places the most literally homeless youth at the greatest disadvantage, despite the interest that they may have in gaining assistance from social services, and access to social institutions.

The barriers in access of services explored in this study were found to be related to the conditions of rural poverty in Humboldt County, and are consistent with the research on rural poverty and homelessness described in Chapter 1. My research supports the theory that deep structural barriers in access to services exist in rural areas, and that a scarcity of services available to people spread over long distances further inhibits the accessibility of these services, especially for the most literally homeless youth. Furthermore, my research suggests that youth who overcome such drastic barriers are exceptional, and that with greater support in transportation or in outreach, more homeless youth on the streets will have the opportunity to access services more regularly.

Another characteristic of rural poverty that may further explain the role of personal choice in rural areas, and an individual's willingness to seek out services, is the notion of a 'rural social identity.' Theories of rural poverty postulate that rural people are less inclined than those in cities to ask for help, and instead prefer to 'make due' with less

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<sup>17</sup> See Seidman 1988 for an example of how multiple personal disadvantages and structural inequalities in homelessness compound to decrease individuals' ability to re-integrate successfully in social institutions.

(Vissing 1996). To the extent that this was salient among homeless rural youth in Humboldt County was not clear from my study. However, exploration of this topic in future research with rural homeless populations may be informative and useful in planning successful services and programs. In short, one's experience of homelessness is subjective, and dependent on many intersecting factors, which was visible in my assessment of youth needs at RAVEN Project. We now turn to a discussion of how RAVEN Project was able to both meet the needs and empower the choices of homeless rural youth.

### Safe Space

The stresses of youth homelessness, including stigmatization, risks and vulnerabilities of the street, and a harsh outdoor climate all contributed to the need to have a place to be indoors. RAVEN Project met this need for temporary daytime shelter, as well as provided youth with the opportunity to access an array of services in a number of areas. Based on the discussion in the focus group, and on qualitative survey data, it was not only the availability of these services and the indoor environment that youth sought at drop-in. Youth came because they had developed meaningful relationships with youth educators, staff, and peers, and because they felt accepted and sheltered from otherwise stigmatizing circumstances related to youth homelessness.

Regardless of background or living situation, youth expressed that they came to RAVEN Project because it was a safe space for 'all types,' was both 'drug and hate-free,' and provided shelter and reprieve from the street. Likewise, for youth who were and/or

appeared to be visibly homeless,<sup>18</sup> and were stigmatized in the broader society because of this, having a safe space at RAVEN Project where they were not exposed to differential treatment for their appearance, sexual orientation, race, or social class also protected and supported positive social and personal identities.

RAVEN Project utilized a ‘harm-reduction’ approach to services provision, which provided opportunities and support for youth with diverse interests and needs. This allowed the organization to address the various intersections between homeless status and living situations among the rural population, and the subjective client needs that these situations presented. At the same time, the harm reduction philosophy empowered the youth clients to make their own choices, and supplied them with information, resources, and assistance where available.

RAVEN Project’s policy of hiring homeless youth from their target population allowed the organization to capitalize on homeless youth strengths in developing supportive social networks. By hiring homeless youth, they provided a place where youth could find, and become positive role models in a non-threatening environment. Not only did working at RAVEN Project give youth a sense of ownership and empowerment, it also gave them much needed employment and job training skills.

In coming to RAVEN Project’s drop in hours, clients sought shelter from the outdoors, reprieve from the risks of the street involving other people and drugs in particular, and escape from the stigmatization that came from appearing homeless. Their

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<sup>18</sup> Referenced by their self-reflections on the survey regarding ‘carry[ing] a backpack, look[ing] dirty, etc.’

responses to the question “how does this community perceive you,” revealed that they felt stigmatized in multiple ways, and their elaboration on this during the focus group indicated their acute awareness of the connection between having a homeless social status and/or identity, and having mental disorders, addictions, an underdeveloped work ethic, general unworthiness, and being a “scapegoat.” All of these statements easily linked back to the research on traditional causal explanations of homelessness, which have traditionally been applied to homeless adults, in particular, from an individualistic perspective. Moreover, all illuminated the typical social psychological atmosphere in which homeless youth interacted with the domiciled public on a daily basis.

RAVEN Project addressed the various needs, interests, experiences and orientations of homeless youth including their need for social support through a diverse and inclusive approach to intervention that utilized youth empowerment and peer group intervention. Their strategies capitalized on homeless youth strengths in developing supportive and diverse peer networks (Bender *et al* 2007, Ennet *et al.* 1999), and reduced the potential for experiencing further stigmatization within social services organizations (Roschelle and Kaufman 2004). Youth who may have had no peer network prior to accessing services were also given access to social support through RAVEN Project, which in itself may guard against risks related to youth homelessness (Ennet *et al* 1999).

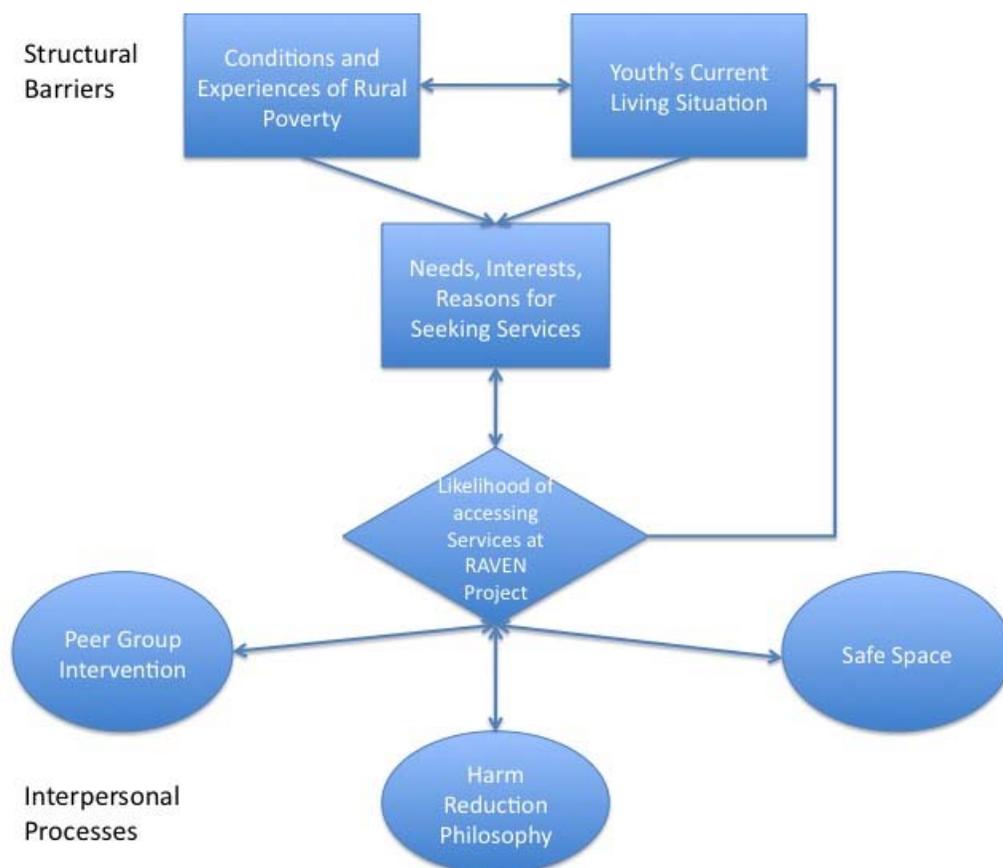
#### Structural and Interpersonal Processes in RAVEN Project Services

Evaluative research often depicts how relevant processes and outcomes facilitate the fulfillment of organizational missions and goals through visual representations and

conceptual models. These models also elucidate the various systems functioning within programs that are identified by evaluative research, but that may have otherwise gone unnoticed or overlooked (Mertens 2009: 158). Figure 1 below depicts the interaction between structural realities of rural poverty that affect homeless youth and the three essential ways that RAVEN Project functions to meet the diverse needs of clients within this context.

Accessing services at RAVEN Project is shown to lessen the impact of rural poverty and exposure to risk that youth experience in homelessness, through both increased access to a range of services, as well as the positive impact of social support found in both peer and adult role models. These positive interpersonal characteristics of RAVEN Project were what kept youth coming back, protected against risks, and supported them in meeting their needs. These interpersonal characteristics of RAVEN Project are presented in the model below as 1) peer group intervention, 2) harm reduction philosophy, and 3) designated safe space.

*Figure 1: Structural Barriers and Interpersonal Processes in Accessibility and Willingness to Seek Services*



Youth at RAVEN Project were likely to want to return to drop-in, because of positive experiences they had while at RAVEN Project, which are seen in the model as internal processes. Based on this finding, the above model illustrates a non-linear process, where different access points link back to each other in a more interactive fashion. For instance, youth who were able to access services at RAVEN Project regularly were also afforded the ability to take steps toward finding work, getting into school, moving into more stable housing, or pursue other avenues of interest, related to their needs and goals. The services RAVEN Project provided allowed youth to take steps toward social reintegration, and lessened their experience of poverty.

The model above illustrates the beneficial cycle that incorporates peer group networks, and harm reduction in supporting homeless rural youth in Humboldt County, and could be used by RAVEN Project in combination with the specific findings in this evaluative study to apply for funding. In order to facilitate the use of these findings, I also created a separate document for RAVEN Project with all relevant statistics, tables, graphs, and figures, to be referenced in their upcoming grant applications.

### Dissemination of Results

After completing the survey and focus group analysis, I shared the results with RAVEN Project staff and gave the organization a copy of this thesis along with an executive summary and report of research findings and recommendations, including the model described above.

The original intent of this project was to assess the provision of services to homeless youth in Humboldt County, and the study found that youth clients were very satisfied and appreciative of RAVEN Project services. The remaining unmet needs of homeless rural youth had less to do with internal processes operating within RAVEN Project, as they did with structural processes related to the conditions of rural poverty, particularly access to services through transportation.

The salience of structural conditions and barriers to services, as well as interests by homeless youth in finding work, going to school, and changing their living situations (among other areas of interest) suggests that a more thorough program evaluation would also need to look specifically at the status of housing, jobs, and school-related services available to youth in Humboldt County. Therefore, my final recommendations to RAVEN project included the following:

1. Youth come to RAVEN Project because they value and benefit from peer-group social support
  - a. RAVEN Project should continue to hire homeless youth from their target population of age 21 and under
    - i. This is especially important considering the high percentages of youth in this study who were interested in finding a job
2. Continue to use the harm-reduction approach to addressing youth interests in services
  - a. Clients are aware of *the range* of services/referrals offered by RAVEN Project
  - b. Clients life choices are respected
  - c. Staff are supportive and responsive to youth interests
  - d. Staff are knowledgeable of issues facing homeless youth and able to engage clients in dialogue about risk behaviors and provide referrals.

3. Continue to network with community organizations to address youth interests and provide services in
  - a. Healthcare, including counseling
  - b. Transportation assistance
  - c. Employment assistance
  - d. Help with college applications

At the time of the completion of this research, I was still engaged in an ongoing discussion with RAVEN Project staff as to how to implement a youth-lead expressive/activist project based on survey responses. Although the outcome was still uncertain, the data generated from the evaluative portion of the project may be used to apply for funding or initiate program development, and to foster community alliances and collaboration in a number of areas. After completing the study, I also presented the findings to the Community Advisory Board of the Practicing Sociology Track, and to the Humboldt County Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Commission, which helped to spread the word about issues facing homeless youth in rural Humboldt County.

## CHAPTER 8 THEORETICAL REFRAMING

### Conceptual Processes and Policy

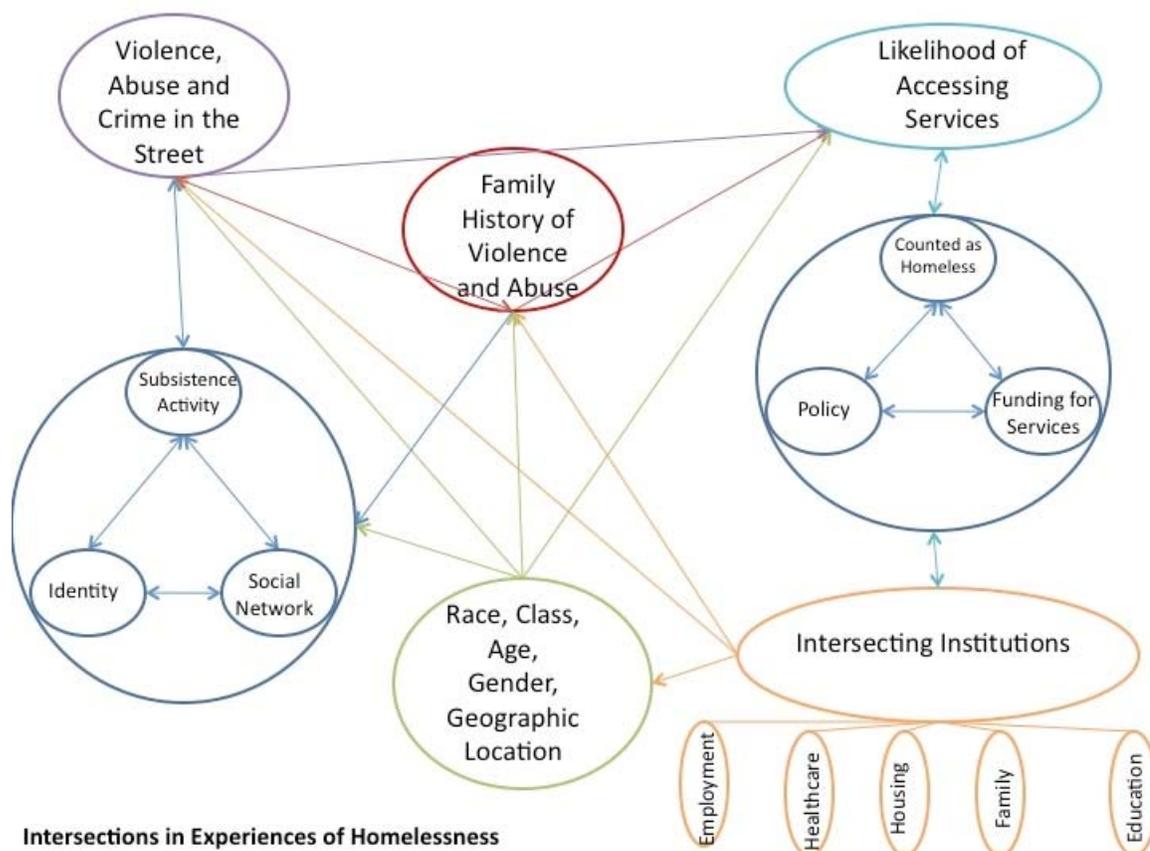
In the contemporary research literature the accessibility of services to homeless populations is a reoccurring theme, especially in studies like my own, where assessment of social services, program evaluation, and policy recommendations make up the explicit purposes of the research. In focusing on social services, studies of homeless populations have traditionally relied on services-receiving populations as convenience samples. This practice implicitly suggests that policy recommendations and the theoretical implications apply to broader populations of homeless individuals.

This trend continues despite the inherent assumptions and biases. The shortcomings of this practice are seen in how barriers in access to services operate to keep sub-populations out of the services receiving population, and therefore their perspectives are not incorporated in the studies that are completed. . Studies have shown these practices exclude rural populations (Vissing 1996, Fisher 2005), as well as homeless youth, families, women, minorities, and non-English speaking populations (see Goetz and Shmiede 1996 for an example). The result is that considerably less is known of these sub-populations, in part due to sampling practices, which in turn further affects the accessibility and willingness to seek out assistance programming among these populations, as services are not designed to meet their needs specifically. Rather,

programs are designed to meet the needs of the most easily accessible homeless populations, represented traditionally as unattached single, white, males.

Environmental and social barriers in access to services, including outreach-based services along with interpersonal processes such as collective withdrawal can render submerged populations of homeless individuals essentially invisible to social researchers. The result is an inherently biased sample population, with sub-populations of unaccessed, uncounted, and therefore programmatically under-funded. The model below depicts the general variables that I see as affecting the accessibility of services, based on both structural and interpersonal processes.

*Figure 2: Theoretical Model of Intersections in Experiences of Homelessness*



## Description of model terms:

### Barriers

- ✧ *Violence, Abuse and Crime in the Street*: Vulnerability to and engagement in risky behavior, or hate crime, or arrest.
  - ✧ *Family History of Violence and Abuse*: Survivor or witness of sexual, physical, emotional, or multi-type abuse, and/or experience or witness to drug or alcohol abuse, particularly in the family or home.
  - ✧ *Race, Class, Age, Gender, Geographic Location*: Social locations that affect experiences of homelessness
- Subsistence System
- ✧ *Subsistence Activity*: What a homeless individual does to meet his/her daily needs. May include pan-handling, sex-work, drug-dealing, day labor, or recycling. Other subsistence activities may be interpreted as trespassing, stealing food, and loitering.
  - ✧ *Identity* – The self-image that is challenged by stigmatization, and which impacts and is impacted by subsistence work and social network.
  - ✧ *Social Network* – People relied upon for support.

**Likelihood of Accessing Services** – The dependent variable upon which the barriers, experiences, and reproduction of homelessness relies.

### The System of Counting

- ✧ *Counted as Homeless*: Refers to who is counted by researchers or policy-makers as homeless, contact with services providers, and by legal definition.
- ✧ *Policy* – Legislation affecting homeless people, including the legal definition of homeless, as well as the provision of services through government funds, non-profits, and private organizations.
- ✧ *Funding for Services* – The money allotted to homeless services programs, including federal funding through the McKinney-Vento Act.

### Intersecting Institutions

- ✧ *Employment* – The amount and type of jobs available.
- ✧ *Healthcare* – Access to insurance, and adequate healthcare, including physical and mental health services
- ✧ *Housing* – The amount and type of affordable housing available.
- ✧ *Family* – Support services for families, including childcare, food-stamps or affordable and accessible, nutritious food, counseling or other social supports.
- ✧ *Education* – The quality of education, and average level of education in a community or area, as well as educational supports and funding for students.

## Description of processes

This diagram illustrates the relationships between multiple variables that contribute to experiences of homelessness. It is informed by the research literature, and is supported by the work I have done with homeless youth in Humboldt County. It depicts the inter-related systems that contribute to the reproduction of homelessness as a

persisting element of inequality, as well as the risks built into structural inequalities and traumatizing and/or stigmatizing personal experiences that homeless communities face.

The interpersonal and social systems that affect accessibility of services are presented by the largest circles, which depict their interdependent components inside. The structural barriers to accessing services are represented by the three large circles on the left-hand side, and operate in convergence with these systems. Funding for programs and beneficial policy development is related to the systems used to count homeless populations, and aptly funded and well-tailored programs in turn influences the likelihood that diverse groups of homeless people will access these services.

In order for social policies to have beneficial outcomes for homeless populations and sub-populations, inequality within intersecting institutions of society must be addressed. Policy makers need to be able to identify and draw on information about and/or directly from different homeless populations and their needs. Likewise, in order for these intersecting institutions to become more equitable for homeless populations, demographic variables of race, class, gender, age, and geographic location, which otherwise stand as barriers in access to services, must be taken into consideration in program and policy development.

Three main barriers which effect the likelihood of accessing services (violence in the street, violence in the home, and experiences related to demographics) are affected by policies differences in individual and group experiences with the intersecting institutions of society. The model is intersectional, meaning that it assumes people from different social locations have differential experience with homelessness and social services.

Criminality, for example, which is directly impacted by the subsistence activities of the homeless, is directly impacted by social location: risk for arrest, or for physical or sexual abuse, may be related to locally based policies, and to an individual's race, class, age, gender, and geographic circumstances.

The interactional processes depicted in the model are also barriers to accessing services. Past histories of violence in the home may become a barrier to accessing services, as psychological trauma may result in avoidance and/or distrust of social services and providers (O'Conner 2003). Past and current experiences of violence also lead some to take refuge in homeless subsistence and support networks, and to resist re-integrating with domiciled communities whether by circumstance, choice, or necessity (Boydell *et al.* 2000, Paliavin 1993, Siedman 1988). Past experiences with trauma may also result in re-experiencing violence, isolation, or contribute to the risk for becoming homeless and therefore, exposed to elevated risk for situational deviance, violence, and stigmatization on the street.

Traumatic past experiences, current stigmatization, and the experience of ongoing inequalities (often related to demographics) faced by the homeless are also very likely to lead to collective withdrawal or collective action. While collective withdrawal can become an additional barrier to accessing services, and subsequent involvement in subsistence systems may increase individual's exposure to risks, it also provides social support for marginalized populations. Collective action has the potential to address inequality and shared hardships successfully, from mobilizing within homeless communities. Therefore, collective action stands as an element related to the subsistence

network of homelessness that could potentially prevent, or facilitate positive outcomes for homeless communities.

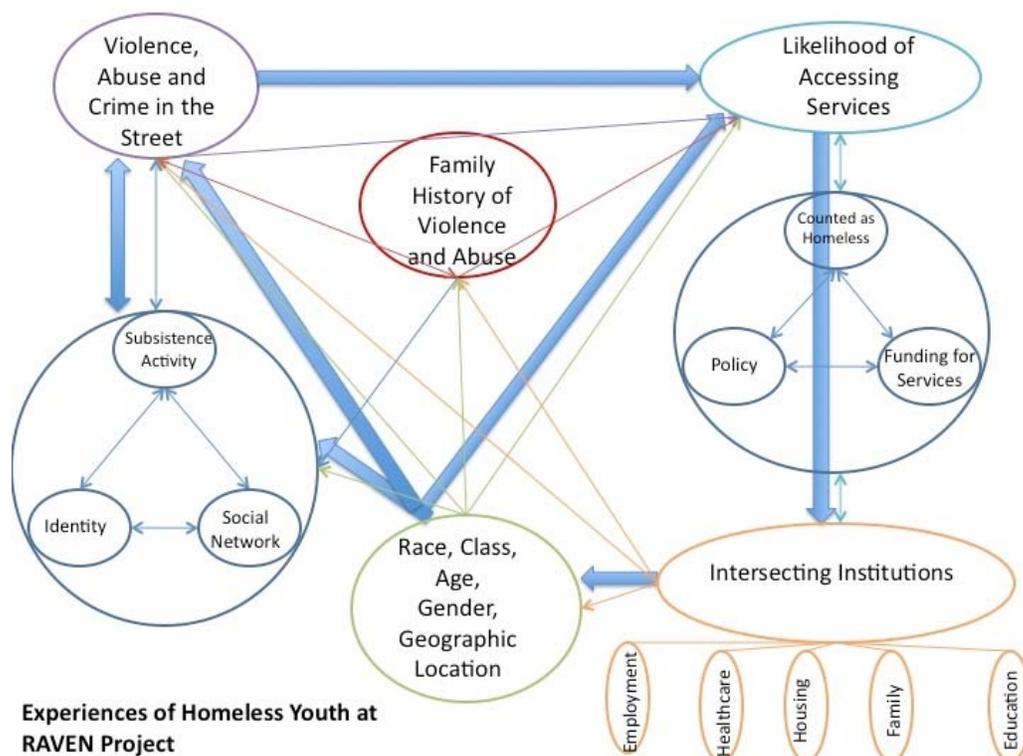
### Application of Holistic Approach to Service Provision

This comprehensive and intersectional model of homelessness may be applied to intervention with homeless populations by addressing the variations in needs and interests in services that diverse populations display. For example, research has shown that homeless adults with families have a harder time completing employment-training programs than do single adults, and non-English speaking homeless adults may not be eligible for these programs at all (Goetz and Schmiede 1996). Policies aimed at improving the experiences of families, and non-English speaking homeless people are therefore needed. However, innovative and successful programs that serve sub-populations of homeless can only come about if these groups can be reached.

Homeless veterans and runaway homeless youth are two hidden populations that are likely to have specific needs, but may be difficult for researchers to contact. These populations may require treatment for PTSD or traumatic histories; however because of their history, they may also lack trust in and avoid service providers (O'Conner 2003). The intersecting relationships between race and class, violence in the street, and the perpetuation of past experiences of violence into re-traumatizing, stigmatizing, abusive and risk-enhancing experiences in the street should all be considered in policies and programs designed to address the multiple needs of these sub-populations.

I present this model below (Figure 3) using my study of RAVEN Project as an example of how real people’s experiences of homelessness can be understood through this map. I have highlighted the specific processes and variables that were present in my research, and suggest how knowledge of sub-populations can be used to develop appropriate services.

*Figure 3: Experiences of Homeless Youth at RAVEN Project*



The likelihood that RAVEN Project youth were able to access services was dependent on their experiences with family history and background<sup>19</sup>, subjective exposure to risks in the street, and demographic variables of age, gender, sexual orientation, and geographic location. Humboldt County youth who participated in my study valued RAVEN Project as both a place where they sought positive social support (which youth experienced differently depending on gender, social class, living situation, sexual orientation, and age), as well as relative safety and shelter from exposure to risk (also related to demographics). Demographics and experiences of risk influenced youth involvement in subsistence systems and social networks, whereby the role of peers and families in providing social and material support and/or shelter was mediated by living situation. Youth research participants elaborated on the importance of their social network relationships, which in the case of the RAVEN Project, functioned not so much as a barrier to services, but as a potential draw.

### Conclusions

One of my main goals in writing this thesis was to display and make clear the absolute interdependence of various social factors and systems that reinforce and reproduce homelessness. I've done this by melding an exploration of traditional and contemporary theories of homelessness, with the provision of research findings from a

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<sup>19</sup> Since my research did not explore this dimension directly, it is not highlighted in this process diagram; however it is supported in the research literature as an important factor contributing to youth homelessness.

participatory study with homeless youth. By synthesizing previous research with my own into comprehensive diagram, I hope to provide social policy researchers, legislators, funders, and service providers with a useful tool to understand how processes and perceptions related to homelessness impact the conditions and experiences of homelessness for individuals who make up a part of their communities.

In program evaluation and service development, this model may serve as a map to help identify the subjective experiences and needs of people at various social locations, and pinpoint where and how services could best be developed. By taking the diverse needs and experiences of sub-populations of homeless people, programs can be developed that meet the specific needs of groups of homeless individuals, who may be now underserved and/or inaccessible by researchers or outreach services. Although I do not claim my model is all-inclusive of the complex array of economic, political, interpersonal, and social factors that contribute to, and sustain homelessness, it is *more* inclusive, and avoids the limitations of broad-based generalizations in recommendations in services. It can be adopted to explain and understand processes operating in a variety of communities and locations where homelessness is prevalent.

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APPENDIX A

Letter from Peter Lavalley



Empowering Lives 1972

**ADMINISTRATION**  
Information & Referral  
(707) 269-2002

**AMERICORPS PROGRAMS**  
ATACTR  
(707) 269-2020

**STRAIGHT UP AMERICORPS**  
(707) 269-2024

**AMERICORPS VISTA**  
(707) 269-2052

**ENERGY SERVICES**  
(707) 444-3831  
Consumer Education, Est. 201  
Weatherization, Est. 204  
Lead Based Paint Hazard  
Reduction & Inspection, Est. 201  
Home Energy Assistance Program  
(HEAP) - (707) 444-3831

**FAMILY SERVICES**  
(707) 269-9590  
Family Shelter Program  
Est. 209  
Multiple Assistance Center  
269-9592  
Emergency Shelter Office  
(707) 269-2075

**HOUSING REHABILITATION  
LOAN PROGRAM**  
(707) 269-2034

**NATURAL RESOURCES  
SERVICES**  
(707) 269-2070  
Landscape Construction  
Terra 4518874

**NORTHCOST MENTOR  
PROGRAM**  
(707) 269-2052

**PROPERTY MANAGEMENT**  
Affordable Rentals (707) 269-2011

**YOUTH SERVICE BUREAU**  
24-Hour Youth & Family Hotline  
(707) 444-CARE  
YSB Administration  
Launch Pad TLP  
Our Home Emergency Shelter  
(707) 444-8322  
Raven Street Outreach Program  
(707) 444-7099  
YSB Thrift Store  
(707) 444-4217

# Redwood Community Action Agency

October 23, 2009

Institutional Review Board  
Humboldt State University  
Arcata, CA 95521

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing to acknowledge that our organization supports the research efforts of Jacqui Brennan, MA Sociology candidate, regarding the Youth Service Bureau's RAVEN project.

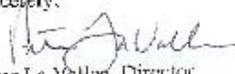
The project provides street outreach and drop in services for homeless youth in Humboldt County. A central drop-in center is located in Eureka and outreach efforts target several communities throughout the county.

Many of the youth we establish contact with are minors who have no contact with their parents or legal guardians for a variety of reasons. These include histories of physical/sexual abuse, family violence, and substance abuse. We support Ms. Brennan's proposal to interview these youth without parental consent with the understanding that no personal identification will be included in her research documents.

Youth homelessness is a serious problem in California. Our organization supports research efforts to identify the needs of this population. We are currently participating with the California Coalition for Youth and the John Burton Foundation to develop a policy statement of youth homelessness and any added research findings will help this effort. I am particularly interested in Ms. Brennan's research because little is available on the subject for rural areas of the State.

Please do not hesitate to call me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

  
Peter La Valle, Director  
Youth Services Division

Helping People, Changing Lives  
Equal Opportunity Housing Provider/EOE  
504 C Street • Eureka, CA 95501 • FAX: (707) 445 0864

## APPENDIX B

## RAVEN Project Surveys

Drop-in survey

## **RAVEN Project Drop-In Survey**

**This survey is completely optional.**

**You may skip any questions that you are not comfortable answering.**

**Please DO NOT Write your Name on the survey.**

Thank you for taking the time to fill out RAVEN's Drop-in Survey. We would like to know your opinions regarding our services and other services available to you in Humboldt County. We're also interested in your experiences with the community, here in Humboldt County.

If you have any questions about this survey, or if you want more information about it, or if you're interested in working with us more on this research project, please ask one of the staff members at RAVEN, they will be happy to talk to you about it.

1) Do you get what you need at RAVEN? (circle the number that best fits your response on the scale below)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Always .....Never

2) Which drop-in hours do you use most often?

(Circle the hours you use most often) →

Drop-in Hours	
Sunday	1:00-5:00
Monday	5:00-9:00
Wednesday	1:00-6:00
Friday	1:00-4:00

3) Are drop-in Hours convenient for you?

Yes

No (if circled no, answer question 3a below)

↓

3a.)How could we make our drop-in hours more convenient?

---

4) How do you like our groups?

Circle the one's you're interested in →

Groups & Hours	
Youth Garden Group	Sundays 1-4
Drum Circle	Sundays 5:30-7:30
Queer Coffee House	Tuesdays 6:30-8:30
Girl's Space	Wednesdays 6:30-8:30
Art Workshop	Friday 4:30-6:30

5) What other groups would you like to see at RAVEN? (Write them below)

---

6) Are the group hours convenient?

Yes    No (if circled no, answer question 6a below)

↓

6a) What hours would be convenient for you? (Write them below)

---

7) What do you get here that is helpful for you? (List up to 4 in order of importance to you)

1. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_\_

8) What else do you need that you don't get here? \_\_\_\_\_

9) Where do you get that stuff that you don't get here?

---

10) Is there anything that you would like to see RAVEN offer?

---

11) During the last month, where did you spend the most time? (Please Circle AND Write number 1 next to the answer that represents where you spent the most time, 2 next to the place where you spent the second most time, and 3 for the third most)

live with friends	traveling	in a vehicle
live w/parents	couch surfing	house or apartment
live w/other family	sleeping outside	shelter or transitional living

12) How do you get to RAVEN? (Please Circle AND Write number 1 next to the answer that represents how you get to RAVEN most of the time, 2 next to the way you get here the 2<sup>nd</sup> most, and 3 for the third most)

my own vehicle	friend drives	skateboard
hitch-hike	YSB staff drives	bike
bus	parent drives	walk

13) Write a couple sentences about how you feel about public transportation in Humboldt County?

---



---

14) Does (lack of) transportation ever prevent you from getting services?

Yes No



14a) About how often? (Circle)

Daily

Weekly

Monthly

Yearly

15) What types of assistance are you interested in receiving? (Score your top five, with one being your top choice.)

\_\_\_ College

\_\_\_ Birth

\_\_\_ Food

Applications

Certificate/Social

Security Card

\_\_\_ Shower

\_\_\_ Help with

\_\_\_ Medical Care

\_\_\_ Laundry

Homework

\_\_\_ Dental Care

\_\_\_ Free Clothes

\_\_\_ Help Getting GED

\_\_\_ Counseling

\_\_\_ Hygiene Supplies

\_\_\_ Voter Registration

\_\_\_ Change Living

(soap,  
toothbrush, etc.)

\_\_\_ Resume Building

Situation

\_\_\_ Safer Sex Supplies

\_\_\_ Help Finding a Job

\_\_\_ Local Bus Tickets

\_\_\_ Free/Confidential

\_\_\_ Emancipation

\_\_\_ Sleeping Bag

STD Testing

Assistance

\_\_\_ Tent

\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

RAVEN Staff can get you hooked up with these services. Please ask one of us if

interested. All RAVEN Project services are STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL.

16) How long have you been in Humboldt County?

---

---

17) Where do you see yourself in five years?

---

---

---

---

18) How do you think most people in Humboldt County community perceive you?

---

---

---

---

19) If you could say something to the community in Humboldt County, what would you say?

---

---

---

---

20) Can you think of a way that you would present your message (from question 19) to the Community? (Would you sing, dance, act-it-out, paint? Use your

imagination...)

---

---

---

21) Would you be interested in working on a project, that you would design, that would say something to the community here? (Circle)

Yes            No            Maybe

22) What do you think you would need in order to work on a project like that?

---

---

---

---

---

**Congratulations,**

**You made it to The End of the Survey!!!**

**RAVEN Thanks You for Your Time!**

Outreach survey

## Outreach Survey

Thank you for filling out this survey. Before you start, we want you to know that this is **completely optional**. You do not have to answer any questions that you are not comfortable answering.

Please do not write your name on the survey.

## Outreach Survey

1) Have you ever been to RAVEN Project? (Circle yes or no)

Yes                      No

1a) If Yes, How did you get there? (You May Circle More Than One)

my own vehicle	friend drives	skateboard
hitch-hike	YSB staff drives	bike
bus	parent drives	walk

1b) If No, What has kept you from coming? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2) Does (lack of) transportation ever keep you from getting services?

Yes                      No

2a) If Yes, about how often? (Circle)

Daily                  Weekly                  Monthly                  Yearly

3) How long have you been in Humboldt County? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## 4) What is your living situation?

live with friends	traveling	in a vehicle
live w/parents	couch surfing	house or apartment
live w/other family	sleeping outside	shelter or transitional li

## 5) Do you receive any assistance now? (ex: county aid, food stamps, shelter)

(Circle)

Yes                  No

## 6) Would you be interested in receiving other assistance?

Yes                  No                  Maybe

## 7) What types assistance are you interested in receiving? (Score your top five, with one being your top choice.)

___ College Applications	___ Resume Building	___ Medical Care
___ Help with Homework	___ Help Finding a Job	___ Dental Care
___ Help Getting GED	___ Emancipation Assistance	___ Counseling
___ Voter Registration	___ Birth Certificate/Social Security Card	___ Change Living Situation
		___ Local Bus Tickets

<input type="checkbox"/> Sleeping Bag	<input type="checkbox"/> Laundry	<input type="checkbox"/> Safer Sex Supplies
<input type="checkbox"/> Tent	<input type="checkbox"/> Free Clothes	<input type="checkbox"/> Free/Confidential STD Testing
<input type="checkbox"/> Food	<input type="checkbox"/> Hygiene Supplies (soap, toothbrush, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/> Other _____
<input type="checkbox"/> Shower		

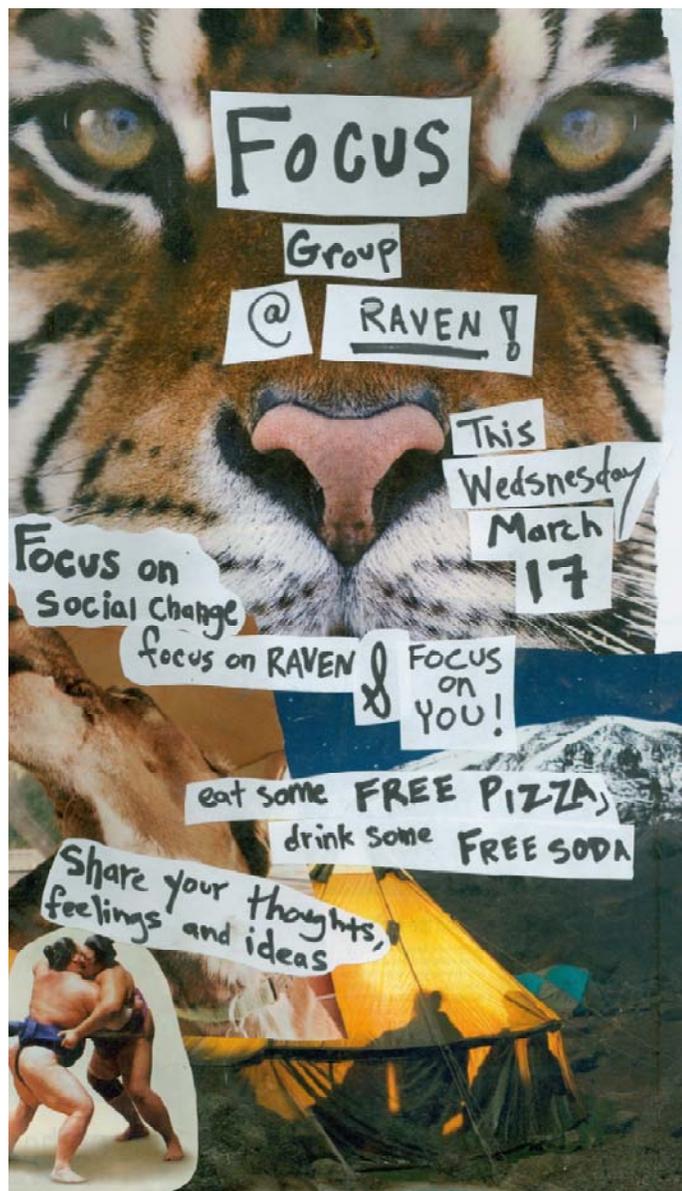
\*\*\*RAVEN Project can help you get connected with all of these services.

If interested, please ask our staff on outreach, or come by our drop-in center. All

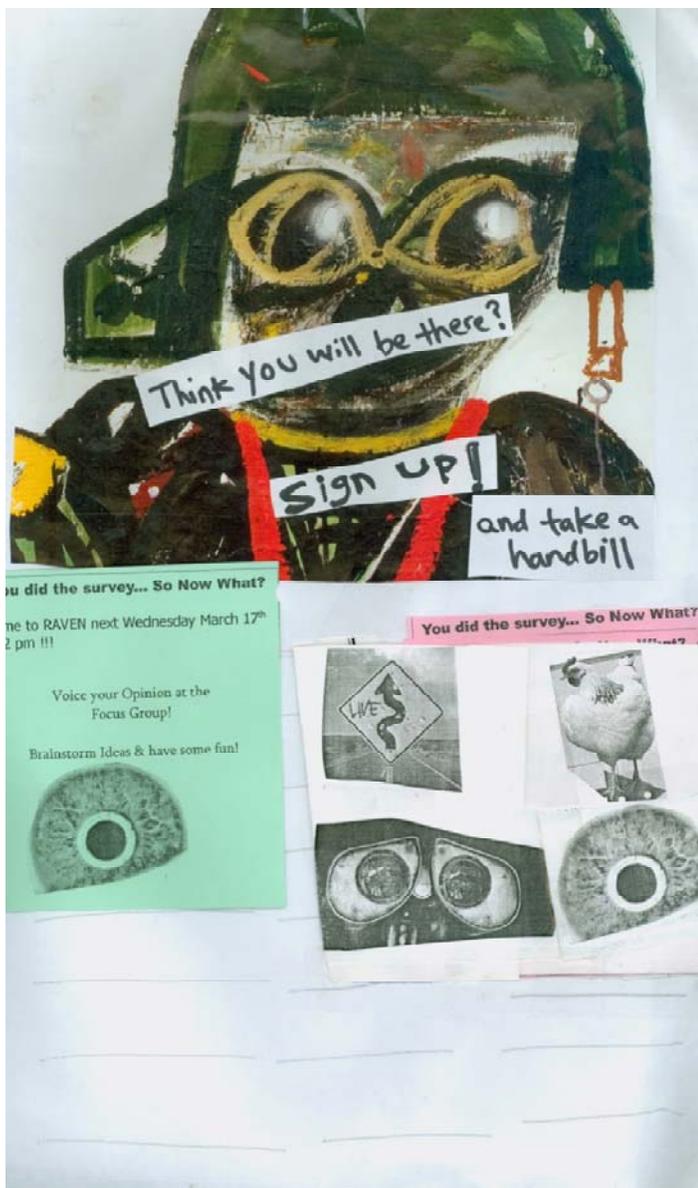
RAVEN Project services are STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL

APPENDIX C

Focus Group Flyer



# Focus Group Handbill



## APPENDIX D

### Focus Group Interview Guide

Thank you for donating your time to the RAVEN Project Focus Group. We appreciate your willingness to help brainstorm ways that RAVEN can be more supportive in meeting your needs!

This Focus Group is part of a larger project through the HSU Practicing Sociology Program that pairs an HSU sociology graduate student researcher (me) with a community organization (RAVEN Project) to do research that will directly benefit that organization. We started this project in the summer of 2009, and have been working together to develop a research plan that will address 3 purposes (1. How well RAVEN Project is meeting the needs of the youth, What circumstances (if any) prevent us from meeting any of those needs, What would you like to see happen with the data from this project?)

#### **Ground Rules:**

Speak One at a Time

Listen to Each Other

No Rude or Offensive Language Directed at any Group of People/No Hate Speech

Any Others?

Remember, everyone in this room has something to offer and we all will benefit from hearing each other's perspective.

Before we start does anyone have any questions or concerns that we should address?

Lets go around the room and say your name, age, and something about yourself that we may or may not already know you would like to share...

1. *How well RAVEN Project is meeting the needs of the youth population who comes here.*
  - Present and discuss graphs from surveys!
  - Talk about group liking in particularly groups with low attendance, how to make them better? If you don't attend the group, how come?
  - Dude's Group, what would that look like?
2. *What circumstances (if any) prevent us from meeting any of those needs?*
  - Transportation difficulties or inconvenient drop-in hours?
  - RAVEN doesn't have what they're looking for?
  - Related to any perception that youth hold of RAVEN that might prevent youth from coming?
    - How did you hear about RAVEN?
    - How long have you been coming to RAVEN?
    - Do youth know about resources and referrals that RAVEN provides for things like shelter? Transitional living? Emancipation, help finding jobs getting id cards?
    - How do you feel about the environment at RAVEN Project?
    - Do you feel connected with the Staff? Youth?
    - What makes you feel that connection?
    - Think of an example of a time that you felt that you belonged...didn't belong. What was that like?
3. *What kind of RESULTS would YOU like to see come out of this research? What would it look like and what would you want your role to be?*
  - Take a minute to reflect on the responses you provided to the survey questions asking:
    - a. How do you think the community perceives you?
    - b. Where do you see yourself in 5 years?
    - c. What message or purpose you would express to this community?
  - Lets start with question b. How do you see yourself achieving whatever goal or vision it is that you have for your future?

- What does that involve?
- Can RAVEN help you out? How?
- What if we had a series of college application workshop? Resume building workshops? When would be a good time?
- Thinking about Question a., Is there anything in your response to this question that you also see reflected in your message or purpose that you would present to the community?
  - If so, what does that look like? What is the connection?
  - If not, what message did you think was important for the community receive? What makes you feel that way?
- Can we come up with a common vision for these messages? Or can we think of a way we would all like to see it presented?
  - Brainstorm some ideas so that we can prioritize them and vote on them and start to develop a common voice.

After visioning/prioritizing exercise, come back together as a group.

Debrief: If you have any questions or ideas that come to you after this group is over, I would encourage you to bring them to me or any of the staff at RAVEN, or write them on a piece of paper and put them in the suggestions box in the drop-in room. IF anything about what we talked about in this group doesn't sit well with you or feels unresolved after we leave, don't hesitate to talk to one of us about that either! Again, thank you so much for your time, and look out for more opportunities to get involved in this project.

## APPENDIX E

## Focus Group Agenda

2 PM RAVEN Project Drop-in Room

2-2:20 Pizza and Introductions, Ground Rules, Informed Consent

2:20-2:35 Discussion of Survey Questions Pertaining to RAVEN Project Services

2:35-2:50 Discussion of Survey Questions Pertaining to Perceptions of Self and Community, bridging the gap between Services offered by RAVEN and needs still unmet.

2:50-2:55 Discussion of Ideas for Community Project.

2:55-3:00 Prioritization 'Visioning' (3-dot) Exercise. Participants given opportunity to vote in 3 areas of future development with RAVEN Project – including 1) ideas for meeting needs, 2) expressive statement or purpose, and 3) medium for expression.

3:00 Debrief and Thank You!