

Impacts of a Peer Support Program for Street-Involved Youth

What you need to know

Homelessness is a growing problem in urban centers, and Aboriginal people are overrepresented within the homeless population in Canada. Youth are the most vulnerable group of homeless people, largely at risk for gang recruitment, prostitution and exploitation. Violence and abuse at home is often the reason youth leave home and become street-involved, and their victimization continues on the street. In the absence of positive role models, street-involved youth often turn to alcohol and drugs as a way to cope with negative experiences. Research has shown that street-involved youth benefit from interventions designed to improve their adaptive coping skills.

What is this research about?

This research examines the success of a peer support program for street-involved youth known as the Links program. By facilitating interactions between street-involved youth and university students, the program exercises three main goals:

- 1 increase understanding, acceptance and advocacy between the university students and the street-involved youth,
- 2 foster supportive relationships amongst and between each of the two groups, and
- 3 enhance the knowledge and skills of each group.



ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

Cheryl L. Currie is a PhD candidate in the School of Public Health at the University of Alberta. Her research interests include Aboriginal health, public health, and the social, economic, and cultural forces that shape public health in Canada.

Dr. Patti LaBoucane-Benson is a Métis researcher, who has worked for Native Counselling Services of Alberta for 16 years, and is currently the Director of Research, Training and Communication. Patti has initiated and led of many community-based, applied research projects within the Aboriginal community in Canada, including a Costs Benefit Analysis of the CHCH program in Hollow Water First Nation.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers recruited 28 university students and 27 street-involved youth (48% Aboriginal) to participate in the program. The youth were between 18 and 26 years of age, and the students were between 19 and 29 years of age. Group sizes were limited to ten participants (5 youth and 5 students) to optimize discussion and bonding.

At their first meeting, program facilitators surveyed participants to determine what they hoped to achieve



in the program and to identify their perceptions of other participants they were to be paired with. The groups met for 12 two-hour sessions at a youth housing facility in Edmonton. An exit survey was distributed during the last meeting to determine what the participants had gained from the program.

What did the researchers find?

Nine themes arose from the group discussions and were matched with the above mentioned program goals.

Under the goal of increasing understanding and acceptance, the researchers found that the program helped change the participants' initial preconceptions of one another. As a result of their interactions, both groups were able to recognize and challenge the stereotypes they held for each other. The discussions allowed a chance for the participants to identify similarities between one another, particularly in relation to substance abuse and addiction.

The increasing attendance of youth at meetings demonstrated that **strong bonds were being formed between the youth and the students.** This finding was evidence that the goal of building supportive relationships between participants was being met.

The final goal of developing the participants' knowledge and skills materialized as some

of the youth showed interest in the possibility of attending university and were curious to know more about student life.

The structure of the peer support group enabled the youth to develop better communication and interpersonal skills, to overcome fears of rejection, and to become more outgoing. In addition, the homeless youth realized there was little difference between themselves and the university students and that they too could strive for and achieve a higher education.

Conversely, the university students realized there was little difference between themselves and the homeless youth once they began interacting with them, and this helped the students empathize with and want to help those who are struggling with homelessness.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

This research can be used to encourage other peer support interventions that improve the employment prospects, economic wellbeing, and health of street-involved youth. It also recognizes its limitations regarding follow up, leading the researchers to suggest that funding for the collection of long-term evaluative data be built into the funding of future programs.

ARTICLE SOURCE

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