PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF HOMELESS YOUTH: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS

A THESIS

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By

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ABSTRACT

Thirty-five participants aged 18 and older were studied in the examination of the public’s perspective of homeless youth. Participants were administered a set of demographics questions and a survey whose structure was based on the work of Haidt & Hersh (2001) via the Social Networking Service Facebook. Thematic Analysis was utilized to qualitatively capture participant’s emotional and physical response to scenarios that deliberately increased the participant’s interaction with homeless youth(s) and/or the severity of the situation. Analysis showed that participants were unaware of the causes of youth homelessness and their experiences while on the streets. Participants exposed to the youths immediate needs were willing to meet them but did not typically suggest referring youths to services or suggest support for increased awareness and funding of such services.
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VITA

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ................................................................................iii
VITA ....................................................................................................................iv
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ...........................................................................1
CHAPTER 2: THE PUBLIC AND HOMELESS YOUTH ..........................................3
CHAPTER 3: PARTICIPANTS AND METHOD ......................................................5
  3.1 Facebook & Participants ...........................................................................5
  3.2 Present study ...............................................................................................6
  3.3 Analytic approach .......................................................................................11
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS .....................................................................................13
  4.1 Initial Template ..........................................................................................13
  4.2 Initial Template Conclusion .......................................................................15
  4.2 Final Template ..........................................................................................16
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION ..............................................................................21
LIST OF REFERENCES .....................................................................................25
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

There are nearly 2.8 million homeless youth in the United States, making up nearly 15% to 25% of the overall homeless population (Cooper, 2006; Cauce et al., 2000). Literature refers to these youth as “runaways,” “push-outs,” “throwaways,” and “street youth” (Adams, Gulatta, & Clancy, 1985; Chelimsky, 1982; Robertson, 1991). The most common label, homeless youth, clearly demarcates/distinguishes those youth who have left home and may presumably return (runaway youth) and those who have left home and may not return (homeless youth). Research has revealed that compared to housed youth, homeless youth experience higher rates of mental health problems (Unger, Kipke, Simon, Montgomery, & Johnson, 1997), suicidal ideation and attempts (Molnar, Shade, Kral, Booth, & Watters, 1998), violent victimization on the streets (Hoyt, Ryan, & Cauce, 1999; Janus, McCormack, Burgess, & Hartman, 1987), substance use (Tyler, Hoyt, Whitbeck, & Cauce, 2001; Baer, Ginzler, and Peterson, 2003; Kipke, Montgomery, Simon, Unger, & Iverson, 1997), teen pregnancy, and high-risk behaviors, such as unprotected sex (Daly, 1996; Robertson, 1991; Robertson, Koegel, & Ferguson, 1990; Unger, Kipke, Simon, Montgomery, & Johnson, 1997).

Some research has tended to blame youth for their homelessness, namely suggesting that the youth has “runaway reaction disorder”, (Jenkins, 1971), poor self esteem, anti-social tendencies, and personality pathology (Stierlin, 1973; Karabanow,
2004). Other research has dismissed the majority of these assumptions, and finds that youth who end up on the streets are not running to the streets, but rather are running away from a dysfunctional home environment (Smoller, 1999), or conflict over sexual orientation, sexual activity, poor school performance, youth/parent substance abuse (Robertson, 1989; Rothman, & David, 1985), and suffering physical or sexual abuse prior to leaving home (Alder, 1991; Powers et al., 1990; Whitbeck and Simons 1990; Hendessi, 1992; Stein et al., 1994).
CHAPTER 2: THE PUBLIC & HOMELESS YOUTH

Glassman, Karno, & Erdem (2010) suggest that views of homeless youth as a threat to society coexist with views of these youth as homeless and hopeless. This makes the development of definitions and policies to support this heterogeneous population tedious and incomplete. Current policy is the result of the merging perspectives towards youth in the Social Security Act of 1935 and the 1961 Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Offenses Control Act. The Social Security Act of 1935 promoted a “whole child” perspective that understood uncared youth as being the responsibility of, rather than a danger to, society. In 1958 this bill was subtly altered to reflect the public’s perspective of youth in crisis by extending aid to runaways from 16 to 18: youth were now individual actors who were responsible for their own circumstance (Glassman, Karno, & Erdem, 2010).

Soon after the Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Offenses Control Act of 1961 was initiated with a focus on preventing and combating delinquent acts. As such, youth in crisis became viewed as threats to society rather than victims of economic or familial circumstance. This policy was the result of an anxiety and fear of youth culture and the felt need to control youth in crisis through rehabilitation and reintegration. This policy transitioned youth on the outskirts from being perceived as lost innocents to being provocateurs of offense (Glassman, Karno, & Erdem, 2010). Though there was no
specific mention of homeless youth in this policy, the umbrella it created placed such youth at disadvantage and in constant threat of incarceration.

The transitions in policy and social perspective led to our current policy, the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) of 1974. RHYA finally acknowledges runaway and homeless youth as populations in need of care. However, RHYA simultaneously supports and demonizes the homeless youth population as the act has only been revised over time (rather than replaced) and still carries the negative overtones of delinquency and fear that stemmed from previous policy. Most recently updated in 2008, under current policy, a homeless youth under the age of 18 is essentially denied aid unless they are willing to return to their family or foster care. This leaves those youth who will not or cannot return to their families with few choices and zero support from current policy and the few programs that desire to serve the population (Glassman, Karno, & Erdem, 2010).

The resulting invisibility of homeless youth may explain the paucity of drop-in/outreach programs to support homeless youth and other lackluster polices. In order to increase funding and support for homeless youth, it is imperative to gather information from policy makers and the public about how resources can be leveraged. However, a critical first step is determining how homeless youth are currently viewed by society at large—is blame still assigned to homeless youth for their homelessness, is society blamed, when and how is the public (if at all) sympathetic to the plight of these youth? The objective of this thesis is to determine the public’s attitudes towards homeless youth.
CHAPTER 3: PARTICIPANTS & METHOD

3.1 Participants

All study procedures were approved by the institutional review board of The Ohio State University. Participants were recruited via the Social Networking Service (SNS) Facebook. SNSs can be defined as web-based services that allow users to: 1) construct a public or semi-public profile, 2) display other users they are connected with, and 3) view and connect with other users. SNSs are primarily organized around people rather than particular interests (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). This arrangement mirrors unmediated social structures, where "the world is composed of networks, not groups" (Wellman, 1988, p. 37). Boyd (2008) suggests that SNSs allow users to socialize with their “friends” even when they are unable to gather in unmediated situations. In SNSs the term "friends" can be misleading as the word does not necessarily mean friendship in the everyday sense and the networks people connect to vary (Boyd, 2006a). The introduction of SNSs has created a new context for research as they provide a new organizational framework for online communities (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Facebook is an SNS that allows users to create a personal profile, add “friends”, exchange messages, and receive automatic updates of “status”, birthdays, and profile changes (Wikipedia, 2011, p. 16). Launched in 2004, Facebook was originally closed as a Harvard only SNS; since 2006, Facebook has expanded to include everyone ages 13 and older. Profiles on this SNS are unable to be fully public to all users; each user is a part of an original network that can be expanded to others through becoming “friends” with a
user in that network. The current research utilized a Facebook user’s profile to access the user’s network of “friends” as a convenience sample. The “status” was used to make the survey link available to the user’s network.

A Facebook “status” allow members to post information regarding their actions, whereabouts, and thoughts (Wikipedia, 2011, p. 16). This information is made available to friends and if desired, the general public. Such a “status” has the potential to be viewed by the poster’s “friends” and “web” of friend’s acquaintances (Wikipedia, 2011, p. 16). Generally short and without much detail, a “status” is an ideal method for posting survey links. For the present study, a “status” was posted with two links which directed participants to a survey whose scenarios portrayed either unidentified and male homeless youth, or unidentified and female homeless youth. The two links differed only in the sex of the individual in the scenarios. Link 1 (n=17) specified female homeless youth as the actors in the scenarios and Link 2 (n=18) specified male homeless youth as the actors. 35 participants (20 women, 15 men), of whom 29 reported an age range from 18-30 (6 reported an age of 31+), completed an online survey via Facebook. The participants were predominantly educated with 34 having at least some college education (97%). Inclusion criteria were being a United States citizen and 18 years of age. Consent was implied by clicking on one of the offered links.

3.2 Present Study

Five scenarios were created to gauge participants’ perceptions of homeless youth. Inspiration for the present study came from the work of Haidt & Hersh (2001) which attempted to analyze the contrasting morality of conservatives and liberals by presenting six controversial sexual practices that fell outside of the “norm” of sexual behavior
(homosexuality, masturbation and incest). Their study used scenarios that formed a progressive sequence, violating sexual norms in increasing intensity in order to gauge participants’ reactions; the authors administered the homosexual scenarios first (2 total), followed by masturbation scenarios (2 total) and finally incest (2 total). The scenarios were followed by seven probing questions to elucidate issues of morality.

The scenarios for the present study are a variation of the model established by Haidt & Hersh (2001) in terms of increasing intensity and differentiation to action. Each scenario was constructed in a progressive “sequence of intensity” based primarily on the scenarios perceived intensity as well as the degree of interaction that occurred with the depicted youth(s). The scenarios progressively increased the likelihood of interaction between participant and the described youth(s) or increased the intensity of the situation by introducing some element of illegal activity, unfortunate circumstances, or sustained time for interaction.

The follow-up questions did not focus on morality as in Haidt & Hersh (2001) but rather attempted to elicit emotional and interactional responses in an effort to gauge the participant’s general attitude towards homeless youth. The analysis of participant responses examined responses across all five scenarios in an effort to arrive at their attitudes towards homeless youth. The scenarios included varying levels of simulated sensory information:

1) Visual only, which provided a visual but did not overtly offer the notion of a behavioral interaction between respondent and homeless youth; and

2) Visual and behavioral interaction, which provided both a visual and behavioral interaction between the respondent and homeless youth.
Each scenario was followed by two questions, much like Haidt & Hersh (2001) that were designed to elicit information regarding the intrapersonal and interpersonal responses of the participants as they engaged with the scenarios.

The full text of the scenarios was as follows:

Driving on an early morning during winter you see a youth wrapped in blankets who is sleeping in a park.

You approach a convenience store during school hours on a Tuesday. Sitting on the curb outside the store are two youth who look to be 14 or 15 years old; both youth are wearing ragged, baggy jeans, soiled T-shirts and have matted hair. One asks you for some spare change while the other continues rapping to a self-made beat.

Waiting at a bus stop you observe a female/male youth exchange drugs for cash with a pedestrian.

You read in the local newspaper about an unidentified female/male homeless youth who was sexually and physically assaulted after exchanging sex for cash from an unidentified adult man.

You work downtown and you walk to work every day. On Fridays a female/male youth sells newspapers for a dollar to benefit the local homeless shelter. She has been selling these newspapers each Friday for 6 months. You’ve gotten to know her name, part of her story, and occasionally you purchase a paper on your way to work.

Scenario One served as a “warm up” scenario to get participant’s thinking about the situation(s) youth on the streets may experience. It served as the least intense of all scenarios as respondents had no contact with the youth and while the youth was in an uncomfortable situation it did not involve any threat to the participant. The scenario was followed with the questions “How do you feel about this situation? Why do you think this youth is sleeping in a park?” Scenario Two progressively built on the emotions elicited by Scenario One by having two youth, in broad daylight, ask the participant for spare...
change. The participant was brought into direct relation with the youths (who were not identified as homeless) which attempted to increase the overall intensity of the interaction. The youth technically were breaking the law as they were truant, as well as being described as unkempt, but the context of the interaction did not suggest a need for a fearful response. This scenario was followed by the questions “How do you feel about the two youth” and “How do you respond to this situation?”

Scenario Three did not necessitate interaction between respondents and actors; however, the respondent was asked to envision observing a youth participating in an overt illegal activity. This allowed the participant to ignore the situation, engage with the youth, or contact some type of authority (the latter two enabling a potentially intense situation). The youth were still not stated as being homeless, as it was hoped the participant’s would suggest homelessness as being a reason the youth was participating in drug dealing (a dangerous and illegal activity). This scenario was followed by the questions “How do you respond to this situation?” and “How do you feel about this situation? Why do you think this youth is selling drugs?”

Scenario Four provided the only instance of a youth being identified as homeless. This scenario is unique because the respondent is not brought into direct contact with the youth yet simultaneously provides the most harrowing experience in the survey. The sexual and physical assault of the homeless youth depicted in the newspaper provides an “indirect interaction” as the participant witnesses the victimization through reading the story. The combination of youth prostitution with abuse by an adult was expected to produce the most outrage among participant responses. The questions “How do feel about the assault and what led to its occurrence?” And “Who is responsible for the assault?”
were chosen to capture the fullest response of participant’s as they assigned blame and conjecture regarding the reason for, and act of, assault.

Scenario Five emphasized the interaction between participant and youth. The interaction occurred during the day and posed no threat to the participant. The scenario focused on the participant’s regular interaction with a homeless youth and attempted to reveal whether or not ordinary citizens would take time to share about themselves. “Does the youth know your name, part of your story? Why or why not?” and “Who do you think is responsible for his/her extended period of homelessness?” were the questions chosen to probe the participant’s response. Neither question inquired about what the participant may have learned about the youth. It was hoped that the information would be offered by the participant. The scenario did not include any illegal activity and was structured to allow the participant to engage in sustained dialogue with the youth. It was considered the most intense of the scenarios as a long term relationship could develop from the regular interaction between homeless youth and participant.

3.3 Analytic Approach

Template Analysis, a qualitative method for “thematic coding” of text, was utilized to code and summarize subjects’ responses. With template analysis, the exploration of text involves several readings of responses while relying on and considering personal experience, information gleaned from literature reviews, and the philosophical nature of the study (King, 2004). Interpreting data with Template Analysis then involves generating lists of codes which provide the basis for the themes that emerge from responses (King, 2004; King, Carroll, & Newton, 2002). The resulting hierarchical
organization groups similar codes in clusters that form “higher-order” codes otherwise known as themes.

To begin coding, the researcher relied upon the studies interpretive nature, the personal experience of the researcher, homeless youth literature, and multiple readings of the data as suggested by King’s (2004, pg 259) guidelines to develop the Initial Template. Following a minimalist approach, the initial coding process produced three highest-order codes that were expected to represent themes and formed the Initial Template. Qualitative data analysis must include checks of reliability and validity. With template analysis, one of three quality checks must be employed: 1) independent scrutiny of analysis, 2) respondent feedback, or 3) creating an audit trail. The first takes place within the analytic team; two independent analysts served as independent member checks on the data as I progressed through various points of the analysis, challenging my assumptions and validating others. The second quality check is only possible with interviews and the author did not report the entirety of the analytic process in the form of an audit trail. The following section documents the process by which the final template was reached.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

4.1 Initial Template

Theme 1: Blaming the Youth and Society for their Predicament

Theme 1 permeated both the male and female homeless versions of the survey across all five scenarios, although varied depending on the circumstances of those depicted in the scenarios. While the majority of blame was placed on parents: ([who is responsible?] “Her parents. If she is too young to get a full-time job, she needs to be taken care of”), many respondents suggested the youth were responsible for their homelessness ([who is responsible?] “Himself” and “Himself first, the shelter 2nd”). When the youth were blamed for their circumstance, both males and females received equal criticism. The “system” was blamed both through blanket statements about the state of society, the failure of the “system” in general, and a lack of attention by schools and foster care (“Is there no where in our society these kids can get help?”).

As per King’s (2004) guidelines, reflexivity was utilized throughout the coding process and changes in the template were made as themes were identified and required further specification. After discussion between me and independent analysts, it was decided that introducing sub-codes to the final template would be used to unveil the multiple levels of blame. In sum, the Initial Template appropriately found a general theme of blame; further analysis was needed and resulted in the development of the Final Template.
Theme 2: Ignoring Homeless Youth; or, “Call the Police”

Theme 2 was typical in scenarios depicting homeless youth participating in illegal activities, including truancy, selling illegal substances, and participating in prostitution. The presence of avoidance, or ignoring, was particularly felt among responses to engaging youth outside a convenience store during school hours (“I would probably go about my day and ignore the situation” and “I’d probably offer a silent prayer, and ‘pass by on the other side’ as the story goes (shameful, but most likely true”). Participants were also upset that youth would not be at school, for example: “[I feel]...a bit of a prejudice against them for not being in school...” Truancy resulted in nearly as many responses to “call the police” as dealing drugs provoked (“I would also question the store worker/manager as to why they had yet to contact the police as to their loitering”). Scenario 3 (drug dealing) received responses varying from a wish to have never encountered the youth to actively taking steps to have them arrested (“I would walk away, not get involved” and “I would notify the police”). While this theme was supported through the initial analysis, it seemed to be lacking an emotional reaction/response accompanying respondents’ actions. There were far more statements that revealed the emotional intensity accompanying both the act of looking away and contacting the authorities, for instance: “My immediate thought would be to look away and not ‘see’ anything, for fear that if they did ‘catch’ me looking, I could end up getting hurt” and “I am disgusted by this situation... [I would] report the situation to the authorities.” Reflexivity, further emersion in the text, and input from independent analysts led to a restructuring of this theme in the final template.
Theme 3: Where’s the Help?

Theme 3 was minimally supported, but nonetheless seemed important. Only a handful of responses were found across scenarios that could be attributed to a desire for services or programs to be available for youth (“I would offer them some food, and give them the address of a drop in center for street youth or a shelter catering specifically to youth”). Generally the statements that spoke to services fit more within Theme 1; only one respondent spoke specifically to the existence of a drop-in center for homeless youth, and two others suggested they would seek out information to give to the youth the next day (suggesting a desire for said information to exist). This theme was closely realized in a question posed by a participant: "is there nowhere in our society these kids can get help?" Unfortunately, this participant did not further elaborate on the need or desire for such an outlet to exist. In short, this theme was found to be lacking in substance, and as the analysis continued was eliminated from consideration.

4.2 Initial Template Conclusion

Reflexivity and scrutiny of analysis by thesis committee led to a revision of the Initial Template. The resulting process identified four specific sub-codes for Theme 1 that illuminated who, and what, participants blamed for the circumstances of homeless youth. Theme 1 was then described as “Pointing Fingers.” Further pursuit of the participants’ willingness to ignore and report homeless youth to authorities led to the discovery of a concomitant discomfort with the youth’s plight. The development of Theme 2, “Taking Action: Meeting Immediate Needs”, did not occur with great frequency; but in those instances when participants took steps to engage (or even
question the circumstances of homeless youth) with the youth a desire to concretely support this vulnerable population became salient. The phrase “meeting immediate needs” highlights the immediate, concrete, and short term nature of the respondent’s actions. Each theme in the Final Template was supported by several sub-codes which resulted from the coalescing of many lower-level codes.

4.3 Final Template

Theme 1: “Pointing Fingers”

Additional analysis based on the initial template revealed four distinct instances when participants used blame as an explanation for the youth’s circumstances. First, much of the blame focused failure of families to support the youth, specifically blaming parents, other family members, and generational poverty. For example: “...her parents who shouldn’t have had her in the first place if they couldn't provide her for her until she was an adult.” Others spoke to a general lack of care, bad circumstances, or neglect on the part of parents, for example: "I would most likely assume he is a victim of generational poverty or a person with a history of bad choices being made for himself or by others.” Second, blaming the “system” occurred commonly, for example "...I suppose I could also blame the "system" for allowing youths to be homeless…” Participants specifically referenced the failure of schools to keep track of students as well as the foster care system which clearly had not supported the youth, such as: “The school district has an obligation to make sure their students are in attendance and in good health/cleanliness” and "...the foster care system should have this girl in a home.” Of note, the survey at no point mentioned the youth’s family origin. Participants did not
clearly describe whether the youth was perceived to have been in foster care and chose to leave or "was given up on" or if the youth left, or was kicked out of, a family environment. Statements such as "Every circumstance is different, but a youth should never be on the street - at the very least, she should be in foster care (although I know some kids would rather be on the street than in foster care)" suggested that foster care is perceived as a remedy, or service to support, youth homelessness.

An additional sub-code centered on the blame of self, although was only clearly stated by one respondent ("People like me who don't do anything when they have the resources to do so") in response to who was responsible for the youths homelessness). This theme was also alluded to indirectly through responses blaming the government as well as "society" "[youth homelessness is the result of] the governmental system that we operate under." In contrast, self-blame was directly dismissed on only one occasion: "It is not his fault for laziness, nor is it my fault for not helping him out, but a result of the society in which we both live."

The final sub-code was the direct blame of the homeless youth. The responses centered on opportunities that the youth had not taken advantage of ("Honestly her. If she wants something... not to be homeless... she can find a way. There are so many ways to make ends meet and move up in life"). In addition, it was assumed that the youth had made poor decisions leading to homelessness and/or involvement in the specific illegal activity, for example:

"I think the youth is sleeping in the park because he has made some sort of bad decision in his past to lead him there"
And

“The youth is selling drugs to either make money or feed his own habit. Neither is acceptable.”

In sum, this theme reveals that respondents were willing to “point fingers” in many directions when suggesting where the responsibility for youth homelessness lies. Although no respondents suggested that they were pointing fingers, the lack of responsibility accepted by respondents suggests that this was indeed occurring. By casting blame on society, the “system”, and the government all respondents inadvertently turned the blame back upon themselves as they have the right to vote and initiate change in policy; though this was not elaborated upon (or possibly realized) by any respondent.

**Theme 2: Taking Action: Meeting Immediate Needs**

Theme 2 brought together the many proactive reactions that respondents had when encountering a homeless youth. This theme was most common in Scenario 2, which described youth loitering outside a convenience store and asking for spare change. Though some participants suggested an aversion to giving cash to anyone who they perceived as likely to abuse it (“I would be afraid they would use the money for irresponsible things, such as drugs/alcohol”), many suggested they would respond by purchasing food for the youths while inside the store (“I would ask if there was any food item I could provide for them” and “depending on the setting I might say ‘I will not give you money, but I will buy you some food in the convenience store, if you are hungry’”) or would offer a small amount of change. One participant’s response, “I would offer them
some food, and give them the address of a drop in center for street youth or a shelter catering specifically to youth” suggested that there is some (albeit miniscule) awareness that there are services available to homeless youth.

In scenario 3, a potentially dangerous scenario where youth are selling drugs, one participant suggested that s/he would take the time to contact the authorities to help the youth, even if it meant having the youth arrested (“I hope I would call the authorities and tip them to what is going on – hopefully they can help her out – although, she will probably end up in jail as well”). This code stands alone among responses to Scenario 3; two others suggested they would attempt to dialogue with the youth, while the other participants elected to either ignore the situation or call the police to report a crime. This single code expresses a desire that police would help and direct youth to services, not just put them in jail. The responses that make up Scenario 3 suggest that although it was common for respondents to be scared of the circumstances homeless youth are in (such as dealing drugs) there were individuals who wish to take action to meet immediate needs when they arise. It is possible that with relevant information such concrete and immediate aid could be transitioned to supporting long term and sustained aid for homeless youth.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

To the author’s knowledge, this is the first qualitative study regarding the public’s perception of homeless youth. As a whole, this study indicates that those pushing for policy reform must engage the public regarding 1) their understanding of the reasons for youth homelessness, and 2) the lack of services that exist for such youths to experience comfort, safety, and adequate education. Addressing these points may increase the public’s general awareness of and sympathy for homeless youth and subsequently impact policy to improve services for this population. The two themes that emerged from the text can be used both individually and combined to elucidate these points.

Though not typical, some respondents perceived the youth to be at fault for their circumstance, a reflection of our publics negative attitude towards those youth who are not living within our cultural norms. The more typical response of blaming the youth’s parents is not a positive or adequate understanding of why a youth is on the streets. Very few respondents provided specifics regarding the reasons for a youth’s homelessness which may highlight the general ignorance the public has of homeless youth. In order for policy to return to a more “whole child” perspective the public must be made aware that its youth are experiencing physical and sexual abuse, a dysfunctional home environment, and/or conflict over their sexual orientation. In addition, the methods youth utilize to survive while on the streets and their increased risk for victimization could be highlighted as a means to increase sympathy and awareness. Perhaps such poignant knowledge will
increase the public’s awareness that we are responsible for youth both before and after they hit the streets. Moving the public from pointing fingers to accepting responsibility for these youth is paramount. Such awareness could increase support to reform, or even replace, the current RYHA policy towards homeless youth.

The unexpected proclivity to meet immediate needs stands in stark contrast to respondent’s “hands off” approach to recognizing society’s responsibility towards caring for homeless youth. The convenience store elicited a strong response to provide for youth in need as well as to question why the youth were in such a position. Previous research by Link et al. (1995) suggested that the public still had compassion towards its homeless in general. The present study builds upon this assertion by demonstrating that given the opportunity people will meet the needs of youth that are immediate and can be quickly addressed. Despite the willingness of respondent’s to meet immediate needs the mention of system-based services for homeless youth was atypical in this study. Though further research is needed to understand this gap it may be surmised that respondents believed these services to already exist (e.g. foster care or shelters).

The study has several limitations. First, there are many ways to conduct qualitative studies, and Template Analysis may not be effectively utilized over SNSs such as Facebook. Many times a respondent would provide a statement, for example: “I feel sad” or, “I would ignore the situation” and not provide any further details regarding why they felt the particular emotion, or what in particular they were ignoring (e.g. the youth in general, an illegal activity, interaction). Interviews allow for follow-up questions and this would have been very useful in collecting more rich and descriptive data in these instances. Further research into the public’s perspective regarding homeless youth may
need to engage participants in a one on one interview setting. This may allow researchers to fill in the gaps suggested by the brief, fragmented responses that were sometimes offered in this study. Overcoming this obstacle is necessary as qualitative researchers look to utilize the web to gather qualitative research.

Second, the respondents in this survey were overwhelmingly grouped in the age ranges of 18-30 (83%) and had attained a BA/BS (80%). A homogeneous sample may reflect only a small portion of the public and leave many voices unheard. Again, this limitation may exist because of the SNS format utilized to make the survey available. This seems counterintuitive as the mean age of Facebook users is 38 years. Future research may overcome this limitation by simultaneously posting the survey links on multiple users “status” whose age ranges cover the 30+ age range. It may prove difficult to access different education attainment via Facebook due to the SNSs focus of networking users within common themes, such as common attended education institutions.

When combined the themes suggest a need for the United States public to return to its roots. Homeless youth are not “those people’s kids”; they are ours. Offering a quick meal is an action worth taking, however, these youth experience pain and isolation that cannot be eliminated through simple acts of kindness. Our country is in need of a campaign focused on increasing the awareness of youth homelessness. Rather than publishing in journal articles, scholars could begin writing accessible literature such as newspapers, magazines, and websites that are available for the general public. Further consideration could also be given to technological means as in Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube to educate communities at various levels. Inaction against youth homelessness is
not an option if America is to remain a generous democracy that represents each of its citizens.
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