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The blurred line between perpetrator and victim - young people, homelessness and violence

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The blurred line between perpetrator and victim - young people, homelessness and violence

Young people experiencing homelessness often have a blurred identity as both victim and perpetrator of violence. In the complex practitioner environment, what is the best way to work with young people who both experience and use violence? In this article Dr Jess Heerde from the University of Melbourne summarises her new research detailing young people's exposure to violence and Rebecca Halliday from Jesuit Social Services talks about how best to engage and support young people around their experience of violence.

Introduction

Rates of homelessness among Victorian adolescents and young adults have risen by 43% across the period from 2006 to 2016¹. Recent estimates suggest 15% of adolescents and young adults nation-wide, experienced homelessness in 2017². Homelessness, for these young people, means having no safe place to call home. Many of these young people have been neglected, maltreated and abused within their family environment³, disengaged from schooling⁴ and have low attachment to supportive peer³ and community networks⁵. Risks for worsening of the impact of these health and social experiences are exacerbated by young people's exposure to violence (as both victim and perpetrator) while homeless⁶.

“There's no one there to protect you. As much as you might think about it and convince yourself that someone will save you and it'll be okay; no one will” says Kylie¹, a 21-year-old woman who is experiencing homelessness in Melbourne. She is one of over 50 young people aged between 16 and 25 years who has participated in a recent study led by Dr Jess Heerde from the University of Melbourne. The study is investigating the factors leading to, and the lived experience, of young people who are homeless. Although no two experiences of homelessness are the same, young people unanimously recounted an array of

¹ Names have been changed to protect anonymity.

violent, distressing victimisation experiences, and dangerous daily situations where they perceived a need to engage in some forms of violence to protect themselves. Despite their inner strength and resilience, experiencing homelessness was described as difficult, tiring, unsafe and unpredictable: “*I watch my back 24/7*” said 22-year-old Mark*.

Exposure to Violence

Young people described their exposure to violence, as both perpetrators and victims². Kelly* in describing the homelessness environment stated, “*It’s not a nice world.*” Similarly, Mike* stated, “*I got surprised and shocked just by the amount of shit that goes on.*” Young people’s descriptions of violence perpetrated were often underpinned by a perception that this violence was necessary due to vulnerability or the threat of victimisation. “*If somebody’s going to pull something on me, I’m not going to be the one that’s getting chopped up*” said Peter. “*I’m going to beat this person until they can’t beat me anymore,*” explained Megan*. In other recollections, young people described shoplifting as a means of accessing the food or clothing they needed. As Kylie* described, “*Food has become a novelty, not something that you eat every day.*”

Young people described having been threatened with serious physical assault (often involving the use of weapons), or physically assaulted, while experiencing homelessness. In recalling his experience of being assaulted, Tom* shared, “*It was multiple weapons, multiple people. It was glass bottles. I was targeted at a bus stop by a group of seven people.*” Often, it was unclear whether young people were victimised by homeless peers, other homeless persons, or non-homeless persons; regardless, the threat of victimisation was regularly expressed: “*It is pretty regular*” said Peter, and “*I got threatened a lot, probably at least 50 times*” said Kelly.

² A comprehensive discussion of the findings summarised in this section can be found here⁶.

Overall, the study findings suggested violence and its threat, was a daily issue of survival for the young people interviewed, which often impacted upon their opportunity to adhere to public laws and regulations that prohibit violence and, support victims. Young people's accounts of violence and their experiences of victimisation were frequently conveyed with a sense of 'normality;' the psychological impact of these accounts and experiences are cause for concern. Young people's expressions and body language suggested vulnerability, shame and unequal power relationships with professional support persons. Indeed, young people often spoke of not seeking help: "*I was too afraid to go see anyone*" said Peter*.

Engaging and supporting young people around their exposure to violence

In this section, Rebecca Halliday from Jesuit Social Services shares her practice wisdom gained through her work in the Connexions Program. Connexions is a youth specific dual-diagnosis program supporting young people aged 16- 28 who are experiencing homelessness.

Rebecca shares that young people's accounts of violence and victimisation (described in the previous section) are consistent with what she hears directly from Connexions participants. She also adds, their exposure to violence, is not isolated to their homelessness experiences, with violence often prevalent in the childhood home environment, and modelled by caregivers. This exposure to violence is strongly associated with elevated levels of anxiety self-reported by young people, and their display of poor emotional regulation and coping skills. Rebecca describes, young people's early childhood experiences appear to become deeply entangled in their identity and sense of self, which is often reported as overwhelmingly negative, and characterised by a deeply held core belief of being worthless and undeserving of care and support.

How do we work with young people who both experience and use violence? The way young people characterise their identity and self-worth can impact on their intrinsic

motivation to engage with services. At Jesuit Social Services, building a positive relationship based on trust and understanding is integral to the support provided across the organisation. *“Practice is guided by a trauma-informed approach, where reliable, consistent and predictable support is provided, to allow a safe attachment to develop. This approach is characterised by curious and reflective questions, designed to nurture a space where participants are listened to and feel understood, where they can feel connected to another person who can bear witness to their stories”*, describes Rebecca. Establishing a trusting relationship can be challenging, explains Rebecca, as a young person’s relational template has often been informed by early negative interactions with caregivers. Young people have learnt to protect and defend themselves from physical and emotional pain and live independently from others. Rebecca explains that through perseverance and repeated attempts by a practitioner to engage a young person, an implicit message is communicated - that the young person is worthy of support.

However, as Rebecca describes, for the relationship between practitioners and young people to feel safe, there must be limits and accountability. Although a young person’s experience is always listened to and acknowledged, and the factors that may have contributed to their use of violence considered, the messaging remains consistent - the use of violence is never acceptable. *“We remain empathetic and non-judgemental but are clear in our communication - young people are responsible for their own behaviour, and there are consequences to their actions. We have to be careful not to collude, minimise or help them justify their behaviour in any way,”* says Rebecca.

For the practitioner-young person relationship to be safe, risk assessment is also central to any practice approach - this must be conducted and reviewed throughout any engagement. As Rebecca recalls, *“in my experience, young people with histories of childhood trauma and exposure to violence, can escalate very quickly, becoming distressed and/or*

agitated or aggressive, which can occur without any warning signs. Such behaviours can be directed at practitioners, community members or property, and often result in young people being banned from the services they so badly need.”

When situations like these do arise, where safety is compromised, Rebecca states her own approach is to cease the contact immediately. But she notes, the follow up in these situations is crucial. *“It is important that the young person’s behaviour does not become a barrier to accessing support, and thereby a function which reinforces their perception of being ‘bad’ which results in being rejected again. The message to a young person is that they are valued and can still access support, but that they have a responsibility to ensure that it is safe to do so.”* Rebecca says that young people’s behaviour has to be addressed and reflected on shortly after the incident, when the young person is no longer in fight/flight mode and can engage in reasoning and reflection: *“Our narrative remains supportive, but directly names the behaviour that is not appropriate, sharing emotional experiences (e.g. feeling scared), and modelling how to communicate and resolve the situation safely and respectfully.”*

Rebecca states a young person should not be shamed, accused or confronted; these actions create further barriers to engagement, accessing support, and opportunities for change. Young people need to be supported in developing insight into their thoughts, feelings and behaviours, and in learning to separate themselves from their behaviour which can further challenge the deeply held beliefs they hold about themselves. A strong therapeutic relationship, as Rebecca has seen through her work, is an integral part of the healing process, and a valuable vehicle for a young person to become connected to other people, and to learn an alternative way of being in the world.

Concluding Remarks

In this article we sought to describe new research detailing young people’s exposure to violence and discuss how best to engage young people around their experience of violence

and support them to have healthy, safe relationships. The knowledge gained through our work recognises people's exposure to violence while homeless is complex and often compounded by early life experiences. In addressing the impact of violence, proactive strategies that address young people's feelings of shame and vulnerability and assist in the development of strong and supportive therapeutic relationships, are required.

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