Characteristics of Natural Mentoring Relationships From the Perspectives of Homeless Youth

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PROBLEM: Homeless youth experience high risks for poor mental health outcomes. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the characteristics of natural mentoring relationships among homeless youth and to identify possible mechanisms that can enhance social support for this population.

METHODS: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 homeless youth aged 14–21 who had natural mentors. The interviews focused on how youth met their natural mentors, the function of these relationships, and how natural mentoring relationships differed from other relationships in the youth’s social networks.

FINDINGS: Main themes that emerged from the interviews included parental absence, natural mentors as surrogate parents, and social support from mentors.

CONCLUSIONS: Findings suggest that social supports provided by mentors enhance youth’s adaptive functioning and may promote resilience, thus the use of natural mentors may be an important untapped asset in designing interventions to improve outcomes for homeless youth.

According to the most recent report by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (Hammer, Finkelhor, & Sedlak, 2002), an estimated 1.7 million youth have had a runaway episode in a given year. Estimates for homeless and runaway youth also varied between 500,000 and 2.8 million (Congressional Research Reports, 2006). Because of their unaccompanied status and affiliation with deviant peer networks on the streets (Whitbeck, 2009), homeless youth face high risks for adverse mental health outcomes. In comparison with their housed peers, homeless youth have considerably higher rates of mental illness, drug and alcohol abuse, victimization, and risky sexual behaviors including survival sex (Edidin, Ganim, Hunter, & Karnik, 2012; Hathazi, Lankenau, Sanders, & Bloom, 2009; Nyamathi et al., 2012; Whitbeck, 2009).

One of the most defining characteristics of homeless youth that distinguish them from their housed peers is the troubled family context. Histories of childhood maltreatment and highly conflicted family relationships are commonly noted among homeless youth and considered to be the main antecedents to youth leaving home (Hyde, 2005). In addition, the rate of parental abuse and neglect for homeless youth is far above the general adolescent population. In one study, an overwhelming 95% of homeless youth reported that they have experienced family abuse or neglect (Johnson, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2005). The troubled family backgrounds at times result in the youth being rejected by their families. Almost half of all homeless youth in a multisite study reported that they were explicitly told by their parents or caretakers to leave or were “kicked out” of their homes (Ringwalt, Greene, & Robertson, 1998).

Given the well-documented risks associated with youth homelessness, recent investigations have focused on protective factors that may mitigate adverse health outcomes for this population (Kidd & Shahar, 2008; Lightfoot, Stein, Tevendale, & Preston, 2011). One such focus is in the area of social support and social networks (McCay et al., 2011; Rice, Stein, & Milburn, 2008). Among general and high-risk adolescent populations such as youth in foster care and adolescent mothers, it was found that youth who had close connections with nonparental adults demonstrated better outcomes in diverse domains such as psychological health, problem behaviors, school attitude, and sexual behaviors, suggesting protective effects from these relationships (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010; Greeson & Bowen, 2008; Rhodes, Ebert, & Fisher, 1992; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Notaro, 2002). Important nonparental adults who have significant influence in the lives of young people are termed natural mentors (Rhodes et al., 1992). Natural mentors are considered normative in adolescent development (Bernat &
Resnick, 2009) and consist of kin relationships such as grandparents or nonkin relationships such as teachers (Dubois & Silverthorn, 2005). In a nationally representative sample of adolescents, it was found that approximately three quarters of the sample reported having relationships with important nonparental adults since the age of 14 (Dubois & Silverthorn, 2005).

Studies on the social networks of homeless youth have indicated that these youth interface with both formal and informal sources of social support, including nonparental adults who may fit the definition of a natural mentor (de la Haye et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2005; Rice, 2010; Wenzel et al., 2012). For a transient population such as homeless youth, natural mentors may be a promising source of intervention as such mentoring relationships are already embedded within the youth’s social networks and have the potential to be more enduring than formal mentoring programs. However, we currently have limited understanding regarding natural mentoring relationships as a potential source of support specifically for homeless youth. A recent investigation revealed that 60% of the study’s homeless youth sample reported having natural mentors, but the characteristics and roles of these mentors were not known (Tevendale, Lightfoot, & Slocum, 2009). To address this gap in the literature, we conducted a qualitative study with the aim of illuminating the characteristics of natural mentoring relationships from the perspective of homeless youth. A detailed examination of the emergence and specific functions of natural mentoring relationships can contribute to our current understanding about social supports available to homeless youth and may inform programs that serve at-risk youth about relationships that could enhance safety and well-being.

**Methods**

We conducted semi-structured interviews with a convenience sample of 23 homeless youth, ages 14–21, who utilized a drop-in community center in northern California. The community center specifically served runaway and homeless youth. Currently, there is no standard definition for homeless youth; therefore, we used a broad definition of homeless youth based on prior research (Carlson, Sugano, Millstein, & Auerswald, 2006; Unger et al., 1998) and federal definitions (McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, 2002; Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, 2008). Homeless youth recruited for the study consisted of youth who lacked stable or permanent housing such as youth who have run away from home, who stayed at places such as motels, hotels, shelters, public parks, or abandoned buildings, and who “couch-surfed,” which is temporary shelter with friends or relatives. Since homeless youth often transition in and out of homelessness (Hyatt, 2013), youth who were at risk for homelessness (i.e., youth with histories of homelessness in the past 12 months) were also included in the study. To avoid the perception of coercion, we did not directly recruit youth who came to the center. Instead, agency staff informed potential participants about the study and referred receptive youth to an investigator who was present during certain days of the week. Youth were assured by staff that their decision to participate would not impact their ability to receive services. Agency staff did not receive any incentive from the investigators to assist with recruitment.

To determine if youth had natural mentors, they were asked, “Is there an important adult at least 25 years old other than your parent or guardian whom you can go to for support and guidance or if you need to make an important decision, or who inspires you to do your best?” (Zimmerman et al., 2002). Attempts were made to recruit participants who had diverse natural mentoring relationships that included kin and nonkin natural mentors. Participants were also asked about their demographics such as age and ethnicity (Table 1) and the characteristics of their mentors (Table 2). Parental consent was waived by the institutional review board for participants under 18 in order to avoid potential harm to youth with histories of parental abuse and/or neglect. As a result, all participants provided their own written consents. The investigator who conducted the interviews had extensive clinical experience with homeless youth.

The interview focused on three specific areas: (a) participant background; (b) how participants met their mentors; and (c) comparison of mentoring relationships with other important relationships (Table 3). We received Human Subjects approval for the study and also obtained a federal certificate of confidentiality to further protect the participants. Each participant was given a $20 gift card for his or her time.

![Table 1. Participant Demographics, N = 23](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>N (%) or M (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>16 (69.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>7 (30.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17.9 (1.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>12 (52.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>7 (30.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>2 (8.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multietnic</td>
<td>1 (4.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1 (4.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th grade or less</td>
<td>3 (13.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some high school</td>
<td>13 (56.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed high school or has GED</td>
<td>7 (30.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number of running away episodes</td>
<td>7 (9.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number of times “kicked out” of home</td>
<td>5 (5.1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

GED, General Education Development Test. Those who pass the test receive a California High School Equivalency Certificate.
Data Analysis

Interviews were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim. An iterative open-coding technique was employed to generate main ideas and experiences as described by participants with a focus on key areas related to natural mentoring relationships (Krippendorff, 2004). A list of codes was independently generated by two investigators, reviewed for agreement, and finalized. Codes within the same focus area were then condensed into conceptual categories and modified during the analysis process. Data collection was ongoing throughout the data analysis process until saturation was indicated, at which point we stopped data collection. Coding was conducted with Atlas.ti software version 6.2.15 (Scientific Software Development, Berlin, Germany).

Results

Three main themes emerged from the interviews: (a) parental absence; (b) natural mentors as surrogate parents; and (c) social support from mentors.

Parental Absence

The life stories shared by participants were dominated by narratives of parents who were absent or neglectful. All of the participants reported troubled childhoods that involved parental substance use, domestic violence, childhood neglect, unstable housing, or being forced to “grow up fast.” As reported by one participant, “I grew up, like everywhere, and some of the places I don’t know the name to.” Many participants talked about parental substance use or mental illness as primary reasons for their parents not being physically and/or emotionally available and antecedents to the participants leaving home. One participant stated the following about her mother’s drug use, “The most she’s ever been clean of drugs, nothing like that, was four years. She got into a relationship where...they were both in the drug scene...When I was 15, I ended up running away from home. I was homeless for a while.”

The majority of participants cited their fathers as the absent parent. Reasons for not growing up with a father or a mother included incarceration, abandonment, being removed from home by child protective services, or death. Many of the participants also reported having stepparents, but the relationships with their stepparents were often tumultuous or violent. Two participants stated the following about their relationships with their stepparents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Demographics and Relationship of Natural Mentors, N = 23</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>N (%)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female 17 (73.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male 6 (26.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age M (SD)</strong> 39 (13.45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American 8 (34.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White 8 (34.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino 4 (17.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multietnic 3 (13.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandparent 3 (13.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aunt/Uncle 4 (17.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cousin 1 (4.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster parent 2 (8.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older friend 4 (17.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend’s parent 3 (13.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant other’s relative 1 (4.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent’s friend 1 (4.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 2 (8.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case manager at community agency 1 (4.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor 1 (4.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Known mentors (years)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 4 (17.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–2 4 (17.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2–4 3 (13.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 4 12 (52.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Table 3. Interview Protocol</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Question</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Participant background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please share with me your background such as where you grew up, your family, where you’ve lived, and how you ended up here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Knowing natural mentors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About this important adult you had mentioned, how did you meet this person and what were the circumstances that brought the two of you together?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How natural mentoring relationships differed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In what ways is your relationship with this important adult similar or different from your relationship with your family and friends?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Function of natural mentoring relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under what circumstances do you seek support from this important adult? How often do you see or communicate with this important adult and what activities do you usually do together?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Describing natural mentors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In your words, how would you describe this important adult?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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older you can’t really be telling someone what to do all the
time all the time, so I kinda got into it with him.

He (referring to step-father) used to beat my mom every
day ’til one day, you know the train nails, big ones? I threw
one of those and it hit him in the face. He jumped out the
back window, he never came back to the house. I never
seen him again after that. All of these other guys tried to
play my dad’s role and I didn’t like it. So I refused to be
home, always ran away.

Mentors as Surrogate Parents

Participants with nonkin mentors met their mentors either
through formal channels such as schools and community
agencies or through people within their social networks
such as significant others and friends. Their mentoring rela-
tionships became closer over time as they spent more time
with their mentors and felt more comfortable disclosing
describing their personal problems. Participants also reported
that the support and attention from their mentors demonstrated an interest in them and reached
out to them, “She would just come and give me a hug and
talk to me, like do things that other teachers wouldn’t do,
like really try.”

Except for participants who identified grandparents as
mentors, almost all participants perceived their mentors as
parental figures and often used the terms “mom” or
“dad” to characterize their relationship. One young woman
responded with the following statement when she was asked
why her aunt was important to her, “Just like a mom. She’s
pretty high up there. She’s like my second mom. ” Partici-
pants verbalized that the support and attention from their
mentors was the type of relationship that they would expect
from a parent. A few excerpts that captured this sentiment
are noted below.

I would describe her as a caring, loving mother. I mean,
even though I’m not one of her actual kids, you can’t
really tell, because she treats me as I’m one of her
dughters. Even though I’m just the grandson’s girlfriend,
she treats me as one of her daughters still.

I feel almost like a mother-daughter relationship with her
because I really, she’s a very important person in my life
because she makes sure like, when it comes to me
graduating, she makes sure to do everything.

So like sometimes if there’s things that I know will stress
her out (referring to her mother), I’ll go to my cousin, talk
to her about it, ’cause I don’t want to tell my mom ’cause
it’ll stress her out. So, I’ll just tell my cousin. So, I think of
her as like a second mom.

A common theme that distinguished natural mentors from
other relationships such as parents and peers was their
ability to talk openly with their mentors and their mentors’
nonjudgmental response and willingness to listen. All of the
participants expressed that their mentors were people with
whom they can talk and share intimate feelings.

She’s not judgmental. The fact that I do get in trouble and
stuff, she understands, and she loves me for it.

Because she understands me, and she takes more time to
acknowledge what I’m actually saying and she doesn’t
judge me. And she listens to my bad parts, and my good,
there’s always two sides to every story.

I can talk to her about anything, no matter what it is, when
it is, who it is, what it’s about, and she’ll talk to you about
it without judging you, without telling you you’re wrong.

I could trust her with things . . . like she will not tell a soul,
not my mom, not my grandmother, she won’t tell anyone.

Like whatever me and her speak about it stays between me
and her. That’s why I feel that like, in a way, she’s my
mom, but in a way she’s my best friend – that best friend
that you know you can count on no matter what.

Social Support From Mentors

When participants talked about their relationships with their
mentors, a dominant theme that emerged was the substantial
social support provided by mentors. The types of support
included instrumental (tangible), emotional, informational
(advice and guidance), and appraisal support (praise and
encouragement) (Table 4). Most participants reported that
their mentors provided some sort of tangible support such as
meals, shelter, money, bus passes, or rides to places. Perhaps
the most distinguishing factor that differentiated support
from mentors versus support from other people was their
mentors’ reliability and unconditional willingness to help
them during times of need.

She’s making sure that things get done because I don’t
have that many people to help me with that kind of thing
and she wants to make sure that if I need something, she’s
gonna go as far as she has to and can to make sure it
happens, so I’m not left out in the dust when I leave. She
wants to make sure I can take care of myself, I’m going to
be somewhere that’s safe.

She takes time out of her day to call me, just to see, ’I’m
just trying to make sure you’re o.k., seeing how your day’s
going’, and just little stuff like that makes me feel like she’s
going to be here for me for, forever.

I think I can count on my aunt for way more things than
my mom. My aunt is way more reliable than my mom. My
mom would like leave in a quick like . . . I couldn’t count
on my mom to like, I mean I can count on her for little
when difficult periods of her depression:

expressed the following about how her mentor helped her

3. Instrumental support  “She’d give like clothes for the baby,
formula, diapers. She was real good about all that kind of stuff. She won’t
ask questions. Rides to like the doctor.”

4. Informational support  “I don’t know exactly like what would be
different, but I know I wouldn’t have
done like some of the things I’ve done
because she’s like one of those people
that like can really give you the best
advice, and you will listen to it, and you
know like my life would have been all
different.”

Table 4. Quotes by Participants Describing Different Types of Social
Support Provided by Their Mentors

1. Emotional support  “I know that for certain things I can go to
her just for that and she would just like
talk to me. We would probably go to
like Starbucks or something just to talk.
Like I can’t really do that with my
friends cause they’ll probably try to get
into it and mess things up and stuff.
She would sit there and tries to work
tools out or if I’m upset I would talk
to her and she would tell me other
ways about it instead being that.”

2. Appraisal support  “I know I’m going to graduate. She told
me today, you know you’ve got three
more weeks, and you get ten credits.
Like that feels amazing to hear that. I
know that doesn’t sound like much but
it sounds like a lot to me. So, she’s, you
know, she’s always just supporting
me.”

things, but I can’t count on her for like big stuff. Like if
there’s something big, I don’t know, it’s weird. My aunt, I
know she would do it.

A young woman who was struggling with depression
expressed the following about how her mentor helped her
through difficult periods of her depression:

. . . every day I wake up, I thank God, because without her
I don’t know where my mind would be. Like I would
probably be, I would want to kill myself or you know,
something crazy like that because before I met her it was,
it was more of a “I just hate myself, I don’t know why I’m
here” . . . She made me feel equal, like she talked to me
every day. And she just let me know, “You know, you’re
doing a good job.”

To the participants, these supportive behaviors demon-
strated that their mentors “cared” about them. For example,
one participant stated, “She’s a really good person. I
wish everybody could be just like her.” Other participants
emphasized the types of social support provided by their
mentors as how they described their mentors. For example:

I would describe her like a helpful person, like she’s great
like even she wouldn’t say anything mean to hurt your
feelings, but she would tell you the honest truth, like if
something is just not right, if she thinks you should do
something in another way, like she’s really honest, she’s
trustworthy, like you can pretty much depend on her for
anything like, not to like just depend on her but you can
really depend on her and she will be there to help you like
a hundred percent.

For several participants, receiving encouragement and
affirmation from their mentors changed their perceptions
about certain situations or themselves and helped them cope
with life’s challenges. Mentors were perceived by participants
as individuals with more knowledge and wisdom and who
had the information or resources that they needed. Corre-
sponding with the trust that participants expressed about
their mentors, they frequently expressed that they listened to
their mentors’ advice and felt that their mentors would direct
them in the right path.

Discussion

To our knowledge, this was the first qualitative study on
natural mentoring relationships as reported by homeless
youth. A key finding was the sense of loss expressed by par-
ticipants regarding parental relationships and how their
natural mentors served as surrogate parents. This finding
elucidates a possible psychological underpinning to natural
mentoring relationships for this population and under-
scores the importance of relationships across social contexts.
The result also supports prior research about the social net-
works of homeless youth being diverse and not necessarily
void of positive connections (de la Haye et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2005; Rice, 2010; Wenzel et al., 2012). For
homeless youth, their social circumstances engender signifi-
cantly more vulnerabilities than that of typical adolescents,
and their marginalized status limits opportunities for the
adult social scaffolding that promotes healthy development.
As a result, natural mentoring relationships may confer
special benefits for the homeless youth population as they
lack the adult and community support that are more acces-
sible to their housed peers. In addition, youth in this study
reported feeling comfortable in disclosing private feelings
and concerns to their mentors that they would not have dis-
closed to others, not even their peers. This finding infer
that a natural mentoring relationship represents a special class of relationship that transcends the proscribed scope and expectations of the mentor’s social role. For example, an aunt who functions as a natural mentor can be a youth’s confidante and a trusted source of support that is different from any other relationship in the young person’s extended family and social network.

Social support provided by mentors was another key theme from the study and reported by youth as an important factor in enhancing their ability to cope with life’s adversities and even mental illness. This finding is consistent with prior qualitative research on natural mentoring relationships among at-risk youth (Greeson & Bowen, 2008). In addition, it was evident from the narratives that the mentors’ supports, whether it was instrumental, emotional, informational, or appraisal support, were highly valued by the youth and distinguished their mentoring relationships as being different from other relationships in their social networks. These findings indicate that social support from mentors can facilitate positive adaptation and perhaps promote resilience. A substantial body of evidence has demonstrated that social support from rewarding interpersonal relationships can have powerful effects on mental and physical health by buffering the ill effects of stress (Callaghan & Morrissey, 2008). There is no reason to believe that the same benefits would not apply to homeless youth.

The current study suggests that, despite their troubled family backgrounds, homeless youth are connected with important nonparental adults in their lives, including extended family members. These natural mentors may serve as stable and enduring relationships that provide homeless youth with a sense of social connectedness (Rew, 2008). Connectedness, a concept grounded in attachment theory, has been used to describe a sense of belonging and a perception of being loved and cared for and can derive from diverse social relationships (Bernat & Resnick, 2009). Youth in this study reported that their mentors cared about them. Research has found that social connectedness, particularly family connectedness, is strongly associated with healthy adolescent development and is protective against risky behaviors (Bernat & Resnick, 2009; Resnick et al., 1997). Homeless youth are often estranged from their parents; therefore, natural mentors, particularly kin mentors, could serve as a source of family connectedness and a protective factor for these youth.

Given the overwhelmingly positive feelings that youth expressed about their mentors in this study, community agencies and health professionals that serve homeless youth should consider natural mentoring relationships as part of a comprehensive approach to addressing the needs of homeless youth and ways to increase the youth’s social capital. Youth in this study expressed that they valued their mentors’ advice and guidance. Natural mentors could feasibly serve as a bridge in a coordinated effort to assist youth out of homelessness and into a safe environment. Professionals who work with homeless youth should consider strategies that encourage the continuation of natural mentoring relationships such as having resources that permit youth to stay in touch with their mentors (e.g., access to the Internet, phones, or bus passes). Several youth reported that their mentors reached out to them, and the trust and connections they had with their mentors did not occur spontaneously but developed over time. Hence, strategies that help homeless youth stay connected with their natural mentors could help develop and strengthen these relationships, and thereby permit youth to access vital support that may not be feasible with their parents or peers.

Limitations

Several limitations about the current study must be noted. The nature and characteristics of natural mentoring relationships were based on the perspectives of 23 homeless youth affiliated with one youth-serving agency; therefore, generalization of findings to other adolescent populations or homeless youth who did not receive services is cautioned. Another limitation is the small sample size; however, as a qualitative study, the sample size was based on content saturation. A quantitative study with a larger sample size could be beneficial in determining the effects of natural mentoring relationships on youth health and functioning. Nevertheless, the finding of social support as a main function in mentoring relationships is consistent with prior research on low- and high-risk adolescent populations (Ahrens, Dubois, Richardson, Fan, & Lozano, 2008; Sterrett, Jones, McKee, & Kincaid, 2011; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Behrendt, 2005). Despite these limitations, findings from the current study add new data to the emerging literature on natural mentoring relationships and protective processes among homeless youth and further refine the definition of a natural mentor.

Conclusions

This study reveals that natural mentors exist in the lives of homeless youth and serve as important sources of social support. Because of the well-documented deviant peer networks that are often associated with homeless youth (Solorio et al., 2008; Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Yoder, 1999), natural mentoring relationships may be under-recognized as important assets in the lives of these youth. The high level of social support given by mentors, as described in this study, provides compelling evidence for agencies that serve this population to consider interventions that assess for natural mentoring relationships and encourage the continuation of these relationships. Another recommendation is to consider social contexts
that promote intergenerational interactions among homeless youth and prosocial adults that could lead to mentoring relationships.

Future studies on natural mentoring relationships among homeless youth should consider obtaining data from the perspective of mentors. Data from natural mentors could enhance our understanding about the nature of these relationships and perhaps clarify reasons as to how or why adults who serve as natural mentors became mentors and whether their perceptions about their roles are congruent with how their mentees perceive them. In addition, interviews with natural mentors could uncover possible youth characteristics that promote interest and helping behaviors from nonparental adults.

Acknowledgements

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References


