Characteristics of Natural Mentoring Relationships from the Perspectives of Homeless Youth

Michelle T. Dang, PhD, RN, APHN-BC [Assistant Professor] and
School of Nursing, California State University, Sacramento

Elizabeth Miller, MD, PhD [Chief of Adolescent Medicine and Associate Professor in Pediatrics]
Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Medical Center

Abstract

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 to 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.

Keywords

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 one-half to 2.5 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, Garnim, Hunter, & Karnik, 2012; Hathazi, Lankenau, Sanders, & Bloom, 2009; Nyamathi et al., 2012; Whitbeck, 2009).

One of the most defining characteristic of homeless youth that distinguishes 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

Correspondence: Michelle Dang, School of Nursing, California State University, Sacramento, 6000 J Street, Sacramento, CA, 95819-6096; dang@csus.edu..

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 multi-site study reported that they were explicitly told by their parents or caretakers to leave or were "kicked out" of their homes (Ringwalt et al., 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, 2011; 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, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 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 to 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 et al., 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 IRB 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.

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.

> I didn't really know my dad. He's in jail right now. He has been in and out of jail my whole life so I don't really know him. When I was like eight, my mom got married to my stepdad, but he was like an alcoholic, really bad alcoholic, drink every day, smoked every day. When I got older I started realizing that he can't. Like you know when you get 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 relationships became closer over time as they spent more time with their mentors and felt more comfortable disclosing their personal problems. Participants also reported that 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." Participants 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 daughters. 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 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 demonstrated that their mentors "cared" about them. For example, one participant stated the following about her mentor, "She does things to show me that she cares, that she wants me to feel safe, that she wants me to feel comfortable, because she knows that if I don't, I'm going to withdraw, and I'm just not going to be o.k."

When asked to describe their natural mentors in their own words, several participants used the words "amazing," "a good person," "a wonderful person," "caring," and "loving." 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. Corresponding 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 participants 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 underscores the importance of relationships across social contexts. The result also supports prior research about the social networks 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 significantly 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 accessible 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 disclosed to others, not even their peers. This finding infers 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 unlike 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 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, Rosenthal, & Milburn, 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 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 perception about their role is 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.

Acknowledgments

References

Ahrens KR, DuBois DL, Richardson LP, Fan MY, Lozano P. Youth in foster care with adult mentors during adolescence have improved adult outcomes. Pediatrics. 2008; 121(2)

Bernat, DH.; Resnick, MD. Connectedness in the lives of adolescents. In: DiClemente, RJ.; Santelli, JS.; Crosby, RA., editors. Adolescent health: Understanding and preventing risk behaviors. Jossey-Bass; San Francisco: 2009. p. 375-389.

Callaghan P, Morrissey J. Social support and health: A review. Journal of Advanced Nursing. 2008; 18(2):203–210. [PubMed: 8436711]

Carlson JL, Sugano E, Millstein SG, Auerswald CL. Service utilization and the life cycle of youth homelessness. Journal of Adolescent Health. 2006; 38:624–627. [PubMed: 16635781]

Congressional Research Reports. The runaway and homeless youth program: Administrative, funding, and legislative action. 2006. Retrieved from http://www.opencrs.com/document/RL31933/

de la Haye K, Green HD, Kennedy DP, Zhou A, Golinelli D, Wenzel SL. Who is supporting homeless youth: Predictors of support in personal networks. Journal of Research on Adolescence. 2012; 22(4):604–616. [PubMed: 23204810]

DuBois DL, Silverthorn N. Characteristics of natural mentoring relationships and adolescent adjustment: Evidence from a national study. Journal of Primary Prevention. Special Issue: Mentoring with Children and Youth. 2005; 26(2):69–92. doi: 10.1007/s10935-005-1832-4.

Edidin JP, Ganim Z, Hunter SJ, Karnik NS. The mental and physical health of homeless youth: A literature review. Child Psychiatry & Human Development. 2012; 43(3):54–375.

Greeson JKP, Bowen NK. "She holds my hand" The experiences of foster youth with their natural mentors. Children and Youth Services. 2008; 30:1178–1188. doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth. 2008.03.003.

Hammer, H.; Finkelhor, D.; Sedlak. Runaway/throwaway children: National estimates and characteristics. Juvenile Justice Bulletin – NCJ196469. 2002. Retrieved from http://wwww.unh.edu/ccrc/pdf/MC18.pdf

Hathazi D, Lankenau SE, Sanders B, Bloom JJ. Pregnancy and sexual health among homeless young injection drug users. Journal of Adolescence. 2009; 32(2):339–355. doi: 10.1016/j.adolescence.2008.02.001. [PubMed: 18692891]

Hurd N, Zimmerman M. Natural mentors, mental health, and risk behaviors: A longitudinal analysis of African American adolescents transitioning into adulthood. American Journal of Community Psychology. 2010; 46(1):36–48. doi: 10.1007/s10464-010-9325-x. [PubMed: 20532613]

Hyatt, S. More than a roof: How California can end youth homelessness. California Homeless Project. 2013. Retrieved from http://cahomelessyouth.library.ca.gov/

Hyde J. From home to street: Understanding young people's transitions into homelessness. Journal of Adolescence. Special Issue: Homeless and Runaway Youth. 2005; 28(2):171–183. doi: 10.1016/j.adolescence.2005.02.001.

Johnson KD, Whitbeck LB, Hoyt DR. Predictors of social network composition among homeless and runaway adolescents. Journal of Adolescence. Special Issue: Homeless and Runaway Youth. 2005; 28(2):231–248. doi: 10.1016/j.adolescence.2005.02.005.

Kidd S, Shahar G. Resilience in homeless youth: The key role of self-esteem. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry. 2008; 78(2):163–172. doi: 10.1037/00002-9432.78.2.163. [PubMed: 18954180]

Krippendorff, K. Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology. Sage Publications; Thousand Oaks, CA: 2004.

Lightfoot M, Stein JA, Tevendale H, Preston K. Protective factors associated with fewer multiple problem behaviors among homeless/runaway youth. Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology. 2011; 40(6):878–889. doi: 10.1080/15374416.2011.614581. [PubMed: 22023279]

McCay E, Quesnel S, Langley J, Beanlands H, Cooper L, Blidner R, Bach K. A relationship-based intervention to improve social connectedness in street-involved youth: A pilot study. Journal of Child & Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing. 2011; 24(4):208–215. doi: 10.1111/j.1744-6171.2011.00301.x. [PubMed: 22044568]

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. (42 U.S.C. 11431 et seq.). Jan. 2002 ReauthorizedRetrieved from http://www.seirtec.org/nche/downloads/mv_full_text.pdf

Nyamathi A, Marfisee M, Slagle A, Greengold B, Liu Y, Leake B. Correlates of depressive symptoms among homeless young adults. Western Journal of Nursing Research. 2012; 34(1):97–117. [PubMed: 21131507]

Resnick MD, Bearman PS, Blum RW, Bauman KE, Harris KM, Jones J, Udry JR. Protecting adolescents from harm: Findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health. JAMA: Journal of the American Medical Association. 1997; 278(10):823–832. doi: 10.1001/jama.278.10.823.

Rew L. Caring for and connecting with homeless adolescents. Family & Community Health. Special Issue: Advancing adolescent health: Center for Health Promotion Research in Underserved Populations: The University of Texas School of Nursing. 2008; 31(Suppl1):S42–S51.

Rhodes JE, Ebert L, Fisher K. Natural mentors: An overlooked resource in the social networks of young, African American mothers. American Journal of Community Psychology. 1992; 20(4):445–461.

Rice E. The positive role of social networks and social networking technology in the condom-using behaviors of homeless young people. Public Health Reports. 2010; 125(4):588. [PubMed: 20597459]

Rice E, Stein JA, Milburn N. Countervailing social network influences on problem behaviors among homeless youth. Journal of Adolescence. 2008; 31(5):625–639. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2007.10.008. [PubMed: 18076981]

Ringwalt CL, Greene JM, Robertson MJ. Familial backgrounds and risk behaviors of youth with thrownaway experiences. Journal of Adolescence. 1998; 21(3):241–252. [PubMed: 9657892]

Runaway and Homeless Youth Act. (42 U.S.C. 5601). Oct. 2008 Retrieved from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/fysb/resource/rhy-act

Solorio MR, Rosenthal D, Milburn NG, Weiss RE, Batterham PJ, Gandara M, Rotheram-Borus MJ. Predictors of sexual risk behaviors among newly homeless youth: A longitudinal study. Journal of Adolescent Health. 2008; 42(4):401–409. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2007.09.023. [PubMed: 18346666]

Sterrett EM, Jones DJ, McKee LG, Kincaid C. Supportive non-parental adults and adolescent psychosocial functioning: Using social support as a theoretical framework. American Journal of Community Psychology. 2011; 48:284–295. [PubMed: 21384233]

Tevendale HD, Lightfoot M, Slocum SL. Individual and environmental protective factors for risky sexual behavior among homeless youth: An exploration of gender differences. AIDS and Behavior. 2009; 13(1):154–164. doi: 10.1007/s10461-008-9395-z. [PubMed: 18535902]

Unger JB, Kipke MD, Simon TR, Johnson CJ, Montgomery SB, Iverson E. Stress, coping, and social support among homeless youth. Journal of Adolescent Research. 1998; 13(2):134–157.

Wenzel S, Holloway I, Golinelli D, Ewing B, Bowman R, Tucker J. Social networks of homeless youth in emerging adulthood. Journal of Youth and Adolescence. 2012; 41(5):561–571. [PubMed: 21863378]

Whitbeck, LB. Mental health and emerging adulthood among homeless young people. Psychology Press; New York: 2009.

Whitbeck LB, Hoyt DR, Yoder KV. A risk-amplification model of victimization and depressive symptoms among runaway and homeless adolescents. American Journal of Community Psychology. 1999; 27:273–295. [PubMed: 10425702]

Zimmerman, MA.; Bingenheimer, JB.; Behrendt, DE. Natural mentoring relationships. In: Dubois, DL.; Karcher, MJ., editors. Handbook of youth mentoring. Sage Publications; Thousand Oaks, CA: 2005. p. 143-157.

Zimmerman MA, Bingenheimer JB, Norato PC. Natural mentors and adolescent resiliency: A study with urban youth. American Journal of Community Psychology. 2002; 30(2):221–243. [PubMed: 12002244]

Table 1

Participant Demographics, N = 23

	N (%) or M(SD)
Gender	
Female	16 (69.6)
Male	7 (30.4)
Age	17.9 (1.6)
Ethnicity	
African-American	12 (52.2)
Hispanic/Latino	7 (30.4)
White	2 (8.7)
Multi-ethnic	1 (4.3)
Other	1 (4.3)
Education	
8th grade or less	3 (13.0)
Some high school	13 (56.5)
Completed high school or has GED	7 (30.4)
Average number of running away episodes	7 (9.0)
Average number of times "kicked out" of home	5 (5.1)

Table 2

Demographics and Relationship of Natural Mentors, N = 23

	N (%)
Gender	
Female	17 (73.9)
Male	6 (26.1)
Age *M* (*SD*)	39 (13.45)
Ethnicity	
African-American	8 (34.8)
White	8 (34.8)
Hispanic/Latino	4 (17.4)
Multi-ethnic	3 (13.0)
Relationship	
Grandparent	3 (13.0)
Aunt/uncle	4 (17.4)
Cousin	1 (4.3)
Foster parent	2 (8.1)
Older friend	4 (17.4)
Friend's parent	3 (13.0)
Significant other's relative	1 (4.3)
Parent's friend	1 (4.3)
Teacher	2 (8.7)
Case manager at community agency	1 (4.3)
Counselor	1 (4.3)
Years known mentors	
1 year or less	4 (17.4)
1 – 2 years	4 (17.4)
2 – 4 years	3 (13.0)
More than 4 years	12 (52.2)

Table 3

Interview Protocol

Focus	Question
1. Participant background	Please share with me your background such as where you grew up, your family, where you've lived, and how you ended up here.
2. Knowing natural mentors	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?
3. How natural mentoring relationships differed from other relationships	In what ways is your relationship with this important adult similar or different from your relationship with your family and friends?
4. Function of natural mentoring relationship	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?
5. Describing natural mentors	In your words, how would you describe this important adult?

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 things 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."
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."