



ACADEMIC
PRESS

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

SCIENCE @ DIRECT®

Journal of Adolescence 26 (2003) 201–212

Journal of
Adolescence

www.elsevier.com/locate/jado

Shelters for houseless youth: a follow-up evaluation[☆]

Rachel Dekel^{a,*}, Einat Peled^b, Shimon E. Spiro^b

^a *School of Social Work, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, Israel*

^b *Bob Shapell School of Social Work, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel*

Received 12 November 2001; received in revised form 20 July 2002; accepted 18 October 2002

Abstract

This study followed 345 Israeli youngsters who had been residents of two shelters for runaway and homeless youths, 6–12 weeks after their departure. Telephone interviews were conducted with the youngsters, their parents, and social workers in the community. A majority of the youngsters had either returned to their family homes, or had been placed out of home. Their residential stability was found to be low. Post-shelter place of residence was related to length of stay at the shelter, amount of contact with their family while at the shelter, and manner of departure. Our findings lead to a typology of shelter uses, and also raise questions about the extent to which shelters achieve their declared goals.

© 2003 The Association for Professionals in Services for Adolescents. Published by Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Runaway and homeless youths; Shelters; Follow-up studies

1. Introduction

The growing number of children and adolescents who have left or were forced out of their homes and are houseless has been a source of concern for policy makers all over the world. [Van der Ploeg and Scholte \(1997\)](#) quote a recent UNICEF estimate that “worldwide there are 80 million children without families who are living on the streets” (p. 15). Most of these children live in third world countries, but all industrialized countries have their share of houseless children and young persons. The estimated number of adolescents who leave home annually in the US range from half a million ([Adams, Gullotta, & Clancy, 1985](#)) to triple that number in recent studies

[☆]This study was commissioned by the steering committee of “Makom Acher” and “Atnachta” and supported by The Interdisciplinary Center for Children and Youth Studies, Tel-Aviv University Bob Shapell School of Social Work.

*Corresponding author. Tel.: +972-3-5317819; fax: +972-3-5347228.

E-mail address: dekell@mail.biu.ac.il (R. Dekel).

(Ringwalt, Green, Robertson, & McPheeters, 1998). The Australian national government's inquiry estimated the number of homeless children and youth as 20,000–25,000 (Boss, Edwards, & Pitman, 1995). For Germany the estimate is 40,000 and for the Netherlands 7000 (Van der Ploeg & Scholte, 1997). For the UK, the estimate is that there are around 77,000 new cases each year of youth who run away or are forced to leave their home (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999). For Israel, we estimate the number of young persons who utilized two shelters to be 500–600 during any 1 year, but we assume many more homeless youths never reach these services.

A variety of services have been developed to answer the needs of houseless youths. The most common among them are shelters, which have two main goals. The first goal, implied in the term “shelter”, is to provide houseless youths with a safe haven and protect them from the dangers of life on the streets. The second is to help these youngsters find a stable, normative living arrangement that fits their needs (Teare, Authier, & Peterson, 1994; Peled & Spiro, 1996). Thus, many youth shelters also provide rehabilitation programs and therapeutic interventions.

Several studies have evaluated shelters for houseless youth by focusing on immediate outcomes, i.e. the manner in which the youngsters left the shelter and their destination upon leaving. Kurtz, Jarvis, and Kurtz (1991) studied 3170 youths who sought help at runaway shelters in eight southeastern states in the US. They found that of the 67% who left with staff concurrence, 53% returned to live with their parents, 15% went to foster care, group homes or institution; and 14% left for the streets. Shelter staff reported that problems were resolved or ameliorated for 57% and got worse for only 8%. Teare and his colleagues (Teare, Furst, Peterson, & Authier, 1992; Teare et al., 1994) who studied a Midwestern shelter in the US found that 69% of 84 youths studied were reunited with their parents or guardians upon leaving the shelter. Youths who were not reunited with their families stayed significantly longer in the shelter and reported more family problems.

In an earlier study based on administrative records of one Israeli shelter (Peled, Spiro, & Dekel, 2000), we found that half of the youngsters left the shelter for their families' homes, 22% were placed out of home, and the others departed to unknown or unconventional destinations. Some of the latter returned to the streets. The youngsters who went home tended to be those who had lived at home before entering the shelter. More of them (compared to those who were placed away from home or went “back to the streets”) kept in touch with their family while at the shelter and adjusted well to the shelter. More of the youngsters who left the shelter for an unknown or an unconventional destination were older, arrived at the shelter on their own initiative, had little contact with their parents, and seemed not to adjust well to the place.

Other than Newman's (1989) evaluation of Britain's first safe house, little is known about the whereabouts of homeless youngsters after arriving at their first post-shelter destination. Newman collected information on residents that left the shelter for their family homes or institutional care, but not on those who absconded or left to other destinations. According to their social workers, 1 month after leaving the shelter, 70% of the youngsters were in their family homes or in institutional care. Half of these youngsters were at follow-up at the same place to which they went when leaving the shelter. Stability was higher among females and among those who came to the shelter from home.

If, as stated above, the goal of the shelters is to help houseless youngsters in finding a normative and stable residence, it is important to find out not only where they go when they leave the shelter but also how long they stay there. Therefore, an evaluation of shelters' effectiveness should gather information on youngsters' post-shelter locations and their stability overtime. Accordingly, the

present study followed Israeli youngsters who were residents in two shelters, 6–12 weeks after their departure. The first aim of the study was to examine the post-shelter place of residence and its stability. The second aim was to determine whether variables related to the youngsters' experience during the shelter stay and the manner in which they departed predicted their place of residence a few months after leaving the shelter.

2. Method

2.1. Agency context

This study focused on the population of two shelters for houseless youth located in Israel's two largest urban centres. The common goals of the shelters are to protect 13–18-year-old houseless youths from the dangers of life in the streets, provide them with "time-out" and an opportunity to reorganize, mediate between them and their parents or services in the community, and help them to find a normative living arrangement that fits their needs. The shelters target a heterogeneous population of youth, no matter what were the circumstances that led them to houselessness. There is no a priori differentiation in intervention according to age, gender, or circumstances of becoming houseless. Rather, the interventions are individualized in accordance with the particular characteristics of each of the youngsters.

Normally, youngsters are allowed to stay at the shelters for up to 6 weeks, with a possible extension to 3 months under exceptional circumstances. Each of the two shelters has 20–22 beds, divided equally between boys and girls. The staff in each of the shelters includes a director, one or two social workers, a house mother, and a number of counselors. From the day they were opened the shelters were used quite extensively with average monthly occupancy ranging between 6 and 18 young persons per night.

2.2. Data collection

Two data sets were used in this study. The first includes selected variables from the shelters' administrative records. The data in these files were routinely collected and stored by shelter staff using three instruments: (1) A brief entry form filled out for every newcomer by a staff member on duty. (2) A detailed intake form completed by the shelter's social worker as part of an intake interview. (3) A case summary form completed by the social worker at the time of departure.

The other data set is based on a follow-up evaluation of the shelters. Telephone interviews were conducted with former residents, their parents, and community social workers 6–12 weeks after the youngsters' departure from the shelter. The interviews were based on multiple choice questionnaires developed for this purpose. Interviewees were asked about the youngster's whereabouts since leaving the shelter, and on his or her experience at the shelter.

The interviewers were social workers but not connected to the shelters in any capacity. Shelter residents provided contact addresses and telephone numbers before their departure for the purpose of a follow-up survey. Numerous attempts were made to locate each of the youngsters, his or her parents and the social workers, and to interview all three.

2.3. *Sample*

According to the agencies' records, 726 youngsters stayed in the shelters between October 1995 and June 1998. The research staff received names and contact information for 495 former residents, of whom interviews were conducted with 169 youngsters (34% of the total), 191 parents (39%), and 192 social workers (39%). The sample for this study includes 345 youngsters (70%) for whom we had data from at least one source. The most frequent reason for not interviewing the youngster, his parents, or the social worker were difficulties in locating the interviewee (42%, 22%, and 25% of each group, respectively).

The sample included an equal number of males and females. Eighty per cent of the youngsters were born in Israel. The age range was 13–19, and the average age was 16.56 (s.d. = 1.49). Almost half of the youngsters (45%) came from families where the parents lived together, 30% of the parents lived separately, and no information was available about this variable for 25% of the sample. Length of stay at the shelter ranged from 1 to 97 days. Almost one-third of the youngsters stayed in the shelter for a short period (up to 5 days), and the average number of days at the shelter was 24.81 (s.d. = 27.79).

To test for possible bias as a result of self-selection, we compared the characteristics of the 345 youngsters in our sample with those of the 150 youngsters for whom no information was obtained. Differences were tested for those variables on which we had complete information, including gender, length of stay at the shelter, manner of departure (with or without staff concurrence), and destination upon leaving the shelter. No significant differences were found.

2.4. *Variables and measurement*

2.4.1. *Dependent variable*

The dependent variable in this study is the youngster's place of residence at the time of follow-up. A composite variable was constructed, based on the following order of priority. Whenever the youngster was interviewed, his or her response was used. If the youngster was not available, the parents' answer was used. If neither the youngster nor the parents were reached, information provided by the social worker was used. The validity of the composite variable was examined by calculating the extent of agreement within dyads among the three sources of information for the question "where did the young person go when he or she left the shelter?" The agreement rate was 74% for the youngster–parent dyads ($n = 99$), 68% for the youngster–social worker dyads ($n = 75$), and 72% for the parent–social worker dyads ($n = 92$). We consider this level of agreement sufficient to justify the use of the composite dependent variable.

Information about the youngster's location was grouped into three categories: (1) family's home, (2) out-of-home placement, (3) unknown or unconventional place of residence, such as living with friends or on the streets.

2.4.2. *Independent variables*

Two sets of predicting variables were measured. The first relates to experience at the shelter and the second to the departure from it.

(A) *Experience at the shelter*

Length of stay: The number of days in the shelter.

Frequency of contact with family: The sum of scores for face-to-face contact and telephone conversations between youngsters and their family members while at the shelters. The scores were reported on a scale ranging from “never” (1) to “daily” (4). The range of the composite “contact” score was between 2 and 8.

Adjustment to shelter: The sum of scores given by staff, evaluating three aspects of a young person’s behaviour at the shelter: conformity to rules, participation in activities, and social integration into the peer group. The score for each aspect was reported on a scale ranging from “not at all” (1) to “very much” (4). The range of the composite “adjustment” score was between 3 and 12.

(B) *Variables related to departure from shelter*

Manner of leaving the shelter: Two categories were used based on staff reports about the manner in which shelter stay was terminated. “Planned and consensual departure” was used when the young person departed after discussion with the staff, often with participation of the parents and a social worker from a community agency. “A one-sided decision” described instances when a resident left without consulting the staff, or was asked to leave because he or she did not adapt, overstayed the time limit or broke some major rules.

Destination at the time of departure: Such information was based on case summary records and grouped into the same three categories as the dependent variable (family’s home, out-of-home placement, and unknown or unconventional place of residence).

Assessment of expected stability of placement: As part of the case summary the social workers noted the expected stability of the placement “arrangement”. Responses were dichotomized and presented as stable vs. unstable.

2.5. Data analysis

Data analysis proceeded in two stages. First, the relationship of each of the independent variables with follow-up place of residence was examined, using either chi square or ANOVA as significance tests, in correspondence with the independent variables’ measurement scales. Next, variables that were found to correlate significantly with the dependent variable were included in a discriminant analysis designed to examine the extent to which models combining various independent variables can predict the dependent variable.

3. Results

At the time of follow-up, 54% of the youngsters ($n = 175$) stayed at their family’s homes, 18% (58) were at an out-of-home placement, and an additional 28% (90) were staying in an unconventional location such as on the streets or with friends. No significant association was found between gender and follow-up place of living. On the other hand, youngsters who were found in their family home or at an out-of-home placement were younger than youngsters who went to unconventional destinations ($M = 16.41, 15.86$ and 17.36 , respectively; $(F(2,232) = 13.36, p < 0.001)$).

Table 1 presents the association between shelter experience and follow-up place of residence. Length of stay at the shelter and contact with parents were significantly associated with follow-up

place of living. Youngsters who were in an out-of-home placement during follow-up had stayed longer periods of time at the shelters compared to youngsters who were found at their homes or at an unconventional locations. Youngsters who were found at their family homes had more frequent contacts with their families during their stay at the shelter when compared to youngsters who were found at unconventional destination at the time of follow-up. Level of adjustment to the shelter was highest among those who were found at their family home at the time of follow-up, but the differences between the categories are not statistically significant.

Table 2 presents the association between variables related to shelter departure and place of residence at the time of follow-up. Former residents who lived in out-of-home placements at the time of follow-up were more likely to have left the shelter in an agreed and planned manner than

Table 1
Place of residence at follow-up and experience at the shelter

	Follow-up place of residence			
	A. Family home	B. Out of home placement	C. Unconventional destination	
	<i>M</i> (s.d.)	<i>M</i> (s.d.)	<i>M</i> (s.d.)	
Length of stay at the shelter (in days)	16.48 (20.01)	35.49 (31.24)	24.51 (24.99)	$F(2,283) = 13.09^*$ B > A, C
Contact with family	4.68 (2.04)	4.30 (1.84)	3.67 (1.78)	$F(2,268) = 6.89^*$ A > C
Adjustment to the shelter	9.37 (2.55)	8.77 (2.06)	8.84 (2.55)	$F(2,276) = 1.75$

* $p < 0.001$.

Table 2
Youngster's follow-up place of residence and variables related to departure from the shelter

	Follow-up place of residence			Total	χ^2
	Family home	Out of home placement	Unconventional destination		
<i>Way of leaving the shelter</i>					
Agreed and planned	74 (49%)	29 (64%)	32 (41%)	135 (49%)	6.26*
Other	76 (51%)	16 (36%)	46 (59%)	138 (51%)	
Total	150 (100%)	45 (100%)	78 (100%)	273 (100%)	
<i>Destination at time of departure</i>					
Family home	119 (80%)	10 (22%)	29 (42%)	158 (60%)	95.98***
Placement	11 (8%)	29 (65%)	14 (20%)	54 (21%)	
Unconventional destination	18 (12%)	6 (13%)	26 (38%)	50 (19%)	
Total	148 (100%)	45 (100%)	69 (100%)	262 (100%)	
<i>Social worker's expected stability assessment</i>					
Stable	54 (37%)	28 (60%)	23 (30%)	105 (39%)	11.40**
Not stable	93 (63%)	19 (40%)	54 (70%)	166 (61%)	
Total	147 (100%)	47 (100%)	77 (100%)	271 (100%)	

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

those who were at their family home or at some unconventional location. The destinations upon departure of those found in out-of-home placements at the time of follow-up were assessed by the shelters' social workers as more stable arrangements than the other two types of destinations.

The strongest association was found between destination at the time of departure and place of residence at follow-up. We found that 80% of the respondents who were at their parents' homes at the time of follow-up, had left for home when they departed from the shelter. Similarly, 65% of those who were at an out-of-home placement and 38% of those at unconventional locations have left the shelter for these destinations. On the whole, 174 out of 262 respondents (66%) were at the time of follow-up at the same type of place to which they left. This represents a slight overestimate of stability since some of the ex-residents may have moved between locations within the same type of location, e.g. from the mother's to the father's home, from a less restrictive to a more restrictive institution, or from a friend's home back to the streets. This analysis shows that stability, i.e. changes in places of living is associated with the place the youngster went to. Youngsters who went to their family's home are more likely to stay there than those went to an out-of-home placement or unconventional destinations.

In order to arrive at a predictive model we used discriminant analysis. Two functions were derived (Table 3). Based on group centroids it can be concluded that the first discriminates between those who were at their homes at the time of follow-up and those who were in placements or in an unconventional arrangement (Wilks' $\lambda = 0.69$, $X^2(10) = 76.41$, Canonical $r = 0.49$, $p < 0.001$). The second discriminant function distinguishes between those who were at some unconventional location and those who were with their families or at some out-of-home placement (Wilks' $\lambda = 0.91$, $x^2(4) = 20.32$, Canonical $r = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 3 presents the variable loadings on both functions. The larger the variable loading, the more this variable contributes to the predicted distinction between the groups. The first function indicates that youngsters who were at their family's home at the time of follow-up had stayed at the shelter for a relatively long time, had more frequent contact with their family during their stay at the shelter, and more often left the shelter for their family home.

The second function provides information about youngsters who, at follow-up, were at unconventional destinations. These youngsters, while in the shelter, had little contact with their families, stayed shorter periods of time and, more often, left the shelter in an unplanned way to unconventional places. In addition, more of the places to which these youngsters left, were

Table 3
Prediction of follow-up place of living: standardized canonical discriminant function coefficients

Variable	Standardized canonical discriminant function coefficients	
	Function 1: Home vs. placement and unconventional destination	Function 2: Unconventional destination vs. home and placement
Contact with family	-0.29	-0.61
Length of stay in the shelter	0.73	-0.37
Way of leaving the shelter	-0.11	0.64
Destination at time of departure	0.61	0.48
Social worker's stability evaluation	-0.15	0.69

assessed as unstable by the social workers at the shelter. Summary classification results revealed that 63% of the cases were correctly classified: 71% of the returns to family home, 61% at out-of-home placements, and 44% at unconventional places of living.

4. Discussion

In an earlier study of one of the two shelters (Peled et al., 2000), we found that 74% of the residents left the shelter to what appeared to be a normative place of residence that answered their needs. Most of them returned to their families' homes, and others were placed by social agencies mostly in juvenile institutions. In the current study, 72% of the former residents were found at home or in an out-of-home placement 6–12 weeks after leaving the shelter. Thus, the distribution of former residents between destinations was essentially the same. There was, however, a significant number of moves between types of locations. At least one-third of the youngsters changed their place of residence within this short time span. Even this proportion over-estimates the extent of stability since we observed only moves between types of locations, not within them. Furthermore, it is quite probable that the ex-residents whom we were unable to interview were even less stable than those included in the study. Since one of the main goals of the shelters is to help homeless youths to find stable places of residence, this goal was not achieved for many of the former residents.

In our previous study, we reported on attributes which differentiated between residents who left the shelter for home and those who left to a placement or to an unconventional or unknown destination. Those who left for home tended to be younger, to have come to the shelter from their homes, to have reported being abused in the past, and used the shelter as a temporary respite. Their stay at the shelter was relatively short, their contact with their parents relatively frequent, and their adjustment to life at the shelter relatively good. The opposite was true for those residents who departed to an unconventional or unknown destination. As for those who were placed in an institution or foster home, more of them had been referred to the shelter by a social agency, and their stay at the shelter was relatively long.

In the current study, we did not look again at the background of the respondents and at the circumstances surrounding their entry to the shelter. Rather, we examined independent variables related to shelter experience and departure, as predictors of location at follow-up. Thus, "destination at the time of departure" changed its role between the two studies from a dependent to an independent variable. Our findings regarding shelter experience variables are consistent with those of the previous study (Peled et al., 2000). Former residents who were found at home at the time of follow-up had adjusted well to the shelter, kept in touch with their parents, and had stayed for a relatively short time. Those who were found at an out-of-home placement had stayed at the shelter for a relatively long time.

4.1. *The significance of post-shelter locations*

In both our studies we divided post-shelter destinations and locations into three categories: The family home, out-of-home placements (mostly juvenile institutions), and unknown or

unconventional locations (e.g. informal shelters, friends' homes, the streets). Each of these raises unique questions for practice both at the shelter and later in the community.

4.1.1. *The home group*

The largest group (54% of the current sample) includes youngsters who were found at their family home. These youngsters had frequent contact with their parents while they were in the shelter, stayed at the shelter for relatively short periods of time, left the shelter for their parents' home, and mostly stayed there. From the previous study we also know that most of these youngsters (59%) came to the shelter from their family homes (Peled et al., 2000). It would seem that many of these youngsters use the shelter as a respite, and return home after a brief runaway experience.

A number of issues arise concerning this group. The first is whether home is necessarily the best place for these youngsters. Did they go back to their family's home because problems were solved and the situation improved, or because they did not have a choice? When asked where they wanted to go from the shelter, a majority of those who returned home said they wanted to be placed away from home or to live independently. Further, in many instances the family social workers conceded that the home was not really the most appropriate place for the youngsters (Peled et al., 2000). These findings are consistent with other studies that found lack of available out-of-home resources (e.g. foster and group homes) to be more influential in service planning than the needs of the adolescents and their families. One study found that in half of the cases of first time out-of-home placements, the youngsters returned home despite the assessment of the staff that this was inappropriate (Greater Boston Emergency Network, 1985). The authors warned that these youngsters are likely to run away again, since the problems that triggered their running away were yet unresolved.

These findings point to the importance of intensive work with both the youths and their families while at the shelter and after departure. However, this may not be enough. The fact that so many young persons return home in spite of their own preferences and their social workers' better judgement may point to an inadequate range of placement facilities.

4.1.2. *The placement group*

The second group, almost a fifth of the sample, includes those who were at an out-of-home placement. These youngsters stayed at the shelter for long periods of time ($M = 35$ days) and their departure from the shelter was planned and agreed upon. For 65% of the youngsters who were in these placements at the time of follow-up, this was the original destination when they first left the shelter. The rest are youngsters that came from their family home (22%) or from unconventional destinations (13%). On the other hand, almost half (46%) of the youngsters who were originally placed in institutions and foster homes were not at their placement at the time of follow-up. Some went home (20%) and others were found in unconventional locations (26%).

The youngsters who left originally for an institutional placement and still were there at the time of follow-up (54%) can be described as success stories. For them the shelter may have served as a "waiting room", a safe place to be in while community welfare workers and shelter staff worked out a suitable placement. But what about those who had been placed out of home and were not found there at the time of follow-up? It is not clear whether anyone took care of them after they

have left the placement. Although much time and energy was invested in finding and arranging the placements, the outcome was obviously unstable.

At the time of follow-up, 35% of the former residents were found in institutional placements although this was not their destination when they departed from the shelter. They had gone either to their parents' homes or to some unconventional or unknown destination. One would have expected that in the case of institutional placements the young person would proceed directly from the shelter to the chosen place of residence. Since arranging a placement takes time, it is possible that some residents chose or were forced to leave the shelter and return to the streets or to their family homes before the placement processes were completed. The question remains whether the shelter residence of these youngsters could have been prolonged, thus avoiding the consequences of yet another transition in their lives.

4.1.3. The unconventional or unknown place group

The third group, 28% of the sample, was at the time of follow-up at an unconventional or unknown place. These youngsters were older than the two other groups, had less contact with their parents, left the shelter in an unplanned manner, and proceeded from the shelter to a place that was assessed by professionals as unstable. It should be noted, however, that most of this group had originally left the shelter for a normative destination. Forty-two per cent left to their family's home, but apparently this did not work well. Twenty per cent were initially placed out of home but stayed there only briefly. For youngsters in this group the shelter seems to have been one out of many stops in frequent moves and transitions.

This group reminds us that for a growing number of youths, homelessness appears to be part of a long pattern of residential instability (Robertson, 1991). Although a minority of the current sample, and smaller than in other places, this group is at risk for homelessness as adults (Robertson, 1991).

4.2. Methodological concerns

Our findings and conclusions should be considered in light of the response rate we achieved. We interviewed 34% of the youngsters, and obtained information for an additional 36% from parents or social workers. This figure in itself may be seen as an additional indicator of program outcome. The difficulty to locate so many of the youngsters may indicate that they have never arrived at a stable place of residence. Furthermore, since it is probable that those for which we had no information are the least stable ex-residents of the shelter, the actual outcome may be less favourable than described in our findings.

Our response rate compares well with rates reported in other evaluations of services for homeless clients. Morrissey and Dennis (1990) concluded that finding methods of minimizing attrition in longitudinal studies is one of the four most serious challenges for homelessness research. As mentioned earlier, no specific rates are available for runaway and homeless adolescents. However, retention rates of adults' homeless research studies show diversity. In a 3-month follow-up, Mulkern, Bradley, Spence, and Oldham (1985) successfully located only 47%. Higher location rates (59%) were obtained in a 6-month longitudinal study of homelessness in Minneapolis (Sosin, Piliavin, & Westerfelt, 1990). The highest retention rate (70%) was reported

by Cohen et al. (1993) of a 12-month follow-up study of individuals who were homeless and mentally ill. In future studies special efforts should be made to increase retention rates. Earlier planning and defining follow-up as a responsibility of the shelter may enhance the availability of background information that enables subsequent contact with subjects, their families and their social workers.

Our reliance on routine administrative data collected by shelter staff had the advantages of economy and non-intrusiveness. It also had several disadvantages, as reflected in our findings. First, the range of items included was less than optimal for our study. For example, information about family relations and events preceding entry to the shelter was not collected. This made it impossible for us to differentiate between the youngsters based on their leaving circumstances. Second, the timing of data entry had some limitations. Intake forms occasionally missed information which clients were reluctant to divulge at the point of entry. Exit forms were affected by the degree to which the staff member filling the form was acquainted with a specific client. Finally, of greatest concern to us was the issue of missing data. Since clients occasionally chose not to answer certain questions during the intake interview, and since staff completing summary forms may not have had an opportunity to get all the relevant information, we had to cope with a high incidence of missing data.

In addition the limited knowledge existing regarding houseless youth in Israel directed us at an exploratory approach and, among other factors, we did not treat age as cardinal variable in predicting destination at the time of follow-up. However, our findings seem to be consistent with research conducted at the UK, which found age to a major explanatory variable of the experience of runaway and homeless youth (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999), especially for the third distinct group we recognized.

4.3. Concluding remarks

Shelters are the most common service for runaway and homeless youth. Most shelters are intended to provide youngsters with more than a “bed and breakfast” facility and help them arrive at a normative, stable, and suitable living arrangement. Our findings and analysis suggest that even when shelter residents go back to their families’ homes or are placed away from home by social services, these outcomes are often inappropriate or unstable. The implications for policy, practice, and research are quite obvious. Need exists for a wide range of out-of-home placements and of services in the community to answer the varied needs of homeless young people. Consistent and imaginative interventions are needed to help each youngster arrive at what may be the most appropriate place, and stay there.

Furthermore, our study has shown that outcomes for homeless youth are complex and unstable. What seems to be a successful solution is often a problematic compromise and vice versa. Future evaluation studies could contribute to the improvement of services for this population by considering the complexity and variability of careers of houseless youth and the meaning these young people attribute to their own actions and to those of service providers. Our findings indicate that just counting the numbers of those who ended at different destinations is not enough. Future studies should include a detailed evaluation, perhaps a qualitative one, that will facilitate discovering the reasons and the underlying process for the relatively low stability we found.

References

- Adams, G. R., Gullotta, T., & Clancy, M. A. (1985). Homeless adolescents: A descriptive study of similarities and differences between runaways and throwaways. *Adolescence*, *20*, 715–724.
- Boss, P., Edwards, S., & Pitman, S. (1995). *Profile of young Australians: facts, figures and issues*. South Melbourne: Churchill Livingstone.
- Cohen, E. H., Mowbray, C. T., Bybee, D., Yeich, S., Ribisl, K., & Freddolono, P. (1993). Tracking and follow-up methods for research on homelessness. *Evaluation Review*, *17*, 331–352.
- Greater Boston Emergency Network (1985). *Ride a painted pony on a spinning wheel ride*. Boston: Massachusetts Committee for Children and Youth.
- Kurtz, P. D., Jarvis, V. S., & Kurtz, L. G. (1991). Problems of homeless youths: Empirical findings and human services issues. *Social Work*, *36*, 309–314.
- Morrissey, J., & Dennis, D. L. (1990). *Homelessness and mental illness: Toward the next generation of research studies*. Rockville, MD: National Institute of Mental Health.
- Mulkern, V. R., Bradley, S. A., Spence, & Oldham, J. (1985). *Homelessness needs assessment study: Findings and recommendations for the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health*. Boston: Human Services Research Institute.
- Newman, C. (1989). *Young runaways: Findings from Britain's first safe house*. London: The Children's Society.
- Peled, E., & Spiro, S. E. (1996). *Evaluation report on Makom Aher after 20 months*. The Joint Forum on Youth Issues, Elem and the Bob Shapell School of Social Work, Tel Aviv University (Hebrew), Tel Aviv.
- Peled, E., Spiro, S. E., & Dekel, R. (2000). Where do they go from here: Destinations of youths exiting a shelter. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *22*, 355–371.
- Ringwalt, C. L., Green, J. M., Robertson, M., & McPheeters, M. (1998). The prevalence of homelessness among adolescents in the United States. *American Journal of Public Health*, *88*, 1325–1329.
- Robertson, M. J. (1991). Homeless Youth: an overview of recent literature. In J. H. Kryder-Coe, L. M. Salamon, & J. M. Molnar (Eds.), *Homeless children and youth: A new American dilemma*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publisher.
- Safe on the Streets Research Team (1999). *Still running*. London: The Children's Society.
- Sosin, M., Piliavin, I., & Westerfelt, H. (1990). Toward a longitudinal analysis of homelessness. *The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues*, *22*, 157–173.
- Teare, J. F., Authier, K., & Peterson, R. (1994). Differential patterns of post-shelter placement as a function of problem type and severity. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *3*(1), 7–22.
- Teare, J. F., Furst, D. W., Peterson, R. W., & Authier, K. (1992). Family reunification following shelter placement: Child, family, and program correlates. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *61*, 142–146.
- Van der Ploeg, J., & Scholte, E. (1997). *Homeless youth*. London: Sage.