(over)
Promoting Resilience: Social Policies in Two Cities

Yet, as the statistics above show, some of these youth do experience modest success in the legal labor market. Nearly one in five was working fairly steadily, and another 59% of the unemployed youth were actively seeking work. In addition to a paycheck, employment exposes street youth to friends and contacts who also work, helping to extract them from the stigma and criminality of street culture. Against steep odds, these youth were anxious and sometimes able to find legal employment during their transition from adolescence to adulthood, revealing great resilience in navigating that transition. The authors argue that effective policy should build on and encourage this resilience. To illustrate, the authors compare approaches to homelessness in Vancouver and Toronto, two cities that take quite different approaches to addressing the issue of homeless youth.

Toronto’s approach to homeless youth in the late 1990s was more responsive than Vancouver’s. It had defined the age of majority as 16, providing shelter to youth without requiring parental consent in the form of four hostels reserved solely for youth aged 16–21. In Vancouver, by contrast, most statutes dictated that parents were legally and financially responsible for their children until they turned 19, making it extremely difficult for youth living apart from their families to receive public welfare. Moreover, care providers could only offer shelter to those younger than 19 if they first had parental permission. There was also no established network of housing or shelters.

Toronto’s social welfare model of providing access to overnight shelters and social services reduced exposure to criminal opportunities, whereas Vancouver’s crime control model and absence of assistance, in contrast, made it more common. The authors’ analysis showed that youth in Vancouver were more likely to be involved in theft, drugs, and prostitution. This heightened exposure to crime in Vancouver urged youth toward their more criminally engaged peers and away from employment opportunities.

Hagan and McCarthy suggest that contacts with law enforcement combined with the turbulent family histories can foster feelings of shame and humiliation among homeless youth, which in turn can impede their ability to secure and sustain legal employment. Drawing on several psychological and sociological studies, the authors contend that early family experiences of shame and rejection can interact with state-imposed criminal stigma to provoke homeless youth into defiant criminal behavior and unemployment. Employers, parents, and teachers increasingly recognize large numbers of “touchy,” angry young people ready to punish any available target for the sins of their past insults, a process that likely started, the authors argue, with the shame many young people felt as children on rejection by caretakers. This sense of shame among homeless youth, coupled with constant arrests or police contact, can set off a chain reaction of emotions that leads to crime sprees and disdain for any job that, in their eyes, requires menial and demeaning work. Lessening contact with the police by offering youth refuge and by supporting them with needed services may ease the pressures to commit crimes to survive, and set them on course for a more healthy transition to adulthood. Given the findings in Toronto and Vancouver, homeless youth may be most likely to traverse the less perilous passage to adulthood in community settings that promise to include rather than threaten to exclude them.

John Hagan is John D. MacArthur Professor of Sociology and Law (Northwestern) and Senior Research Fellow (American Bar Foundation). Bill McCarthy is a professor of sociology at the University of California Davis and a visiting professor of sociology at the University of Toronto.