Talk to Me: Information Needs and Information Seeking Behaviors

Among Homeless Youth

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Abstract

This paper examines the information needs and information seeking behaviors of homeless

youth, taking a global perspective that includes youth in Ghana as well as youth in the US and

UK. Information needs such as shelter, health, and employment are discussed. The emphasis on

face-to-face information exchange and the preference for peer-to-peer information sharing is

examined. Differences in information needs and information seeking behaviors between

homeless youth and homeless adults and families are also examined.

Keywords: Homeless Youth, Information Seeking Behaviors, Information Needs, Everyday Life

Information Seeking

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Among Homeless Youth

Homeless youth are a critically understudied population in the library and information

sciences. In this paper, I shine a light on the information needs and information seeking

behaviors of homeless youth. I am defining youth broadly, including individuals from thirteen to

twenty-three years of age. Children twelve and under are not included, and homeless children of

that age are well-studied elsewhere. I am also allowing for a very broad definition of homeless,

as the exact definition of what constitutes being "homeless" is contentious (Reid & Klee, 1999).

Also considered are the differences between the information needs and seeking behavior of

homeless youth and that of homeless young children, families, and adults.

Homeless youth have unique information needs that cannot be properly examined by

looking at all homeless individuals as a homogenous group. They are critically understudied in

the library and information science literature, making it difficult to form a definitive picture of

their information needs and behaviors. However, by careful analysis of key sources, we can learn

much about the information needs and behaviors of homeless youth. Homeless youth have

information needs related to basic survival needs, such as shelter and securing an income, and

they are likely to seek this information using face-to-face communication with peers and other

trusted "insiders" in their information communities.

Literature Review

There is a surprising lack of literature available on homeless youth's information seeking

behavior and information needs. While there is a large amount of information on the poor

(Chatman & Pendleton, 1995), various oft-disadvantaged ethnic groups (Haras, 2011), and

homeless populations in general (Angie Kelleher, 2013), this same attention is not paid to

homeless youth in the literature. Most papers that are written about homeless youth are from a Western perspective (Markwei & Rasmussen, 2015), covering locales like the United States (Alexander, Edwards, Fisher, & Hersberger, 2005; Ensign & Panke, 2002) and Britain (Reid & Klee, 1999). I was only able to find one paper written about homeless youth in a non-Western locale (Ghana) (Markwei & Rasmussen, 2015).

There is a large focus in the literature on information seeking behavior to satisfy basic needs, including how homeless youth go about searching for services to provide them with what they need. Little to no attention is paid to information seeking for other purposes, such as entertainment or non-employment-oriented personal development.

Much of the literature takes on an advice-driven tone. There are professional articles about how to best serve homeless youth (Hill, 2013). Other articles preach that libraries and other information providers must change how they treat homeless patrons, not treating them all as "problem patrons," but instead as unique individuals (Hersberger, 2005).

Overall, the current literature portrays a lack of breadth and depth in regards to the information needs and information seeking behavior of homeless youth. There simply aren't enough studies on information seeking among homeless youth to provide a reasonably complete view. What studies do exist don't go beyond how homeless youth access services and information to help satisfy their basic needs. There is a need for the literature to expand its views, to stop only studying homeless youth as individuals that need access to basic needs and government services, and to explore other aspects of their information seeking behaviors and information needs not directly related to the struggle for survival.

<center>Information Needs</center>

Homeless youth have a wide variety of information needs. However, these needs are almost universal among the population. In locales as diverse as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Ghana, the information needs of homeless youth are almost exactly the same, once one controls for differences in governmental structure (such as there being a lack of government-run services in Ghana) (Markwei & Rasmussen, 2015). These information needs are often related to basic needs (items that would be in the lower levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs), such as food, shelter, and obtaining money (Markwei & Rasmussen, 2015). Other needs such as health-related information are also present (Ensign & Panke, 2002). There are also dependent needs such as finding information on obtaining a government ID to gain access to a housing service to obtain shelter.

A primary need is the need for information on legitimate sources of income and employment opportunities. The difficulty of obtaining money can lead to teens turning to methods like prostitution in order to make ends meet (Terrile, 2009). Homeless individuals have also expressed that help finding available jobs would be extremely helpful (Alexander et al., 2005).

A wide variety of other information needs are also present. Homeless youth have a distinct need for healthcare information. In addition to standard healthcare, there is a need for reproductive health information (Ensign & Panke, 2002), and an implied need for mental health information given the high rate of mental health issues in homeless teens compared to their homed counterparts (Terrile, 2009). Information on educational sources was also an implied need, given that homeless youth tend to fall behind in school, as well as in their general literacy (Terrile, 2009). Information about transportation options, which enables additional employment and education opportunities, is also a real concern for homeless youth (Hill, 2013).

The final apparent information need was a need for information on the eligibility of these homeless youth for various government services and programs, where such services and programs are present. Many homeless youth don't know about their eligibility status for these services (Hill, 2013), which prevents them from obtaining shelter, food, and other basic needs through these services.

Information Seeking Behaviors

Homeless youth portray a variety of information seeking behaviors. Most of these fall under the purview of Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS), that is, information seeking for non-work purposes (Savolainen, 2009).

Reliance on Peer and Family Ties

There is a very strong preference among homeless youth for seeking information from peers and through family ties, where they exist. Homeless youth rely on a number of different peer groups, such as other homeless youth and family friends. When it comes to family members, homeless youth will often receive information from or seek information from family members with whom they still have workable relationships. This latter resource is not always available, depending on the unique circumstances of the homeless youth in question.

Peer groups are a prominent source of information, and homeless youth often use them as a part of their information seeking behavior. For example, in Ghana, homeless youth rely on their peer groups to obtain information (Markwei & Rasmussen, 2015). They generally do not use libraries, except for school libraries for assignments and recreational reading (Markwei & Rasmussen, 2015). With this reliance on their peer group, homeless youth in Ghana take advantage of their social capital to seek information: "they rely on the social capital embedded within their community of friends to facilitate information seeking for resolving their everyday

problems" (Markwei & Rasmussen, 2015). This creates a deep sense of community and

encourages information sharing among the homeless youth (Markwei & Rasmussen, 2015). It

should be noted that this flies in the face of the common concept in the literature that adolescents

are individual information seekers. Instead, it reinforces youths' tendency to work in groups and

that they value their peers (Markwei & Rasmussen, 2015). Youth in the United States also tend

to rely on their peers (Alexander et al., 2005).

Family members are another prominent target for homeless youth's information seeking

behavior. Family members can either act as sources of information when approached by

homeless youth, or they can come to the youth and provide information on their own initiative.

Either way, this makes them a valuable source for homeless youth's ELIS behavior. An example

of this is family members providing phone numbers of homeless social service organizations to

homeless youth (Alexander et al., 2005).

This reliance on peer and family ties has strong implications for how information

resources should be designed to ensure they are discovered during homeless youth's seeking

behavior. Homeless youth expressed a desire for the formation of some sort peer-to-peer network

(Alexander et al., 2005), and this would dovetail nicely with the reliance of homeless youth on

peer and family connections as part of their information seeking behavior.

Homeless youth can have their pool of potential information sources narrowed by their

situations, as well, giving an extra layer of explanation for relying so heavily on peers and family

members. For example, while Mooko's study of information seeking behaviors indicated a wide

variety of information sources available to rural women in Botswana (Mooko, 2005), homeless

youth in Ghana do not have nearly the breadth of people to get information from, focusing

primarily on family members and other homeless youth (Markwei & Rasmussen, 2015). This

seems to hold less true for homeless youth in places like the United States, but strained family relationships were mentioned across several sources, which could have a narrowing effect as well.

Preference for Face-to-Face Communication

Homeless youth also have a very strong preference for face-to-face communication. There is a strong tendency among homeless youth towards "utilizing human information sources" (Alexander et al., 2005). Face-to-face communication can be considered the best way for information to be obtained by homeless youth (Woelfer J.P & Hendry D.G, 2009). This preference for face-to-face communication was noted among homeless youth in all cultures, including Ghana (Markwei & Rasmussen, 2015) and the United States (Alexander et al., 2005).

This preference for face-to-face communication helps to define what homeless youth find important in their information seeking behavior. Referrals to other information providers and services are valuable to homeless youth (Hersberger, 2005). This was noted to be especially true when these referrers could also facilitate setting up homeless youth with that service by engaging in actions such as setting up appointments (Alexander et al., 2005).

The attitude of the information provider is also very important to homeless youth (Hersberger, 2005), and a bad experience or an attitude that offends the youth can affect their future information seeking behavior. An attitude by an information provider that is especially understanding, and considers the special needs of homeless individuals (such as taking public transit stop locations into account when providing job listings), will be viewed positively by these youth (Hersberger, 2005). This will assumedly encourage homeless youth to prioritize these information providers in the future when engaging in ELIS. However, homeless youth are unlikely to use a service or want to interact with an information provider if that provider or

institution discriminates against them by classifying all homeless individuals as "problem patrons" (Hersberger, 2005). Homeless youth also won't use a service or information provider if they feel judged by that provider (Hersberger, 2005).

The preference by homeless youth for face-to-face communication when searching for information also has implications for what format should be used to deliver information. While homeless youth will use other sources besides people in their information search, such as the internet, books, and pamphlets, they use those less often. This implies that important information can't be provided just in pamphlet and booklet form (Alexander et al., 2005). However, written sources can still be important in some cases (Woelfer J.P & Hendry D.G, 2009)S. In addition, while face-to-face information is preferred, communication over the phone with services such as Ask-A-Nurse has also proved valuable to homeless youth (Ensign & Panke, 2002).

This preference for face-to-face communication has a direct effect on forms of information poverty among homeless youth. Face-to-face communication lessens the impact of technology access, or lack thereof, on an individual's level of information poverty (Woelfer J.P & Hendry D.G, 2009). This is presumably because while certain resources, such as websites, require access to certain technologies, almost no technology is required to interact face-to-face with another person and to gain information from them.

Homeless youth's preference for face-to-face communication has implications for information providers such as libraries. It indicates a need for outreach by institutions such as libraries, as homeless youths will not think to go in the doors without someone coming and communicating with them the benefits and information sources available in person (Markwei & Rasmussen, 2015). This outreach is very important to facilitating homeless youth's everyday life information seeking (Hersberger, 2005; Hill, 2013).

This preference for face-to-face communication among peers and trusted information service providers by homeless youth points to a style of ELIS in the vein of Chatman's "small world" style (Alexander et al., 2005; Savolainen, 2009). All of this face-to-face communications creates a "community of information," where insiders learn from insiders (Alexander et al., 2005). The in-group, such as trusted information providers or members of the same demographic (e.g. other women, in the case of information seeking about reproductive health), can end up narrowly defined (Ensign & Panke, 2002). However, these insiders are homeless youth's first stop in their everyday life information seeking, making them a critical part of homeless youth's information seeking behaviors.

Regional Variation

There are some variations in information seeking behavior depending on what culture the homeless youth seeking information is a part of. For example, youth in Ghana don't use social media as part of their information seeking behavior (Markwei & Rasmussen, 2015). Instead, they tap their social network in person or over the phone (Markwei & Rasmussen, 2015). They also use their social network for other purposes than youth in the UK or USA use social media. While homeless youth in the West use their social media for sharing art and for entertainment, youth in Ghana use their social networks to learn things such as work ethics and basic trade skills (Markwei & Rasmussen, 2015).

The differences in technology access in different regions of the world affect homeless youth's information seeking behavior, as well. Lack of access to the Internet cuts off a wide range of potential sources of information, including websites, e-mail, and online databases of information (Markwei & Rasmussen, 2015). This predicates a higher dependency on information resources such as peers and family members.

Lastly, differences in the culture between various countries can lead to different reasons for homelessness, which in turn impacts the information needs and information seeking behavior of homeless youth. In Ghana, homeless youth often choose to be homeless in order to make money living in the city, an intentional choice that they believe is sacrificing short-term comfort for gains over the longer term (Markwei & Rasmussen, 2015). This causes them to seek out less information from their peers about acquiring shelter and other needs. Instead, they are more likely to seek out information about various businesses they can work to earn money as unskilled laborers (such as shoe shiners and head porters), and information on how to excel at those jobs (Markwei & Rasmussen, 2015). This is in sharp contrast to homeless youth in the UK, who discuss looking for shelter as a high priority, though they experienced some difficulty in obtaining it (Reid & Klee, 1999).

Barriers During Information Seeking

Homeless youth across the world experience many barriers during their information seeking behavior that can cause great difficulty. Sometimes, these issues are so severe that they are unable to find the information they seek, either through being blocked completely from accessing an information resource such as a library, or by being discouraged from taking advantage of it to the point that information resource is no longer part of their search.

Libraries create, perhaps unknowingly, a large number of barriers to homeless youth's information seeking behaviors. Many libraries apply their fines and fees policies for everyone, including the economically disadvantaged and the homeless. These costly fees can be a barrier to homeless youth (Terrile, 2009), as the inability or unwillingness to pay them means that the youth may stop using the library as soon as they've built up a fee owed. They also may *never* use the library due to the potential to owe the library money in fines and fees. In addition, in other

countries lack of awareness of how library use fees are applied may contribute to homeless youth not using them. In Ghana, public libraries are free for homeless youth to use (Markwei & Rasmussen, 2015). However, it's possible that many homeless youth are unaware of this, further contributing to the likelihood that they will not choose to use the library as an information resources when they search for information (Markwei & Rasmussen, 2015).

Library policies are another barrier to homeless youth's information seeking behaviors. Policies about unpleasant odors, noise, and sleeping in the library are often applied unevenly, to the detriment of the homeless (and thus homeless youth) (Hersberger, 2005). Digressions to the rules that will get a homeless youth get kicked out of the library, such as sleeping, would not get a toddler kicked out for the same digression (Hersberger, 2005). Hersberger (2005) points out that this sort of uneven application of policies is inherently discriminatory. This discrimination can lead to homeless youth having a difficult time accessing library services due to getting kicked out of the library due to circumstances outside their control (such as having a strong smell when they have nowhere to bathe). Or past experiences with this sort of discrimination can lead them to avoid using the library completely.

Librarians can also pose a barrier to information access during homeless youth's ELIS. Many librarians are often uniformed about the needs of homeless teens (Hill, 2013). They do not know how to deal with the sorts of information requests that homeless youths might have beyond what is generally covered in a standard reference question, especially when that teen requires help, such as finding services/help for sexual abuse victims (Hill, 2013). Librarians receiving better training and reaching out to the homeless-youth-serving organizations in their communities can help to alleviate this problem and arm the librarians with the knowledge they need to help meet the specific information needs of homeless youth patrons (Hill, 2013).

Technology access can also pose a barrier to information seeking behavior among homeless teens(Alexander et al., 2005). Especially in the West, technology access is essential for access to many information resources, such as websites and information stored on disks. Not having access to this technology can prevent homeless youth from effectively searching for job listings, e-mailing service providers, or completing a variety of other tasks as part of information seeking to satisfy their information needs. It is interesting to note, however, that this is less of a problem in places like Ghana. Here, the homeless generally do not even have sporadic internet access, and so their information communities and social networks are not based around those technologies (Markwei & Rasmussen, 2015). Instead, they rely simply on word of mouth and cheap pay-per-call cellphone access (Markwei & Rasmussen, 2015). This indicates that the difficulties presented by technology as a barrier to information seeking can vary wildly from place to place, depending on the culture of the place and that culture's attitude towards/reliance on technology for effective information seeking.

The attitudes of the information providers can also prove to be a significant barrier to information seeking by homeless youth. An information provider who acts superior to the information seeker (a homeless youth) can offend the youth, and make it so they don't return to the information provider again in their next information search (Ensign & Panke, 2002). The staff of a library or other information provider and their attitude play an essential mediating role between homeless youth and various services (Woelfer J.P & Hendry D.G, 2009). This means that if the information service provider's attitude is enough to turn a homeless youth off from using that resource in the future, the homeless youth will lose a crucial ally and mediator in their search to get the information they need about various services.

Differences in Information Needs and Seeking Behavior

Homeless youth have a number of differences from the more broadly-studied homeless families, adults, and young children in their information needs and information seeking behavior. While homeless youths are poorly covered in the existing literature, making direct comparison difficult, I was able to draw a couple of interesting conclusions.

Policies are often not designed to address the specific needs of homeless youth. Library policies often target the homeless as an entire class of people, not making any sort of distinction between homeless youth and adult homeless individuals; or, indeed, between homeless youth and homed youth. This can lead to homeless youth having trouble engaging in information seeking because they cannot prove they are not supposed to be in school, for example. Even the ALA, generally a very forward thinking organization, does not take homeless youths' unique needs into account. The ALA policy is for homeless patrons in general, and doesn't address youths any differently than adults (Hill, 2013). This can easily create policies that, while acceptable for homeless adults, can seriously impair homeless teens' ability to get access to the information they need.

Homeless youth are also likely to encounter additional difficulty compared to homeless families when it comes to acquiring adequate information about housing. This is because many housing resources are inappropriate for homeless youth, but may still be flagged as being oriented towards all homeless individuals due to an information provider painting with a broad brush or a simple overlook of the details. Because many shelters prioritize families with young children over single homeless teens, this can lead to very long waiting lists for housing (Reid & Klee, 1999). This extra foible of needing to find information on housing that will give a homeless teen just as much of a chance at it as a homeless family is something that homeless families and older homeless adults do not have to overcome, creating a difference in the

difficulty of completing their information search between homeless youth and the rest of the homeless population.

There are other differences between homeless youths' and others information needs. They are likely to need information on their rights as far as school access and how to get the necessary supplies and equipment in order to complete their education (Hill, 2013), in contrast to homeless adults who have already completed school and have no need of that information. Also important is information about legitimate employment opportunities, as for youth this is a much more limited set of opportunities than it is for homeless adults (Terrile, 2009). This creates a more difficult information search for the youth than a homeless adult or a family would experience when seeking information to fulfill their employment need.

All of these differences, and more, indicate that homeless youth do not have the exact same information needs as other homeless individuals and families. These differences are important to keep in mind in order to provide the best service possible to homeless youth, and to best facilitate their information seeking behavior and to help them meet their information needs.

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

Homeless youth have a wide variety of information needs and behaviors. Most of their needs are related to basic survival needs, the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Markwei & Rasmussen, 2015). This includes categories such as resources for shelter, food, and employment. Homeless youth are likely to try to meet those needs through engaging in information seeking behaviors that rely on face-to-face communication, often between peers and family members. Technological methods such as phones and the internet are also used, as well as traditional written media like pamphlets or booklets.

Homeless youth also face significant barriers to their information searches. Not all information providers treat them fairly, and sometimes discriminatory policies or attitudes can turn homeless youth away from using an information resource in their search. Homeless youth also face barriers when it comes to access to technology, cutting them off from resources that require technology to access.

Homeless youth are not well-studied in the literature, receiving much less coverage than the homeless as a whole or other subcategories of homeless, such as homeless families or adult homeless individuals. This also means that the differences in their information needs compared to these groups, such as the school/education information need, are sometimes ignored. Information providers' policies are often written in a way that treats homeless people as homogenous, and young people as homogenous, without taking into account the unique information needs and behaviors of homeless youths at the intersection of the two categories.

Future research is desperately needed and could go in a number of different directions. Further study of the information needs of homeless youth, especially information needs beyond access to government services and basic survival information (e.g. food, employment), would create a more well-rounded picture of the information needs and behaviors of homeless youth. I believe that further study of the differences in information behavior between homeless adults and homeless youths could be enlightening, and would enable librarians and other information providers to tailor their services uniquely to each group's needs.

Homeless youth's information needs and behaviors are complex, with a reliance on face-to-face information sharing and their information communities to get the information they need. They deserve to be studied more, and to have the barriers between them and information lowered. While there are challenges in doing so, it is necessary to ensure that homeless youths'

information needs are being met and that they are able to engage in effective information

seeking. To do any less would be to abridge their right to information, and would make their

lives even more difficult than they already are.

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