

# What We Know and Still Need to Learn from Research on Homeless Children and Youth

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For details on research presented here, see  
<http://sun.science.wayne.edu/~ptoro/>

# The Existing Research on Homeless (Children) and Youth

## 1 - Defining Homelessness

Single adults, families, and youth

## 2 - Special issues in Defining Homeless Youth

"Homeless adolescents" as the over-arching category

Runaways, throwaways, "system kids," street youth

13-17 vs. 18-25 years old

"Literally homeless" vs. "precariously housed" (e.g.,  
"couch surfers")

## **The Existing Research (continued)**

### **3 - Four Sampling Approaches for Homeless Youth**

**Community-based surveys**

**Service settings (e.g., clinics)**

**Youth shelters**

**Streets**

### **4 - Prevalence & Geographical Distribution**

**1.6-1.7 million annually (7.6% of adolescents  
aged 12-17)**

**Urban vs. rural homeless youth**

**Street youth mainly in certain cities**

# **The Existing Research (continued)**

## **5 - Basic Characteristics**

**Gender & sampling approach**

**Minorities over-represented**

**GLBT-6%**

**Pregnant & parenting**

## **6 - Family Conflict & Maltreatment**

## **7 - School Problems**

## **8 - Mental Health & Behavioral Disorders**

## **9 - Risky Behaviors & Victimization**

# **Research on Homeless Youth: Some New Frontiers**

## **1 - Longitudinal Studies**

**Detroit Study of Probability Sample**

**Montreal Studies of Street Youth**

## **2 - Homelessness and Foster Care**

**Detroit Follow-up Study**

**3-State Study at U of Chicago**

**The Housing, Adolescence, and Life Outcomes  
(HALO) Project:**

**A longitudinal study of 250 homeless and 148  
matched housed adolescents**

(funding from National Institute of Alcoholism and  
Alcohol Abuse; Paul Toro, Principal Investigator)

# Baseline Probability Sample of 250 Homeless Youth

- Adolescents (ages 13-17) were sampled from throughout the 8-county Detroit metro area
- They came from youth shelters, outpatient and residential programs, and other sites

# Baseline Matched Sample of 148 Housed Adolescents

- Homeless adolescents nominated 5 to 10 peers from their neighborhood
- Housed sample was matched on race, gender, age, and neighborhood income

# Housed-Homeless Differences at Baseline

Groups differed significantly on a wide range of variables, including:

- Family and community violence, parenting, housing moves, etc.
- Diagnoses, symptoms, conduct problems, school functioning, sexual behavior, etc.

## Methods of Longitudinal Follow-up

### Initial Project: Full-length interviews attempted at 3 time points

- 6 months (N=231, 58% of total 398 from baseline; 115 homeless, 116 housed)
- 12 months (N=150, 38% of 398)
- 18-42 months (N=235, 59% of 398)

## Continuation Project: 3 more annual full-length interviews

- 4.5 years (N=327, 82% of 398)
- 5.5 years (N=296; 74% of 398)
- 6.5 years (N=330, 83% of 398)
- 388 (97%) have at least 1 of 6 possible follow-up interviews
- 368 (92%) have at least 2

# Procedures to improve follow-up:

- Positive "human encounter" with interviewer
- Keeping in regular contact between interviews
- Use of "collateral contacts," such as parents and close friends
- \$20-\$50 payment at each interview
- 1-800 number
- Persistent tracking and "dropping in" on residences
- Use of web-based services and other "public" data (e.g., from drivers' licenses)

## Basic Outcomes after 4.5 years

- 93% of homeless were housed
- 33% with parents, 34% on own, 21% with friends or other relatives
- Lower levels of family conflict, stress, and other negative outcomes

# Three Dimensions of Religiosity as Predictors of Outcomes

Sawssan R. Ahmed, Patrick Fowler, &  
Paul A. Toro

# Measures:

- Multidimensional measure of Religiosity
  - Public, Private, & Family dimensions
- Substance abuse/dependence
  - Items from DISC/DIS
    - Problems caused by alcohol or drug use
  - Alcohol symptom count (0-16)
  - Drug symptom count (0-24)

# Cross-sectional & Longitudinal Analyses:

- Regression analyses at baseline/6 months (Time 1) and 12-18 months (Time 2)

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Figure 1. Drug Symptoms as a Function of Stress and Family Religiosity (Time 1 scores)

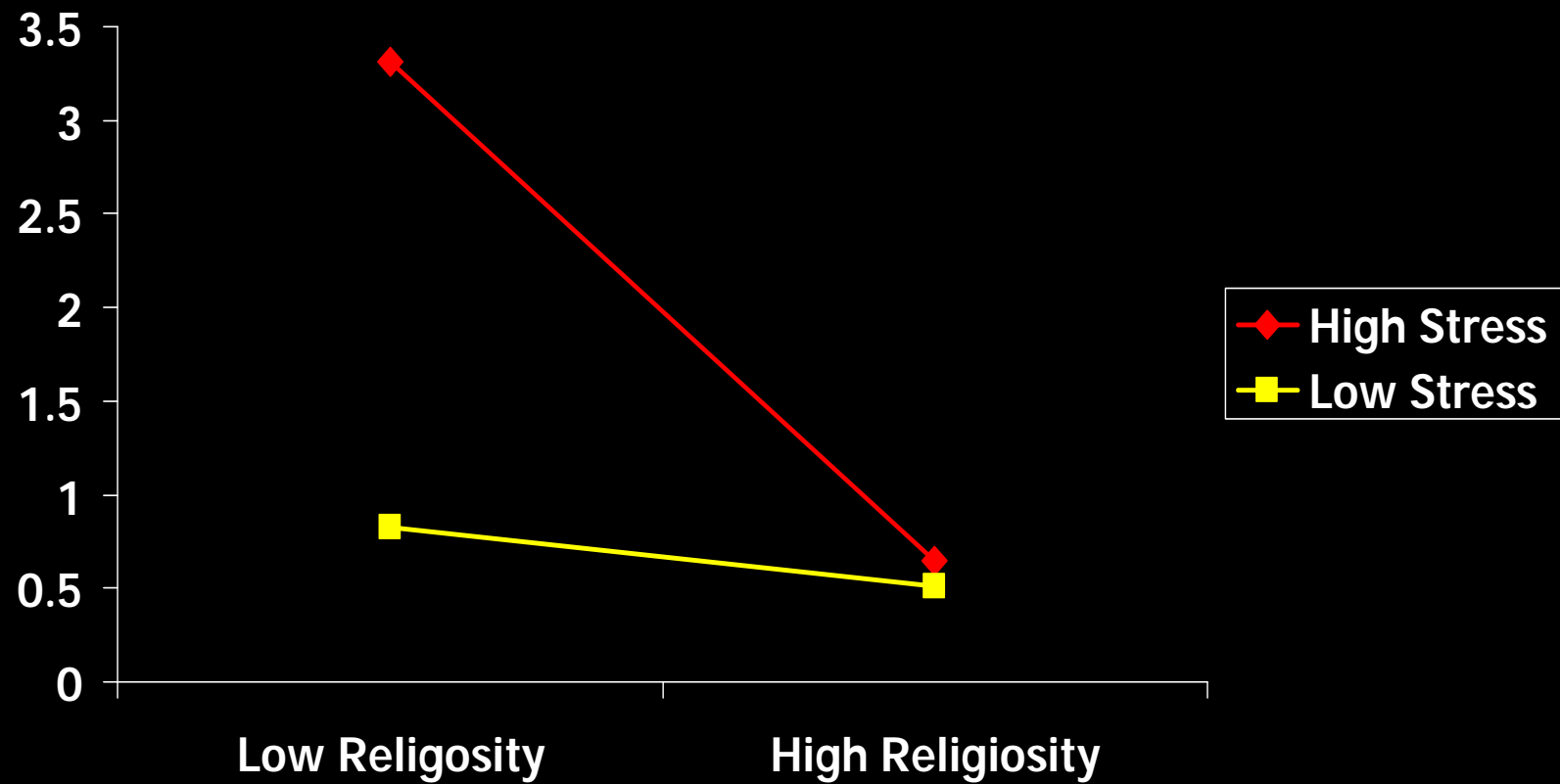
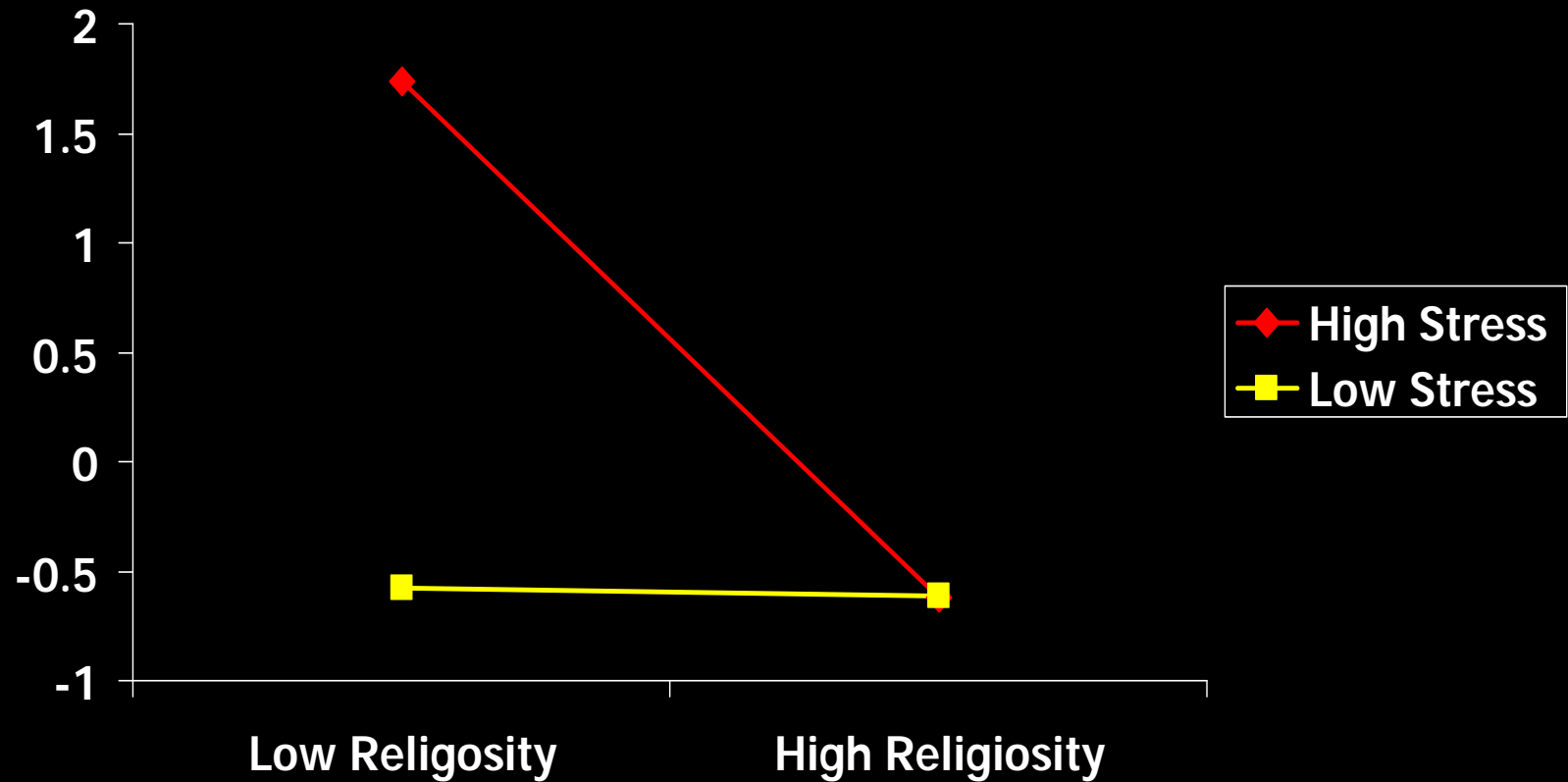


Figure 2. Drug symptoms as a function of Stress and Public Religiosity (Time 2 residual scores)



# Recent Analyses: Substance abuse

- Hierarchical linear modeling
  - Nests change within individuals
  - Deals with missing and unevenly spaced data
  - Utilizes multiple time points of data
- Levels of predictors
  - Level 1: time-varying. Peer drug or alcohol abuse.
  - Level 2: inter-individual. Parent drug/alcohol abuse, parental monitoring, homelessness.

# Measures: Peer substance abuse

- Social Network Interview
  - Alcohol index:
    - frequency
      - (0=never, 1=a few times a year, 2=monthly, 3=weekly, 4=daily)
    - quantity
      - (0=1-2 drinks, 1=3-4, 2=5-6, 3=7-8, 4=>8 drinks)
    - Mean across friends
  - Drug frequency (any drug; 0=never, 4=daily)
    - Number of friends using drugs at least monthly

## Preliminary analyses: unconditional growth curves

- Substance use
  - Linear increase for both alcohol ( $t=14.36$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and drug symptoms ( $t=3.41$ ,  $p<.01$ )
- Peer substance use
  - Alcohol index shows linear increase ( $t=13.14$ ,  $p<.001$ )
  - Number of friends using drugs shows linear increase ( $t=3.53$ ,  $p<.01$ )

## Peers and alcohol

- Youth with peers who drink more reported more alcohol symptoms across time ( $t=19.53, p<.001$ )
- Significant interaction of time and peer influence ( $t=-4.18, p<.001$ )
  - Peer drinking-personal drinking significantly associated at all time points
  - Stronger association between peer and personal drinking earlier (baseline-2 years) than later (4.5-6.5 years)

## Peers and drug use

- Drug symptoms increase over time
- Peer drug use
  - Peer drug use significantly predicts personal drug symptoms over time ( $t=15.00, p<.001$ )
- Change in personal drug use is fully mediated by change in number of drug-using peers

# Homelessness and alcohol

- Homeless youth had more alcohol symptoms at baseline ( $t=2.39, p<.01$ )
- Housed youth showed greater increase in alcohol symptoms ( $t=-2.12, p<.05$ )

# Homelessness and drugs

- Peer drug use fully mediates variance in drug symptoms over time
  - No change in drug use to predict
- Homeless youth had more drug symptoms at baseline ( $t=3.60$ ,  $p<.01$ )
- Housed youth showed closer association between friend drug use and personal drug use over time ( $t=-2.87$ ,  $p<.01$ )
- Secondary analysis: homeless youth had more drug using friends at baseline ( $t=2.93$ ,  $p<.01$ ), but no homeless/housed prediction of change in friends ( $t=-.90$ ,  $p=.37$ )

# Summary

- Peers influence substance abuse
  - Cross-sectionally within adolescence (intercept)
  - Change (slope)
    - Influence stronger in adolescence for alcohol
    - Influence fully accounts for change in drug use
- Homeless teens have more deviant peers, but influence of peers tends to be similar for both housed and homeless

# A Follow-up Study of Youth Aging Out of Foster Care in Michigan

*Paul A. Toro & Patrick Fowler*

- Methods
  - Record Review
    - All cases that closed in 2002 and 2003 who were 18 years or older
    - Southeast Michigan (Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb Counties)
    - Population = 816 cases
  - Structured 30-minute phone interviews
    - Sample of 264 of these youth interviewed (32%)

## *Final Sample (N=264)*

- Average age at follow-up = 21
- 52% Female
- 78% African-American, 21% Caucasian
- 36% had own kids

- Average Time Since Leaving Foster Care = 3.6 years
- Average age of entry into foster care = 13
- Average age at exit = 17.5
- Average number of placements = 5.8

## *Housing*

- 17% had been “literally homeless” at least one day since leaving foster care
- An additional 33% had experienced “precarious housing” (e.g., temporarily staying with friends)

## *Employment*

- Most respondents had worked since leaving foster care
- On average, respondents were unemployed 48% of the time since leaving foster care
- Average monthly income when working = \$598

## *Psychopathology*

- High levels on Brief Symptom Inventory, even when compared to low income sample
- Especially high means on Psychoticism and Paranoid Ideation (about double compared to norms)

## Outcome trajectories & 2nd follow-up

- 4 “trajectory groups” based on housing, education, & occupational outcomes
- 2<sup>nd</sup> follow-up 6 years after exit from foster care now planned (youth will be, on average, 24 years old)

# **Research on Homeless Youth: More New Frontiers**

**3 - Homelessness among Youthful Offenders**

**4 - Intervention Research**

**5 - Prevention Research**

**Youth aging out of foster care & offenders  
Employment**

# Plans for Comprehensive Intervention in Detroit

- Engage youth in year prior to expected "aging out" (around age 17)
- Provide financial and emotional support for years during the transition to adulthood

