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The best way to help homeless youth is hardly ever used

Study finds drop-in centers embraced by those who fear, avoid shelters

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COLUMBUS, Ohio – Teens without homes, many of whom have suffered at the hands of those entrusted with providing them care and kindness, often refuse to seek warmth and nourishment at shelters.

But there's new evidence that drop-in centers – safe havens with fewer rules and no older adults – could open doors to jobs, sobriety and housing that is safe and secure.

The study confirmed what lead researcher Natasha Slesnick (<https://news.osu.edu/faculty-experts/n-z/slesnick-natasha.html>) has seen in two decades of work with homeless youths: Drop-in centers tailored to their needs and age have greater appeal for the hardest-to-reach kids.



Natasha Slesnick

Slesnick, professor of human sciences (<http://ehe.osu.edu/human-sciences/>) at The Ohio State University, now has data to prove that they're particularly powerful hubs for moving young people away from homelessness and toward employment, housing and stability.

"Many kids won't go to shelters because they're hiding on the street. They're avoiding the service system because they've been abused and betrayed by everyone who is supposed to love them," said Slesnick, who is also founder and executive

director of Ohio State's Star House (<https://starhouse.ehe.osu.edu/>), a drop-in center not far from campus that serves more than 800 young people a year.

"They're fearful of being preyed upon by older people at shelters, and the paperwork can be overwhelming."

For the study, published in the January 2016 issue of the journal *Prevention Science* (<http://link.springer.com/journal/11121>), researchers set out into the woods, abandoned buildings, sandwich lines and libraries of Columbus, Ohio to find teens and young adults homeless and disconnected from services.

The study included 79 youth, all of whom were assigned an advocate whose job it was to focus on the individual's needs and goals and to help connect the person to the right services. The advocates tried to link half of the youth to a drop-in center and the other half to a crisis shelter.

Eighty percent of those encouraged to visit the drop-in center showed up at its doors. Only 18 percent of those in the shelter group sought refuge there. In fact, 31 percent of those assigned to the "shelter" group ended up visiting the drop-in center.

The drop-in model isn't a replacement for shelters but an alternative that offers hope for the hardest-to-reach young homeless, Slesnick said.

"Every city needs a drop-in center," she said, adding that there are likely only about a couple dozen throughout the country.

"This is an underserved marginalized population with few resources devoted to their problem. For most of them, a shelter is not going to solve the problem."

Drop-in centers aren't designed to be residences. They don't have beds. The one in Columbus is open around the clock, though, and provides food, hot showers, clothes and toothpaste and soap. Young people stop for a meal, to wash their clothes and to visit. There's a room for art and couches in front of a big TV. There's a gym for basketball and a room where expectant moms can have a medical checkup.

Slesnick is hopeful this new evidence helps convince local, state and federal leaders that they should dedicate more money to drop-in centers rather than relying so heavily on shelters to help young people who are unlikely to show up at their doors.

As a whole, the homeless kids and young adults, all of whom had been on the streets for at least three months prior to the study, were hungry for support. Whether or not they ever visited the drop-in center or the shelter, they willingly met with the men and women trying to help them.

Those assigned to the drop-in group met their advocates an average of 17 times in six months. Those in the shelter group met an average of 12 times.

“For some of them, having a nonjudgmental advocate in the study was the first time they’d experienced something like that. They ate it up,” Slesnick said.

Both groups saw improvements in measures including alcohol and drug use and depression. But the drop-in group saw greater improvements in several areas and had more contact with individuals and agencies that provide help. Three months after the start of the study, members of the drop-in group reported almost 15 contacts in the last month, compared with 10 contacts for the shelter group.

National estimates of the number of homeless young people vary widely, from 500,000 to 2 million. Part of that is because so many of them are disconnected from services that could help them and so getting a good count is impossible, Slesnick said.

Homeless young people are at high risk for victimization and suicide. They often have mental health problems and abuse drugs and alcohol. But they can have full, productive lives if given the right opportunities and assistance, Slesnick said.

“We need these kids to feel empowered. We need these kids off the streets,” she said.

Next, Slesnick wants to study more than 700 homeless young people in Columbus, Texas and Florida to try to get a better handle on the role of drop-in centers in helping move people from the streets and into homes.

Slesnick's research team at Ohio State included Xin Feng, associate professor of human sciences; Brittany Brakenhoff, Jasmin Carmona and Aaron Murnan, graduate students in human sciences; Scottye Cash, associate professor of social work; and Annie-Laurie McRee, assistant professor of health behavior and health promotion. Xiamei Guo of Xiamen University in China also participated in the work.

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