

**The worlds of homeless white and  
African American youth in San  
Francisco, California:  
A cultural epidemiological  
comparison**

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## Outline

- Before we start...
- Street Y-SE study methods
- Street Y-SE study results
- Some implications
- Next steps/next project?

Before we start....

- **Research is SLOW**

- Getting funded → Gathering data → Analyzing data → writing and publishing papers → dissemination

- Research is SLOW
- Research is behind front line experience; not ahead of it
  - Validity of findings (do they reflect reality) needs to be assessed through communication
  - Implications need to be placed in broader and current context

- Research is SLOW
- Research is behind front line experience; not ahead of it
- Research results are broad strokes, patterns.

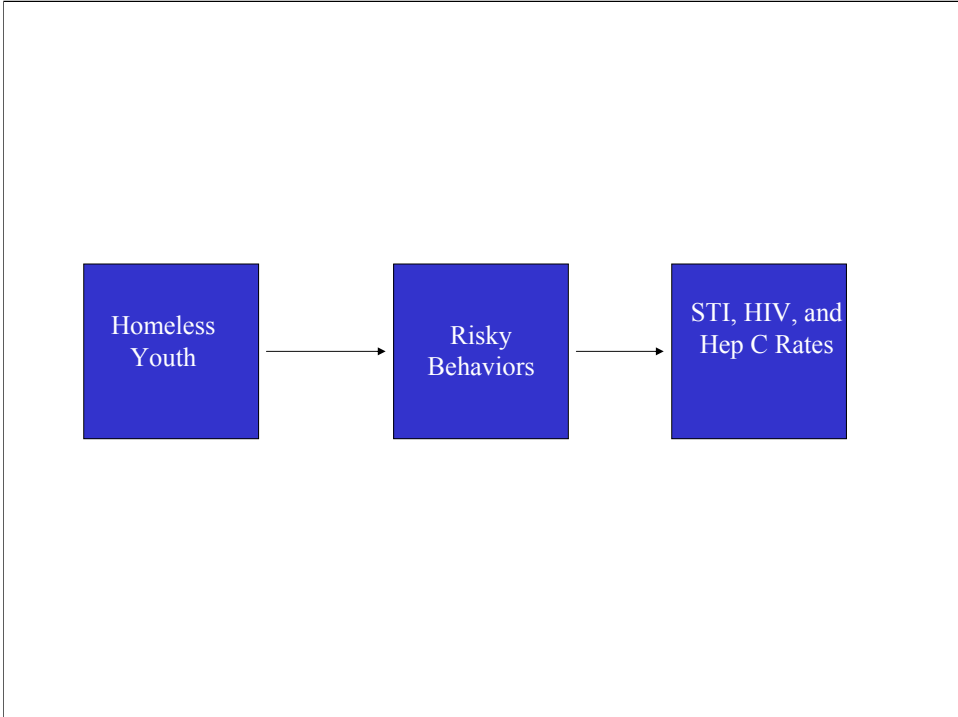
- Research is SLOW
- Research is behind front line experience; not ahead of it
- Research results are broad strokes, patterns.
- **Interpretation of differences by ethnicity:**
  - Shared historical and socioeconomic root causes vs. inherent differences.



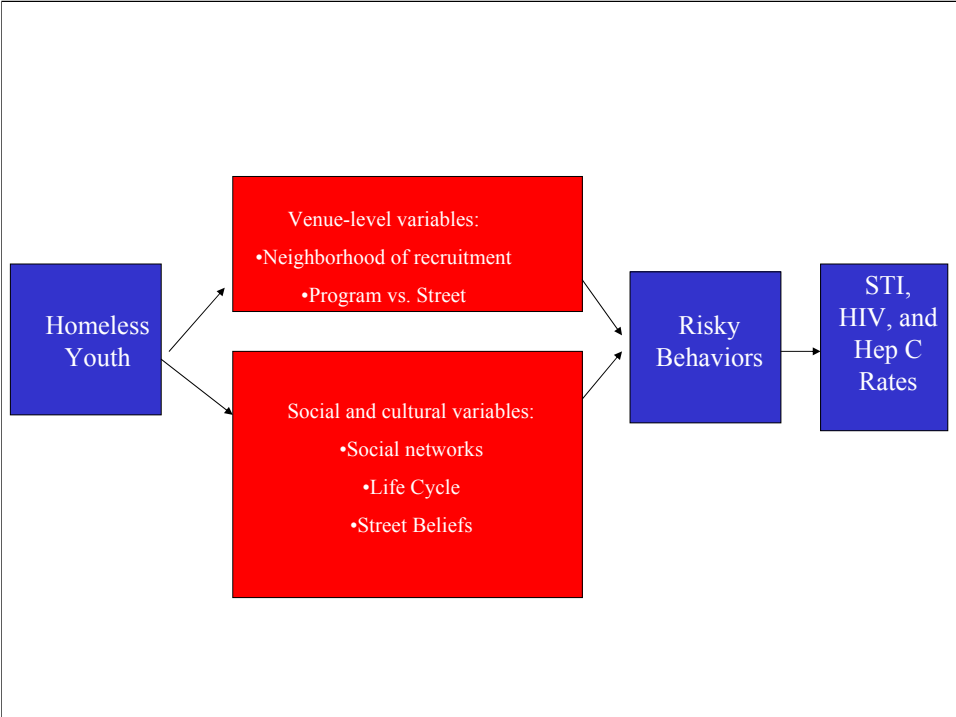
## **Study Goal**

Will talk to you today about some results from the Street Y-SE project, which stands for Street Youth in Social environments

Study based on premise that youth are not all the same and that their health is determined not just by whether they decide to do what doctors or outreach workers tell them to you, but also by the context of those decisions. Specifically, we were interested in understanding how health risk behaviors and risk for sexually transmitted infections were affected by Street culture, youth's changing social networks and the life cycle of youth homelessness.



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**Study Eligibility**

## Eligibility

- Homeless for at least 2 nights in the prior 6 months.
- “Unstable housing” term used instead of “homeless.”
- “Having to stay in a place that is not your home because you could not stay in your home or you did not have a home, including having to stay in a shelter, outdoors, a squat, with a stranger, in a car, on public transportation, in a welfare hotel or other hotel.”

**Methods—Ethnographic study**

## **Aim of Ethnographic Study**

- To describe the venues of sites where youth spend time
- To compare African American and Anglo youth's experience of being homeless

## **Methods: Ethnographic Study**

- Sampling and recruitment
  - Street-based recruitment in five neighborhoods
  - 28 Anglo/Latino homeless youth; 26 African American youth.
- Interviews
  - On the street, in parks, cafes, fast food restaurants
  - Initial focus on venue description, then greater focus on experience of homelessness by AA youth
  - Recorded and transcribed

**Methods: Survey study**

## **Methods: Survey Study**

- Assessment and mapping of sites where street youth
- Recruitment 290 youth for survey completion
  - 242 street-recruited youth from 28 sites in 3 neighborhoods
  - 48 program-recruited youth (Guerrero House and Lark-Inn)
  - For these analyses, focus on 205 youth (145 White and 60 AA); 171 street-recruited and 34 program-recruited.

Ethnographic interviews

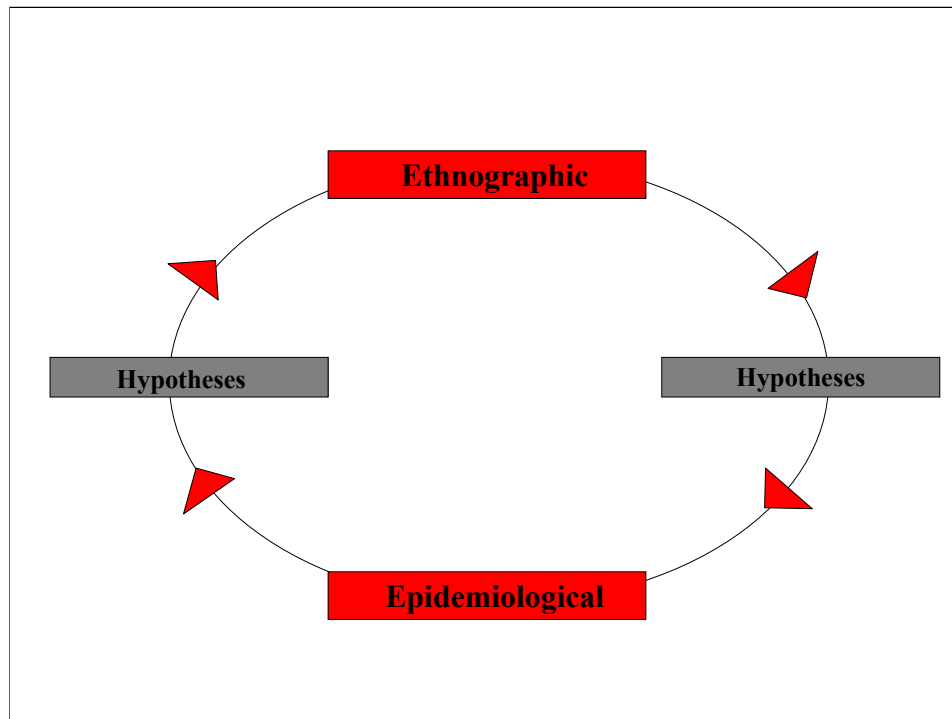
5 neighborhoods: mission, castro, polk, haight and market street

Pda brief surveys to characterize who is there

Focus on the 205 youth who were white or AA for the study

## **Methods: Survey Study**

- Measures:
  - Audio computer administered self-interview survey
    - demographic, behavioral (drug and sexual risk), and life cycle measures
  - Interview-administered survey
    - social network data
  - Urine-based testing for gonorrhea and chlamydia



What I am going to present to you is the result of a feedback process that took place during this project during which we went from ethnographic observations to generating hypotheses to testing hypotheses with survey data from the same population—helped us see if our conclusions or hunches based on talking to youth held up when testing for them in the data.

So data I am presenting includes both quotes and words as well as numbers.... to examine some of the same issues

## **Results**

## **Overview**

### **African American and Anglo youth**

Shared and divergent experiences in 5 key areas:

- Family and path to the street
- Housing
- Street survival strategies
- Drug use
- Self-identification and service utilization

All African American youth interviewed for the ethnographic study were local  
Majority of Anglo youth were not from SF

Family

## Family

- Shared background of social and familial dysfunction
  - Parental substance abuse
  - Failure of social services, group homes
- White youth experience:
  - Minimal family ties
  - Reconstruct family ties on the street
  - Street is home
- African American experience:
  - Effects of poverty and lack of local economic opportunity
  - Continued ties to nuclear and extended family
  - Street is “nasty”

AA youth come to the street bcs no way to make money locally if not involved in local gangs and market street is seen as an open market where anyone can participate and make money.

## **Family—Anglo youth**

“We have a strong family sense. We’re good to each other. When you’re good to kids out here, they’re good to you back. It’s kinda like a family.”

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“It’s like a big family you know. I mean kids may say they hate each other and fight and you know turn their backs on each other. But in the end you know, it’s like a family. A big dysfunctional family. But my normal family’s dysfunctional so I’m pretty used to it.”

## **Street as home—Anglo youth**

“Kids feel that that’s their house. You come into the park, you’re stepping into our home.”

## **Family—AA youth**

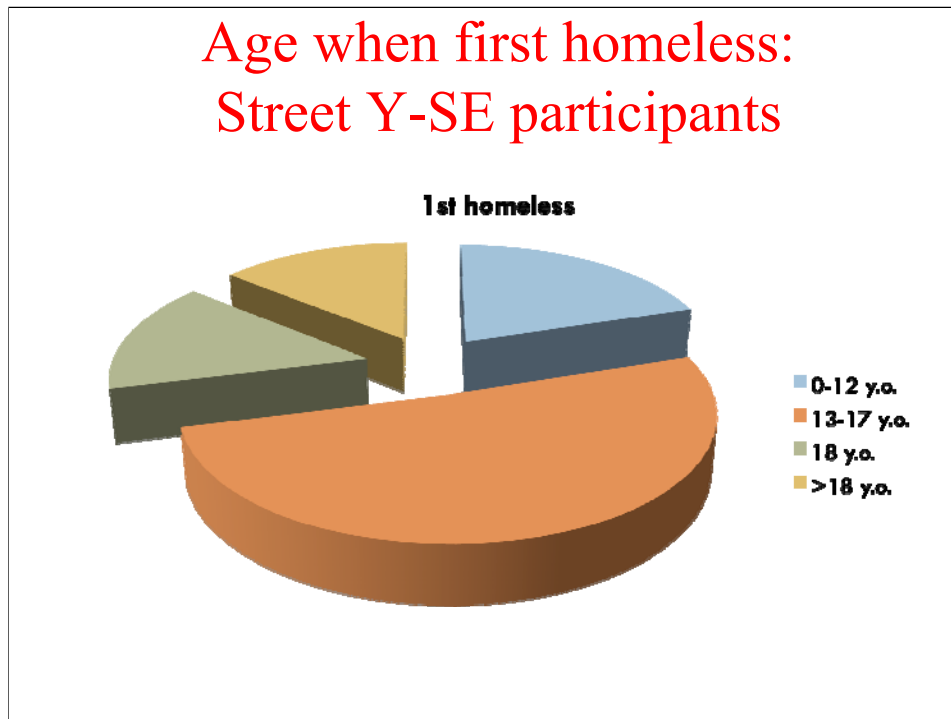
*“Oh I grew up fast man. I knew what time it is out here [on the street] at an early age. When you got certain family members on drugs, you can't do nothing but have to go. That's the way some of us grew up. Crack took over the household so what can you do? Just learn how to hold your head, how to make something happen for yourself.”*

## Family—The numbers

- Shelter with families (AA>W)
- Economic support from families (AA=W)
- Foster care (AA>W)
- Homeless at an early age (AA=W)

- Shelter with family in the past month: 27% AA vs. 8% White
- Economic support from families: 22AA vs 18W
- Foster care 61% vs. 23%
- 15.7 years vs 15,2 W

## Age when first homeless: Street Y-SE participants



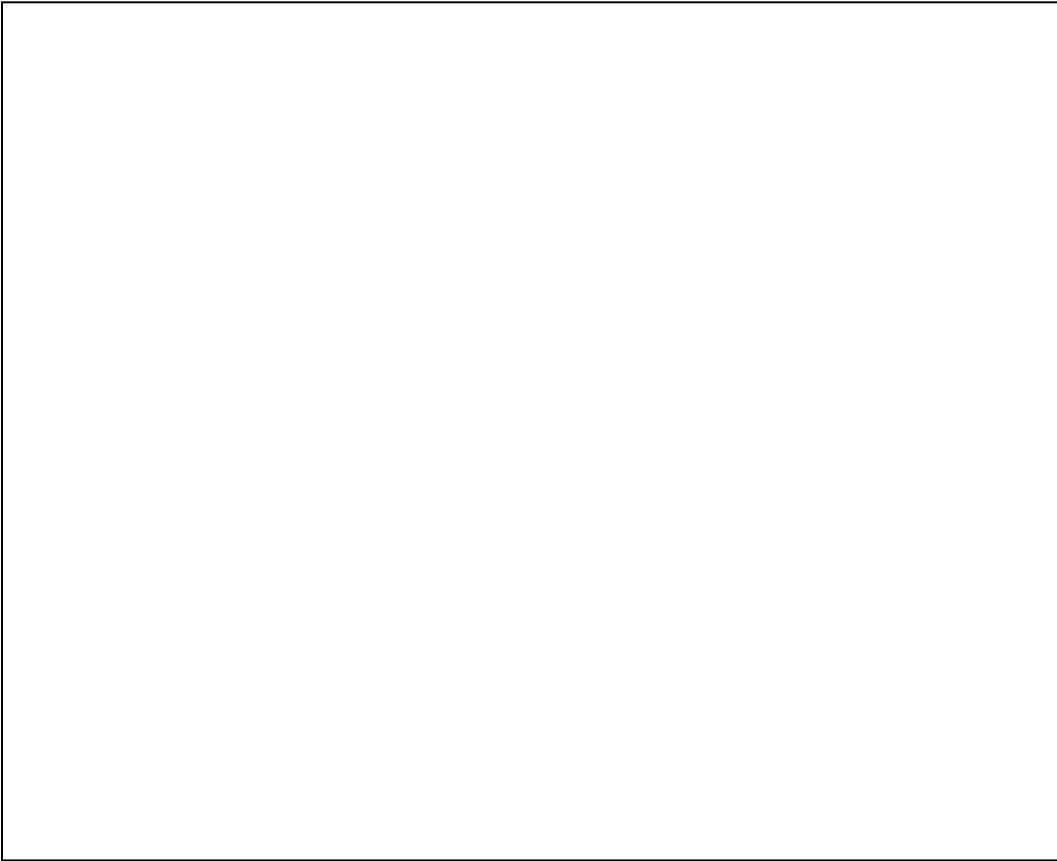
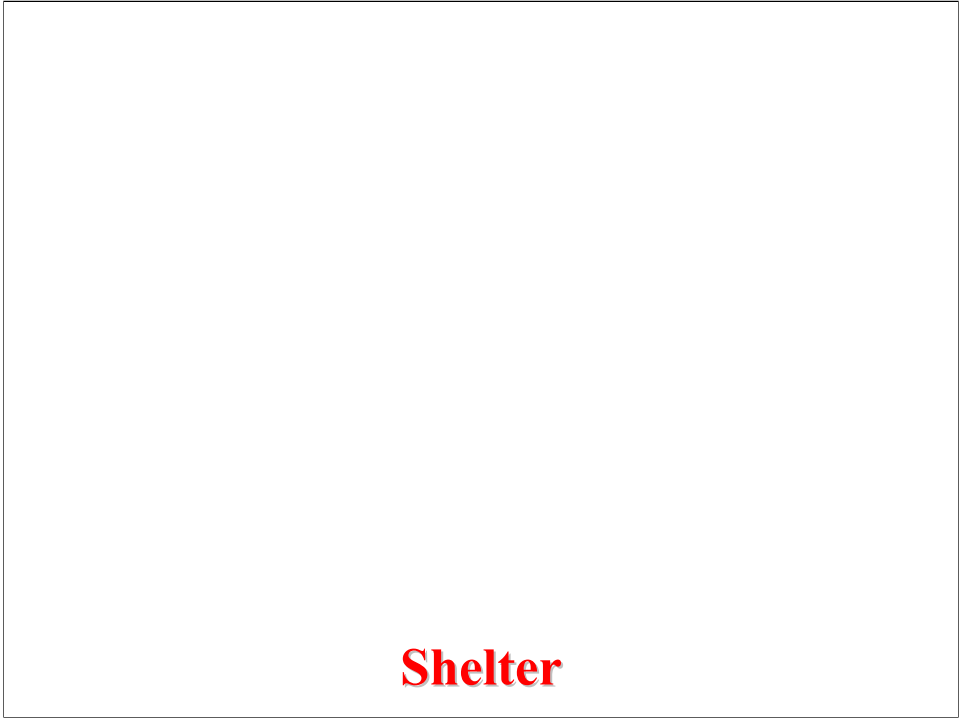
0-12 y.o ----20%

13-17 y.o.---- 51%

18y.o.-----15%

>18y.o.----14%

Average age at which homeless same in both groups—between 15 and 15.5 years of age



## **Shelter/Housing**

- White youth:
  - Often literally homeless
  - Avoid but do not shun shelters
- African American youth:
  - Family → family → friend → family
  - But do fall through the cracks
  - Reject shelters

Define literally homeless: living in the previous month in a place not meant for human habitation (street, park, abandoned building, beach, vehicle) or in home of a stranger or paying sex partner.

When fall through the cracks, then will trade sex for drugs or a place to stay, stay up all night, stay in an sro.

Youth reject shelters.

## **Shelter/Housing**

### **White youth**

“Here in San Francisco, honestly I tend to sleep outside a lot. But the weather’s usually pretty mild. You know I like having a nice squat, especially if it’s wintertime and stuff. But honestly when it’s real nice out if I can find a good spot where nobody’s gonna mess with me and a couple of friends that are also sleeping outside, I’d rather do that.”

## **Shelter/Housing**

### **African American youth**

“I be everywhere. Back and forth. I don’t live in a stable, you know what I’m saying, environment. I be place to place. That’s how it goes down in the hood, you feel me. You don’t, you know, stay at one place. I stay mostly family to family, like little cousins, you know younger-younger generation, maybe let me stay over. I stayed on the street for a minute, not a long time. I went to group homes. It’s all good though.”

## **Shelter/Housing**

### **African American youth**

Interviewer: Would you ever consider staying in a shelter?

Participant: Hell no. I got too many ways I can come up to just be sleeping in somebody else's shelter, man. I be in jail getting fed by the man before I be dead homeless.

## Market Street

*“If we’re down here, we came from some kinda unstable background, you know what I mean so. You don’t see rich kids come down here sell dope, do you? OK... Um very few of us, I would say, out of a hundred percent, say maybe six percent of us have our own place, not even that much... I know what it feels like wondering where you gonna sleep the next night...”*

## Shelter/Housing: The numbers

- Homeless prior night (W>AA)
- Literally homeless prior month (W>AA)

Homeless prior night (81 W> 62 AA)

Literally homeless (81 W> 37 AA)

## Street survival strategies

## Street survival

## Street survival: Epidemiological data

- Drug dealing for survival (AA=W)
- Homelessness-associated street survival activities (W>AA)
- Survival sex (ever) (W=AA)
- Pimping (AA males >W males)
- Incarceration (AA=W)

- Drug dealing for survival (40 AA= 36 W)
- Homelessness-associated street survival activities (W>AA)
  - Panhandling (63 vs. 17)
  - Selling items on sidewalk (35 vs. 20)
- Survival sex (ever) (W=AA)
  - (16% overall; no diff by race or gender)
- Pimping (AA males >W males)
- Incarceration (AA=W) (8% AA vs. 9% W)

Drug use

## Drug use and abuse

- All youth
  - Alcohol
  - Marijuana
- White youth
  - Speed, cocaine, heroin
  - Injection drug use stigmatized but accepted
- African American youth
  - Ecstasy and powder cocaine acceptable
  - Injection drug use, heroin and crack cocaine shunned

## Drug use and abuse: White youth

- *If you get caught like shooting up anywhre near the front of the park, sometimes they'll kick your ass. Sometimes you'll get a long lecture about it. A lotta people keep it a secret. Like when I was using [intravenous] drugs, I kept it a secret.*

## Drug use and abuse: African American youth

- *Down here is mostly black kids and not too many black people I know do that kinda stuff [inject drugs]. They might snort some coke or smoke weed or pop a pill... Not too many black kids shoot up these days.*

## Drug use and abuse

## Drug use: Epidemiological data

- Lifetime injection drug use (W>AA)
- Self-reported Hepatitis C infection (W>AA)

Lifetime injection drug use (44%W > 1.7%)

Self-reported Hepatitis C infection (14 W> 0 AA)

**Self-identification and service  
utilization**

## **Self-perception/self-presentation**

- White youth:
  - Readily take on label of homeless
  - Readily identifiable as homeless
  - Panhandling common
- African-American youth:
  - Reject label of homelessness
  - Cannot easily be identified as homeless
  - Being homeless is taboo
  - Shun panhandling

**Self-perception/self-presentation  
Anglo youth**

“You know there is a lotta freedom in being homeless. It’s something that people don’t realize that though they see it as a negative, we see it as a positive because we have no other choice, you know we are forced to live this way at this point. So we’re taking it with stride.”

**Self-perception/self-presentation  
African American youth**

“I never told anybody (I was homeless). That was embarrassing to me. I felt, I thought, at that time, I thought people would treat me funny or be you know be mean towards me. Like you’re a bum, so I never told anybody.”

## **Self-perception/self-presentation African American youth**

*Interviewer:* I do these interviews and a lot of times [the people are] dressed pretty nice and all that stuff...

*Participant:* And they ain't got no damn money [laughs]! They be just as poor, yes. And they trick the little girls into buying them a nice outfits. Or most little girls nowadays, they steal. So the girls be the ones who stole all them damn clothes. It just looks nice, but they didn't pay for it. And they don't even have any money. They be looking like a million bucks but...

## Services

- White youth:
  - Extensive knowledge of services
  - Rely on services but reject rules regarded as restrictive
- African American youth:
  - “What services?”

## **Services and Anglo Youth:**

“Haight Ashbury Youth Outreach Team is wonderful. They come pass out condoms and snacks and fresh shooting supplies and they’re totally cool. You feel comfortable with them. They’re not snooty like conservative people. They are kids that dress like we do.”

## **Services and Anglo youth**

“I had a lotta problems with the staff you know. Things get stolen, they tell us we’re, they’re not responsible if anything’s stolen from the shelter. They tell us to lock it up in the lockers, but you can only get in your lockers during a certain time of the day. I also don’t like that they control when you can take a shower and I also don’t think they should kick you out during the day.”

## **Services and African American Youth**

“When I was growing up the YMCA, the Boys and Girls club, there were all kinda programs. Now, you don’t see that no more. No money, no money from the government, It ain’t no discrimination, they’re just not out there. And then when you do go, they tell you “come back tomorrow.” Then you come back tomorrow, they tell you “Come back tomorrow.” And it’s sad. They took the camel to the water. But every time the camel come there to drink ,it ain’t no water there.”

## **Services and African American Youth**

“I got a dude I been knowing for a minute. He always walk up and down the streets. They pass out you know toothbrushes, toothpaste, candy, condoms, all things like that. Yeah they, they do their thing. Oh sometimes, I-I take the candy and toothbrush, give it to people, you know who I feel like need it, or see somebody on the streets, like here, give it to ‘em or something.”

## Self-identification and service utilization: The numbers

- Shelter usage (AA=W)
- Accessed drop-in or outreach services (W>AA)

Shelter usage (22 AA=14 W)

Accessed drop-in or outreach services (51 W> 18 AA)

## **Implications**

- Homeless youth are not all the same
- There is a critical role for a range of services in which all youth can find themselves reflected
- Strengths differ; youth as resilient adaptors

## Implications

- African American youth homelessness integrally tied to local lack of local economic opportunity:
- Critical role for stabilizing the housing situation for foster youth and recently incarcerated youth
- Need for substance abuse treatment and transitional housing

## Next steps

- Need to increase visibility of all homeless/unstably housed youth
- Lack of data/ability to monitor
- Youth know best how to reach each other

→“We R Hear” Project

Data important for advocacy and for program planning

Create a model project to monitor numbers and trends; accounting for range of homelessness experience, seasonal variation

How can these data help YOU????

**Thanks to our community collaborators!**

- **Larkin Street Youth Services**
- **Haight-Ashbury Youth Outreach Team**
- **At the Crossroads**
- **Community Health Programs for Youth**
- **SFDPH, Division of STD Prevention**

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***Thank you!!!!***