

Self-esteem may be key to success for Portland's homeless youth, study finds

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Service providers for youth experiencing homelessness typically focus on the big three: food, shelter and health care. But a new study from Portland State University Community Psychology graduate student Katricia Stewart shows overall well-being is just as important.

She published her study, "Intrapersonal and Social-contextual Factors Related to Psychological Well-being Among Youth Experiencing Homelessness," with her advisor Greg Townley in the *Journal of Community Psychology* earlier this year. This work was funded by a student research grant awarded to Stewart by APA Division 27, the Society for Community Research and Action.

"In the end, they're still just kids and [young adults](#) who need to enjoy themselves and have creative outlets and make friends," Stewart said. "There needs to be a balance between serving those [basic needs](#) and having opportunities to just be a young adult."

Stewart argues that focusing only on food, shelter and [health care](#) above all else isn't the best way to serve [youth](#) experiencing homelessness.

"While those fundamentals are important, so are opportunities for youth to cultivate community, develop supportive relationships, and engage in meaningful hobbies," she said.

Stewart studied components of well-being—including [self-esteem](#), [mental health](#), sense of community and empowerment—and which

factors made a difference in the day-to-day lives of homeless youth.

While all the factors are important, Stewart said self-esteem and mental health stood out as the primary predictors of psychological well-being.

"Greater self-esteem predicted greater [psychological well-being](#), which makes sense when you consider the age group—18 to 24 years old—who are in a time in life when identity and self-esteem are important parts of development," she said.

Many of the 100 Portland youth surveyed for Stewart's study stated they were homeless because they were either kicked out of their home or chose to leave; were managing personal issues like drug use or pregnancy; or struggled financially.

Further, many were living in unhealthy or abusive environments and battling with a difference in family beliefs or values.

These circumstances might contribute to youth feeling dis-empowered, Stewart said.

"However, if supported in the right way, they can develop a stronger sense of empowerment and self-worth," she said. "This, in turn, might be one of the many important factors in changing the trajectory of their lives."

Building their self-esteem and helping them recognize they can take action to improve their situations is one factor at play; [service providers](#) can also help youth identify and pursue opportunities or skills that support their future—such as education, housing, or employment, she added.

p:ear, a Portland nonprofit providing educational, artistic and

recreational opportunities to youth experiencing homelessness, worked with Stewart during the study. She identified p:ear as an example of a service provider examining the bigger picture and helping youth make strides in overall wellness.

"They provide a space for youth to build confidence and develop themselves, pursue activities and do things that can make them feel good about themselves," she said. That includes access to art, job skills training and recreational activities.

Stewart hopes her findings will help inform future research and program development at [homeless](#) service centers. She looks forward to opportunities to continue working with p:ear and with youth experiencing homelessness in her role as a graduate student research assistant with PSU's Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative beginning this summer.

More information: Katricia Stewart et al, Intrapersonal and social–contextual factors related to psychological well-being among youth experiencing homelessness, *Journal of Community Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1002/jcop.22152](https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22152)

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