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**Integrating Interventions: Outreach and  
Research among Street Youths in the  
Rockies**

**by**

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Forthcoming in *Globalizing the Streets: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Youth, Social Control and Empowerment in the New Millennium*. Edited by David C. Brotherton and Michael Flynn, Columbia University Press.

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# **Integrating Interventions: Outreach and Research among Street Youths in the Rockies**

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This paper is dedicated to the memory of Franklin James, a tireless advocate for the homeless. The authors gratefully acknowledge support from the Fannie Mae Foundation that made this research possible.

## **Introduction**

The household or family, however constituted, is the primary economic unit through which any individual encounters the forces of the local, national, and global political economy. In households wages are redistributed to care for the young and the old and its members learn the social and practical skills of daily life. Families also, ideally, provide emotional support and care to their members, buffering them from vicissitudes in the larger society. The processes of globalization have restructured the labor market and the access of families to sources of income (Sassen 1991). While some families achieve vast wealth and prosperity, many more must piece together a livelihood from multiple jobs with few or no benefits in the form of health care, pensions, or earned leisure (Newman 1999). Global processes have also restructured the public sector, eroding the safety net for families and cutting investments in human capital through public education, health care, and job training programs (Castells 1989). This disinvestment, coupled with welfare reform and the loss of subsidized housing units throughout the country (National Coalition 2002), has, in the past decade, contributed to an increase in the number of children and young people living in extreme poverty and often without permanent housing (Mickelson 2000).

In a world where the family is increasingly the sole source of support, what drives any young person to leave home while still legally and economically dependent upon his or her parents? Studies demonstrate a complex interplay of factors including, at the very least, family dysfunction, changes in household composition, and characteristics of the young person (Fest 1998; Kryder Coe et al.1991; Olson, Minnino, Liebow, and Shore 1980; Ruddick 1996; Schaffner 1999; Whitbeck and Hoyt 1999). There is some evidence that running away is associated with social class, with more runaways and homeless young people coming from working-class and lower-income households (Schaffner 1999; Whitbeck and Hoyt 1999); however, there are few detailed studies of this relationship<sup>1</sup> or of its links to globalization. Not all poor families are unhealthy; nonetheless, the chronic frustration of making ends meet with few resources often manifests as alcoholism, drug addiction, criminal activity, and abuse, transforming the family from safe haven to treacherous landscape (Newman 1999; Singer, Valentín, Baer, and Jia 1998).

Where the impact of globalization can be documented more clearly is in the urban environment in which young people who run away from home must survive and meet their basic needs (Katz 1998). To maintain stable, independent lives adolescents must have external and internal resources such as employment at a living wage, access to affordable housing, legal

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<sup>1</sup> An important exception is the excellent study by Joan I. Vondra (1986). As Vondra concludes, the relationship between social class and running away is complex; some families are able to weather the storms of unemployment and poverty and remain intact and healthy while others with more economic resources cannot.

independence, support from adults and peers, a positive sense of self, hope in the future, and the ability to sustain beneficial social relationships. For most young runaways the balance of these resources is precarious: one small mistake, one fight, or the loss of one resource can topple the arrangement, leaving them literally on the streets. For the streets to be a viable place for young people to survive there must be niches in the formal economy for work that demands few skills, informal economic activities, rent-free shelter (parks, abandoned buildings), sources of free or low-cost food, clothing, and health care. The young person must be creative, resourceful, and able to defend him or herself. Globalization shapes each of these factors, both those that enable a young person to live on their own and those that make living on the streets a possibility and often a necessity.

A key characteristic of the global political economy is the variety of responses it engenders in local communities: the researcher's task is to describe and document the links between global processes and local responses (Lewellen 2002). This chapter represents part of a growing body of literature documenting the experiences and environments of homeless and runaway young people in urban centers in North America, from the "global cities" of New York (Finkelstein 2005 and this volume), Los Angeles (Ruddick 1996), San Francisco (Donovan 2002 and Pfeffer 1997), and Vancouver and Toronto (Hagen and McCarthy 1997) to the smaller cities of the Midwest (Lundy 1995; Whitbeck and Hoyt, 1998) and the Northeast (Schaffner 1999). It examines the circumstances of homeless and runaway young people in Denver, Colorado and the interventions of Urban Peak, a not-for-profit agency that serves them. The conditions under which these young people live are shaped by global forces: in the world of flexible capital and labor, young people with little or no family support must be the most flexible to survive.

So, too, are the agencies that seek to assist these young people constrained by global forces and social values that are institutionalized in public policy and programs. Urban Peak has adopted a social work, case management model for its shelter services. While this model provides valuable services such as housing, employment, education, health care, counseling, and treatment for drug and alcohol addiction to homeless and runaway young people, it does so at a price (cf. Rowe 1999). Programs are designed and funded to solve "problems" rooted in the individual young person: substance abuse, mental illness, physical illness, or adolescent pregnancy. While this approach does serve well young people who have recently left home, retain some trust of adults and institutions, and who lack confidence in their ability to survive on the streets, it is less effective for and often rejected by young people who have been living on their own for a significant period of time and who have had multiple bad experiences with a variety of institutions from juvenile justice and foster care to public schools and health care

services. Additionally, by directing services to the individual and his/her problems, it ignores the larger political and economic forces that place all young people in industrialized countries in a position of economic dependence until well into their late twenties (International Labour Organization 2000; Larson 2002). More importantly, young people's independence is in fact undermined by the agency's monopoly on important resources like subsidized housing,<sup>2</sup> by funding that is insufficient to help young people establish secure, long-term self-sufficiency, and by requiring that they be defined as homeless and runaway to be "worthy" of receiving services. Although, because of their youth, this may cast them in a sympathetic light, it also labels them as deviant (Schneider and Ingram 1997). Thus it is important to critically examine social work case management as the sole model for delivering services to young people living on their own.

### **Urban Life in the Age of Information**

#### **Globalized Cities and Flexible Youth**

Cities, because of the opportunities they provide for work, education, and adventure, have long been magnets for young people (Kleniewski 2002:6). Cities have also been visibly restructured by globalization and hence what they offer young people and how young people locate themselves in cities has changed. Manuel Castells argues that a new mode of development based on information technology, in which "*its raw material itself is information, and so is its outcome,*" coupled with the restructuring of capitalism in the late 1970s has led to the rise of the "informational city" (1989:6, emphasis ours). As capital is freed from the control of national governments, global cities arise that concentrate capital and the enterprises that serve them (Sassen 1991).<sup>3</sup> Both Sassen and Castells link these processes with changes in the opportunity structure of major American cities: a bifurcated or bimodal labor market with a small number of jobs concentrated in the high-wage, high-skill, high-tech sector and a much larger number of jobs in the low-wage, low-skill, non-technical service sector. While there is instability in each of these sectors as businesses and hence workers must adapt to constantly and rapidly changing international markets, workers in the non-technical sector are extremely vulnerable to unemployment, poverty, and homelessness. Flexibility for these workers means multiple part-time jobs at minimum wage without pension or savings plans, health care benefits, or job

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<sup>2</sup> Amy Donovan developed this concept through her work with homeless and runaway young people in San Francisco. The authors are grateful to her for many long hours of late night phone conversations through which we developed this discussion.

<sup>3</sup> As Lewellen notes, "Globalization may be conceived as empirical fact, as theory, or as ideology" (2002:8). Whether it is fact or theory and if these changes merely represent the extension and intensification of capitalism or a truly new form or mode of development (Castells 1989) is an important and fascinating discussion beyond the scope of this paper.

security. One-quarter of workers in the U.S. currently hold a temporary job (Honkala, Goldstein, and Thul 1999: 530).

Whereas in the post-WWII era, a high school diploma was sufficient preparation for high paying jobs in manufacturing or small businesses (Scandlyn 1993), as the U.S. and other industrialized economies shifted from manufacturing to services, the economic value of a high school diploma declined. From 1973 to 1987, mean real earnings for 20-24 year-olds not enrolled in school declined 12%. In 1967 the median weekly wage of 18-24 year-old males was 74% of the adult wage (25+ years of age) but by 1988 it had dropped to 54% (Sum and Fogg 1999:81, 86). In Office for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)<sup>4</sup> nations, adolescents and young adults, because of their relative lack of work experience and education, are most likely to find their first jobs in the service sector where they may be competing with immigrants and older dislocated workers. To delay entry into a very competitive job market and to increase their skills, young people who can afford to are extending their formal education.<sup>5</sup> These patterns contribute to an increase in the average age for completing the transition from school-to-work into the mid-20s (International Labour Organization 2000; Larson 2002). Moreover, jobs in this sector contribute minimally to the development of human capital through on-the-job training or career-building experience.

Individuals under the age of 18 now comprise 10-15% (Taylor and Hochron 1996:27) of the total homeless population in the U.S.<sup>6</sup> Today's homeless are younger, poorer, more consistently living in shelters or on the streets, and include many more women with children. The average age of homeless individuals nationally is now 30, compared to 55-65 in surveys of homeless individuals conducted in the 1950s. Women, who constituted three percent of the skid row population in Chicago in the 1950s (Bogue 1963), now constitute up to one-third of homeless adults. In contrast, the elderly, in particular elderly men, once the majority of homeless individuals, have virtually disappeared from the streets. As many as 1.6 million adolescents are

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<sup>4</sup> "The OECD was set up under a Convention signed in Paris in 1960. The original members are Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom, and the United States." The following countries became members subsequently through accession: Japan, Finland, Australia, New Zealand, Mexico, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and the Republic of Korea (International Labour Organization 2002: 11, footnote 16).

<sup>5</sup> As Reed Larson observes, "Adolescents in these families [those not 'winners' in the global market] never enter school or are pulled from school to help support their families. . ." (2002:12). In the U.S., they may be required to attend school, but the schools they attend are often under funded and serve as sources of discouragement and lack of self-confidence.

<sup>6</sup> Although individuals 9-21 years of age represent only 4.1% of the total homeless population in Denver, this figure does not include young people who are counted as part of "youth headed families" or as "children in families," but who may be expected to find their own shelter and meet their basic needs on their own (DHPG 2003:32).

homeless at some point (from 1-2 nights to several months) each year with approximately 200,000 living permanently on the streets (Taylor and Hochron 1996:27). This reflects the political character of the social safety net. Social security and Medicare have been very effective in reducing poverty among the elderly; a group defined as worthy of security through virtue of their past work. The elderly have protected these benefits by voting as an organized bloc and appealing to that worthiness (Mink 1998). It also reflects the absence of an effective safety net for young men and women who have not yet “proved” their worthiness at a time when the state is pulling away from investment in the human capital of its young citizens (Larson 2002; Castells 1989).

In the literature on youth homelessness a great deal of attention is paid to the psychological and social development of adolescents: what is rarely discussed is adolescents’ place in the family cycle and its economic consequences. Young people are dependent upon their parents for housing and economic support, either through continued formal education or while working, well into their late twenties. Wages in entry-level jobs, regardless of the type of work, are much lower than for older, experienced workers. In a study of the working poor in Harlem, Katherine Newman found that employers in fast food restaurants, one of the most available sources of work in inner cities, favor older workers, new immigrants, and those from outside the immediate neighborhood over local, native-born adolescent workers. Thus adolescents, who lack family support, if they must rely on private sector housing, are always vulnerable to periods of homelessness even if they can find steady employment. Some industrialized countries recognize this and build it into their housing policy. In the Netherlands almost everyone is expected to move through public housing at some point in their life, particularly during early adulthood. In Finland students receive a housing allowance (Avramov 1999). In the U.S., however, young people must turn to family or peers.

Whereas American adolescents experience less autonomy in adult activities as producers of goods and services, they are targeted by advertisers and marketing programs as consumers of youth-oriented products such as movies, video games, music, and fashion. Far from being passive in this sphere, young people often use consumption or abstinence from consumption to express their protest against the marginal place they occupy in the global economy (Aitken 2001; Ferrell 2001; Finnegan 1999; Ruddick 1996).

### **Denver’s Place in the Global Political Economy**

Denver is linked to the global information-based economy as a “secondary milieu of innovation” (Castells 1989:114). These smaller urban centers provide technological innovation and production that serve higher-order centers on which they are dependent. The rapid growth in

size and population of Colorado's Front Range cities: Denver, Fort Collins, Boulder, and Colorado Springs, over the past decade has, in large part, been fueled by serving as a secondary center of computer and communications technology for Silicon Valley. Denver is the largest urban center in the western plains and intermountain region of the U.S. With a population of 554,636<sup>7</sup>, it is located in the center of a seven-county metropolitan region of just over two million (US Census Bureau 2001a). Economic room for small investors, an active federal center, and significant defense spending contributed to its high-tech boom (Castells 1989). In 1999, Denver was one of the fastest growing and most prosperous cities in the nation (Olinger 2001). The city's population grew by 18% from 1990-2000 (Denver Homeless Planning Group 2003:27, hereafter DHPG), with regional growth for the metropolitan area 41.9% and for the state, 23.1% in the same period (U.S. Census Bureau 2001a). Because of Colorado's link to Silicon Valley, the highest proportion of total and net migration to Colorado is from California, with Texas yielding the second largest number of internal migrants (Colorado State Government 2004).

But Denver's general growth and prosperity belie increasing poverty and homelessness, particularly for native-born Coloradoans. Although government and health care is the first and social services is the third largest employment sector in the Denver metropolitan area and both offer relatively high wages, the greatest number of job vacancies are concentrated in the lowest-paid sectors, retail trade and food service.<sup>8</sup> These figures, taken from employer surveys, do not reflect employment in the informal sector. Reflecting the bimodal labor market of the global economy in industrialized nations, Denver also has a high number of employers in the professional, scientific, and technology sectors (16.4%) although the total proportion of employees is small (7.8%). The majority of all jobs require more than a high school education (63%) and 72% require related or specific experience (Colorado Department of Labor and Employment 2004). Thus Denver's high tech job market is not particularly welcoming to young people with little work experience or training and only a high school diploma or Graduate Equivalency Diploma (GED).

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<sup>7</sup> The city and county of Denver are coterminous. The Denver metropolitan area's population of 2.3 million is divided among the following cities and counties: Denver City and County 499,775, Boulder County 273,112, Arapahoe County 482,089, Adams County 331,045, Douglas County 156,860, and Jefferson County 509,222 (U.S. Census 2001b). In the 1990s Colorado was the third fastest-growing state by percentage, with Douglas County the fastest growing county in the nation. Douglas County entered the decade with 60,000 residents and more than doubled its total population in 10 years, an increase of 191% (Olinger, 2001:10A).

<sup>8</sup> Jobs in retail trade pay an average of \$9.69/hour and in food service \$7.84/hour. These data come from a survey of employers conducted by the Colorado Department of Labor; hence, they do not reflect wages paid in cash, tips, or other forms of unreported compensation. Many of these jobs are part-time and do not include health care and other benefits (Colorado Department of Labor and Employment 2004).

In a metropolitan region whose median household income ranges from \$29,293 in Denver County to \$63,570 in Douglas County, almost one-fifth (17.7%) of Denver's residents are poor. Of children ages 5-17 years of age, 28.5% are poor. Disinvestments in human capital in Colorado during this period are evident throughout the public infrastructure. Almost one-third of Coloradoans are medically uninsured or underinsured (Tilly and Chesky 2002). Colorado ranks 39<sup>th</sup> out of 50 states in per capita spending for public education (K-12) and 47th nationally in total taxable income spent on education (NEA 2004). General fund support for higher education declined by \$179.6 million from FY 2002 to FY 2004 (University of Colorado 2003). Colorado's voters have approved several amendments to the state's constitution that limit tax increases that would support education.<sup>9</sup>

Public investment in Denver during this period favored projects that support business and tourism, for example, a new airport, highway improvement, sports stadiums, and a new convention center. This public development, coupled with gentrification of areas adjacent to Denver's central business district in which Single Room Occupancy (SRO) hotels had been located, meant the loss of 2,665 rooms between 1974 and 2001 (DHPG 2003: 10). Although the state does provide housing vouchers for those who qualify, they are inadequate to the need. Because the rapid increase in population generated demand for housing, rents rose by 42% from 1998 to 2003 (DHPG 2003:8). Although in Colorado new housing developments ate up the surrounding prairie and prices for houses climbed rapidly, nationally the investment of GDP in housing actually declined from 1960 to 1995, a result of a "global investment environment" that favors liquidity and short-term investments (Bartelt 1997:3).

### **Methods**

This article is based on a qualitative study of young men and women who are or have been homeless or have run away from home conducted from September 2000 to September 2002. The purpose of the study was to identify factors that place currently homeless young people at risk for homelessness as adults. The first part of the research consisted of life history interviews with older adolescents and young adults who had been homeless during adolescence and now had a variety of living situations. The second part consisted of an ethnographic study of individuals who are currently homeless that incorporated life history interviews with participant observation on the streets. In the first part, the sample consisted of 48 individuals aged 17 to 30; in the second

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<sup>9</sup> The Tabor Amendment, passed in 1992, is the key legislation that limits state revenue, requires voter approval for tax increases and limits property taxes. Amendment 23 (2000) and the Gallagher Amendment (1982) further limit increases in property taxes and on the tax base for local government including school districts by limiting the value of residential property. With the downturn in the national economy, by 2001 Colorado faced some of the most serious deficits in state revenues in the country (Legislative Council Staff 2003).

part, the sample consisted of 35 individuals ages 15-20. The sample was purposive: participants were selected to match the demographic characteristics of homeless and runaway individuals served by Urban Peak in the shelter and through street outreach and to represent the range of outcomes of young adults who had been homeless as adolescents. Participants were recruited by recommendations from Urban Peak staff and from other informants as being experts on street life (Handwerker 2001). There is some overlap in the two samples with regard to age.

We used a flexible life history interview schedule to obtain information on participants' childhood and family life, how they entered street life, the key events that impacted their life on the streets, their comments on access to, use of, and recommendations for services, and their plans and aspirations for the future.<sup>10</sup> Interviews lasted from 45-90 minutes and took place in a variety of locations, from the shelter to cafés and public spaces convenient to the individuals being interviewed. We analyzed data using computer software programs to identify themes and patterns in the data; provisional models were generated and tested in further interviews (Strauss and Corbin 1990).<sup>11</sup>

From the beginning the study has been a participatory project in collaboration with Urban Peak and its staff. The research proposal was reviewed and approved by the Urban Peak Research Committee that comprises Urban Peak staff members and service providers and researchers from the community who meet quarterly to discuss research with homeless and runaway young people in the community. We convened advisory groups of young men and women from the shelter to assist us in the development of the interview questions. We also participated actively in service delivery through the interactions surrounding the interviews and through regularly scheduled volunteer work as members of the outreach team, discussed below. Not only did our continued dialogue with young people and staff at Urban Peak enable us to more fully observe street life, it contributed to the validity of our findings by using a variety of data

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<sup>10</sup> Life history is ideal for our purposes for two reasons. First, it enables us to collect information on each of the topics that we thought, based on the literature and our initial group interviews and discussions with the research committee, would be important factors in determining if homeless and runaway young people were at risk for chronic homelessness. Second, life history provides a flexible interview in which the participant can narrate his or her life events in their own style. The structure and flow of their narrative can reveal important information about the participant's perceptions: how they connect events, what factors they see as significant, areas of contradiction or denial, and what aspects or events in their lives they view as most important. Subsequent interviews were more directed to ensure the saturation of themes and explore key factors in more depth.

<sup>11</sup> The interviews were recorded on audiotape, and then transcribed and analyzed using NUDIST 6 and Atlas.ti 4.2. We met regularly to review our findings. Mid-way through data collection, we developed a graphic model from the data to depict the role of homelessness in the life course of young adults. The model was further refined and tested in subsequent interviews and observation. The project was reviewed and approved by the Human Subjects Research Committee (HSRC) of the University of Colorado at Denver. Informed written consent was obtained from each individual who agreed to participate in the study, and each was paid \$20 and provided with a meal.

collection tools.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, intervening with Urban Peak clients directly, e.g., taking a young person to the emergency room for treatment or referring them to a soup kitchen, gave us first hand experience of the factors and events that impact their lives.

### **Homeless and Runaway Adolescents and Young Adults in Denver**

During the city's period of economic growth and prosperity in the 1990s, its population of homeless young people doubled (James 1991:2; Metro Denver Homeless Initiative 2003).<sup>13</sup> This is part of the overall increase of 40.3% in the number of homeless persons in Denver 1998. Many adults who moved to Colorado seeking work in the expanding high wage, high-tech sector found themselves unable to find stable employment at a sustainable wage. This, combined with rising housing costs, contributed to an increase in the number of homeless families with children.<sup>14</sup> In 1996 complaints from recreational users of the bike path along Cherry Creek and the South Platte River resulted in sweeps of these areas and a prohibition against camping (DHPG 2003). In 2003 the city's newly elected mayor took up the situation of a visibly increasing population by creating a commission to end homelessness in the city in the next ten years (Drayer 2003). Although few of the young men and women we interviewed came from families that were currently homeless, the majority did come from families in which one or both parents worked in relatively low-wage jobs or had experienced un- and underemployment in the past five years. Although one young man's parents were both professionals, most participants' parents had high school educations and were working class: postal employee, childcare worker, legal assistant, auto mechanic, construction worker, and truck driver.

### **Hard Living Families**

In a working class neighborhood in Washington, D.C. in the late 1960s, as global restructuring was hitting East Coast cities in the form of deindustrialization, Joseph Howell (1973) observed two opposing life styles – settled living and hard living. Settled living families owned their homes, attended church, had solid marriages, did not drink or use drugs, were rooted in the community, and lived within their means. They were protective of their children, often

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<sup>12</sup> In anthropology this is known as “triangulation,” which comes from the nautical technique of using three points to establish one's location. Anthropologists use multiple sources of data to ensure that they are accurately locating the “point” or phenomenon under study (Handwerker 2001).

<sup>13</sup> The figures from the two surveys used slightly different methods to count homeless and runaway youths and therefore are not completely comparable. Franklin James' survey of 1991 was more inclusive than the later point-in-time surveys, thus the increase is, if anything, higher than the total numbers here indicate. Using only data from the point-in-time surveys, the number of homeless youths increased from 197 in 1998 to 401 in 2003.

<sup>14</sup> “In 1995, 74% of the homeless population was single individuals and 26% were persons in families. In 2001, 66% of the homeless population was persons in families and 34% were single individuals” (DHPG 2003: appendix, homeless trends).

applying strict discipline, and their children completed high school and sometimes college. Hard living families, in contrast, survived from day to day, renting houses or apartments and moving frequently. Their daily lives were chaotic: adults drank heavily, and personal relationships, the focus of much of their time and energy, were fragile and filled with conflict that often erupted into violence. Howell states that these two styles represent ends of a continuum. Families might move from hard to settled living at different points in time or siblings in the same extended family might have hard or settled styles of life. Settled living was always precarious: the death of a wage earner, the loss of a job, or a divorce could quickly send a settled family into the chaos of hard living. Howell's point is not that working families differed in the values by which they lived their lives, but in their access to and control over the resources necessary to realize those values.

Over three decades later, the plight of the families of the young people we interviewed in Denver are remarkably similar and resemble the difficulties faced by the "working poor" families in Harlem described by Katherine Newman (1999). As Steve,<sup>15</sup> a 17 year-old staying at Urban Peak said:

Pretty much until I was, you know, about eight, everything was real easy, you know, carefree. And that's when my, well sort of, my first step dad died. He was, you know, I called him dad, you know, he really was as far as I was concerned. Apparently, my, my real dad had abused me and my mom left him when I was still a little baby, so . . .

After his stepfather's death, he and his mother returned to Colorado to live with her parents. She supported them by working as a legal assistant and then remarried a man who abused her, contributing to her attempting suicide six times. She divorced him and remarried. The new husband and Steve had conflicts over discipline and authority, at which point Steve began living at a friend's house. When they asked him to leave, he sought refuge at the shelter.

Sherry's life began with hard living. She never knew her father; her mother had four children by her early twenties and gave the youngest two up to foster care. Sherry and her sister went to live with her grandmother because her mother was an alcoholic and heroin addict. Her mother checked herself into a treatment program for two years and has been drug and alcohol free since. But her second marriage resulted in her being jailed on charges of attempted murder when her husband, drunk, jumped out of the back of the pickup truck she was driving. She divorced him and returned to Denver where she attended a local college and became a family advocate. She then supported her two oldest children and Sherry's sister's child, working hard to establish a more settled life.

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<sup>15</sup> All names are pseudonyms and identifying information has been changed to protect the privacy of participants.

Then she got me and my sister back. So I think that's why she was freaking out when we started using drugs. . . . Well, she was telling me, you know, you can't live here if you're not going to school. You need to get a job; these are my rules and all that.

Bill, 19, who grew up in Oregon and California, said that although his father made good money working in lumber mills and mowing lawns, there was often no food in the house because his mother was using methamphetamines. His father also used drugs and drank heavily until he became a born again Christian and a youth pastor. But Bill had trouble in school with truancy and poor grades, and he came home one day to find his things piled on a blanket in the front yard with a note on the front door saying "You're gone."

Another source of stress and family dysfunction that often propels adolescents to run away is methamphetamine production and use in rural areas of Colorado and Texas. One of us interviewed a young woman and two young men who had arrived at Urban Peak from rural Texas to get help in establishing independent lives in Denver. Everyone in their extended network of family and friends was involved in the production and use of methamphetamines. Dave described the life:

[Town's name] was full of meth. It was all there was around. I tried it, liked it, and kept doing it. I was snorting, shooting, eating, smoking it. I stopped getting high after smoking for so many days. I would be up for months. It ate my teeth away, my bones. I feel like I'm 60 but I'm only 20. My back is always hurting even though I eat calcium. Meth is everywhere. People make it to support their habit and make money. My brother uses it, my dad uses it; it's why my parents got divorced. My dad is an auto mechanic. He'd get high to work, so he could work for long stretches of time.

Dave went on to say that no one he knew actually became wealthy making and selling methamphetamine because they all used it too much themselves and therefore it remained within the local community. The number of methamphetamine labs seized by law enforcement agents in Colorado rose from 31 in 1998 to 550 in 2003 (Laurie Moriarty, North Metro Task Force, lecture May 18, 2004). Many factors, including the ease of producing methamphetamine, contributed to this rise, but among them are the economic pressures on families in the working and middle class that force them to take multiple jobs, commute long distances, and work long hours.

In many of the families these young people come from, the path away from drug addiction, alcoholism and toward more settled living involves conversion to strict forms of fundamentalist Christianity. Whereas for many families and their children organized religion provides stability, direction, and strength in coping with personal crises, for others it drives a wedge between adolescents who are struggling for independence and their parents who are struggling to establish or maintain order. It is especially problematic for adolescents who have experienced highly inconsistent efforts at discipline from their parents. Six of the young people

among the sample of currently homeless young people we interviewed attributed their decision to run away to conflicts arising from their parents imposing their strict Christian beliefs on them; three of these individuals turned to Satanism.

In straightened circumstances, adolescents, who produce little income for the household but are expensive to support, may be the family members most likely to be “spun off.” Mary, 16 years old, asked one of us for directions to the Colorado State Fair. She wanted to go there so that she could become a “carnie,” running amusement rides and traveling across the country. She said that her mother had suggested it, telling her to get out and see the country as she had done when she was a young single mother. Probing further, we found that her mother had recently remarried and now lived with her new husband and their two young children and two slightly older children from his previous marriage with Mary in a one-bedroom apartment. “There isn’t much room. It’s really tight, so she needs me to get out on my own.” When adolescents act out, have mental health issues, or are children from previous unions, families may not have the financial or emotional resources to keep them at home.

The majority of young people living on the streets we interviewed had left home one or more times previously. These rehearsals took the form of staying in the homes of their friends or living with extended family members (grandparents, aunts and uncles, older siblings). Often it is not until these resources are exhausted that a young person appears on the streets. As Laurie Schaffner (1999) notes in *Teenage Runaways*, it is the growing tension between the ideals that adolescents have internalized about family as a source of love, support, and guidance and the reality of their situation that finally provides them with the emotional energy or “moral capital” to leave abusive homes.

Without interviewing parents as well as young people it is difficult to establish how much economic stress directly contributes to young people leaving home. Many of the individuals we interviewed were vague about their parents’ work history and economic status, particularly for the early periods of their lives. Events that led them to leave home were most commonly attributed to conflicts in interpersonal relationships or personality traits rather than to economic conditions. This “psychologizing” of social problems is itself a feature of the erosion of the social contract under globalization, as the state decreases its supportive programs and justifies it through an ideology of individual responsibility (Castells 1989; Schneider and Ingram 1997). Figures of failures are also important in reinforcing positive values and norms of achievement in those who are barely making it by (Newman 1999:212-216). Young people internalize these messages and attribute being on the streets to personality traits or poor decisions: “I don’t know, some people just don’t seem to have much motivation;” “The biggest change that I think I would change

would be . . . my defiance . . . that's what put me to where I am now;" "No, it's up to the person individually. I mean, life is how you choose." Jay expressed anger at himself and others who are on the streets:

So I meet someone who is super smart on the street and just has got so much smarts and so much quickness and just doesn't care that they have all of this. It makes me mad and I'll yell at them for it. It will be like, do you realize, that like you could find a cure for AIDS or you know make the anti-nuclear bomb or something?

Given that Jay has not completed his GED and has a serious addiction to heroin, intelligence alone will not make this expectation realistic.

This is not to suggest that young people are not affected psychologically by their family experiences. Judith Musick argues that for girls in "underclass" communities or chaotic family situations, the identity questions raised during adolescence concern relationships rather than what action they will take to improve their situation: "Who cares about me? Who can I trust? Who can I depend on?" (1991:118). Most of the young people were fiercely loyal to their families of origin even when they had experienced significant abuse and neglect, a not surprising finding considering the symbolic and emotional power of family in our society (Weisner 2002).

### **Life on the Streets**

The most recent point-in-time survey of homeless young people in Denver (Metro Denver Homeless Initiative 2003) showed that there were roughly twice as many males as females; that over half of the young people counted were 18-20 years old, and that almost three-quarters were Caucasian with a significant minority of African Americans but relatively few Latinos or Asians. These numbers reflect the most visible group of young people on the streets in Denver, the "central city" population who spend a significant portion of their day on the pedestrian mall<sup>16</sup> in the central business district where they congregate, share information and resources, and panhandle. The majority of the young people we interviewed were born in Colorado or lived in Colorado before becoming homeless, consistent with findings from the Midwest Homeless and Runaway Adolescent Study (cf. Whitbeck and Hoyt 1999:7). Young people from other areas of the country pass through the city on their travels, particularly in the summer; however, they do not spend significant amounts of time hanging out on the Mall with

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<sup>16</sup> "In 2003, the 16th Street Mall ranked #2 in metro tourist attractions in a survey conducted by the Denver Metro Convention & Visitors Bureau." I. M. Pei designed the 16-block section of 16<sup>th</sup> Street, completed in 1982, with a tree-lined meridian, benches, information kiosks, and chess tables to encourage pedestrians to linger and shop. Free shuttle buses run up and down the Mall every few minutes and connect with the light rail system at Stout Street (Downtown Denver Partnership 2004).

local street young people. From our observations, whereas these “travelers” may cross paths with locals, they maintain social and physical distance from them.<sup>17</sup>

On any given day on the Mall, there will be a mix of young people who are living on the streets for the first time, who have been living on the streets off and on for several years, who are experiencing their second or third episode of homelessness, and who are living in the shelter or other housing (Section 8, sharing an apartment with friends) but spend significant portions of their time on the Mall.<sup>18</sup> On the weekends and during the summer there are also young people, “home kids” or “home bums” who live at home but come to the Mall to try out street life.

Life on the streets is hard and dangerous – a reality which the young people we interviewed readily acknowledge:

It was a junkyard chow. And he'd bit my arm. I went to the hospital, I was thinking, well, they're just going to give me a tetanus shot. . . . laid me down, and then put these two arm straps on me. And they came up with all these syringes and gave me 12 rabies shots in my stomach.

Around 3:00 in the morning every night, well, your body temperature lowers, like around 3:00 in the morning. And your hands, living on the street, turn black and like even after I got off the streets it took me about three weeks to get the black off my hands.

In addition to physical hardships of living in abandoned buildings or under bridges, they are subject to the taunts of pedestrians. “I’ve had people yell all kinds of things at me,” said Diana, 17 years old. “Things like, ‘Get a job!’ and ‘You’re going to rot in hell!’ and ‘You’re disgusting.’”

Life on the streets is not all pain and suffering, however. Young people are quick to talk about the advantages of life on their own. “Maybe I know no matter where I go I’m always going

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<sup>17</sup> Travelers were not the focus of this study. See Finkelstein in this volume for a description of the traveler subculture.

<sup>18</sup> Because of its central location, active pedestrian traffic of tourists and urban workers, free shuttle buses and connection to the city’s light rail system and regional bus system, and variety of public spaces, the Mall is very attractive to young people on their own. This attractiveness has been met with some ambivalence and resistance from local business owners, specifically the Downtown Denver Partnership and Business Improvement District, workers in the area, and police. In 2003 the Federal Reserve Bank, whose building faces the Mall, replaced the low, broad concrete border surrounding its property with a five-foot iron fence. Increasing security following 9/11 was one probable motivation; nonetheless, the low concrete border was a popular place for street youth to hang out. Prior to building the wall, we observed increasing frequency in occasions where homeless youth were harassed and chased away by the Fed’s security guards. Most of the young people viewed it as a direct action taken to push them away. Skyline Park, designed in the 1970s by Lawrence Halprin to mimic Colorado’s many red rock canyons, with multiple levels and water features, was another public space occupied by youth on their own. By 2000 the park had fallen into disrepair and whether it should be restored or redesigned was the focus of active public debate. The park is currently closed and is being completely rebuilt with a more conventional design on one level (Denver Downtown Partnership 2004). It will be interesting to see if and how young people use the new park.

to find like family, I guess you could say. I don't think anywhere that I go I'll really be unsafe or anything like that." Andy described living in his car: "It was kind of nice actually. I didn't really mind it because it was shelter. You know, it was a controlled environment. It was like my home. I used to have my two skateboards in it. And I had a really nice house which was a car." Several individuals mentioned attending "rainbow gatherings" as being relaxed settings where you didn't need money to get food, where sharing and acceptance were the stated norms, and you could camp without being hassled. Others spoke of having the freedom to make their own decisions and not meet other people's demands.

The Mall is attractive to young people on their own because of the contact it provides with individuals and businesses that have greater economic resources. Strangers can also be kind and generous. One young woman told me that an older woman asked her for a lighter and then offered her a joint. We have observed pedestrians hand out bags of hamburgers from McDonald's or pass along their leftovers from a meal at a local restaurant. *Spanging* [combination of "spare" + "change"] can yield enough cash to buy a bag of heroin, some marijuana, a meal, or to pool with others to rent a hotel room. Although some young people said they routinely made \$60 a day spanging, \$20 is more likely. Homeless and runaway young people are the scavengers of the urban environment, getting meals through donations or diving into dumpsters and trash cans, panhandling, hustling for odd jobs, and occasionally shoplifting. Adults may cruise the city's streets at night looking for young people who will exchange sex for money or a place to stay. "I think they assume that you're on the streets and you're female like 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning that you're out for – looking for sex for exchange for something."

### **Prospects for the Future**

Once on the streets, however, adolescents and young adults are seriously limited in the options available to them. It is not surprising that the majority of young people on the streets recruited for surveys are between 18 and 21. Legally, they are neither children nor fully adults. Increasingly responsible for criminal acts as if they were adults, individuals under the age of 21 nonetheless face restrictions in obtaining birth control, consenting to non-emergency medical treatment, signing leases or entering into other contracts, and enrolling in public schools (Discenza 2004). Another serious constraint is the lack of access to identity documents such as birth certificates which may be held by parents whom the adolescent does not want to contact. Even when agencies like Urban Peak help a young person obtain their birth certificate and a state-issued ID card, other institutions, most notably the police and city hospital, are frequently negligent in returning documents to individuals. In 2003, the Holy Ghost Church spent an

average of \$3,545 per month, an increase of over 300% from 2001, assisting homeless persons to replace their documents (DHPG 2003: 20).

During Denver's boom in the 1990s demand for housing rose, resulting in a surge in new housing starts which, in turn, generated a demand for low- and non-skilled day labor in construction and supporting service industries. This, along with a general shortage in the labor market during the boom,<sup>19</sup> may have contributed initially to the rise in numbers of homeless and runaway young people. Through our observations and based on comments made in informal interviews, it was evident that young people could leave home and support themselves through day-labor jobs in construction that paid in cash at the end of the day and whose employers did not ask for ID or drug tests. In general, the jobs young people on their own obtain are in low-wage occupations that demand little or no formal training, for example, working in fast food restaurants, cleaning up construction sites, telemarketing, selling goods from street carts, working in retail sales, or selling food at sports stadiums. Almost all jobs held by the young men and women we interviewed are paid at the current minimum wage of \$5.15 (Colorado Department of Labor and Employment 2004).

Frequent moves during childhood mean frequent interruptions in education and obtaining the certification necessary for good jobs. As Spike noted: "I've got a lot of experience, but I don't have the job experience, work experience." Their only advantage may be literacy, basic math skills, and speaking English. As Ray noted recently, "Used to be you could get day jobs pretty easy. But I went down two days this week and nobody picked me. All the Mexicans were getting jobs, but they wouldn't pick me." Thus, when unemployment increases, they are no longer competitive with other workers. The lack of permanent residence also handicaps them in the mainstream job market: without a reliable residence or telephone, employers cannot reach them and they cannot call their employer if they are sick or late. "I lost my job. I was really sick last week. I could hardly stand up. But I didn't have any way to call them. So I guess it's gone." Physical appearance, from styles that incorporate multiple piercing and tattoos to poor hygiene from lack of access to bathing and laundry facilities and clean clothing, often make employers reluctant or unwilling to hire young homeless people. As another young woman said, "They won't hire me for food service because of the way I look. You know, dirty and with my piercings and all." Individuals with drug or alcohol addictions may not be able to pass mandatory drug tests or fulfill job requirements on a regular basis.

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<sup>19</sup> In 2001 Colorado's unemployment rate was 2.5%, slightly more than half that of the national rate of 4.25% (State of Colorado 2001).

Length of time on the streets and number of homeless episodes are factors that individuals attribute to their ability to exit street life. Young people who spend most of their time on the streets quickly accumulate long lists of misdemeanors, status offenses<sup>20</sup> or “lifestyle” crimes: urinating in public, walking on the grass, breaking curfew, sleeping on sidewalks, camping in non-camping areas, and aggressive panhandling. Others may have records of more serious crimes. Dan, now 26, said that he had been looking for a job for several months but could not find anything because he had a felony on his record. Whereas individuals in their late teens and twenties maintain a hopeful outlook on their life prospects:

I want to be having kids in like five years. You know, maybe like look into getting a house with a yard and all that stuff. Washer, dryer, start the plan to have kids. Have a good job. Have a career hopefully by then, you know; not just a job (Interview transcript, female, age 19)

By the time they approach 30 their hopelessness has often turned to despair:

I’m kind of at that little crest right now from moving out of the real young adult age... I’m still kind of – once you reach 30, you’re kind of leading up to where there’s even less available. I know I’ve got to get off the streets now and stay off while I’m relatively young, or I might never get off (Interview transcript, male, age 30).

Thus it becomes crucial to intervene when adolescents are first on the streets.

## **Providing Shelter: Urban Peak**

### **History and Objectives**

In 1988, the Capital Hill United Neighborhood (CHUN) established Urban Peak as a storefront drop-in center with street outreach in the Capital Hill area of Denver to serve the increasing number of homeless and runaway adolescents in the central city. In 1992 Urban Peak incorporated as a not-for-profit agency and opened a 20-bed youth shelter, Safe at St. Paul’s, based on an existing church-run shelter. It is the only state-licensed shelter for homeless and runaway young people in Colorado.<sup>21</sup>

Urban Peak’s mission is to serve homeless and runaway youth. We provide youth a safe, caring, stable environment and assist them in permanently exiting street life. Urban Peak believes in the potential of every youth to contribute to our world.

Over the past five years Urban Peak has expanded its facilities and programs. The agency constructed a new shelter south of downtown and created a subsidiary not-for-profit agency,

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<sup>20</sup> A status offense is when an offense occurs because of a person’s place in the social order, i.e., age, gender, marital status. In the case of minors in Denver, for example, being under the age of 18 and on the streets after 11:00 p.m. on a weeknight or 12:00 a.m. on a weekend night violates the city’s age-based curfew.

<sup>21</sup> Information on the history and objectives of Urban Peak is compiled from a number of documents including a description of Urban Peak Programs, Urban Peak Strategic Plan 2001-2004, Urban Peak brochure (1999) and their website (<http://www.urbanpeak.org> accessed June 15, 2004).

Urban Peak Housing Corporation that owns and manages three apartment buildings with a total of 75 units. In 2001, Urban Peak established Urban Peak Colorado Springs that offers day treatment services and outreach and will open an overnight shelter in late 2004. In 2002 Urban Peak opened a Resource Center four blocks from the Mall as a base for its street outreach program. The following year it merged with The Spot, a recreational center for urban young people ages 14 to 24, and created the Starting Transition And Recovery (STAR) program, a residential treatment program for young people with drug addictions.<sup>22</sup> In the FY 2003-04 Urban Peak Denver served 420 young people with an average of 33 young people staying at the shelter each night. Of the total served, 45 obtained their GED, 207 found employment, and 252 (60%) permanently exited street life (Urban Peak 2003).

In addition to direct services, a key feature of Urban Peak's vision statement is "Being the Expert." To that end, staff members conduct and facilitate research on the characteristics and experiences of runaway and homeless young people in Colorado and, with other local researchers, present their work at local and national conferences in a variety of disciplines, e.g., youth justice, drug treatment, anthropology, and adolescent medicine and nursing.

Urban Peak is required by law to contact the legal guardians of minors within 72 hours of their entering the shelter; however, its policy is contact them within 24 hours whenever possible.<sup>23</sup> The agency embraces the concept of reunification of young people with their families and builds its programs around strengthening this base. Given the pervasive physical, sexual, and emotional abuse present in these families, however, it is not always possible to re-establish family ties. To assist young people who need to become independent as minors, the agency's staff worked with community leaders and state legislators to draft Colorado's Homeless Youth Act (Colorado Revised Statutes 18-601). The act is modeled on the federal Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (P.L. 106-71) and provides a legal definition of "homeless and runaway youth" so that young people on their own can enroll in school, sign a lease, and consent to non-emergency medical and dental care.

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<sup>22</sup> STAR is a collaborative project of Urban Peak Denver, the Office of Drug Strategy, University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, Addiction Research Treatment Services (ARTS), Denver Human Services and Colorado's Alcohol and Drug Abuse Division (ADAD). Funding comes from a variety of sources: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for the subsidized housing, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMSHA) federal dollars for treatment, DSCIP for Wraparound services, and the City of Denver. Urban Peak staff manage the site and oversee the program (Petersen, personal communication, Sept. 30, 2003)

<sup>23</sup> If UP cannot locate the parents, they work with social services to arrange a safe living situation. In most cases, social services usually grants permission until a suitable custodian is identified. Sometimes Urban Peak requests that social services take custody depending on the situation and the age of the client.

The goal of exiting street life means that a young person will be able to support him or herself and any legal dependents (children) in permanent housing.<sup>24</sup> What young people tell us is that although they need support to leave the streets, they also want to be empowered to live independently. To achieve this goal Urban Peak uses an individual, intensive case management model in which each young person works with a case manager to assess their strengths and needs, formulate a service plan, and then complete the plan with supervision by the case manager and other staff members. Thus Urban Peak is not an emergency shelter where individuals can spend an occasional night or week. To remain at the shelter, clients must 1) participate in routine chores, 2) be alcohol and drug free while on the premises, 3) participate in programs or leave the shelter during the day between meals, and 4) work with their case manager in accordance with their service plan. Individuals are also encouraged and supported to clear up outstanding warrants.

### **Shelter Services**

Shelter services and transitional housing are key components of Urban Peak's efforts to assist homeless young people to exit street life. J. T. Fest distinguishes between "runaway youth" and "street-dependent youth" and their use of shelters and other services. Adolescents who run away have trouble with authority and discipline which may be inconsistent or absent in their families, "but, again, the family bond is healthy and the return home is viable. Individuals in this category are quick to seek services, often terrified by their street experiences, and generally not accepted by street-dependent youth (1998:16). Disparaging comments about the shelter and its rules suggest an awareness of some young people's need for structure. John, who attributed some allure of the streets to the lack of accountability to others, also stated that "I went to the shelter because I kind of want some authority over me." In discussing plans for a resource center downtown with Jason, he said: "Like if I had a place like this right here, where you could just hang out. Guaranteed you can't come in if you're drunk." Staff members at Urban Peak are open to the ideas and suggestions of young people: issues that affect the shelter population as a whole, e.g., people destroying shelter property or not doing chores, can be addressed at the weekly community breakfasts. The Youth Council meets monthly to make recommendations to shelter

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<sup>24</sup> Permanent housing in this context means housing to which the occupant has legal title and protection as long as they meet their legal and fiscal responsibilities, e.g., a leased apartment or house or a dwelling unit that is individually owned.

staff.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, the shelter is *not* a democracy, and adult staff members retain control over residents' activities and behavior.

Not all individuals are willing or able to utilize services on this basis. Young people who have been on their own several years call those who stay in the shelter "shelter rats" or "weekend warriors" who are put down for their lack of street skills, lack of experience of true hardship, and lack of ability to "make it on their own." Darryl, who was staying in the shelter until he got a lease on his apartment, told us about his attitude toward the shelter:

Outreach Staff: I had heard that the street kids didn't like the shelter kids.

Darryl: Yeah, well, they come down here and try to be cool, but they don't have a clue. The kids down here can't stand them. They're soft. They couldn't make it out here for a day.

Outreach Staff: The shelter kids really look up to you guys.

Darryl: Yeah, I guess they do. But they should be scared of us. We're tough. They don't know nothin' and we'd beat their asses if they tried anything down here. They want to be one of us, but they don't get it. Me, I'm doing something with my life.

Darryl's statement is typical of young people who have lived on their own for several months to several years. Fest (1998) would describe them as "street-dependent youth," those who come from deeply dysfunctional family situations where there is no viable family bond. Their level of distrust of authority is high: this is reflected in their rejection of shelter youth who they view as dependent and weak. When Susie was asked what kind of shelter she would like she said:

Buy one of these big giant hotels or something and turn it into a place to stay for kids. And not like, Urban Peak, I mean they kind of have strict rules, but at the same time it would be more like you're renting a room from me for like ten bucks and like, as long as you keep it clean and take care of it, that's it.

Many individuals we encountered on the streets had stayed at the shelter for periods of time, but were unable or unwilling to live within the structure of shelter life. When restricted from the shelter premises for failure to either conform to shelter rules or make progress toward their treatment goals, they often interpreted this as a permanent banishment rather than a consequence of their actions which could in most cases be rectified by meeting with their case manager. In contradiction to Fest's view of these young people as "street dependent," one could view them as determined to maintain their autonomy and dignity even if it means going without resources to which Urban Peak controls access.

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<sup>25</sup> At the September, 2003 Youth Council meeting the following topics were discussed: organizing a "paintball" activity with staff, dorm captains, making it possible for clients to prepare at least one meal per month at the shelter, disrespect toward staff, an all-client phone to be placed in the drop-in center, concern with clients taking food outside, and a project to address appearance of the picnic tables.

## Reaching Out

Many young people simply do not trust adults. They have little or no experience—either in their families or in institutions like public schools or police -- with adults who will listen to their point of view and allow them to express their feelings while maintaining appropriate boundaries and limits. As John said, “You know you can’t trust a cop. So many of them are corrupted by money.” We have observed young people who would stay on the periphery of a group not saying anything to the staff member for months until one day they opened up. In some cases, behaviors that young people develop while living on the streets, e.g., drug or alcohol addiction, outstanding police warrants, and patterns of violent confrontation make it impossible for them to be accommodated in the shelter. These are the individuals that are viewed as the hardest to reach those for whom leaving the streets may require several cycles of leaving and returning to street life before they can achieve a more stable life (Fest 1998).

To serve these individuals, Urban Peak has an active and innovative street outreach program in which we participated. Each day staff members and volunteers walk the Mall to contact young people. Service is based on a risk reduction public health model in which the goal is to maintain or improve the health and safety of young people while they are on the streets. Similar programs exist in New York, San Francisco, Seattle, and other U.S. cities. We each carry a backpack filled with items donated to the agency: sodas, protein bars, hygiene products, warm clothing in winter, socks, condoms, limited first aid materials, and bleach kits.<sup>26</sup> When an opportunity arises, we counsel them on safe sex practices, HIV prevention and transmission, conflict resolution and other health and safety issues. The outreach team also provides free testing for sexually transmitted infections (STIs), pregnancy, and HIV on the Mall.<sup>27</sup>

An important component of the outreach program is the peer outreach worker.<sup>28</sup> Peer outreach workers are young men and women in their late teens or early twenties who have left street life. They participate in street outreach, peer counseling, and assist other outreach staff in developing programs. They are very successful in serving as links between the world of the

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<sup>26</sup> Needle exchange is illegal in Denver. Bleach kits are given to IV drug users so that they may clean their “works” or needles by flushing them with a disinfectant. The kits include a small plastic bottle filled with a chlorine bleach solution, a vial of clean water, cotton balls, an aluminum cap, a twist tie, alcohol wipes, and a condom in a small baggie.

<sup>27</sup> Urban Peak uses the Ora-Sure® oral test for HIV. It consists of a large swab that is placed against the inner lining of the mouth for five minutes, and then collected by the outreach team and processed by one of Urban Peak’s physicians. Outreach Team members receive training in administering the test and on counseling young people. To test for STIs and pregnancy, a young person is given a clean plastic cup with lid which they take to a nearby public restroom. The urine samples are taken to the City’s Department of Health (DOH) where they are processed. The young person is given an identification number that they use when calling the DOH for their results.

<sup>28</sup> The official title is “Youth Opportunity Enrichment Worker.”

streets and the world of the agency and more mainstream work. Young people on the streets often know them from when the peer outreach worker was on the streets who can observe that they are working and earning a good income and have confidence and skills to bring to the relationship without having “sold out.”<sup>29</sup> In doing this research, the peer outreach workers have been invaluable partners in providing contact with young people, explaining the purpose and nature of the research, and in sharing their insights, knowledge, and observations.

Urban Peak staff members who walk the city’s streets daily develop an accurate picture of the street community at any given point in time, e.g., trends in drug use, ability to find work, and group dynamics. Outreach staff members provide young homeless people with backpacks and clothing when available. In addition to these material supports, outreach workers also provide information, services, and case management similar to that offered in the shelter directly to young people on the streets. Whereas many of the young people on the streets express dislike for the shelter at Urban Peak, few have strong feelings against the outreach team. Many don’t realize that the outreach team is part of Urban Peak’s program.

Brian: I don’t like Urban Peak any more. They used to be just for street youth, for them. It was their place where they could chill and take a shower and have a dry place to sleep. Now it’s like a group home. It’s all about money.

JS: What about outreach?

Brian: Oh, the people with the backpacks? That’s fine. They just give out what you need – food, condoms, stuff like that.

### **Contrasting Models of Service Delivery**

To some extent young peoples’ very different reactions to the shelter and outreach staffs reflects the very different approaches – risk reduction and case management – of the two components of the Urban Peak program. Whereas most of the outreach team staff members have done some work in the shelter, members of the shelter staff are not always equally aware of what street outreach is like. The “risk reduction model” of public health assumes that the individual’s living situation may not change and therefore directs service to reducing risk behaviors within that setting. It thus honors, to some degree, young people’s autonomy by offering support for change only when the young person asks for it. As Jason said, “You can’t force feed anybody man, you can’t, that’s not how you teach people man.” The outreach team works on the young person’s turf where they have no direct authority and young people can easily avoid them. For example, a young woman who was addicted to heroin had worked with an outreach staff member

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<sup>29</sup> This evaluation of the effectiveness of peer outreach workers is based both on direct statements by young people and on direct observation of positive encounters, requests for services, and evidence of changed behavior (getting a job, enrolling in a GED program) during outreach over a period of three years with four different peer outreach workers.

so that she could enter a rehabilitation program. As the time to enter approached, she would “disappear” every time the outreach worker was on the Mall though other young people would report that she had “just been here.”

Michael Rowe, in a study of encounters between outreach workers and homeless persons, describes them as “crossing borders” between the worlds of the homeless and the “social and organizational elements of status, function, and power” (1999:5). Outreach workers provide services that link homeless persons to the basic resource of affordable housing. In exchange for this resource, homeless persons enter the institutional world of social service delivery that controls who is deserving of care and what kind of care. But the relationship is not equal and both parties are aware of the role that power plays in their encounters. In the case of young people, they will have to accept, at least for the purposes of obtaining services, the identity of being “homeless and runaway” and abide by the rules of the shelter and the goals of their service plan. Like the homeless adults that Rowe interviewed, many of the young people who are clients at Urban Peak fear that they will not be able to maintain a “new identity.” Darryl, who obtained an apartment, became increasingly nervous as the night arrived when he was to receive an award from Urban Peak for his progress toward independence. He was afraid that he would mess up, lose his job, or do something that would cause him to lose his apartment. This fear of failing was not unusual among the young people we interviewed. Outreach workers are divided between their empathy for the young people they serve, an awareness of the difference in power between themselves and the young people, and a desire to rescue them (Rowe 1999). This ambivalence is exaggerated when young people are involved, as they often evoke parental responses and may manipulate those impulses to get handouts and other forms of assistance. Certainly in our own encounters with young people, we have each had the impulse to “rescue” someone from life on the streets.

The ambivalence surrounding the amount of autonomy young people should have manifests itself in two areas. In 2002 Urban Peak opened a resource center a few blocks from the Mall as a base for the outreach team. This facility provides a convenient place when more information, privacy, or access to the computer is needed, a place they can wait for medical appointments at the free health clinic for the homeless across the street or access the free on-site health clinic just for young people on Tuesday evenings. The Spot, an evening recreational center that merged with Urban Peak in 2003, has an on-site GED program. Additionally, P.S.1 at The Spot, a branch of a Denver Public School charter school (P.S.10), provides a fully accredited diploma-granting high school program on a flexible schedule. Increasingly, individuals are aware that they can drop by the resource center to pick up things they need and meet with staff on a

more extended basis than during outreach. Thus the resource center serves as a “gateway” (DeRosa et al., 1999) to services.

While planning the resource center, Urban Peak staff members who worked at the shelter voiced their concern that creating a center near the Mall would facilitate young people staying on the streets by providing a safe and comfortable place for them to hang out. So far, this has not proved to be the case, in part, because the main room is deliberately small and because the staff has been clear in setting limits to hanging out. Given the mission of the agency to help youth exit street life, this policy is understandable; however, it fails to acknowledge that young people might stay on the streets if they have a drop-in center as a resource because there are few alternatives open to them on their own terms that would make self-sufficiency possible.

The second area concerns the provision of supplies by outreach workers. Although outreach workers distribute condoms and bleach kits, they will not provide young people with the means to “sleep rough,” e.g., sleeping bags, tents, or cooking equipment. Again, this reinforces the agency as the gatekeeper to housing and jobs without acknowledging that by being part of the social service system they are already contributing to the dependence of these young people. If the goal is to keep young people safe until they are ready to leave the streets, then why not provide them with the means to stay warm and to prepare food?

Ironically, it is through a part of their program outside the case management model that Urban Peak effectively fosters long-term independence. Employing young people who have been homeless is one of the most successful long-term strategies that Urban Peak provides. Peer outreach workers and youth hired as receptionists and administrative assistants not only receive training in office skills or peer counseling, they also participate in all of the training courses provided to Urban Peak staff, for example, updates on STIs and HIV or dealing with individuals in crisis. Several peer outreach workers have attended national and statewide youth leadership conferences where they have given presentations about their work. These positions empower young people to work in jobs from a basis of strength, using the skills and knowledge they already possess in a setting that is structured but familiar and supportive and in which their employers have a stake in their success. These individuals have been able to move from their work at Urban Peak into higher-paying jobs or jobs that better fit their long-term interests, e.g., banking, social service, full-time clerical work, creative writing programs, and research. One former outreach worker told me that she wanted to quit her job every month or so but her Urban Peak employer “just wouldn’t let me.”

### **Facing the Reality of the Global Political Economy**

Despite or perhaps because Urban Peak has been successful in garnering support in the community and the legislature for its programs, it has not challenged the assumptions and contradictions on which the social service system is based. The social service model assumes that the “problem” of homelessness rests within individuals and families, not in the larger society. Thus programs are directed to assisting individuals and families and limited in their scope and the amount of support they provide. Additionally, they rest on moral decisions of who is “deserving” of help, defined for the most part by who cannot help themselves. The agency thus becomes the gatekeeper to resources by determining eligibility. Individuals who want services must accept the ascribed status of “homeless,” “runaway,” “drug addict,” “mentally ill,” or “victim of domestic abuse” to access the resources the agency controls.

Getting young people off the streets may improve their quality of life, but it also contributes to making their situation less visible and thus easier to ignore. Youth homelessness is but one aspect of the growing impoverishment of large numbers of people in developing and developed nations in response to globalization. Additionally, leaving the streets requires separating homeless young people from the street-based peer networks (Fest 1998) that could potentially serve as a source of collective consciousness, solidarity, and political action (Ferrell 2001). Developing that consciousness would take effort because the majority of young people we interviewed in Denver internalize the values of mainstream society and see themselves as the primary cause of their homeless condition and the source of changing it. Although they may “rail against the system” in the abstract through punk music, anarchist symbols and anti-materialism, these postures more closely resemble the “shadow values” (Liebow 1967) and “street corner mythmaking” (Hannerz 1969) of poor African American men in the 1960s than the radical drop-outs of the 1960s. Unable to achieve the goals of mainstream society (house, marriage, children, car), they reject them outwardly while holding themselves to those standards inwardly.<sup>30</sup>

Working within the system means that solutions are often political compromises or “work arounds” that makes things easier for individuals but do not address the marginalization of young people in general. Legally defining a young person as homeless or runaway quickly secures them access to services and the ability to consent to them but does not provide the same status as emancipation. By providing housing that is, in part, privately funded, agencies like Urban Peak enable the state to avoid developing a comprehensive, coherent housing policy for its citizens that confers benefits regardless of age, gender, marital or parental status; a policy that acknowledges

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<sup>30</sup> In the majority of our interviews, when young people were asked about where they would like to be in five years, when they were able to think that far ahead, their answers focused on having a stable home, job, and family.

the vagaries of the global economic system and the contribution that flexible workers provide. This piecemeal approach to social programs is one aspect of the dismantling of the welfare state in the U.S. that began during the Reagan Administration (Castells 1989) and culminated in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996.

Accompanying the changes in benefits is the change in how those who receive benefits are viewed. Instead of poor women receiving benefits so that they can raise their children, they are stigmatized as irresponsible, immoral and undisciplined (Mink 1998). Thus receiving assistance of any kind “contaminates” recipients as similarly irresponsible and undeserving. Although Urban Peak does not view the young people they serve in this way, the young people we interviewed recounted multiple encounters with people on the streets who called them “lazy,” “disgusting,” or told them to “get a job.” Despite the fact that most people who receive public assistance do so for relatively short periods of time (Mink 1998), this view of recipients has led to a fear of creating dependency and a “just enough” approach to services: as long as services are “just enough” to survive on then work will seem a better alternative. But our interviews with young people consistently show how precarious their life off the streets is. The “just enough” philosophy actually creates dependence by pushing them back onto the streets when they lose their job or their roommate moves out unexpectedly. The longer they are on the streets the more likely they are to have felony records, chronic health problems, or frequent changes of residence that disrupt work histories, education, and social networks. Without a safety net to rely on during the lean years of early adulthood, some may never achieve full independence. Nor should that safety net be dependent upon a history of abuse or neglect, mental illness, or any other “pathology.” If young people can commit an offense merely by their status as minors (e.g., curfew violations), then they should have access to low-cost housing on the same basis and without a social service agency as intermediary if they wish (cf. Donovan 2002).

As a not-for-profit and state-licensed agency, Urban Peak must compete for funding with other programs that “manage” young people who are “out of place,” e.g., foster care, residential treatment centers, and prisons. Thus Urban Peak evaluates its programs, in part, on their cost effectiveness.<sup>31</sup> While cost effectiveness is a laudable feature of any program, the fact that Urban Peak must “sell” its program in this way demonstrates how little our society truly values these young people who lack support from their families. At present, there is very little money or

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<sup>31</sup> Urban Peak can move a youth from homelessness to self-sufficiency for just over \$5,500. In Colorado Springs, the cost per successful outcome is just over \$3,800. For youth in housing, the figure is just under \$10,000 and is higher due to the fact that youth stay in the program much longer. These costs represent a tremendous savings to the community when compared to the \$53,655 annual cost of detention or the \$53,527 annual cost of residential childcare facility placement, both of which are probable outcomes for homeless youth not served by Urban Peak (Urban Peak 2004).

policy support to fund aftercare services, services that are essential to maintaining long-term independence. It also means that Urban Peak must ration its services where they are most likely to succeed: with young people who have more internal and external assets when they arrive. “Research indicates that services for homeless people reproduce social stratification by selecting easier clients” (Avramov 2002:34).

Research on youth homelessness in Europe shows similar trends to those in the U.S. (Avramov 1997) with clear links to global political and economic processes. What is needed now is true participatory action research that works with clients not only within the system but against the system (Brown and Tandon 1983). Research that clearly links the marginalization of young people to their place in the global political economy; research that demonstrates the need for an adequate support system for young people not only during but after episodes of homelessness; research that builds their capacity to advocate for themselves and their peers to take a valued place in society.

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