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## Emergency Youth Shelters: Agents of Positive Change

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## Emergency Youth Shelters: Agents of Positive Change

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### Abstract

This study examines positive development experiences within emergency youth shelters. Eighty-two youth residing at three shelters completed up to three surveys measuring developmental assets and psychosocial outcomes during their stay. Findings indicate immediate reductions in distress and increases in life satisfaction. Internal asset, health behavior, and female caregiver relationship scores increased significantly for youth completing Survey 3. Youth with fewer external resources outside of the shelter exhibited the greatest increases in internal asset scores. Findings suggest that brief shelter stays may improve mood and life outlook. Longer stays may facilitate change in more stable characteristics associated with reduced risk and increased thriving over time.

### Background and Objectives

Youth homelessness is associated with increased risk for residential instability, family conflict, school difficulties, and other negative psychosocial outcomes (Toro, Dworsky, & Fowler, 2007). Accordingly, many of these youth have had limited opportunities for positive, strength-building experiences associated with healthy youth outcomes in traditional youth samples (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Emergency shelters can serve as primary support services for these youth, providing needed resources and alleviating immediate crises. Additionally, relationships and experiences within the shelter may facilitate more lasting changes, such as building and strengthening social connections and personal attributes associated with successful transition into adulthood.

This research examines relationships among youth developmental assets and social and psychological outcomes over the course of shelter stay. Eighty-two youth completed up to three surveys. It was predicted that youth would exhibit immediate reductions in mood; longer stays would be associated with changes in asset scores and other indicators of positive development.

### Method

#### Participants

Age:  $M=15.4$  years,  $SD=1.9$ ; 62% girls/young women  
49% African American; 38% Caucasian; 10% Multiethnic

#### Data Collection (N; Average Length of Stay)

Survey 1 (82 youth;  $M=2.6$  days,  $SD=1.6$ )  
Survey 2 (73 youth;  $M=7.8$  days;  $SD=3.7$ )  
Survey 3 (50 youth;  $M=13.4$  days;  $SD=4.3$ )

#### Measures

##### Developmental Assets (DAP, Search Institute, 2005)

Internal: commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, positive identity  
External (Survey 1 only): support, boundaries and expectations, empowerment, constructive use of time

##### Outcomes

General Distress (GHQ-12, Goldberg et al., 1997)  
Life Satisfaction (SLSS, Heubner, 1991)  
Health Behavior (from PLQ, Muhlenkamp & Brown, 1983)

Program Satisfaction (CSQ-8; Larsen et al., 1979)  
Relationships with Primary Caregivers

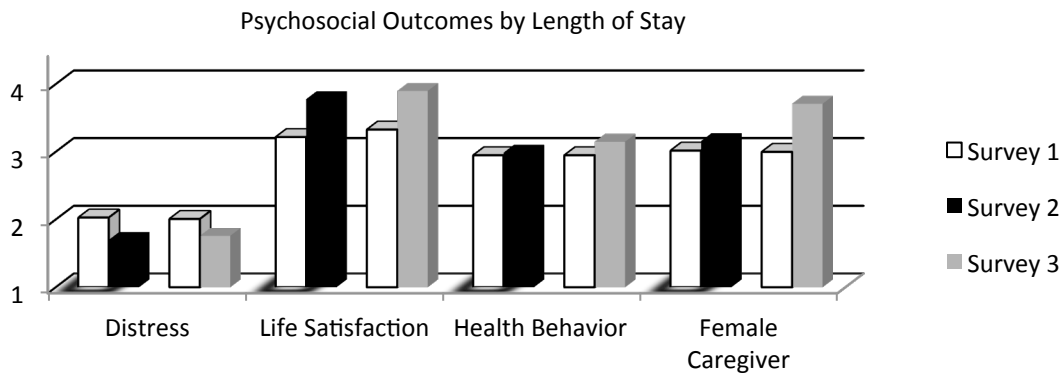
**Results**

T-tests were conducted to assess change in internal asset and psychosocial outcome scores.

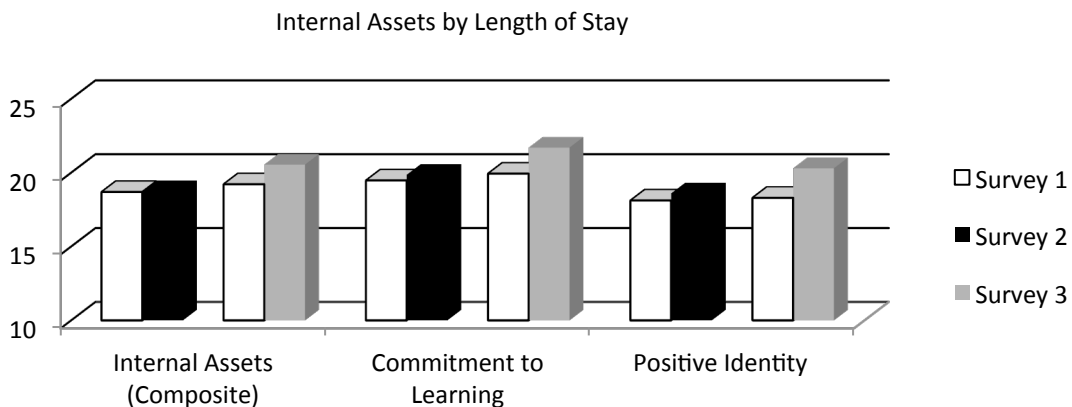
Survey 1/2: Participants evidenced significant decreases in distress and increases in life satisfaction ( $p < .01$ ).

Survey 1/3: Participants additionally evidenced significant increases in internal asset (composite, commitment to learning, positive identity;  $p < .05$ ), health behavior and female caregiver relationship scores ( $p < .01$ ).

Changes in program satisfaction, male caregiver relationship, positive values and social competencies were not significant.



Note. Participants completing the Survey 1 seven days post admission were excluded from analyses (N=4). Distress: 1=low distress, 4=high distress; life satisfaction: 1=low satisfaction, 6=high satisfaction; health behavior: 1=never perform behavior, 4=regularly perform behavior; relationships: 1=don't get along at all with caregiver, 5=get along very well with caregiver.



Note. Participants completing Survey 1 seven days post admission (N=4) were excluded from analyses. Interpretive ranges for asset scales: low (0-14), fair (15-20), good (21-25), and excellent (26-30).

Change scores for composite internal assets (Survey 1/3) were negatively correlated with Survey 1 composite external asset scores ( $r=-.34, r<.05$ ); youth with fewer resources outside of the agency demonstrating greater increases in internal asset scores.

## Conclusions

Findings suggest relationships and experiences within emergency shelters may provide opportunities for positive development, particularly for youth with few family, school or community supports.

This study followed youth for approximately two weeks. Longer stays or sustained program or staff contact may enhance development.

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