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## ATTACHMENT, SOCIAL NETWORK AND HOMELESSNESS IN YOUNG PEOPLE

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Homelessness in young people is partially explained within the framework of attachment theory. The relationship between family background, parenting style, experiences of separation and loss, and quality of the attachment relationship was examined in a group of homeless youths ( $n=108$ ) and two comparison groups, i.e. residential youths ( $n=85$ ) and a large control group of youths from the 'standard' population ( $n=1228$ ). Also, data regarding the influence of social support were obtained. Results indicate that growing up in a family with divorced parents, and especially a lack of parental responsiveness and emotional support are significant factors in the genesis of homelessness. Social support systems can, however, act as a protective factor and thus prevent the development of homelessness.

As noted by Van der Ploeg and Scholte (1997, pp. 16-18), the number of homeless youngsters all over the world has reached staggering figures. Research in the United States provides different estimates of homeless youth, with figures ranging between 100,000 and 300,000 adolescents living on the streets. James, Smith and Mann (1991) report the number of homeless youths to be even over 500,000. In other parts of the Western world like West Germany the number of runaways at the end of the 1980s was estimated on a yearly basis at about 40,000. In France, some authorities consider the number of homeless children to be up to 10,000.

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Homelessness must be considered a process which starts with running away from home, a foster family or from a residential center. Most of these youngsters return to their (residential) home. However, approximately one out of every ten does not, but keeps on moving from friends to strangers, and from squats to shelters, hoping to find a more permanent place. When there is no one to provide them with a roof over their head temporarily, they will find themselves on the street (Van der Ploeg & Scholte, 1997). Structural developments within society, such as economic deprivation and its social consequences, are probably the major cause of young people's living on the streets outside the Western world. For many youngsters in the United States, Canada or Western Europe the root causes for homelessness more often seem to lie in adverse family experiences, such as parental neglect in infancy and childhood, aggravated by negative schooling experiences during middle childhood and adolescence (Van der Ploeg & Scholte, 1997).

As for the situation in Europe, until very recently the presence of homeless youth in European cities was an unknown, or at least not a publicly discussed, issue on the political agendas of the European member states (De Feijter & Blok, 1997). This is true for the Netherlands also. Before, the main focus - politically as well as scientifically - had been on homeless adults. It was only in the second half of the eighties that the first publications on homeless youth started to appear (e.g. Janus, McCormack, Burgess & Hartman, 1987; Randall, 1988; Van der Ploeg, 1989). Even in a well-ordered welfare state like the Netherlands, the presence of homeless youth has become a serious problem with roots in societal structures as well as in personal life conditions. Estimates of the number of homeless youths range from 4300, a momentary estimate at one point in time (Van Loef & Wever, 1995) to 7000, a number based on a period-estimate over the course of one year (De Bie & Dortmans, 1990).

As previously mentioned, there are certain structural developments within society, such as unemployment, poverty, and shortage of affordable and accessible housing, which may serve as explanations for the growing number of homeless youths. However, in our opinion, this more 'structural' view seems only marginally applicable to the situation in the Netherlands (cf. De Feijter & Blok, 1997). For a better understanding of the roots of youth homelessness in the Dutch context, our main focus will be on a social-psychological approach. From such a perspective homelessness can - partially - be explained by an individual lack of social skills leading to the inability to develop and maintain contacts and, therefore, to inadequate or insufficient social support (cf. Heydendael, 1993).

## THEORETICAL BASIS

To provide an explanation for homelessness in adolescents and young adults, this study draws support from the socio-ecological developmental model of problem

behavior (Van der Ploeg & Scholte, 1990). This model, used here mainly as an analytical model, lists the risk factors which may occur in three important social subsystems - family, school, and friends - also in personality. Combinations of these factors, set against a background of risk factors within the wider demographic and macrosocial context, could result in internally or externally directed problem behavior. In this model, runaway behavior is regarded as a form of externalized problem behavior. The data collected in this study relate mainly to the social subsystems 'family' and 'friends', the latter being broadly interpreted to include the entire social network: not only peers but also significant adults, such as family members, acquaintances and social workers.

In the subsystem 'family', a disharmonious, negative family atmosphere with an insecure attachment climate is considered an important antecedent of problem behavior, in this case running away. An explanation for this may be drawn from the attachment theory developed by Bowlby (1969-1980, 1977). This theory is based on the hypothesis that young children are born with an innate tendency to become attached - a tendency said to have had survival value in the original "environment of evolutionary adaptedness". The theory (see also Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986; Marris, 1991) makes a connection between the quality of the early parent-child relationship, later socio-emotional development and the formation of interpersonal relationships. A child who has established a good affectionate bond with his<sup>1</sup> parents during the first years of his life will benefit from it later in the interaction with peers and adults (cf. Suess, Grossman & Sroufe, 1992).

If the young child finds that the caregiver meets his fundamental needs, he will develop a sense of basic security, internally represented in a 'secure' working model of attachment. This mental model is formed on the basis of the child's expectations concerning support from the environment, expectations based in turn on the child's experiences with his caregivers during the first months and years of his life. At the same time the child develops an image of himself within this working model as someone who is, or is not, capable of dealing effectively with the environment and of getting the attention which he needs (cf. Van IJzendoorn, 1992).

The working models serve as a guideline and a basic framework for later transactions with the environment, especially for the course taken by one's own and others' behavior in personal and social relationships, and the way in which this behavior is interpreted. In Bowlby's view, the child who grows up with the constant 'non-availability' and rejection of his parents will consciously or unconsciously try to eliminate the need for the proximity of others. Such experiences lead to the development of 'insecure' working models of attachment, which may take a number of different forms. The nature of the perceived lack of availability

<sup>1</sup>Generally in this article, for reasons of convenience, 'he', 'him', etc., will be used to refer to 'he/she', 'him/her', etc.

and the working models which are developed determine how an individual functions in relationships and which kinds of relationships are formed (Kolk, 1989).

The more consistent the insecure attachment experiences, the more the child will develop a working model in which he constructs a negative image of both himself and the surrounding world: in his confrontation with the world he can rely on neither his own competence nor on the support of his environment. As the working model becomes stronger, he will interpret his further experiences also within this framework and the pattern will thus become increasingly difficult to break. The methods which the child originally developed in order to get by will also acquire more permanent forms and become an unconscious response pattern.

From the perspective of this theory, the problem of running away and staying away from home and/or becoming homeless is not just an incident or the direct consequence of a conflict with the parents. It is more likely to be a deeply rooted psychological problem, arising out of a lack of trust in the availability and accessibility of the caregiver (Stefanidis, Pennbridge, MacKenzie & Potharst, 1992). Moreover, this lack of trust will easily be generalized to the wider social environment and thus lead to a general inability to engage in, and maintain social contacts, or to the avoidance - conscious or unconscious - of such contacts. In conclusion, it may be stated that an insecure attachment climate in itself and in its consequences can be regarded as a risk factor for the development of runaway behavior (cf. Tavecchio & Roorda-Honée, 1994).

But, are there any factors which are capable of inhibiting this negative development? Besides characteristics of the child and the family which can prevent a negative development, Garmezy (1985) identifies a third category of protective factors relating to the possibility of support outside the family in the form of a social network. This social network may consist of other significant adults, such as family members, teachers, and social workers, but can consist also of peers, such as friends, classmates, colleagues, steady boy/girlfriend, or a combination of the two categories. Historical developments in recent decades have resulted in an increase in the influence of peers on adolescents (Bogt & Van Praag, 1992). In the event of problems at home, young people will therefore be more able to fall back on peers. This can be especially important for homeless young people, because by definition they have a problematic relationship with the parental environment. For them, peers could well serve as an important compensation for their bad relationship with their parents.

Summarizing the foregoing in terms of protective and risk factors, we can develop the following theory regarding the etiology of homelessness or runaway behavior. An insecure attachment climate is a risk factor, because it results in the child's forming a negative image both of himself and of his immediate social environment. Given sufficient consistency of the negative experiences, the child develops an insecure working model, by which the negative image is generalized

to the wider social environment. This can lead to relational incompetence and, ultimately, to runaway behavior. However, if the insecure attachment climate within the family is compensated for by positive experiences in the wider social environment, for example in the form of a supportive network of adults and/or peers, the child will develop a more positive image both of himself and of that environment. This also results in a more balanced working model and reduces the risk of developing relational incompetence and consequent runaway behavior.

A supportive social network might thus function as a protective factor in preventing the development of homelessness.

### MAIN QUESTIONS

To test the validity of this theory, a study was conducted in which various groups were compared on a number of background variables, on characteristics which are indicative of the quality of attachment, and on the size and perceived quality of the social network. The research questions which guided this study were:

1. Is there a difference between homeless youths and other youths in the investigated characteristics?
2. Which of these characteristics should be regarded as antecedents of homelessness?
3. Does the presence of a social network outside the immediate family context reduce the risk of homelessness developing?

### METHOD

#### SUBJECTS

The research was carried out with three groups. All the participants in the study were selected according to age (15-24) and ethnicity (i.e., raised by an ethnically Dutch mother). The research groups may be characterized as follows:

1. Homeless youth (Ho), the target group, consisting of 70 boys and 38 girls with an average age of 20 and 18 years respectively. They were recruited at assistance providing institutions throughout the Netherlands specializing in the provision of general or more specific shelter for (homeless) young people. A young person was defined as homeless if he/she had been without a fixed home or residence for at least three months, and during that time had slept at a minimum of three different places. The subjects in the target group had been homeless for an average of 16.5 months, and had slept at six different places during the three months preceding the study. Sixty percent of these youths had a history of institutional care of 3.5 years on average. During that time they stayed in an average of 2.2 different institutions (min. 1 - max. 6). This group of homeless youths had been homeless for almost twice as long as the youths who had not lived in institutions (20 and 10 months, respectively).

2. Residential youth (R), a comparison group of 50 boys and 35 girls with an

average age of 18 years, ex-residents of the Nationally Working Residential Facilities (LWRV). The average length of time spent in institutional care was 3.5 years - as for the homeless youths with an institutional history - but the number of institutions involved was significantly lower: an average of 1.62 ( $p < .01$ ; min. 1 - max. 4). At the time of recruitment, these respondents had to have left the residential institution at most 3 years and at least 3 months ago, may not have been transferred to another residential institution, and may not have become homeless. A comparison group of ex-residential youth was chosen because previous research had shown that 60 to 80 percent of homeless youths have spent a shorter or longer period of time in residential institutions. Residents of the LWRV institutions were chosen precisely because of the severity of their problems, which are largely similar to those of homeless youths (Haaster, Van den Bogaart & Mesman Schultz, 1993). A comparison between the two groups may help to elucidate why, with a similar background and problems, some young people end up on the streets, while others are able to maintain themselves within society.

3. Utrecht Control group (UC), consists of 1228 'standard youths', 550 boys and 678 girls, with an average age of 19 years. They form a representative group of respondents who took part in the second 'wave' of the WIL investigation, a survey study of development during adolescence and of intergenerational transfer (Meeus & 't Hart, 1993). This 'standard group' provides a bench-mark for assessing the degree of deviation of the target group and the comparison group.

The total sample comprises 1421 respondents, 670 boys and 751 girls, divided across a target group, a control group and a comparison group. The average age is 19 years. The Utrecht Control group and the Homeless youth are on average slightly older than the Residential youth. In the Homeless group, the boys are older than the girls.

## PROCEDURES AND MEASURES

From the perspective of attachment theory it is possible to indicate a number of factors which either constitute conditions for the development of a secure attachment relationship, or are a consequence of this. These factors must be regarded as *indicators* of the quality of attachment. Thus, the *responsiveness* of the significant caregivers and the number and severity of *separation experiences* are regarded as determinants of the quality of the attachment relationship. The degree to which the subject feels at ease in intimate relationships, his specific *attachment style*, is regarded as the outcome of attachment experiences up to now. The size and perceived quality of the *social network*, i.e. the number of people by whom the respondent says he is accepted and appreciated, is regarded as a consequence of the quality of attachment.

The data were collected using closed interview questions and the following instruments. The subject's classification into social class was based on a

combination of educational and occupational level of the parents, and distinguishes five categories (E. van Ammers, personal communication, 11 July, 1996). The information about educational and occupational level of the parent(s) for the Utrecht Control group was provided by the parents themselves; for the other two groups, by the youths. In 1990, 18% of families in the Netherlands were in the highest class of large entrepreneurs, senior civil servants and academics; 20% were in the upper middle class and 20% in the lower; 35% were skilled laborers and 8% unskilled laborers.

The responsiveness of the parents was measured using the Parental Bonding Instrument (Parker, Tupling & Brown, 1979). On the basis of 25 questions, information was gathered about the parents' 'care' and the 'control' experienced by the respondent during the first 16 years of his/her life. The same items were scored separately for the father and the mother on a 4-point Likert scale. High scores on the care scale indicate affection and warmth; low scores show rejection and indifference. High scores on the control scale indicate excessive parental control and the creation of dependence; low scores on this dimension represent the encouragement of independence and autonomy. The instrument has good psychometric qualities: both the split-half and test-retest reliability are good and the scores are not influenced by age, gender, family size or social desirability. A shortened version was used in this study. Correlations between the old scales (12 and 13 items, respectively) and the new scales (both 10 items) range from  $r = .96$  to  $r = .99$ . All scales have a range of scores between 0 and 30. The internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) is high for all scales and ranges from  $\alpha = .80$  (control of father) to  $\alpha = .93$  (care of father).

An empirical measure of the attachment indicator separation experiences was obtained by calculating the number of different rearing situations experienced by the subjects, on the basis of answers to the question about which caregivers had reared them at which periods in their lives. After all, a change in the rearing situation entails the temporary or long-term separation from one or more important attachment figures, and the need to adapt to an entirely new (social) environment. The age at which the break from the first rearing environment took place also was determined; this may be seen as one of the factors determining the severity of the separation experience. The correlation between the two variables is  $r = -.76$ ,  $p < .000$  ( $N = 1421$ ). Thus, the earlier the break-up of the original rearing environment, the more frequently the child changes rearing situations.

The Attachment Styles Questionnaire (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mayseless, 1990; Van IJzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg, Haas, de Ruiter & Zwart-Woudstra, 1993) is designed to assess the conscious opinions of the subjects about themselves and their social environment. Four attachment styles are distinguished: avoiding, ambivalent, disoriented and secure. The subject classifies himself by placing a cross by the attachment style which in his view, describes him best. After choosing



**TABLE 1**  
INTERNAL CONSISTENCY OF ATTACHMENT STYLES QUESTIONNAIRE

Classification	Avoidant	Ambivalent	Disoriented	Secure	Anova
Likert-scale	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	<i>F</i> (3,1321)
Avoidant	<b>5.61</b>	3.67°	3.85°	3.29	226.6 <sup>*</sup>
Ambivalent	2.57°	<b>5.63</b>	3.27	2.56°	170.1 <sup>*</sup>
Disoriented	2.89°	3.67	<b>5.87</b>	2.73°	337.6 <sup>*</sup>
Secure	2.81	3.42°	3.17°	<b>5.69</b>	329.7 <sup>*</sup>
Frequency	n = 479 (35%)	n = 141 (10%)	n = 336 (24%)	n = 426 (31%)	n = 1382 (100%)

<sup>\*</sup>  $p < .001$

<sup>°</sup> means with this symbol do not differ significantly from each other (Duncan multiple range test  $p < .05$ ).

one attachment style, the subject classifies himself again by indicating on a 7-point Likert scale for each of the four attachment styles the extent to which he considers that attachment style to apply to himself. The scale scores obtained in this way also permit correlational analyses with the instrument to be made. The instrument's internal consistency, measured by combining the classification with the Likert scales, is good: the group classification is always confirmed by a significantly higher score on the corresponding Likert scale (see Table 1).

The social network was assessed in two ways. The Personal Network (Fischer, 1982; Tilburg, 1985; Meeus, 1990) represents the degree to which the subject reports being supported in various domains, such as leisure time, relationship problems, school and work, by ten explicitly-named network members. In view of the absence of data for (especially) the target group in the other three domains, this study examines only the domain 'relationship problems'. Using a principal components analysis, this domain could be reduced to two core dimensions: a *family factor*, measuring the quality of the present relationship with parents and brothers and/or sisters, and a *friends factor*, measuring the quality of the present relationship with best friends, other friends, and acquaintances. Both factors together explained 62.5% of the variance in the original variables. The correlation between the two factors is  $r = .30$ ,  $p < .001$ .

The Social Support Questionnaire-6 (Sarason, Pierce & Sarason, 1990) consists of six 'two-part' items (i.e. questions about Number and Satisfaction, see below) and is the short version of the original questionnaire of 27 items (Sarason, Levine, Basham & Sarason, 1983). The instrument measures the perceived social support. The SSQ-6 distinguishes two aspects in the concept of social support: the number of people who are available in six specified problem situations and the satisfaction felt with the perceived support. The aspects are measured with the N(umber) scale and the S(atisfaction) scale, a 6-point Likert scale (1 'very dissatisfied' to 6 'very satisfied'). The internal consistency of the N scale is  $\alpha = .90$  and of the S scale  $\alpha = .87$ . The correlation between the two scales is  $r = .49$ ,  $p < .001$ .

**TABLE 2**  
SUMMARY OF BACKGROUND VARIABLES

Characteristics	Utrecht Control	Residential	Homeless
number	1228	85	108
percentage girls	55	41	35
average age	19	18	19
percentage low social class father*	38	52	59
percentage low social class mother*	46	77	71
percentage divorced parents	11	41	69
percentage special elementary education	4	35	33
percentage low educational level**	13	54	64
percentage runaways	5	52	91

\* unskilled and skilled laborers

\*\* highest education attended: lower vocational education (LBO)/ preparatory vocational education (VBO)/ part-time apprenticeship school (Streekschool)

## RESULTS

This section first presents the ways in which the investigated groups differ from each other with regard to the background variables and the indicators of attachment. A discriminant analysis is then used to examine which variables are the best predictors of homelessness. Finally, the relationship between the social network and the development of homelessness will be discussed.

### BACKGROUND VARIABLES

**Social class of father and mother.** For the Utrecht Control group, the class distribution accords with that of the Dutch population in general. Of the Residential youth group, a quarter of the fathers are in the lower middle class and over half are in the categories skilled and unskilled laborers. Over three-quarters of the mothers are in these latter categories. For the Homeless youth group, 71% of the mothers and 59% of the fathers are skilled or unskilled laborers. A quarter of the fathers are in the highest social class of large entrepreneurs, senior civil servants and academics. Thus, in general, the majority of both the Residential and Homeless youths come from the lower socio-economic strata.

**Divorces.** Every year in the Netherlands 30% of current marriages are dissolved (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 1995). For married couples with children the percentage is lower: 16% (Chorus, 1995). For the Utrecht Control group the percentage of divorces is lower than might be expected on the basis of the national data. For the other two groups, the opposite is the case. The percentage of divorced parents is especially high for the Homeless youth: 69% for the total group, 75% for those with a history of institutional care.

**Educational level.** In the Netherlands approximately 5% of children at elementary school level attend a form of special education. The percentage of respondents in the Utrecht Control group who attended special education is somewhat lower. Of

the Residential and Homeless youth, over a third attended special education. The educational level attained by these young people in terms of *the highest education attended* is fairly low: 59% attended education to the level of preparatory vocational education (VBO)/lower vocational education (LBO)/part-time apprenticeship school (Streekschool), and 36% to high school level (lower general high school education [MAVO]/ (short) intermediate vocational education [(K)MBO]). In terms of *completed education*, two-thirds of the Homeless youth and half of the Residential youth report elementary school as the highest completed education. Of the Utrecht Control group, almost 90% completed education at high school level or above.

**Runaways.** The view that homeless young people are, by definition, runaways is somewhat moderated by the findings of this research: 91% of the Homeless youth say that they have run away from home or been sent away on one or more occasions. Consequently, for 9% of them, this was not the case. Of the Residential youth, over half have, at some time, run away or been sent away. The youths in both groups were on average just over 13 years of age when they ran away for the first time. The percentage of runaways in the Utrecht Control group was very much lower, at just under 5%, and they were more than two years older than the other runaways when they first ran away from home.

#### INDICATORS OF ATTACHMENT

**Separation experiences.** Both the Homeless and the Residential youth were found to have experienced a large number of different rearing situations (see Table 3) and in this respect they differ significantly from the Utrecht Control group ( $F[2,1416] = 1012.2; p < .001$ ). The same applies for the age at which the youths underwent their first separation experience: the Homeless and Residential youth differ significantly from the Control group, but not from each other ( $F[2,1388] = 437.6; p < .001$ ). Within the group of Homeless youth, a distinction can be made between those with a history of institutional care ( $N = 65$ ) and those without ( $N = 43$ ). Homeless youth without an institutional history have experienced half as many different rearing situations as the Homeless youth with such a history (means of 2.4 and 4.9 respectively;  $t[105.9] = 9.21; p < .001$ ). Moreover, they were on average four years older at the time of the first separation experience (11.2 and 7.2 years

**TABLE 3**  
SUMMARY OF SEPARATION EXPERIENCES: MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS

	Utrecht Control n = 1228	Residential n = 85	Homeless n = 108
number of rearing situations*	1.2 <sup>a</sup> (.44)	4.1 <sup>b</sup> (3.0)	3.9 <sup>b</sup> (1.9)
age at 1st separation experience	17.2 <sup>a</sup> (3.1)	9.1 <sup>b</sup> (5.3)	8.8 <sup>b</sup> (5.3)

\* different superscript indicates significantly different values at .05 level minimum

**TABLE 4**  
**RESPONSIVENESS VARIABLES: MEANS AND (STANDARD DEVIATIONS)**

	Utrecht Control n = 1228	Residential n = 85	Homeless n = 108
care of father <sup>+</sup>	22.1 <sup>a</sup> (6.1)	17.4 <sup>b</sup> (9.2)	12.4 <sup>c</sup> (9.9)
care of mother	25.3 <sup>a</sup> (4.4)	20.5 <sup>b</sup> (8.4)	16.2 <sup>c</sup> (9.2)
control of father	7.4 <sup>a</sup> (4.6)	10.4 <sup>b</sup> (7.4)	13.7 <sup>c</sup> (7.8)
control of mother	6.9 <sup>a</sup> (4.5)	10.3 <sup>b</sup> (7.7)	14.3 <sup>c</sup> (8.7)

\* All scales consist of 10 items and have a range of scores between 0 and 30.

+ Different superscript indicates significantly different values at .05 level minimum

respectively;  $t(104)=-4.16$ ;  $p <.001$ ).

For over half of the Residential and Homeless youth, the first separation experience took place before the tenth year. This applies for almost three-quarters of the Homeless youth with a history of institutional care. For half of the Utrecht Control group, the first 'separation experience', strictly speaking, occurred only at, or near 'adulthood', i.e. at 18 years of age or later.

**Responsiveness.** The second indicator of attachment is the perceived responsiveness of the parents. Table 4 presents the means and standard deviations of the two parenting dimensions 'care' and 'control', as measured with the Parental Bonding Instrument. The Homeless youth experienced by far the least care and the most control from both their father and their mother. Analyses of variance revealed that the differences between the three groups were significant, with  $p$ -values  $<.001$ . No differences were found between Homeless youth with, and without, a history of institutional care.

**Attachment style.** The parenting style expresses the degree of availability of the parents experienced by the subject. This measure should show some correlation with the attachment style described by the subject, as it is, after all, theoretically the outcome of earlier attachment experiences. This is, in fact, the case: the percentage of Homeless youth who describe themselves as securely attached is only 13%, compared with 33% of the Utrecht Control group and 23% of the Residential youth. Analysis of variance reveals that the securely attached respondents perceived both parents as more caring and also as less controlling than the insecurely attached respondents ( $p$ -values  $<.001$ ).

**The social network.** A relationship is hypothesized also between the responsiveness of the parents and the size of the social network. On the 'family' and 'friends' factors of the Personal Network, the Homeless youth scored much lower than the respondents in the Residential and Control groups. This was especially true of the

**TABLE 5**  
**DISCRIMINANT ANALYSIS PERFORMED ON UTRECHT CONTROL (UC), RESIDENTIAL (R) AND HOMELESS (Ho) YOUTH**

Variables	Correlation of predictors with discriminant functions			
	Function 1	Function 2		
rearing situations	.88			
age at 1st separation	-.58			
special education	.31			
educational level	-.28			
divorced parents		.62		
care of mother		-.53		
control of father		.40		
eigenvalue	1.82	.10		
canonical correlation	.80	.29		
Wilk's lambda	.32	.91		
<i>p</i> -value	.000	.000		
group centroids	UC -.47	UC -.20		
	R 3.78	R .55		
	Ho 2.84	Ho 2.04		
Classification	UC	R	Ho	
	<b>97.7%</b>	.8%	1.5%	
Total correctly classified: 92.1%	12.0%	<b>54.7%</b>	33.3%	
	19.1%	28.1%	<b>52.8%</b>	

'family' factor<sup>2</sup> ( $F[2,1310] = 118.23; p < .001$ ; means on a 10-point scale (min. 10 - max. 100): 29, 56.3 and 66, respectively). The post hoc comparison revealed that the difference between the Residential youth and the Utrecht Control group also is significant. The results on the 'friends' factor show that the Homeless youth differ from both the Residential and Control youth ( $F[2,1390] = 28.16; p < .001$ ; means of 42, 53.3 and 57, respectively). In this case the difference between the Residential and Control groups was not significant.

### PREDICTING HOMELESSNESS

In order to discover which characteristics are the best predictors of homelessness, a discriminant analysis was performed. This analysis included only those variables relating to the subject's past: the civil status of the parents, the subject's type of education and educational level, the number of rearing situations, the age at which the subject left the first rearing environment, and the responsiveness of the parents as measured on the dimensions of care and control.

The top half of Table 5 presents the variables included in the discriminant functions. The first function has the greatest discriminating power and shows that the Residential and Homeless youth differ mainly from the Control youth in the

<sup>2</sup>In view of the low response for the variables 'relationship with brother' and 'relationship with sister', only the relationship with the parents is included in the calculation.

number of different rearing situations, the young age at which their original rearing environment was broken, the higher participation in special education and the lower educational level. The second function discriminates especially the Homeless youth from the other two groups: their parents are more often divorced and they perceived their mothers as less caring and their fathers as highly controlling.

### **SOCIAL NETWORK AS A PROTECTIVE FACTOR**

The last research question concerns the possible significance of a social network outside the immediate family context for the prevention of homelessness. The Homeless and Residential youth were asked to state which people they could count on during the last six months of living at home or in the institution, respectively, and how satisfied they were with the support they received.

SSQ-6 results showed that the Residential youth had a greater number of supportive people available to them than the Homeless youth ( $t[191] = 2.92; p < .01$ ) and that they were also more satisfied with them ( $t[167.5] = 2.81; p < .01$ ). Focusing the comparison on the Residential youth and the Homeless youth with an institutional history gives a similar result. Compared with the Homeless youth with an institutional history, the Residential youth had more people on whom they could count during the last six months in the institution ( $t[148] = -3.53; p < .001$ ) and they were also more satisfied with them ( $t[91.32] = -2.81; p < .01$ ). Further analysis reveals that especially the father, the mother, the social worker, and the foster parents were the people who constituted the difference in the size of the network. These data become more meaningful when we confine the comparison to those respondents in the Residential group who perceived their parents as equally uncaring and controlling as the Homeless youth. The network of this group ( $N = 33$ ) was also found to be significantly larger than that of the Homeless youth with an institutional history ( $t[96] = 2.29; p < .05$ ), and their satisfaction with the support they received is also greater ( $t[86.7] = 2.17; p < .05$ ). The difference in size of the network in this case is mainly due to the social workers.

### **SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION**

This article reports on a study concerning the influence of the quality of attachment on the genesis of homelessness, and the size and quality of the social network as a potential protective factor in its prevention. In addition to a representative control group, the study included a group of youths who, like 60% of the investigated group of homeless youths, have a background of institutional care. As expected, significant differences were found between the three groups on all the measured characteristics. The differences between the control group on the one hand and the homeless and residential youths on the other are much more pregnant than the differences between these latter two groups. The results of the

discriminant analysis lead to the conclusion that, besides having divorced parents, a lack of perceived parental responsiveness and emotional support must be regarded as especially crucial for the development of homelessness.

The question as to whether the social network might possibly have a protective function in the prevention of homelessness can be answered affirmatively. The data appear to provide an empirical basis for the theoretical notion that contacts with significant others, such as family members, acquaintances and social workers, can compensate for the negative influence of the lacking relationships with parents and good friends, and thus reduce the risk of runaway behavior. The residential youths had access to a more extensive network of (especially) social workers and foster parents during their stay in the residential institution than did the homeless youths with an institutional history. This applies also for those residential youths who have experienced just as many different rearing situations and who judge their parents to be just as unresponsive as the homeless youths with an institutional history.

In conclusion, the results of this study support our view that, in the genesis of homelessness, the lack of a secure attachment relationship with one or more caregivers in the past constitutes a risk factor which in all its consequences can have very long-lasting adverse effects. In accordance with attachment theory, in homeless youths the lack of trust in the availability and accessibility of caregivers early in life may have generalized to the wider social environment, leading to the inability to engage in, and maintain, social contacts or to avoid such contacts. It is the reaction of these youngsters to a history of rejection and neglect, and a mechanism for survival in an insensitive and indifferent environment. However, it appears that by providing specific and timely support, it may be possible to break the downward spiral which threatens to entrap affectively neglected young people, making them increasingly incapable of assuring themselves of supportive social networks which can compensate for the role of the parents. The findings of a recent study by Gijtenbeek (1996) concur with this. His results show that a thorough analysis of the young person's position in his/her network, and intensive guidance in the initiation of new contacts, or the restoration of contact with members of the network, are very effective and can greatly reduce the relapse into homelessness.

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