

The Everyday Life Information Seeking Behaviour of Urban Homeless Youth: Preliminary Findings

Evelyn Markwei

School of Library, Archival and Information Studies

University of British Columbia

dedeiaf@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

Youth homelessness, or the issue of street children, is a growing phenomenon in cities across the world including Sub-Saharan Africa. Homeless youth, like all adolescents, are transitioning from childhood to adulthood and it is imperative that they have access to sufficient relevant information for mastery of their developmental challenges. However, their immediate living circumstances, especially their state of homelessness makes it extremely difficult for them to access information for workable solutions to many of those challenges. Ammerman et. al. (2004) also ascribe homeless youth's lack of access to information to their inexperience and lack of knowledge of service systems and resources which are primarily tailored for adults, and lack of understanding of how to access such service systems. Clearly they need an information service tailored to their needs. Provision of quality information services, according to Agosto and Hughes-Hassel (2005), requires an understanding of the natural or day to day human information seeking behavior, that is, their everyday life information seeking behaviour (ELIS). Thus an investigation into the everyday life information needs and seeking of homeless youth is necessary if their information needs are to be met in an efficient manner. The purpose of the study was to investigate the everyday life information seeking behaviour of homeless youth in the city of Accra, Ghana to highlight their information needs in order to inform stakeholders such as public libraries and other agencies, both governmental and non-governmental, that work with homeless youth, to facilitate effective information service to this disadvantaged group.

The study is significant in many ways. The findings of the study increase the knowledge base and understanding of youth information seeking behaviour and everyday life information seeking (ELIS) behaviour of youth, especially homeless youth in the Library and Information Science Literature (LIS). A review of the literature revealed that little attention has been paid to youth information seeking behaviour outside the library and school context, that is, their ELIS behaviour. They also reveal ELIS behaviour of homeless youth in an environment of limited services and information resources. A review of the literature also shows that it is the first study of ELIS behaviour of homeless

youth in Africa, and one of only a few studies of information needs of homeless youth worldwide.

The main objectives of the study was to investigate their information needs, sources of information, patterns in their information seeking, problems they encounter in their information seeking, and how libraries and other stakeholders can meet their information needs.

The study was conducted within the theoretical framework of Dervin's (1983b) Sense-making approach, Chatman's (1996) theory of information poverty, Chatman's (1999) theory of life in the round, and Savolainen (1995) concepts of 'way of life' and 'mastery of life'.

The study adopted the interpretive tradition and the ethnographic methodology. The city of Accra was chosen as the location of the study. The snowball sampling procedure was used to recruit 40 homeless youth, 20 boys and 20 girls between the ages of 15 to 18 years to participate in the study. Observations, the critical incidence technique and in-depth interviews were used for the collection of data.

The preliminary findings appear to confirm Wilson's (2000) assertion that the motive of any search for information is ultimately to satisfy one or more of the human basic needs namely physiological, affective and cognitive needs. The patterns in their information seeking behaviour also conforms to Chatman's (1999) theory of life in the round, Chatman's (1991) theory of gratification, and Savolainen (1995) concepts of 'way of life' and 'mastery of life'. The barriers to meeting their information needs include, poverty, lack of opportunities for self development, lack of access to relevant information.

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