Everyday Life Information-Seeking Behavior of Marginalized Youth: A Qualitative Study of Urban Homeless Youth in Ghana

Evelyn Markwei & Edie Rasmussen

To cite this article: Evelyn Markwei & Edie Rasmussen (2015) Everyday Life Information-Seeking Behavior of Marginalized Youth: A Qualitative Study of Urban Homeless Youth in Ghana, International Information & Library Review, 47:1-2, 11-29, DOI: 10.1080/10572317.2015.1039425

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10572317.2015.1039425

Accepted author version posted online: 05 May 2015.
Published online: 05 May 2015.

Article views: 134

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Everyday Life Information-Seeking Behavior of Marginalized Youth: A Qualitative Study of Urban Homeless Youth in Ghana

Evelyn Markwei
School of Information and Communication Studies, University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana

Edie Rasmussen
School of Library, Archival and Information Studies, Irving K. Barber Learning Centre, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

This article examines the everyday life needs, information needs, sources of information, and information-seeking behaviors of homeless youth in Accra, Ghana. Forty-one homeless youth, ages 15 to 18 years participated in this qualitative study. Participants were identified by snowball sampling and data was collected by field observations, an adaptation of the critical incident technique and in-depth interviews. The results show that (1) information needs of the homeless youth in the study relate to basic needs following Maslow’s hierarchy of needs; (2) their information sources are primarily interpersonal and comparatively limited in range; and (3) the most important information-seeking behavior is a community approach, characterized by free sharing of information among their social network of friends. The results further revealed that participants relied on their social network of friends to meet 8 of the 11 information needs identified in the study. The study suggests that this behavior results from their environment of limited resources, a proposition that should be examined with further research on the everyday life information-seeking behavior of marginalized communities.

Keywords: everyday life information-seeking behavior, marginalized youth, homeless youth in Ghana

INTRODUCTION

Youth homelessness or the issue of street children is a growing phenomenon in many regions and countries of the world, including Ghana. Like all adolescents, these marginalized youth need information to master their developmental challenges, for successful transition into adulthood. They also need information to navigate the challenges of their homelessness and improve their lives also. Examining the everyday life information-seeking (ELIS) behaviors of these disadvantaged youth will lead to a better understanding of their everyday information needs, preferred sources of information, the factors that determine the choice of these sources, contexts of their information-seeking, and the effective ways by which governments and other stakeholders can meet their information needs. The study suggests that an information service that is convenient to use, readily accessible, and employs peer to peer dissemination of information will be a most effective service for this particular group of youths.

Statement of the Problem

 Provision of quality information services to any group requires an understanding of their ELIS behavior, or their natural way of looking for information (Agosto & Hughes-Hassell, 2005). Therefore, an understanding of the everyday life information needs and information-seeking by homeless youth is necessary, if their information needs are to be met in an effective manner. A review of the literature
on youth information-seeking behavior, however, reveals little research into the ELIS behavior of homeless youth. The few available studies, such as those of Woelfer and Hendry (2009); Alexander, Edwards, Fisher, and Hersberger (2005); Reid and Klee (1999); and Ensign and Panke (2002), have been conducted in North America and the United Kingdom. No studies have been published on Africa, including Ghana.

Significance of the Study

The study is significant in many ways. It is the first study of ELIS behavior of homeless youth or street children in Africa and, therefore, adds knowledge to the ELIS literature from an African perspective. It contributes to the knowledge and understanding of ELIS behavior of youth, especially homeless youth, an area on which the library and information science (LIS) literature indicates there is little research. Research on youth information-seeking behavior has been described by other authors as limited (Agosto & Hughes-Hassell, 2005; Fourie, 1995; Shenton & Dixon, 2004) and largely focused on the library and school context (Shenton & Dixon, 2004). According to Chelton and Cool (2007), this has led to inaccurate perceptions and creation of gaps in the understanding of youth and their information-seeking behavior. For example, they are perceived as “one-dimensional student beings” (p. xvi), and individual information seekers, a perception that is at odds with their developmental characteristics (Chelton & Cool, 2007). In other words, adolescents like to hang out with their peers and have developmental needs other than their educational pursuits. Havighurst (n.d.), for example, has indicated 11 developmental tasks that adolescents must master to become successful adults. In the light of these discussions, there is a need for more research into the ELIS behavior of youth, for better understanding of their information behaviors and improved services to meet their needs.

This article describes the everyday life needs or problems of homeless youth in Accra, their expressed information needs, sources of information, and information-seeking behaviors within the framework of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Huitt, 2007), and makes suggestions for effective information provision to these marginalized youth.

Definition of Terms

Homeless youth are defined as youth ages 12 to 18 living on their own often under inadequate living conditions without the support of a parent or a responsible adult.

ELIS is defined by Savolainen (1995) as “the acquisition of various informational (both cognitive and expressive) elements which people employ to orient themselves in daily life or to solve problems not directly connected with the performance of occupational tasks” (p. 267). He explains that in order to gain a full understanding of the individual approaches to information seeking, it is best not to compartmentalize non-work and job-related information seeking since they complement each other. For this reason, this study examines how homeless youth look for information to gain mastery over the problems they encounter in both the work and non-work aspects of their everyday lives.

This study adopted Dervin’s Sense-Making definition of information need, that is, a gap in a person’s knowledge or the different situations in which they become stopped in their movement and need to determine what sense they must construct to continue moving. Dervin (1976) identifies four life situations that might cause a person to stop in his/her movement across time space: decisions, problems, worries, and comprehending. Thus, information needs in this study were obtained by asking participants to describe their problems, concerns, or worries and how they resolved them. Hersberger (1998) acknowledges that articulating information needs can be difficult for individuals, but they are able to describe them within the context of a problem and the resolution of a problem. In this study, information sources are formal, informal, and interpersonal sources consulted by participants to resolve their everyday problems.

LITERATURE REVIEW

ELIS Behavior of Young People

ELIS behavior studies of young people in the LIS literature have focused on career decision-making (Edwards & Poston-Anderson, 1996; Julien, 1999), health information seeking (Borzekowski, Fobil, & Asante, 2006; Gray, Klein, Noyce, Sesselberg, & Cantrill, 2005; Ybarra, Emenyonu, Nansera, Kiwanuka, & Bangsberg, 2008), drug information (Todd, 1999), and daily lives and routines (Agosto & Hughes-Hassell, 2005; Shenton & Dixon, 2004). The literature reveals that young people in both the United States and the United Kingdom have similar information needs such as the need for consumer information, information on transportation, personal finances, time, and weather, and to support daily routines (Agosto & Hughes-Hassell, 2005; Shenton & Dixon, 2003b). The subjects in these studies have a preference for people as sources of information (Agosto & Hughes-Hassell, 2005; Shenton & Dixon 2003b) but also use other sources such as books, libraries, magazines, and the Internet (Edwards & Poston-Anderson, 1996; Gray et al., 2005; Shenton & Dixon, 2003a), and telephones, television, computers, radio, newspapers and personal communication systems such as e-mail, written notes, and instant messaging (Agosto & Hughes-Hassell, 2006). The reasons for their preference for interpersonal sources include convenience (Shenton & Dixon, 2003a), ease of communication and access, and reliability (Fisher, Marcoux, Miller, Sanchez, & Cunningham, 2004).

Findings of the few studies of ELIS behavior of homeless youth reveal that their information needs relate to basic needs such as health, jobs, shelter, financial advice, and counseling (Alexander et al., 2005; Ensign & Panke, 2002; Reid & Klee,
However, a study of organization and presentation of information to homeless young people by Woelfer and Hendry (2009) in Seattle, WA, involving an alliance of nine service agencies revealed categories of needs unrelated to basic needs. They included events, art, drugs/alcohol, IV drug use, legal, pet care, relationship/safety, and Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-Questioning (LGBTQ).

Homeless youth use both formal and informal sources in their information seeking. For example, homeless youth in the United States use reference books from a library or bookstore, family and friends, herbalists, naturopathic pharmacies, general practitioners, and “Ask-a-Nurse” phone consulting service as sources of health information (Ensign & Panke, 2002). Other sources are yellow pages and brochures for information on shelter, and newspapers for job information (Alexander et al., 2005). Woelfer and Hendry’s (2009) study in Seattle also revealed that brochures and flyers are important sources of information for homeless youth who patronize the nine service agencies mentioned in their study. Their analysis of 250 documents from these agencies revealed 91 brochures and flyers used to address 15 categories of needs of homeless youth. In the United Kingdom, the youth use the Department of Housing, social services, day centers and family and friends for housing information, and Department of Social Security, hostel staff, and probation or social services for financial advice (Reid & Klee, 1999).

Only a few studies have investigated the ELIS behavior of young people in Africa, and these studies, including Nwagwu (2007), Ybarra et al. (2008), and Borzekowski et al. (2006), have focused on their health information seeking. Health information needs of youth include information on STDs, HIV and AIDS, pregnancy, fitness, exercise, diet, and nutrition. Sources of health information are mostly interpersonal sources, parents, siblings, friends, teachers, and health care providers. Other sources are the Internet, books, magazines, and clinics. The reported studies used a survey methodology with a questionnaire as the data collection instrument. While these studies provide valuable information about the target group, it is clear that there is a need to go beyond health information-seeking to an in-depth investigation into the everyday life information needs and information-seeking behavior of African youth, including marginalized youth, using qualitative methods. Findings from such studies will enable information providers and other stakeholders to provide a holistic information service which will facilitate the successful growth of African youth into successful adults. This study used qualitative methods to investigate the ELIS behavior of homeless youth in Accra, Ghana.

METHODOLOGY

Research Setting and Selection of Participants

The fieldwork was conducted in Accra, the Ghanaian capital from July 2010 to December 2010. The location was chosen because Accra is the most endowed city in Ghana and a seat of government. It has many more industries and large markets than any other city in Ghana and is also a major transport hub with connections to major cities of the country, making it a preferred location for rural-urban migration, especially youth in search of better life.

Research involving homeless or street youth is fraught with problems, such as the tendency of the youth to prevaricate about their current circumstances, reasons for being on the street, and family backgrounds (Aptekar, 1994; Aptekar & Heinonen, 2003). These problems, according to Aptekar and Heinonen (2003), are directly related to a failure by the researcher to gain the trust of the youth prior to the collection of data. In the light of these problems, the field activities of the study started with volunteer work by the first author as a phonics teacher at a school for children (from nursery to grade 3) of homeless youth and market women near the venue of the study, a market area in Accra. The purpose of the volunteer work was to build trust and identify key informants among the parents of the school children. The researcher was introduced by the director of the school to a male street youth who was a security guard at the school and to two homeless parents who had a young child in the school and who worked as head porters at the market. These persons served as key informants in introducing the researcher to other homeless youth who lived and worked at the market. Thus the study participants were selected using the snowball sampling procedure. The researcher gained the trust of the youth through daily visits to the market, informal interactions and engagement of their services in their role as head porters and shoe-shine workers. Forty-one homeless youth, comprised of 19 females and 22 males, aged 15 to 18, participated in the study. This number of participants proved to be adequate for the saturation of the data collected as shown by the consistency of the responses in relation to the research questions. Marshall (1996) explains that the appropriate sampling size in a qualitative research study is one large enough to answer the research questions, that is, to the point of data saturation when no new categories or themes are emerging from responses of participants. Ethics approval necessary for the conduct of research involving marginalized youth was obtained from the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) before commencement of the study. Obtaining parental consent for conducting minimal risk research involving at risk youth was raised as a source of concern during the ethical review process. This problem was resolved when the BREB agreed that youth age 15 to 18 who had been living on the streets without adult supervision were mature enough to participate in the study without parental consent, and for this reason participants in the study were selected to fall within this age range. The purpose of the study, rights of participants, protection of their confidentiality, etc. were duly explained to each participant. Each participant signed a consent form as an indication of his/her understanding of the terms of the study and his/her willingness to be a participant before commencement of the interviews.
Data Collection Procedures

Data was collected through observations and in-depth interviews using an adaptation of the critical incident technique. Two modes of observations were used in the study. The first mode was a non-participatory observation that involved a week of daily visits to the market to observe the activities of the youth, the problems they encounter, and their interactions with each other, their customers, and city authorities in an un-obtrusive manner. This was followed by participant observation which involved informal conversations with the youth both at their rest times and while making use of their services in a friendly manner with the purpose of gaining their trust. Finally a series of interviews was conducted, in which an adaptation of the critical incident technique was employed to acquire information from study participants. Gremier (2004) defines the critical incident technique as “a qualitative interview procedure which facilitates the investigation of significant occurrences identified by the respondent, the way they are managed, and the outcomes in terms of perceived effects” (p. 66). An initial pilot study involving five street youth revealed that the participants could not identify significant occurrences in their lives except their need for money, so the researcher adapted the critical incident technique for the main interviews by questioning them about their reasons for coming to Accra, their everyday problems, and how they resolved them. This strategy was to guide participants to focus on significant problems they have encountered in their lives, their everyday challenges, and strategies for solving them. For example this strategy enabled Abeeku, a shoe-shine boy to describe a significant occurrence in his life, that is, the death of his father, its consequence upon his life and how he attempted to resolve them as illustrated in the responses below:

Q. Why did you come to Accra?
A. I was attending secondary school and at a point in time, my father died and I did not have anybody to sponsor my education so I stopped the school and came to Accra.

Q. Did you take the decision yourself to come or someone asked you to come?
A. It was my own decision to come. When I stopped the school and was at home doing nothing, my friends were coming to Accra and I also joined them.

Q. So when you arrived in Accra, what was your immediate need?
A. I had wanted to go back to school at that time and I tried but I could not make enough money from the shoe-shine job I did. I went home and I came back frequently but I still couldn’t continue the school, so that is why I came to Accra.

Each participant was asked to describe three everyday life problems and how they were resolved. The pilot study was also used to test the effectiveness of the research instruments in answering the research questions, mode of questioning, and recording of the interviews with a digital recorder. The pilot study proved very useful. For example, it led to the purchase of a stamp pad for thumb printing of consent forms by participants who could not sign their names, and the reframing and refining of some of the questions which participants found difficult to answer or which were ineffective in collecting relevant data. The interviews were conducted in “Twi,” a local language spoken by the majority of Ghanaians. The questions gathered information on their demographic characteristics, reasons for coming to the city, problems and their resolutions coupled with probes to ensure the research questions were adequately answered. Each interview lasted between 25 minutes and 1 hour.

The interviews were translated into English and transcribed by the first author. To preserve anonymity, each participant was assigned a pseudonymous name based on Ghanaian common naming schemes such as day of birth, birth position among siblings, and names of twins and their siblings.

Data Analysis and Reliability

The transcribed data was first imported into the NVivo software for a detailed qualitative content analysis. Categories and themes relating to the research questions were identified by carefully reading the transcripts twice. For example, with regard to the first research question (What are the expressed information needs of homeless youth?), 11 categories of needs, namely money, shelter, employment, education, skills development, security, respect, justice, food, respect, and fair wages, were identified in the problem statements of study participants and their reasons for coming to Accra. These categories were used to create child nodes or codes under the theme or tree node information needs in the NVivo software (Figure 1).

The findings of an information needs study of urban residents by Dervin (1973) in Seattle and Syracuse suggest that individuals with high levels of education and socio-economic status, such as managers and professionals, are “least likely to articulate their problems in terms of complaints” and more likely to state their problems as “needs for information or advice” (p. 124). Therefore, considering the low socio-economic status and educational level of participants of the current study, the nature and type of need in the problem statements of participants were analyzed by adapting the scheme used by Dervin (1973) in her study. A spreadsheet of the problem statements (131 in total, identified in the transcript data relating to reasons for coming
to Accra, and the three everyday problems indicated by each participant was created in Excel (Figure 3) and each problem statement was assigned to one of Dervin’s three categories in accordance with these questions:

- Is the problem statement a mere complaint about a personal or social concern?
- Does the problem statement suggest a need for information, or advice?

![FIGURE 1 Tree node showing categories of information needs.](image)

![FIGURE 2 Coding of need for shelter of participants.](image)
**FIGURE 3** Spreadsheet for categorizing problem statements to assess inter-rater reliability.

- Does the problem statement suggest a need for assistance, or help to resolve the challenge?

This categorization process was repeated by an independent researcher using all 131 problem statements, followed by a calculation of Cohen’s Kappa K to establish the reliability of the results. The results indicated an overall agreement of 93% and a fixed-marginal kappa of 0.80. According to Randolph (2008), Kappa of 0.70 or more indicates adequate inter-rater agreement.

Most of the problems recounted by the participants, such as lack of shelter, lack of respect for female porters by market women, etc., during the interviews were consistent with the field observations made by the researcher at the market, indicating that the interview responses were an accurate reflection of the information needs and behaviors of the study participants.

**RESULTS**

**Background of Participants**

The demographic characteristics of the participants are summarized in Table 1. Participants come from four of the ten regions of Ghana. The Northern and Upper East regions are historically poor regions as a result of regional inequalities in development; their relative poverty is often referenced as the North South Divide (Shepherd & Gyimah-Boadi, 2004). Although the Ashanti and Brong-Ahafo regions are considered rich in terms of infrastructural developments and natural resources (Kwankye, Anarfi, Tagoe, & Castaldo, 2009; Langer, 2007), the results show that the main occupation of 75% of the parents of the study participants is crop farming, which has been described as the economic activity with the highest incidence of poverty in Ghana (Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy, 2003; Ghana Statistical Service, 2008; UNDP, 2007).

Parents of participants have little or no education and have large families. Participants tend to be self-employed and work as shoe-shines, head porters, and truck pushers. Shoe-shine workers go to neighborhoods throughout the city to polish and repair shoes for customers; head porters carry loads in large head pans for shop owners, market women, and customers of the market; and truck pushers cart loads with rented trucks for shop owners and traders. In the absence of jobs in the markets, they go from house to house to collect garbage. These are jobs that require minimal capital to start, and that are available to youth who lack qualifications to apply for other jobs. For example, one of the participants, Kobi (a male participant) who is a truck pusher, indicated he was not qualified to apply for a job as a garbage collector because he had no high school certification (referring to commercial garbage collecting businesses for which the minimum qualification for employment is Basic Education Certificate Examination [BECE] or grade 9 qualification).

They also use these jobs to advertise their availability for other jobs as reflected by one of the respondents who is a porter:

Yes we start with that job right away. It is when we are doing it that people will inquire about our interest in other jobs. (Afua)

This finding of lack of the requisite qualifications to apply for other jobs is consistent with those of Kwankye, Anarfi, Tagoe, and Castaldo (2007) who mentioned that child mi-
grants find it difficult to get jobs in the city because of their low level of education and skills.

As mandated by BREB certification, participants are between the ages of 15 to 18 years though a relatively high percentage of participants (41.5%) were not able to give their exact age as a result of their parent’s inability to record the birthdates of their children and the prevalence of child-birth at homes instead of the hospitals where the birthdates of children are recorded. This is consistent with data provided in the Ghana Health Service Annual Report (2009), which states that only 41.8% of births were supervised in the northern regions from which the female participants come.

Participants have varied education levels, from grades 1 to 10. Many of the participants (37%, primarily female participants) have never attended school. This high rate of non-school attendance is rather surprising since the government has instituted policies intended to make education free and accessible to all, especially the poor. These policies include free and compulsory universal basic education since 1995, the capitation grant to eliminate levies on pupils, the Ghana Schools Feeding Programme (GSFP) to provide school children in deprived areas with one hot nutritious meal a day, and a textbook development and availability policy for greater access to textbooks in public schools since the 2005/2006 academic year (Ghana Educational Sector Performance Report, 2010). The lack of education of many of the study participants implies a need for government to work with other stakeholders to ensure such youth have the opportunity to attend school so that they can be equipped with the information they need for future advancement.

Participants’ reasons for coming to the city to endure homelessness include parental poverty, parental neglect, death of a parent coupled with a large number of siblings, lack of job opportunities in their local environment, and the positive reports they receive from friends and siblings returning from the city and the relative affluence of the returnees. Apart from poverty, the causes of homelessness among the youth in the study are inconsistent with causes of homelessness reported in other studies, especially those conducted in North America. In Canada, reported causes include parental substance abuse, sexual or emotional abuse, youth substance abuse, adolescent rebelliousness at home and school, trouble with law enforcement agencies, the quest for independence among youth and travel or moving to a larger city (Public Agency of Canada, 2006; Higgit, Wingert, & Ristock, 2003). In the United States they include conflicts over religious beliefs, sexual orientation, educational performance, and conflicts with parents over life style choices, such as hair color and cut, body piercing, clothing (Hyde, 2005), and the failure of remedial programs such as juvenile correction, mental health, and child welfare programs (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2006).

In summary, the findings show that the homeless youth in this study are from low socio-economic backgrounds, come from rural and poor areas of Ghana, have limited or no education, and are members of large families. The cause of their homelessness is primarily poverty, but they are also influenced by friends and siblings who have returned from the city.

### Everyday Life Needs of Participants

The qualitative content analysis of the problem statements of study participants revealed 11 categories/types of needs or areas of concern in their everyday lives. Not surprisingly, a frequency distribution of these needs among participants (Table 2) showed that the most important area of need is money, expressed by 98% (or 40 out of 41) of the participants.

When the participants were asked to indicate the purposes for which they needed money, they responded that they needed it to meet personal and life goals, as summarized in Table 3. The participants’ emphasis on improving their future lives by undergoing short-term discomfort to satisfy longer-term goals is a striking finding of this study, which, like differences in the causes of their homelessness, sets it apart from other studies of street youth.

The 11 categories of needs identified in the problem statements were also found to relate to basic needs following Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Huitt, 2007) as illustrated in Figure 4.
TABLE 2
Categories of Information Need

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of Information Need</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Money</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>(98%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelter</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>(61%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>(59%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>(54%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esteem</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>(44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>(39%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>(24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquire skills</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>(22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair wages</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>(15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>(15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>(5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While participants did not directly express information needs related to belonging, their response to the need for information on employment, food, health, and security which involved information sharing through their social networks, suggests that they have a desire to satisfy their belonging need.

Analysis of the problem statements using Dervin’s (1973) scheme described above showed that a majority of the statements (68.7%) were complaints about social or personal issues. For example, Adusa, who was working as a shoe-shine to save money to pay for the registration fees for his final examination, complained about the cheating of some of the customers:

One other problem is that after charging for work done, the customers refuse to pay the agreed fee and if you complain, you can be beaten up. (Adusa)

About 28% of the problem statements were requests for assistance. For example, when the youth were asked about the kind of help they would need from the government to improve their lives, Joojo who is in the last year of his three-year apprenticeship training to become a welder indicates:

If I get money to take care of myself whilst I am learning the trade, I will finish my apprenticeship in time to be able to open my own shop and life will be good. I could not continue my education and if I am not able to finish my apprenticeship, life will not be worth living. (Joojo)

Kwabena, who is a truck pusher, working to raise funds for his training as a glazier, mentions that:

We will ask him (the government) to provide us with accommodation so that we will have places to sleep when we come to Accra and wake up strong to go to work the next day. We sleep outside when we come here. (Kwabena)

One of the head porters replied:

I will tell the government to develop our hometown for us so that we wouldn’t have to come here. If our hometown could be developed to be like here or Kumasi with jobs for us without the sand [talking about the untarred roads in her hometown] that there is, we would never leave the place for anywhere. (Maana)

These responses show that the youth need government assistance in the provision of funds to complete their skills training, shelter facilities in the city, and infrastructure development and job opportunities in their hometowns so that they do not have to come to Accra to work. These findings suggest that if the government formulated and implemented policies to address the needs of these youth they would not be on the streets but would stay in their places of origin to work and pursue their goals.

Only 3.1% of the problem statements suggested a need for information or advice; one such example is Oko who needed information on sources of funding for his education:

My problem is how to get someone to pay my fees so that I can concentrate on my studies. I have two other siblings in SSS [Senior Secondary School] and knowing that there is no money at home, if I don’t work to make some money, the burden will be too much on my parents sponsoring three people in SSS. I know that if they had money, they would sponsor my education and that is why I struggle to get what I will use to pay my school fees and that is my problem. (Oko)

These results suggest that the participants have real problems, but do not express them in information terms or as an information need. However, a deeper analysis of the data reveals that the participants actually shared, received, exchanged, or looked for information in the resolution of their everyday life needs, problems, concerns or issues, implying that they do have information needs but do not generally conceptualize the problems in their everyday lives in terms of a lack of information.
The information needs associated with their everyday problems, sources of information, information-seeking behaviors, and practices are described next.

**Employment**

The youth are primarily self-employed but those who opt for alternate jobs obtain information about jobs through prospective employers, their siblings or their friends as indicated by the responses of Maana, Badua, and Kobi.

The employers come to us when we are sitting down and then we follow them to go and wash for them. (Maana)

She [sister] looked for the chop bar [local restaurant] job for me. (Badua).

When I arrived here I saw some people from my hometown here who were doing the job [garbage collection] and they introduced me to it and said if I could, I should do it. I said because I am a young boy I could do it and started it. (Kobi)

Others look for the jobs themselves as illustrated by this exchange with the interviewer:

Yes. But sometimes people hire me to be a mason labourer at their building sites and that earns me some money. (Baako)

Q. Do the people hire you or you go and look for the job?

A. I go and look for the job. (Baako)

They also received other job related information such as counseling on how to handle customers and ways of finding information from their siblings and friends as indicated by the responses of Oko and Adusa.

We talk to the person about how to be polite when dealing with clients. (Oko)

When I arrived here, my brother who is here took me round the whole day and showed me how to find my way back home. The next day, I was able to do it on my own. (Adusa)

These discussions show that in resolving their need for employment, they acquire job related information from their friends, siblings, and prospective employers or find it themselves.

**Shelter**

Most of the youth in the study have no shelter. They spend the day working. During their lunchtime they sit together under trees and in open spaces both in and around the market to eat and have some rest, and in the evening after the shops are closed, they sleep outdoors on the verandahs in front of the shops by obtaining permission from shop/store owners:

We asked permission from a lady store owner to sleep in front of her store. (Ama)

It is important for them to seek permission because of the hostility they receive from some shop owners. For example Baako indicated that some shop owners do not want them to sleep in front of their shops:

We sleep outside and the owners of the places where we sleep constantly harass and threaten us with ejection and throw stones at us. They sometimes burn our clothes in our absence. (Baako)

The shop owners do not want us to sleep in front of their shops and they maltreat us. Sometimes we come back from work and we can’t find our belongings. (Baako)

The hostilities the youth encounter from shop owners suggest that they need information about shop owners willing to give them sleeping spaces. They also need information about where their friends live so they can join them. For example Mensah called his friends to find out where they lived when he arrived in the city.
I had lived at Lapaz [a suburb of Accra] before so when I arrived, I called them on the phone and they came to take me home. (Mensah)

Mensah probably made this call by using the services of a mobile phone kiosk which are numerous in the city of Accra. These are small scale businesses operated in kiosks where customers use the mobile phones and pay per call. It is accessible to everyone including street youth.

Skills Development

Some of the study participants acquired vocational skills through apprenticeship training. The information for their training was obtained solely through face to face instruction, and observation of the master craftsman, as indicated by Joojo’s response:

No we don’t use books to learn the trade. We only use books to write down estimates and measurements of jobs to be done. We observe what the master craftsman does and do likewise. (Joojo)

On the streets they rely on themselves, their friends and siblings to learn the skills of their job. This is especially true among the shoe-shine workers who repair and polish the shoes for customers:

You learn it [shoe-shine work] here by following someone who teaches you for about two days, after which you go alone. (Mensah)
I knew how to sew shoes before coming here.

I learnt it by mending shoes at home. (Tawiah)
One of my brothers taught me [cobbling]. (Anane)

Thus, for their skills development, they rely on the master craftsman, friends, siblings, and themselves for their training information.

Health Information

The youth acquired health information such as information on STD and HIV from their teachers, friends, market women, mothers, television advertisements, and the radio:

We learnt it in school as part of the curriculum. (Joojo)
From the TV or sometimes as we walk about, they will be saying it on someone’s radio, and then we listen to it. (Sisi)
My mother told me. She said I should be careful and not play with boys because there is HIV/AIDS. (Abena)
I heard it from the market women. We hear them when they are talking about it. (Afua)
I learnt it from a schoolmate who liked going after women and is now infected with the disease. (Kwesi)

School Information

As indicated in Table 1, the participants have varied levels of education. Some of them, such as Yoofi, Adusa, and Kojo (grade 9), Oko (grade 12), and Nsiah (grade 7), were on break from ongoing schooling at the time of the data collection and were in the city working to raise money to buy school materials and pay for school related costs when school reopens. Thus, many of them had experience as students.

Analysis of the findings revealed that their sources of information for their schooling are varied, including interpersonal, print, and library sources. Kojo, Abeeku, Adusa, and Kuuku (all male participants) indicated a variety of sources used in their education. The print sources include books, pamphlets, and handouts as indicated by the following responses:

I don’t have anywhere else apart from my books. (Kojo)
When I was in school, I couldn’t get money to buy pamphlets and handouts, so I had to rely on what was taught by the teacher in class. (Abeeku)

The findings revealed that the participants who used library sources visited their school libraries to read, and borrow books for study and recreational purposes. One of the participants, Kuuku, further indicated that he also looked up words in the dictionary as he read story books from the library:

We had a library in the school so we went there to read. (Abeeku)
There is a library in the school and we are allowed to go and take books and study.
I go to pick a book to study and when I am through with it, I go for another one and then another. (Adusa)
I go and read story books from the library and as I read, I look up words from the dictionary. (Kuuku)

To learn more about their sources of school information, the participants were asked to describe what they do when they need clarification or further explanation of their assignments or course information. They identified friends, and seniors in school, siblings, and teachers:

We help ourselves a lot. If you don’t know something, another person will help you.
When we got to form two and our seniors were in form three, if we had any difficulty in solving an assignment in class, we asked our seniors for help. (Anane)
I have a sibling who explains it to me. (Yoofi)
I usually take the book to the teacher and ask him or her to explain that particular topic to me since I did not understand it when it was being taught. (Jojo)

Thus, their sources of school information are primarily interpersonal sources including teachers, friends, school seniors, and siblings. Others are print sources such as books, pamphlets, and handouts. Libraries were the least referenced by participants, only in the context of their prior life as students, not in the context of their present life on the street.

Money

For these homeless youth, the most important information need regarding money is how to manage their earnings. Since most of them have an economic goal, saving and keeping their money safe while living on the street is a problem they must solve. To this end, they receive financial advice from their friends and local microfinance agents called (in the local language) “susu” agents with whom they save their earnings, rather than in the bank. Their friends introduce them to the agent who then informs them about details of the service, as expressed by Fiifi:

I don’t know about the banks around here. All I know is the susu operator to whom my friend took me. That is where we all save when we come here. (Fiifi)

The findings reveal that the participants are well informed about the savings process as explained by Koku:

There is a card with the front ruled up to c310,000 [31GH¢ or $22] and the back also c310,000, if you are able to complete it, it amounts to c620,000 [62GH¢ or $44], he gives you c600,000 [34.29] and c20,000 [2GH¢ or $1.4] is his profit. You will have to determine how much you want to pay daily . . . . (Koku)

They also share information about their financial wellbeing especially on days without earnings in order to receive help. For example, in response to a question about how they obtained money on days without earnings, Akosua explained:

Those people who have been here for a long time, when new people come and do not get money for the day, they [the newcomers] will approach them and say, “my sister, today I did not get anything so if you have money please help me out.” (Akosua)

The youth also counsel each other on discretionary expenses such as spending money on prostitutes and girl friends as indicated by Ago and Kuuku below:

Someone advised me that if you come here and go for prostitutes, you will never make enough money to go back home because the little money you make, you will take it there. (Ago)

Because you might waste the little money you get on your girl friends and would not be able to send money home when needed or save any money. (Kuuku)

Thus, the study participants obtained financial information and advice from their friends and the microfinance agent.

Security

Their security concerns include preventing theft of their money and sexual assault as a result of their outdoor shelter for sleeping. They need information on how to keep their money secure and how to get help from their friends when they are in imminent danger. For example, Baako discussed the problem of thieves and how to protect against them:

We have no protection against them except that we are advised to keep minimal cash only for emergencies on us and save with the susu agent as and when we make the money. (Baako)

In the event of an imminent danger, such as a sexual assault, one of the female participants explained that they cry out for others to come and defend against the culprit.

Also sometimes, a boy may try to have sex with one of us and in such situations, we all gang up and beat this person up and if we can’t beat him, we cry out for others to come to our aid to catch him and beat him up. Then he does not come again. (Ama)

Again they relied on their friends for the information they needed to keep them safe and secure.

Administration of Justice

In the event of conflicts, false accusations by peers, and problems with employers, the youth rely on trusted elders, friends, self-appointed arbitrators, and Hometown Association leaders (that is, leaders of voluntary groups based on a common hometown) for counseling, support, and mediation. For example Esi described how their leaders counsel and resolve their conflicts:

Well most of us are from the same area so we know each other. We all have two leaders so if there is a problem they see to it. They will have a meeting with you and counsel you to stop because here such behaviors can bring you great trouble. (Esi)

One of the participants also explained that in the case of a false accusation, he would have to solicit the support or help of a trusted friend or an elder.
They can accuse you of stealing if you don’t have a good friend who will support you in times like this, … you will have to look for an elderly person to plead on your behalf and promise not to repeat it again. (Mensah)

Another respondent also mentioned that some of their townsmen provide counseling and mediation services for a fee.

Some of the boys from our hometown are here. When you have a problem you will tell them but they will charge you for it. If someone is pestering or harassing or wanting to pick a quarrel with you, you can go to them for help but they would ask you to pay. (Ama)

Food
The findings suggest that the youth freely share information about their living circumstances and offer support or help to those in need. For example Yoofi indicated that:

When for a reason someone is not able to work on a particular day, we are able to give money to such a person to buy food. (Yoofi)

This statement implies that they also share information about their daily access to food. They share such information with their friends or siblings: For example Kweku shared his food with his friend and Mansa’s sister gave her money to buy food on days she did not earn any money.

Respect and Fair Wages
The participants identified problems in resolving issues of fairness and respect. Sometimes they receive unfair wages for the services they render and endure verbal attacks from their customers, and feel powerless to respond, as indicated by these responses:

Yes, sometimes there are some people who refuse to pay the agreed fee and on such occasions we don’t argue with them but leave the scene. If the person says her money is not up to the fee what can you do? (Efia)

Sometimes we get insults from people we have done nothing against, and we can’t do anything about it because we came to meet them here. (Meefua)

Some adopt coping mechanisms, such as accepting this treatment as a risk associated with their job, ignoring the offense, or using it to win the favor of customers. One of the respondents stoically mentioned that:

Every job has its own problems, when we carry the load, some will give us enough money, others will pay us little money. (Akua)

Another indicated that she did not protest when she was underpaid for her services because:

Next time when she sees you, she will know that you are a good girl and she may give you another job to do. (Efia)

And in fact those who protest may risk further verbal or physical abuse, such as experienced by Adusa:

Yes I have been beaten before. I charged him [the customer] GH¢1 [67 cents] and he gave me 40Gp (27 cents) and this resulted in an argument and I ended up being beaten. (Adusa)

Participants’ sources of information are summarized in Table 4. It reveals four main categories of information sources: interpersonal, institutional, print, and media. It also shows that participants have a preference for interpersonal sources.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Everyday Life Needs
The 11 types of everyday life needs identified in the study relate to the basic needs of physiological, safety, esteem, and self-actualization/cognitive needs based on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. This finding is significant because it is inconsistent with Maslow assertion that the higher needs of self-actualization and cognition can only be pursued after the lower physiological, safety, and esteem needs have been met (Huitt, 2007). In this study the participants were pursuing these needs concurrently, supporting other critics of Maslow’s proposition such as Boeree (2006), who also notes that historically, there are several examples of renowned people who have self-actualized without meeting their lower needs. Apart from the needs for security, fair wages, shelter, and respect, which are a consequence of the homelessness of the youth, the needs for money, health, employment, vocational skills, and education are comparable to the universal needs of adolescents such as personal, social, educational, and cognitive competence, health and physical well-being, and preparation for work identified by a Carnegie Corporation (1992) report. The implication is that in spite of their homelessness, these youth are desirous of meeting their developmental goals and deserve to have the relevant information needed by all adolescents to facilitate their maturation to successful adulthood.

Information Needs
The study participants generally expressed their problems as complaints rather than as information needs. This can be ascribed to the low socio-economic status of participants as suggested by Dervin (1973). The findings from her studies of information needs in Seattle and Syracuse suggest that
individuals with higher levels of education and social status are more likely to formulate their problems as needs for information or advice than as complaints.

The findings clearly showed that the homeless youth in this study need or use information in the resolution of their everyday problems. These findings have theoretical implications. It can be proposed that, although the poor may not express their everyday problems as a need for information, they do make use of information in resolving their everyday problems.

Also the fact that the information needs identified were to satisfy basic needs including physiological, safety, esteem, and self-actualization needs strongly supports Wilson’s (2000) assertion that the ultimate goal of any search for information is to satisfy one, or more of the basic human needs. It also contributes to the debate on the meaning/definition of the term “information seeking toward the satisfaction of needs” (Information needs section, para. 12).

The study identified 11 categories of information needs; that is, employment, acquire skills, financial management/advice, health, security, shelter, food, education, administration of justice, respect, and fair wages. Fewer information needs were found than in studies of homeless young adults in a North American context. For example, a study by Woelfer and Hendry (2009) to investigate how nine service agencies organize information to support homeless young people in Seattle, WA, identified 15 categories of information needs from 91 information resources. These information needs include basic needs such as food, shelter, employment, and health also identified in the current study, but also other information need categories such as art, drugs/alcohol, event/homeless advocacy, pet care, drug use, LGBT, alliance programs, etc., which were not identified in the present study. This inconsistency can be ascribed to the situational differences between homeless youth in Ghana and North America. Studies conducted in North America, such as Guadagno, Muscanell, and Pollio (2013), Pollio, Batey, Bender, Ferguson, and Thompson (2013), Woelfer and Hendry (2010, 2011, 2012) have established that homeless youth have ready access to computers and information systems, digital artifacts, such as mobile phones and iPods, and use e-mail and social media for communication. Homeless or street youth in Ghana have no ready access to technologies such as computers. For example two of the male participants of the current study mentioned that they did not understand their ICT course because of inadequate computers for practice. There is a need for more research into the use of technology by street or homeless youth in Ghana.

Generally, unlike their North American counterparts, homeless youth in Ghana are virtually responsible for fend- ing for themselves with no direct government interventions in the form of policy or service agencies. The United States, for example, has the Run Away and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA), the purpose of which is to establish and authorize funding for support services and programs for at-risk youth including runaway and homeless youth. Some of these programs include the Basic Center Program (BCP) to provide shelter services for youth under 18 years and counseling to reunite youth with families or placement in foster care and the Transitional Living Program (TLP) to provide food and shelter, life skills, education, and employment training to help youth to acquire relevant skills to live independently (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2006). Such legislation is non-existent in Ghana. Therefore, the purpose or focus of ELIS of street youth is to satisfy their immediate or basic needs. Thus, in spite of the situational differences, the

### Table 4

Summary of Sources of Information for the Satisfaction of Information Needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of Information Needs</th>
<th>Interpersonal</th>
<th>Institutional</th>
<th>Print</th>
<th>Media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial management</td>
<td>Friends, siblings, trusted customers, ssu, or local microfinance agents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School information</td>
<td>Friends, siblings, seniors, teachers</td>
<td>Libraries</td>
<td>Books, pamphlets, lesson notes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>Friends, siblings, employers, self</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration of justice</td>
<td>Friends, parents, trusted elders, self appointed arbitrators, hometown association leaders</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>School mates, mothers, teachers, market women,</td>
<td></td>
<td>TV advertisements, radio</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills acquisition</td>
<td>Master craftsman</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security</td>
<td>Self, friends</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>Friends, siblings, self</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelter</td>
<td>Friends, siblings, shop owners</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair wages</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Downloaded by [SOAS, University of London] at 04:18 04 December 2015
findings of the current study corroborate those of other ELIS studies of homeless youth such as Alexander et al. (2005), Reid and Klee (1999), and Ensign and Panke (2002), that the information needs of homeless youth relate mainly to basic needs including food, healthcare, and money. Hersberger (2005) explains this phenomena by pointing out that persons in transitional crisis such as the homeless tend to prioritize basic needs over other information concerns.

Many of the studies of the information needs of youth reported in the literature, such as Williamson, McGregor, Archibald, and Sullivan (2007), Shenton and Dixon (2003a), and Lorenzen (2001) have been conducted in an educational setting, resulting in a one-dimensional view of them as student information-seekers. However, this study, and other studies of homeless youth such as Woelfer and Hendry (2009), Alexander et al. (2005), and Reid and Klee (1999) place them in the context of their everyday life, and shows that their needs are multi-faceted, arising from the conditions of their life on the streets, and are not simply related to their educational needs.

Sources of Information

The findings (Table 4) indicate that the sources of information for the youth are primarily interpersonal.

These are sub-categorized as family members (parents, siblings), business people (microfinance agent, market women, employers), colleagues (friends and school seniors), experts (teachers), opinion leaders (hometown association leaders, arbitrators), and members of the public (customers and elderly people). Other sources are print (books and pamphlets), institutional (libraries), and media (radio and TV) sources. It must be noted that some of the homeless youth are still in school. They come to Accra during the holidays to work to buy school-related items. For example Nsiah, a grade 7 student, was in Accra to work and earn money to buy his school uniform, a bag, sandals, books, and also save some money for lunches when school reopened. Their preference for interpersonal sources is consistent with findings of other youth information behavior studies such as Shenton and Dixon (2004), Agosto and Hughes-Hassell (2005), and Ybarra et al. (2008). The implication is that the information-seeking behaviors of participants of the study are consistent with those of other young people, in spite of their homelessness. Young people rely on other persons as primary sources mainly for convenience, according to Shenton and Dixon (2003b). Additionally, reliance on interpersonal sources often involves conversation, which is a natural human activity. Fisher, Marcoux, Miller, Sanchez, and Cunningham (2004) mention also that the reasons for interpersonal preference are familiarity and ease of communication, ease of access, and reliability.

This overwhelming reliance on interpersonal sources implies that the youth have a preference for face-to-face communication which information providers and other stakeholders must consider in designing information systems or services for them.

The findings also make clear that apart from the borrowing of books for study and for leisure from their school libraries, the library (especially the public library) did not play a major role in the ELIS of these youth, even before they became homeless. There is a need for public libraries in their communities to be proactive in reaching out to them and creating awareness about their resources especially because they are free for patronage by the youth.

Range of Sources

The range of sources available to the youth in the study was found to be limited compared to those reported by other studies. For example Shenton and Dixon (2004), Shenton (2008), and Fidel, Davis, Douglas, and Holder (1999) reported that apart from print and interpersonal sources, young people in other countries use electronic sources, such as CD-ROM and the Internet, as compared to print, library, and interpersonal sources used by the youth in the current study for their school information seeking. This implies a need for government and other stakeholders to make electronic sources available to the youth so that they benefit from the wealth of information the Internet provides. ELIS studies involving other populations also reported a wide range of sources. For example sources of information available to rural women in Botswana reported by Mooko (2005) include community welfare officers, women’s organizations, traditional doctors, church and political leaders, and the village chief, in addition to media and interpersonal sources. In spite of this limitation, youth in this study are able to meet their information needs by relying largely on their social network of friends. Based on this finding, it can be proposed that, in an environment of limited information resources people rely on their social networks to meet their information needs. This finding is supported by Woelfer and Henry’s (2011) study of homeless young people on social network sites. The study reported how homeless young people made stunning and life changing discoveries on social network sites. The study reported how homeless young people made stunning and life changing discoveries through their social networks on Facebook. For example a homeless young person (Jazz) was re-united and reconciled with his family after a case manager who was a Facebook friend communicated with Jazz’s sister on his Facebook site. Another participant (Lulu) who was abandoned as a baby searched and found her mother through Facebook. The heavy reliance on friends as information sources in the current study also has implications for information dissemination to the youth in the form of peer-to-peer education by stakeholders.

Factors That Determine Choice of Information Sources

The findings suggest that the choice of sources by study participants was based on accessibility, credibility, and convenience. The sources of information identified in the study such as friends, market women, siblings, teachers, and se-
niors are readily accessible to the youth because of proximity and their personal relationship with them. Their primary reliance on microfinance agents for saving their earnings also signals trust, convenience, and reliability. The participants’ responses indicate that they have confidence, based on experience, that the susu agent is reliable and will not cheat them. They also find using the services of the microfinance agent rather than the banks convenient because they have ready access to their money even after normal working hours as indicated by this response:

We don’t take our money to the bank, because if I need to go home right now and my money is in the bank, I won’t have access to it because they close at a certain time (Maana).

The finding that accessibility is a factor in determining choice of information source is consistent with Harris and Dewdney’s (1994) theory of information habits, which asserts that people prefer to use interpersonal sources rather than institutions or organizations in looking for information because of ease of access. Trust as determinant of choice of information source is consistent with Chatman (1999) who argued that a condition for accepting information in a small world is that the provider can be trusted or the information can easily be verified.

Modes of Information Seeking

The findings revealed four modes of information seeking by study participants. These are: active search, passive attention, passive search (Wilson, 1997), and a community approach.

Active search is information acquisition through some form of active behavior. This behavior was evident in their everyday job and school information seeking. For example, Koku actively looked for a job by asking prospective employers:

I have been asking people about masonry and those who really make shoes. (Koku)

In their school information seeking they tend to ask their friends or siblings for help with their assignments and explanation of their lesson notes as indicated by these responses:

If I come home and I don’t understand anything, I go to my friend for him to teach me. (Tawiah)
I have a sibling who explains it to me. (Yoofi)

Passive search is the acquisition of relevant information by an individual at the time when he/she is engaged in something else or another errand (Wilson, 1997). This was identified in their job seeking when employers approached the youth with job offers. For example Ajoa accepted an employer’s offer to work at a chop bar (local restaurant) during a rest hour with her friends.

In passive attention, information is acquired with no intention of looking for it (Wilson, 1997). This was evident in their media use when they acquired life and health lessons through patronage of the TV or radio as shown by Nsiah:

I learnt on TV that stealing can result in being killed by a mob, or being shot by the police. Because of this, I have vowed never to engage myself in stealing anybody’s property. (Nsiah)

A community approach to information seeking can be described as the free and voluntary sharing of information among members of a community for individual success. This approach was evident in participants’ everyday job seeking in which newcomers are provided with information about skills, work ethics, and appropriate social behavior:

We also buy a box [for the new shoe-shine work] and stock it for him to start work. He is made to follow one person round the whole day and he is shown the rudiments of the work. After this, he is left on his own to do his work. (Oko)
When you first come, you are advised that if you find a client’s money or mobile phone in a shoe you are working on, you have to give it back to the person. Don’t take anything that belongs to another person. (Tawiah)
We advise each other against womanizing, marijuana smoking, and all other forms of social vices. If you are someone who wants to make money and go back home, you should shun all these things. (Kweku)

The purposes for information sharing by study participants, i.e., skills acquisition, advice on work ethics, and appropriate social behavior, are inconsistent with those of teens in other studies. For example, a Pew Internet survey revealed that teens post information such as personal photos and videos, interests, such as, books, music, movies, relationship statuses, videos, etc., on social medial sites including You Tube and Facebook for social and entertainment reasons (Madden et al., 2013).

This community approach to information seeking is considered the most important aspect of their ELIS behavior, since there are no government interventions or support systems for homeless youth or street children in Ghana like those prevalent in most developed countries such as the United States and Canada. The youth in this study have formed a community to share information to promote their common well-being.

The Role of Social Capital in ELIS

Social capital is explained by De Graaf and Flap (1988) as the number of people a person can mobilize to support him or her with the resources at his or her disposal. The find-
ings revealed a deep sense of community among the homeless youth characterized by mutual support and care for one another, trust, and free sharing of information. In other words they rely on the social capital embedded within their community of friends to facilitate information seeking for resolving their everyday problems. This assertion is based on the fact that their friends were a significant source of information in their ELIS behaviors, which encompassed obtaining information on employment, financial management, administration of justice, food, shelter, health, skills development, security, school information, etc.

The principle of social capital is also reflected in some of the responses of participants when they were asked about the help they received from one another as indicated below:

Oh as for them if you need something, maybe money she will give it to you then when you get it, you pay back. If she also needs something she will ask you and you will also give her. That is how we help ourselves. (Maana)

If my friend does not have money to buy food, I am able to give him some money to buy food and if he is sick, I go to buy medicine for him. He also does the same thing for me. If I need anything that he has, he gives me. (Baako)

The above responses show that the homeless youth in this study help each other with the expectation that their help will be reciprocated. The sense of community revealed in the current study is consistent with that observed by Alexander et al. (2005) who also reported a sense of community among the homeless youth participants of their study in the King County area of Washington and concluded that it results in a valuable information dissemination strategy. This finding of reciprocity is also consistent with that of Coleman (1988) who explained social capital as follows: A shows B a favor and trusts that B will reciprocate this favor in the future. This favor he continued, “establishes an expectation in A and an obligation on the part of B” (p. 102).

The deep sense of community and information sharing among the youth identified in the study also contradicts the perception in the literature that youth are individual information seekers and affirms the fact that during adolescence, youth tend to work in groups and their peers become very important to them (American Psychological Association, 2002).

CONCLUSION

This study has described the everyday needs, information needs, and methods of information seeking of homeless or street youth in Ghana. These youth are neither throwaways nor runaways but are on the streets primarily as a result of poverty. Their main reason for coming to the city to endure a homeless life is to work and earn money to meet their personal needs and life goals.

The findings show that the everyday life needs of these homeless youth relate to their basic needs based on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. However, the youth pursue higher and lower needs concurrently contrary to Maslow’s assertion, and in keeping with later modifications to Maslow’s theory (Aldefer, 1972). Their information needs, such as need for information on employment, skills development, financial management or advice, health, security, shelter, and food, relate to their basic needs. Their sources of information are primarily interpersonal, especially their network of friends. Other sources are print, library, and media sources, such as TV and radio. They have a limited range of sources compared to those available to young people and other populations reported in other ELIS studies. Factors that influence their choice of sources are accessibility, credibility, and convenience. Social capital is an important feature in their ELIS behavior. Their information-seeking practices present a new mode of information seeking, the community approach. Other modes of information seeking identified in the study are active searching, passive search and passive attention.

The study made new theoretical propositions as follows:

- In an environment of limited information resources people rely on their social networks to meet their information needs.
- Although the poor may not express their everyday problems as a need for information, they need and use information in resolving their everyday problems.

The second proposition is inconsistent with Chatman’s (1996) assertion that people, who are defined as information poor perceive themselves to be devoid of any sources that might help them. This inconsistency might be ascribed to the differences in the age groups and living circumstances of the participants of the present study and Chatman’s. Participants of the present study are short-term visitors to the city and also, adolescents whose developmental characteristics include a preference for hanging out with their peers for their social development (DeMarco, 2002). Thus, they survive the challenges of their homelessness by living together in communities characterized by a culture of sharing resources, including information. On the other hand, the participants of Chatman’s (1996) study are adults who are established in their ways and live independent life which might be devoid of information sharing. These findings imply a need for more research into the ELIS behavior of the poor to verify these propositions.

There is also a need for further studies outside the European/North American context, where differing social situations and cultural values may have a significant impact on information-seeking behavior. In particular, the participants in this study differed from homeless youth in other studies in terms of the causes of their homelessness, in that they appeared to be more focused on trading short-term discomfort.
for longer-term economic security for themselves and their families.

These findings have implications for libraries and other information providers, such as for design of information services that employ peer-to-peer dissemination of information, and are readily accessible and convenient to use. Public library outreach services that would engage the youth and expose them to sources of information other than interpersonal sources would be of benefit to these youth. This kind of outreach is lacking in public libraries in Ghana and an investigation of youth services, especially services to disadvantaged youth available in public libraries, is needed in the Ghanaian context.

Although this study reports significant findings about the ELIS behaviors of the youth with implications for theory, policy, and practices relating to these youths, the main limitation is that the findings are applicable only to the 41 homeless youth who participated in the study. They may, however, be transferable to homeless youth in similar settings or the context described in the study.

This study provided a rich source of data for further analysis. Future work will include: A study of the barriers to the ELIS of urban homeless youth, theoretical interpretations of a study of ELIS behavior of urban homeless youth, an analysis of health seeking practices of homeless youth in Ghana, and media use among street youth in Ghana.

FUNDING

This study was carried out with the aid of an Anne and George Piternick Student Research Award from the School of Library, Archival and Information Studies, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada and a grant from the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada. Information on the Centre is available on the web at www.idrc.ca.

REFERENCES


**AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES**

Dr. Evelyn Markwei is a lecturer at the School of Information and Communication Studies, University of Ghana.

Professor Edie Rasmussen is a faculty member at the School of Library, Archival and Information Studies at the University of British Columbia.