

Understanding Young Adults Experiencing Homelessness Through a Qualitative Approach

Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services
2022, Vol. 103(4) 422–437
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DOI: 10.1177/10443894211042325
journals.sagepub.com/home/fis



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Abstract

This article presents a non-experimental, exploratory study of the experiences of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness in Washington, DC. Using a community-based participatory action approach, researchers conducted open-ended survey interviews with 57 participants, all of whom identified as persons of color. Findings offer insight on where youth stay most evenings, what precipitated youths' most recent experience of homelessness, strategies used to cope or survive on the streets, primary service needs, and advice from youth experiencing homelessness. The youth's family experiences were an important factor in their experiences of homelessness. Implications for social work practice, policy, and research are discussed.

Keywords

homelessness and housing, adolescents/young adulthood, transition age youth, poverty, community-based participatory action

Manuscript received: January 26, 2021; Revised: July 23, 2021; Accepted: July 31, 2021

Disposition editor: Sondra J. Fogel

Introduction

The experience of homelessness in the United States is one of the most persistent social issues of contemporary society. In 2019, approximately 568,000 individuals in the United States experienced homelessness on a single night (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Community Planning and Development, 2020). Unaccompanied youth between 18 and 24 years of age are a distinct and particularly vulnerable and growing subset of the larger population experiencing homelessness (District of Columbia Interagency Council on Homelessness [DCICH], 2017; Rahman, 2015; Rahman et al., 2015). Unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness face multiple barriers to successfully transitioning into

adulthood including poverty, victimization, disconnection from families of origin, unstable housing, and health risks that result from residing in dangerous and unstable environments (Bender et al., 2018; Metropolitan Washington Council of Government [MWCOG], 2020; Petering et al., 2017; Wenzel et al., 2012).

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These numbers are ever-increasing in light of the COVID-19 pandemic (Gabriel et al., 2021), the associated downturn in the economy (Silliman Cohen & Bosk, 2020), and the growing precarity of housing among single people and families living on the edge of homelessness (Coughling et al., 2020).

Understanding the situation of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness offers valuable perspective to policy makers and social service providers. This article presents the findings from an exploratory study of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness in Washington, DC. The qualitative study was initiated by a community partner who approached one of the authors to ask her to undertake a study to help the agency better understand the experience of youth who were experiencing homelessness, given the growing numbers of young people encountered by their street outreach teams. In this article, the authors report findings about where youth actually stay when experiencing homelessness, what precipitated their current experience of homelessness, which coping strategies they use, and what services they need.

This article will first review the literature on homelessness among youth populations, including causes and risks. Next, the article will explain the methodology and report the study's findings. Finally, there will be a discussion of the implications for social work clinical, community, and policy practice impacting unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness.

Literature Review

The size and scope of homelessness among unaccompanied youth between the ages of 18 and 24, sometimes referred to as "transition-age youth" (TAY) (Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness, 2018), is challenging to describe with precision due to the transient and unstable nature of their living situations. More than half of TAY who experience homelessness are unsheltered (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Community Planning and Development, 2020), and thus experience homelessness

in a variety of settings including on the streets, abandoned buildings, parks and alleyways, and in temporary and unstable settings such as the couches of friends and strangers (DCICH, 2017; Trawver & Aguiniga, 2016; Zerger et al., 2008), as opposed to sheltered in transitional housing programs or emergency shelters (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Community Planning and Development, 2020). This makes it extremely difficult to capture the exact scope of homelessness among TAY, who are considered the population to be most likely underreported in annual point-in-time counts (Trawver & Aguiniga, 2016). The absence of an infrastructure, as noted by the nationwide shortage in shelter space for youth space and developmentally appropriate programs for TAY, also makes it difficult to find them and include them in the official counts (DCICH, 2017; Trawver & Aguiniga, 2016). Furthermore, unaccompanied youth are experiencing homelessness for significant periods of time. Studies report that unaccompanied youth spend anywhere from 2 months to 8 years at a time experiencing homelessness (Edidin et al., 2012).

The experience of homelessness among unaccompanied TAY is a growing problem in the District of Columbia (DCICH, 2017). The 2020 Point-in-Time (PIT) count of persons experiencing homelessness conducted by the COG Homeless Services Planning and Coordinating Committee found that 485 TAY experienced homelessness on a single night in January 2019 (MWCOG, 2020). This figure represents an approximately 141% increase of homelessness among TAY in the District since 2016 (MWCOG, 2020). This increase of youth experiencing homelessness in the District reflects a national trend in the increase of youth experiencing homelessness (DCICH, 2017).

Structural and Familial Factors of Youth Homelessness

Homelessness among unaccompanied TAY is caused by both structural and familial factors (DCICH, 2017; Pedersen et al., 2016; Zerger et al., 2008). One of the most pervasive causes

of homelessness among youth is that of poverty; resulting in lack of necessary resources such as food, clothing, and stable housing (DCICH, 2017; Rahman, 2015; Rahman et al., 2015; Toolis & Hammack, 2015; Zerger et al., 2008). The lack of affordable housing across the United States is a primary cause of homelessness overall. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition (2019), only 19 of every 100 homes are affordable and available for extremely low-income households throughout the nation. Transition-age youth typically do not have access to educational or employment prospects to afford even a basic one-bedroom apartment in most jurisdictions. If they are part of a family unit when they become homeless, many youth are forced to separate from their families due to shelter restrictions which do not admit all ages and genders reflected in families (DCICH, 2017; Rahman, 2015; Rahman et al., 2015; National Alliance to End Homelessness [NAEH], 2015).

Familial breakdowns or disruption in the family system also contribute to homelessness among youth (DCICH, 2017; Edidin et al., 2012). Youth are forced out of their homes due to the following familial challenges: lack of adequate financial resources, death of a primary caregiver, mental ill health or behavioral issues exemplified by the youth, and cultural expectations which dictate that a youth over the age of 18 must live self-sufficiently (Berman et al., 2015; DCICH, 2017; NAEH, 2015; Schmitz & Tyler, 2015; Tyler & Schmitz, 2013). Some youth choose to leave home due to relational conflicts, the occurrence of physical or sexual abuse, or substance abuse existing in the family structure (Bender et al., 2018; NAEH, 2015; Schmitz & Tyler, 2015; S. J. Thompson et al., 2016; Tyler & Schmitz, 2013; U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness [USICH], 2015a). Other youth run away from home once becoming victim to rape or physical abuse by an intimate partner of a caregiver; often resulting in the rejection of that youth by their primary caregiver (Schmitz & Tyler, 2015).

Lack of support in exiting from foster care and incarceration also contributes to homelessness among youth (Bender et al., 2015;

DCICH, 2017; MWCOG, 2019; Tyler & Schmitz, 2013). It is estimated that one in five, or 4,800 of the 24,000 youth who age out of the foster care system each year will experience homelessness (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Community Planning and Development, 2018). Of these youth, at least 25% will experience homelessness between 2 and 4 years of exiting foster care (Tam et al., 2016; Zerger et al., 2008). Youth with a history of incarceration are at risk for experiencing homelessness; an estimated that 26% of youth between the ages of 18 and 25 with a history of incarceration experience homelessness (Tam et al., 2016). Furthermore, youth having experienced foster care and incarceration have a higher vulnerability to substance abuse, mental and physical health issues, and victimization once on the streets in comparison with their peers experiencing homelessness who have not had a history of involvement with these systems (Bender et al., 2015; Tam et al., 2016; Tyler & Melander, 2010).

Youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer/questioning (LGBTQIA), an emerging sub-population of homeless youth of which 30% to 40% of homeless youth self-identify, are pushed into homelessness upon disclosing their sexual identity to families, foster care homes, communities, and friends (DCICH, 2017; Keuroghlian et al., 2014; Maccio & Ferguson, 2016; USICH, 2015a). In some samples, studies report that more than 40% of LGBTQIA youth are forced out of their homes due to their sexual orientation or gender identity (Maccio & Ferguson, 2016).

Increased Risks for Homeless Youth

Approximately one third to one half of homeless youth are at risk for experiencing and witnessing victimization including various forms of abuse, exploitation, and violence (Bender et al., 2014, 2018; DCICH, 2017; Tyler & Beal, 2010; USICH, 2015a). A study by Bender et al. (2014) reports that 100% of youth aged 18–24 years ($n = 145$) endured at least one traumatic event while experiencing

homelessness such as experiencing the sudden death of a close friend or loved one, witnessing a severe assault, being physically assaulted by an acquaintance or stranger, witnessing a drug overdose, or being threatened with death or serious harm. The likelihood of a youth to endure or witness a traumatic event while experiencing homelessness is directly linked to longer lengths of time in homelessness (Bender et al., 2018; Rahman et al., 2015; S. J. Thompson et al., 2016; Trawver & Aguiniga, 2016).

Sexual exploitation and trafficking are also risks for youth who are experiencing homelessness (Bender et al., 2014, 2018; DCICH, 2017; Rahman, 2015; Rahman et al., 2015). Tyler and Beal (2010) found significant correlations between experiences of sexual exploitation and youth who identify as females, are of a sexual minority, have an unkept appearance, engage in panhandling, or have friends who trade sex for material needs. Studies have found that over 30% of youth who experience homelessness engage in survival sex to maintain basic needs such as shelter and are two to three times more likely to experience rape and sexual assault than their housed peers (Rahman et al., 2015).

Another risk consequence of youth experiencing homelessness includes an increased likelihood of engagement in criminal activity to survive (DCICH, 2017; Ferguson, Bender, Thompson, Xie, & Pollio, 2012). In comparison with housed peers, youth experiencing homelessness have been found to have greater involvement in theft, drug activity, and property offenses; resulting in multiple arrests and even incarceration (Ferguson, Bender, Thompson, Xie, & Pollio, 2012; Rahman, 2015). In some samples, youth aged 18–24 years have reported an average of 6.5 arrests within a 3.5-year span of experiencing homelessness (Wachter et al., 2015). Other studies indicate that 61% of male youth and 39% of female youth have experienced police involvement while being on the streets (Wachter et al., 2015).

Youth experience challenges in gaining steady employment and income generation when experiencing homelessness due to fac-

tors such as drug addiction, lack of adult role models, transience, and pressure to immerse in street culture for survival (Ferguson, Bender, Thompson, Maccio, & Pollio, 2012; MWCOG, 2019). Instead, many youth turn to illicit activities such as panhandling, drug dealing, and prostitution for economic survival (Jennings et al., 2015; Rahman, 2015). In one study ($n = 52$), 69% of 17- to 24-year-old African American youth experiencing homelessness in the Baltimore, Maryland, and Washington, DC, areas reported being unemployed (Jennings et al., 2015). These youth reported the following reasons as challenges to maintaining reliable employment: insufficient pay from employment, weaknesses in education translating to meaningful work opportunities, and lack of financial mentors (Jennings et al., 2015). Youth also experience challenges in completing high school in addition to securing higher or continuing education (Crutchfield et al., 2016; DCICH, 2017; Pedersen et al., 2016).

Severe substance use is also a risk factor for youth experiencing homelessness (DCICH, 2017; Eddin et al., 2012; Pedersen et al., 2016; Petering et al., 2017). In their study, R. G. Thompson and Hasin (2011) determined that one third of youth aged 18–21 years experiencing homelessness ($n = 424$) had a history of drug abuse and were three to four times more likely to have an alcohol disorder than their housed peers. Additional risks of homelessness for youth include mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, suicide ideation; physical health risks including asthma, tuberculosis, diabetes, and hepatitis; and intimate partner violence (Bender et al., 2014; DCICH, 2017; Pedersen et al., 2016; Petering et al., 2017; USICH, 2015a). Youth who identify as LGBTQIA are at greater risk for mental health and substance abuse issues, sexually transmitted diseases, suicidality, physical and sexual assault, as well as sexual trafficking than their cis-peers (DCICH, 2017; Keuroghlian et al., 2014; Zerger et al., 2008).

Youth experiencing homelessness endure social stigmatization from family members, caregivers, and even professionals (DCICH,

2017). Youth report feeling a lack of power over their lives as they are often excluded from decision-making processes made by professionals which dictate youths' futures (Rahman et al., 2015). Youth are often judged with negative stereotypes; labeled as unmotivated, unruly, broken, or automatically assumed to be dealing drugs (Bender et al., 2007; S. J. Thompson et al., 2016; Toolis & Hammack, 2015).

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic adds additional risk factors for youth experiencing homelessness. John Burton Advocates for Youth (2020) has identified COVID-19 risks and impacts for youth experiencing homelessness. Youth who are unsheltered have less access to showers and sinks and less control over social distancing practices, which makes them vulnerable to contracting and spreading the virus. Youth experiencing homelessness more often have underlying health conditions such as asthma which is a risk factor for COVID-19. Nationwide, youth who are experiencing homelessness are disproportionately Black, which is a risk factor for COVID-19 hospitalization. Also, youth experiencing homelessness are at risk for severe outcomes when contracting COVID-19 because they are much less likely to access necessary health care services (John Burton Advocates for Youth, 2020).

There is a growing literature on the risk factors and particular vulnerability of youth who are experiencing homelessness, as well as an increase in this subset of the population experiencing homelessness in Washington, DC and throughout the United States. This article reports on a research study of the experiences of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness in Washington, DC, which offers context to causes and risk factors identified in the literature. The primary purpose of the study was to fill gaps in local knowledge about the context for youth experiencing homelessness based on a request by a primary street outreach agency observing an increase in youth on the streets and a desire to advocate for and develop interventions that met their needs. The research partners also wanted to situate the DC-experience into the national

context for homelessness experienced by transition-aged youth.

Method

This study used a non-experimental qualitative survey research design (Julien, 2012) to conduct in-person individual interviews with 57 unaccompanied youth, between the ages of 18 and 30, experiencing homelessness in Washington, DC. This article reports on the findings from the open-ended survey interviews.

To conduct this study, a research team composed of one faculty member and six social work graduate students at The Catholic University of America (Catholic University) partnered with Pathways to Housing DC (Pathways) a nonprofit, community-based agency which provides street outreach to persons who are experiencing homelessness in Washington, DC. The Pathways outreach teams had observed that the population of people living on the streets was getting younger, and they wanted to better understand the experiences that contributed to homelessness among this younger population. They also wanted to hear from young adults themselves about the specific services that would best support them in getting off the streets and into stable housing.

The research study was conducted as part of a graduate course on homelessness. The target sample size was 30 interviews, five interviews per student, in an attempt to strike the balance between saturation and student learning experiences. However, students were invited to conduct more interviews within the 3-week timeframe allotted for data collection to gain more research practice experience. Due to the enthusiasm of the students and the community partner, the target was exceeded by 27 interviews. In addition to being trained in data collection and using the survey instrument, the students were also required to complete Human Subjects ethics training. This study was approved by Catholic University's Institutional Review Board.

Following a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach, the Catholic University research team and Pathways part-

nered to design and conduct this research project to explore the general demographics and experiences of unaccompanied youth living on the streets of Washington, DC. Pathways co-designed the survey instrument, they helped train the data collection team, they reviewed and commented on the findings from the analysis prior to publishing the final report, and were present and provided space for a community-wide presentation on the findings. Their close partnership throughout the study increased the trustworthiness and rigor of the research process, and the relevance of the findings.

The rigor of the analysis was also enhanced by embedding data analysis into the graduate course. For example, all of the students were required to analyze the data from the interviews they conducted using a standardized tool. Students sent their data analysis to the professor in addition to the raw data. In addition, the professor and the PhD student independently analyzed data from all 57 surveys and met two to three times to compare quantitative findings and to distill themes. The analysis of the five MSW students was considered in the distillation of themes identified by the professor and PhD student. A fuller discussion of pedagogical strategies used in this course are the focus of a forthcoming publication.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study consists of a non-random, purposive sample of 57 participants. Based on recommendations from the Pathways community partners, the sample frame included any adult between the ages of 18 and 30 who was experiencing homelessness in Washington, DC. This sample attended to the need for ethical considerations of research on legal adults over the age of 18. One 32-year-old person was included in the study due to his affiliation and strong reciprocated bond with a young adult community living near Union Station. The University research team interviewed 57 unaccompanied youth who were experiencing homelessness during a three-week period in the fall of 2016. Based on their extensive prac-

tice with youth experiencing homelessness, the Pathways staff trained the research team on how to identify and approach young adults who were potential participants. After being approached by a research team member, participants completed a written informed consent process before the interview. In total, 23 interviews were conducted standing in the streets around Union Station, the Martin Luther King Library, and the Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC. Fourteen interviews were conducted at the Monday night drop-in program at Sasha Bruce, another local social service organization, located in the Chinatown neighborhood. The remaining 20 interviews were conducted at the Sasha Bruce daytime drop-in program located in another area of the city. Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes, and participants were given a \$10 gift card for participating in the study. Very few people turned down the opportunity to participate in an interview, although the team did not count refusals.

The research team created a survey that included basic demographic questions and also elicited open-ended, qualitative responses around six primary areas: (1) where participants currently stay, (2) what precipitated their most recent episode of homelessness, (3) what life looked like when they were stably housed, (4) strategies they use to cope or survive, (5) their primary service needs, and (6) the single most important thing that would help them find a stable home. Because of the short answer responses and limited response time, this was considered a survey interview rather than an in-depth interview.

The general demographic information collected in the survey was entered into an Excel spreadsheet to tabulate descriptive statistics. The response to each open-ended question on the qualitative survey was noted by the interviewer and recorded by hand with pen and paper during the interview and then written up in detail in a word document after the day's interviews were completed. The open-ended survey responses were reviewed by each of the first two authors, who assigned open codes to the responses and then collapsed them into thematic categories. For example, answers to

Table 1. Participant Demographics (*N* = 57).

Average age	22	Ever in foster care?	
Gender		Yes	22
Men	37	No	35
Women	18	Ever incarcerated?	
No answer	2	Yes	33
Average time in homelessness	3.3 years	No	24
How many times homeless		LGBTQ status	
First time	27	Yes	7
Second time	5	No	46
More than twice	2	Unknown	4
On and off	21	Race	
Have children?		African American	41
Yes	16	Latina/o	2
No	37	Mixed	10
Unknown	4	Other	6
Are children in your care?			
Yes	3		
No	13		

Note. LGBTQ = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer/questioning.

the question “What do you consider to be your primary service needs?” were grouped into codes such as “Money” and “Healthcare.” Participant Responses “cash,” “Social security income,” and “help saving money” were all included under the code “Money.” The trustworthiness of the analysis was enhanced through in-person reconciliation of any differences in the two researchers’ individual coding schemes.

Findings

This section reports the demographic profile and findings of the open-ended survey interviews regarding the participants’ experiences of homelessness, the factors leading to their current situation, and their ideas about how to best serve the needs of young adults experiencing this crisis.

The participants included various genders, racial and ethnic identities, and parental statuses. Table 1 includes the demographic profile of study participants. The ages of participants ranged from 18 to 32, with an average age of 22. One 32-year-old person, who is outside of the 18–30 parameter, was included in the study due to his affiliation with

a young adult community. In terms of gender, 37 participants identified as men, 18 as women, and two declined to answer the question. Seven participants identified as belonging to the LGBTQIA community. The majority of participants (41) identified as African American, 10 reported being of mixed ethnicity, two identified as Latina/o, and six preferred to be classified as “other,” but none identified as White. Some participants selected multiple categories for their race.¹ Sixteen of the participants reported having children. Of those with children, ten were men and six were women. Three of the 16 parents had their children in their care: two women and one man.

Twenty-two of the participants reported a history of having been in foster care, and 33 reported having been incarcerated at some point in their lives. Participants reported having experienced homelessness between 4 days and 15 years; however, the average length of time experiencing homelessness among the 57 participants was 3.3 years. Twenty-seven participants reported that this was their first-time experiencing homelessness. Five reported that it had been their second time, and 21 reported experiencing homelessness “on and off” for many years.

Where Unaccompanied Young Adults Spend the Night

When asked where they stay most evenings, 20 participants reported that they slept on the streets overnight, mentioning specifically the locales of Union Station, the Verizon Center, and a variety of public parks. Of the participants who reported regularly sleeping outside, many explained that they do so in the company of friends to be able to protect one other.

While acknowledging the shelters as an option, several participants expressed concerns that the available shelters were neither safe nor clean places to stay. Many participants shared that they only resort to shelters during extreme weather conditions. One participant mentioned that “the vibe is wrong” in shelters. One participant mentioned that the shelter hours were inflexible and unaccommodating. One participant expressed: “they kick you out early and their schedule doesn’t fit with mine.”

Ten participants reported sleeping at the homes of family and friends such as a cousin, adopted grandmother, aunt, friend, or mother. Yet even when staying with friends, participants expressed feeling vulnerable, as one youth said:

If it’s not your real blood family, they can put you out whenever they want. They can want money from you. They can steal from you. They say they can take your shit. They say that since you’re living in their house, things you have [you] gotta share. Until you get fed up and leave.

Many participants reported that they had no regular place to stay, reporting that they sleep in a variety of locales such as at port-opots, late night restaurants, hotel lobbies, laundromats, community rooms in apartment buildings, building hallways, bus stations, trains, “trap houses,” hospitals, and jails, “fluctuating between hotels, outside, friend’s house, grandfather’s truck, with friends or in a shelter.” Regardless of where individuals reported staying, the sense of uncertainty was a common thread.

Most Recent Experience of Homelessness

The participants were also asked, “What situation precipitated your most recent experience of homelessness?” The findings highlight that the experience of homelessness for the youth in this study was related to negative experiences with their biological or foster family. Twenty-one participants said they were “kicked out” of their family home. There were a variety of scenarios associated with these experiences including, coming out as gay, pregnant, or causing pregnancy. One woman reported being raped by her mother’s boyfriend and the mother put her out as a result. Several young adults reported having issues with anger that caused them to get kicked out by their family.

Ten of the participants left their homes by their own choice. Of these, three individuals left due to sexual or physical abuse perpetrated by a parent or a parent’s boyfriend. Several participants reported feeling unsupported by and a burden to the household. For example, two participants left their family homes due to feeling that the house was too crowded. As a result, they wanted to give their siblings more room and felt it would be better if they were not there.

Several participants (5) reported that their experience of homelessness was caused by the death of a parent or grandparent they had been living with. Each participant in this situation lost their home due to not being able to afford the rent. In one case, a participant reported running away from her home when, after her mother died, her mother’s surviving boyfriend continued to sell drugs in the house, resulting in an unsafe environment for that youth. Other participants became homeless when they or a parent lost their job. In some cases, the job loss created a condition where the family had to separate to find shelter or access services.

Five participants reported that their episode of homelessness was caused by being released from prison without a secure place to stay. Three participants specifically mentioned aging out of foster care “without a

plan.” Three participants reported having started college, but then were forced to drop out of school due to not having the funds they needed to continue. In these cases, their parents could not take them back into the home, and they began experiencing homelessness. Of the 57 participants, only four mentioned long-standing histories of experiencing homelessness. Although only one participant mentioned victimization as a contributing factor to their experience of homelessness, several participants indicated that sexual abuse, rape, and physical abuse were parts of their life experiences. Family—biological and foster—crises overwhelmingly caused the participants’ current experience of homelessness.

Coping Strategies

Participants in this study reported a variety of strategies to cope or survive while living on the streets or in unstable housing. Twenty-three participants described relying on friends or family for a variety of supports, such as occasional meals, showers, or a place to stay. Eighteen participants reported accessing available social services. Of these several mentioned the Sasha Bruce social service agency specifically, and how important the drop-in center is to them in terms of offering support and structure for their lives. Others mentioned showers, shelters, and meals offered by providers in addition to participating in free programs available throughout the city. Sixteen participants expressed that they did what they had to do to survive, that is, to “just get by.” Of these 16, six participants reported stealing or selling drugs. One participant mentioned specifically using “weed to ease my mind from doing something crazy.” Another participant mentioned being “creative about finding places to sleep.”

Many participants mentioned engaging in artistic endeavors such as listening to music, attending free festivals, singing, dancing, drawing, writing poetry, or reading as important coping strategies, and others engaged in efforts to stay healthy by playing basketball, working out, and eating well. Twelve participants talked about the importance of continu-

ing to set goals for themselves to maintain hope for the future. Some of these goals included finding housing and employment, reuniting with children, or “becoming an entrepreneur,” and those who maintained employment expressed that having a job kept them focused.

Another important coping strategy was relying on faith. Participants noted the importance of prayer and reading the Bible to help them survive, and one person said “God keeps me alive.” Other coping strategies were trying to keep a positive attitude, and not letting their current situation get them down because something could be waiting for them right around the corner.

Sources of Support

When participants were asked, “What is the most significant source(s) of support you have right now?” 26 identified friends as the most significant sources of support while living on the streets, including friends they lived with on the street who provided support and safety on a day-to-day basis. Some participants also mentioned staying from time-to-time with friends who are housed who sometimes give them a place to sleep, a meal, or provide other necessities. Friends were also available to talk by phone when they felt down. Several participants described support given by family members as similar to what friends provided, that is, an occasional meal, bed, and listening ear, and three participants mentioned that all they had was themselves saying “I just deal with it” on my own, or “I just go day-to-day and keep my head above water.”

Sixteen participants mentioned social services, particularly the Sasha Bruce Drop-in Center and, specifically, the care and attention of its director. Other social services mentioned as important were shelter and food stamps. And echoing some of the coping strategies noted above, eight participants mentioned faith and spirituality, others mentioned arts and entertainment, and others noted that earning money was their most significant support.

Despite finding some support through friends and family, several participants

expressed a sense of isolation, and sometimes saw others as potential hazards or impediments. One participant shared:

If I'm your friend and I know you're homeless, I wouldn't just let you stay on the street. When you're homeless, friends don't invite you to dinner or invite you to stay over. [And] when you have money they want you to spend it on them or with them.

Services Needed

When asked, "What would be the single most important thing the City or service provider could do to help you find a stable home?" 39 participants stated the need for more affordable housing. In addition to more affordable housing, participants also expressed a need for help navigating the housing process, resulting in a faster and smoother route to housing. Several youth mentioned specific ways to obtain housing such as making vouchers or the rapid-rehousing program more available to them, improving shelters, or converting abandoned buildings into affordable housing. Generally, participants articulated that more funding needs to be directed toward affordable housing for their age group. Several participants expressed frustration that the housing support that does exist is not accessible to their demographic. One participant felt that housing assistance was only geared toward people who have a mental illness or some kind of disability. One participant stated, "People like me who actually work and try to improve ourselves never get the help we need to get our lives in order." In addition, many participants expressed frustration at the length of time it takes to secure housing. Many feel that the process is very confusing and that there is limited availability of housing to begin with. Participants expressed a desire for a range of housing options that included a supervised housing program that provided structure, developed skills, and prepared, connected, and supported young adults in employment. Others expressed a desire for vouchers to be able to afford their own independent apartment or single room. One participant,

who was pregnant, expressed a desire for more group homes where whole families could live together and support one another.

Nineteen participants also cited the need for employment, job training, or job supports as the single most important thing to assist them in ending their experience of homelessness. Of these 19, one participant implored "just take a chance on me and give me a job opportunity." Other participants expressed the need for more support services such as counseling and case management as the most important thing to get them out of homelessness. Participants shared the need for programs where the providers could "help me rebuild by life" or where they could find a "good social worker to tell me what to do." Many of these young adults offered specific praise for one agency's day program yet expressed frustration with other programs. One participant expressed, "Service providers should put more effort into actually helping you and working with you. They should try to get to know you and understand you." Another participant said: "Providers should stop judging clients based off how they look. Providers need to hire people who are passionate about their work. A lot of the people just don't care."

Some participants said education was the single most important thing they needed to combat the experience of homelessness. These participants felt that the ability to get their General Educational Development certificate, to enroll in college, or get help preparing a resume or job application would result in a greater chance to find a job and secure their own housing. The majority of these participants expressed a desire to work and support themselves. Several of these participants talked about the discrimination they experienced in seeking employment, based on race, disability, or appearance. Other participants described frustration with being denied employment and benefits because they could not produce the proper documentation.

A range of other primary service needs were also identified by participants with regard to assisting transition aged youth in navigating the experience of homelessness. When asked, "What do you consider to be

your primary service needs?” participants mentioned the need for help with clothing and basic necessities such as shoes, transportation, cosmetics, personal hygiene items, and a phone. One participant shared that it was humiliating to get hand-me-down clothes. He would rather get gift cards so he can pick out clothes that are “right for me.” Other participants reported the need for better access to food, meals, water, and food stamps; and still others identified the need to access mental health therapy and health care. While none of the participants reported serious mental illness, many of them disclosed experiences of trauma, for example, rape, sexual assault, physical assault, emotional abuse and other tragic life events such as the death of family members and loss of homes, jobs, and supports. Few mentioned currently receiving mental health counseling to help them heal and to develop strategies for moving forward. Some of the participants with children mentioned assistance with child-care or reunifying with their children as their primary service need.

Discussion

The findings from this study add to the knowledge base around the situation of youth experiencing homelessness and underscore the issues of housing, employment, as well as social and emotional support as key for youth experiencing homelessness. The study also adds to the local knowledge about the experience of young people in Washington, DC, who are experiencing homelessness. The findings from this study support the core outcomes listed in the 2013 Federal Framework to End Youth Homelessness: stable housing; permanent connections; education/employment; and social-emotional well-being (USICH, 2013). These core outcomes are also noted in the literature on structural and social factors that contribute to youth homelessness. The participants in this study identified stable housing as their primary need and also expressed an openness to a range of housing models including apartments, congregate-living arrangements, and permanent supportive

options. A range of options for youth coming out of homelessness are benchmarks for communities to track in their efforts to end youth homelessness, and are identified as best practices in ending homelessness experiences for youth (USICH, 2018). The second most important need voiced by participants was the desire for jobs and employment support. One respondent who was employed mentioned that their employment status was an important factor in maintaining mental health and hope. Noting the high rates of unemployment among youth experiencing homelessness, Slesnick et al. (2018) found that employment is linked to more stable housing and mental health among youth.

In addition to the structural factors that cause youth homelessness, the literature identifies disruptions to the family system as another contributing factor for youth homelessness. The youth in this study described family disruptions as a precipitating factor for their current experience of homelessness including physical and sexual abuse, significant family conflict, death of a family member, loss of job by a head-of-household, and poverty. Issues of trauma and the need for mental health care and age-appropriate spaces were also noted by the youth and those are also core findings in the TAY literature.

This study also surfaced areas that need additional examination. Study participants demonstrated a great deal of resilience through healthy coping strategies (e.g., goal-setting, healthy activities, faith, and employment). A deeper examination of the cultivation of these strengths, strategies, and resilience would enrich the literature. While the literature addresses the role of stigma and discrimination experienced by individuals due to their homeless status, the role of stigma with transition-age youth needs more exploration.

Limitations

It is important to note several limitations to this study. First of all, data were collected from a convenience sample of young adults who were found through street outreach methods and interviewing participants at

drop-in centers. In addition, the sample size was 57, which represents only 11% of the 2020 transition-age youth count in Washington, DC. Both of these sampling issues raise questions about the generalizability of the findings beyond the DC-area. Furthermore, this sampling method did not yield significant participation from LGBTQIA youth, and youth exiting from foster care or incarceration. Some of the participants had those experiences, but the literature reflects much higher percentages of those experiences than what was found in this study. In addition, none of the data collectors spoke other languages besides English so that limited the data collection team's ability to engage youth whose primary language was something other than English. Finally, this study reflected a community-based participatory research approach, but the community partners who were engaged in each phase of the research process did not include any youth currently experiencing homelessness. The absence of youth research partners diminishes the model as a fully CBPR approach, and may have implications for the who, how, and what of the study.

Despite these limitations, the findings support other research examining the causes and consequences of the homeless experience among transition-age youth, and the insights and suggestions among the participants reflect many of the recommendations offered by the USICH, and NAEH, and social scientists for ending youth homelessness. While additional development to create culturally and age-appropriate interventions for this population should be prioritized, also needed are significant investments in housing, employment, and mental health care.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Social workers play a leading role in service provision, community outreach, and policy creation when it comes to individuals experiencing homelessness. Social workers also are integral to the four critical interventions identified to address youth experiencing homelessness: (1) Prevention, (2) Early Intervention/Crisis Response, (3) Family Intervention, and

(4) Appropriately Tailored Housing Options (NAEH, 2015). The findings from this study echo the need for these four core elements to end the experience of homelessness for youth, and also inform the following recommendations for housing, employment and education, and social services to address the needs of youth who are experiencing homelessness and who are therefore at risk for mental health crises, physical health challenges, and intimate partner violence (Bender et al., 2014; DCICH, 2017; Pedersen et al., 2016; Petering et al., 2017; USICH, 2015b).

Social workers engaged in policy practice must create a variety of affordable housing options for youth experiencing homelessness. This includes short and long-term housing options that range from therapeutic crisis beds for those needing immediate response while escaping a traumatic event to transitional housing options focused on employment and mental health to long-term vouchers where young adults can live independently and permanently. Social workers engaged in case management and advocacy work should create supportive employment opportunities for young adults who have little to minimal work experience. This includes offering pre-employment skills (resume writing, interviewing, completing job applications) and cultivating relationships with prospective employers who are interested in and willing to "take a chance" on the young adults and give them a supportive employment experience, and connecting young adults to those employers. Additional GED and apprenticeship or certificate programs that prepare young adults for existing jobs with good wages would benefit this population. Drop-in centers that are developmentally and culturally appropriate can serve as entry points for advancing education, job skills, mental health recovery, and social connectedness. Drop-in centers could also be a good venue for obtaining important documentation such as state IDs, social security cards, driver's licenses, medical records and birth certificates.

Finally, although this exploratory study contributes to understanding situations of youth experiencing homelessness in Washington, DC,

it also highlights the need for further research to address this growing issue in the United States. In this study, respondents most commonly reported that a family conflict precipitated their current episode of homelessness. This is well-documented in the literature and calls for more attention to research examining strategies focused on shoring up families and communities to strengthen social bonds within and outside the family. Some youth also mentioned racism and discrimination as contributing to their experiences of homelessness and the loneliness and isolation associated with being in a stigmatized and targeted group. Additional research on the role of racism and implicit bias in helping youth exit the experience of homelessness is needed. Since there is such a strong correlation between foster care and youth who are experiencing homelessness, research examining how racism and implicit bias within foster care systems lead to experiences of homelessness among youth of color who age out of the foster care systems are necessary.

Conclusion

This qualitative study of 57 young adults experiencing homelessness adds to the growing literature on this underserved population. As a CBPR project, it adds to the local knowledge about young adults experiencing homelessness, a relevancy requirement important for this methodology. The findings in this study also echo the literature and best practice models that prioritize housing, employment, education, and social connections as essential factors to prevent and end youth homelessness. The study findings also surface the resilience, inner resources, and strength of young adults, and point to the importance of community for survival on the streets. As communities continue to create and refine their plans to end homelessness, strategies specific to culturally addressing the needs and hopes of young adults are critical to include.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Note

1. Selection of multiple race categories accounts for why the numbers in the “race” category add up to more than 57.

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