



Using cell phones for data collection: Benefits, outcomes, and intervention possibilities with homeless youth



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ABSTRACT

While many homeless youth use cell phones to stay socially connected, and maintaining positive social ties can contribute to pathways out of homelessness, little is known about how using cell phones for data collection can improve these young people's lives. We conducted baseline and follow-up interviews with 150 homeless youth as well as provided them with a cell phone for 30 days to gather daily data using short message service (SMS) surveying. This paper examines youths' opinions about study participation and how they used the cell phone. Results revealed that youth liked participating in the study because the SMS texting portion, for example, made them feel that someone still cared about them, prompted them to self-reflect on their life, and allowed them to make a difference (e.g. educating the public about homelessness). Despite numerous benefits of study participation, improvements that youth discussed for future studies included changing the format of our text questions to allow for explanations and the use of higher quality phones. In terms of study phone usage, youth reported using the phone to schedule appointments, contact employers, and to keep in touch with family and friends. Finally, we highlight ways in which cell phones via SMS could be used with homeless youth to provide informational resources along with educational and employment opportunities, all of which are important intervention strategies in improving life situations for this population.

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1. Introduction

Recent estimates show that as many as 2.5 million children in the United States experience homelessness on a yearly basis (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2014). Many of these young people run away or are pushed out of their homes due to family conflict, abuse, and neglect (Tyler & Cauce, 2002), and then experience further deleterious outcomes while on the street, including victimization (Tyler, Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Cauce, 2004), substance misuse (Hadland et al., 2011) and poor mental health (Brown, Begun, Bender, Ferguson, & Thompson, 2015). Moreover, homeless youth who spend more time on their own report decreased family support (Bao, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2000). Though social support is integral to enhancing homeless youth's sense of well-being (Barczyk, Thompson, & Rew, 2014), it is difficult for them to stay in touch with family and friends, especially for those who do not own a working cell phone. For homeless young people who often feel lonely and depressed (Brown et al., 2015), having daily social contact via short message service (SMS; i.e. using text questions to gather data from respondents), may provide these young people with a

sense of belonging and connectedness to the larger culture, something that homelessness commonly prevents. If homeless youth can stay in contact with family and friends from home, they are typically less likely to become embedded in street life (Johnson, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2005), which increases their likelihood of transitioning off of the streets (Auerswald & Eyre, 2002).

Because homeless youth are a transient population (Tyler & Whitbeck, 2004), and also have been found to be very "tech savvy" (Rice, Lee, & Taitt, 2011a), providing this population with a cell phone would be a way to stay in touch with these young people, gain insight into their daily lives, and provide youth with a sense of belonging. Prosocial connectedness can potentially help homeless youth cope with the stressors of street life by bolstering resilience (Dang, 2014), as well as enabling them to access resources that promote their physical, emotional, and financial well-being (Chew Ng, Muth, & Auerswald, 2013). Presently, however, there are clear gaps in the literature for understanding benefits and possibilities of cell phone data collection for homeless youth. As such, we conducted baseline and follow-up interviews with 150 homeless youth as well as provided them with a cell phone for 30 days to gather daily data using short message service (SMS) surveying. We believe this is the first study to date to use SMS to collect daily data from homeless youth. Stemming from this larger study, the purpose of this microanalysis is to examine youths' opinions

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about study participation and what they used the cell phone for during the course of the study. Inquiry into homeless young people's views on their individual impact as participants of research helps to position these marginalized youth as active contributors in shaping interventions aimed at their well-being. Finally, we discuss the practical implications of cell phone ownership among homeless youth and provide several suggestions for how a cell phone could be used as an intervention tool with this population.

2. Literature review

2.1. Cell phone ownership among homeless youth

Studies examining cell phone use among homeless populations have found surprisingly high rates of ownership. For example, a study of East Coast homeless youth found that 78% of their sample owned a cell phone and half of these youth received the phone as a gift, whereas 44% purchased the phone themselves (Jennings et al., 2016). Among a sample of West Coast homeless youth, Rice et al. (2011a) found that 62% of young people owned a cell phone and of these, 40% reported having a working phone. Similarly, rates of mobile phone ownership among homeless youth in Colorado revealed that approximately 47% of these young people owned a phone (Harpin, Davis, Low, & Gilroy, 2016). In terms of phone payment plans, 38% of all youth reported having a monthly contract for their phone, 23% purchased minutes for their phone as needed, and the remainder of youth did not own a cell phone (Rice et al., 2011a).

2.2. Technology use among the homeless

Use of technology including Internet, email, computer, and social media has also been examined among the homeless. In their study of homeless young adults, Pollio et al. found that 46% of respondents reported daily technology usage, while 93% used technology at least weekly (Pollio, Batey, Bender, Ferguson, & Thompson, 2013). Homeless young people most often used technology to communicate with friends and family (Pollio et al., 2013; Rice et al., 2011a), while fewer young adults used it for entertainment and education (Pollio et al., 2013). Moreover, cell phones are used by homeless youth and/or homeless adults to contact caseworkers or agency staff personnel (Rice et al., 2011a), as well as potential and/or current employers (Eyrich-Garg, 2010; Rice et al., 2011a). Rice and colleagues note that cell phones themselves are a cheap resource that increases homeless youth's access to resources such as housing and employment, as well as sources of support.

2.3. Technology and intervention among the homeless

Rice and colleagues examined homeless youths' connections to home-based social relationships accessed through social networking technology, such as the Internet and cell phone texting, and found this to be associated with reduced alcohol consumption (Rice, Milburn, & Monro, 2011b) and improvements in homeless youths' sexual health (Rice, Monro, Barman-Adhikari, & Young, 2010). Relatedly, a study of homeless youths' mobile phone behaviors and their openness to using mobile health (mHealth) technologies, including health-related phone applications, revealed that youth had a high interest in using mHealth information, especially concerning HIV and STIs, as well as mental health and pregnancy prevention (among young women) (Jennings et al., 2016). The authors also noted, however, that due to financial constraints, maintaining phone connectivity was a challenge for this population and indicated that strategies promoting phone functionality for mHealth would be needed in order to address youth's intermittent phone access (Jennings et al., 2016). Overall, these findings suggest that social networking technology holds great potential as an intervention tool for homeless youth.

In general, research has shown that a large percentage of homeless young people are consistent users of various forms of technology (Pollio et al., 2013) and that certain segments of the homeless population own cell phones (Rice et al., 2011a), although many homeless youth often have intermittent access (Jennings et al., 2016). Despite these findings, prior research to date has not used cell phones as a data collection strategy with homeless youth. As such, we used SMS via cell phones to collect data from homeless youth to gain significant insight into their daily lives and to examine outcomes of having a cell phone over a 30-day period.

2.4. Research questions

The current study addresses the following three research questions: What did youth like most about participating in the study? What might we do differently next time? How did youth use the cell phone? These questions not only offer insight into the youths' daily experiences of having a cell phone, but also provide important information for researchers conducting this type of inquiry with this population. Moreover, we offer insight into how SMS via cell phones could be used as an intervention tool to improve the life circumstances of this highly vulnerable population.

3. Design and methods

3.1. Sample and data collection

Data for this study are from the Homeless Youth and Young Adult Texting Project, a pilot study designed to examine risk factors for substance use and identify both personal and environmental protective factors among homeless youth. Additionally, this study was designed to field test short message service (SMS) surveying to ascertain its utility and feasibility with this population. From August 2014 through October 2015, 150 homeless youth and young adults (henceforth referred to as youth) were interviewed in two Midwestern cities. Of the 150 respondents interviewed at baseline, 112 or 76% completed a follow-up interview. The university Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this study.

Four part-time interviewers conducted the interviews, the majority of which were done in shelter conference rooms, with fewer completed at a public library and outside in a park if weather permitted. Interviewers included trained agency staff, and both authors, all of whom had completed the Collaborative IRB Training Initiative course for the protection of human subjects in research. Interviewers screened for eligibility, which required young people to be between the ages of 16 and 22 years and considered homeless or runaways on the night prior to the screening. *Homeless* includes those who lack *permanent* housing such as having spent the previous night with a stranger, in a shelter or public place, on the street, staying with friends (e.g. couch surfing), staying in a transitional facility, or other places not intended as a domicile (National Center for Homeless Education, 2010). *Runaway* refers to those under age 18 who have spent the previous night away from home without parental permission (Ennett, Bailey, & Federman, 1999). Less than 3% of youth we approached for an interview refused to participate or were ineligible. Participating agencies offered various services such as emergency shelter care, food programs, transitional living services, and street outreach.

Because some of the respondents were minors, we applied for and received a waiver of parental consent from the IRB. A waiver of parental consent is a more appropriate scientific approach with this population because many of the youth in this study would be considered mature minors. These youth have already made early transitions to adult behaviors and, in some cases, independence. With the waiver of parental consent, all study participants who were minors were treated as mature enough to provide assent. Interviewers obtained written informed

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