



Perspectives on housing among homeless emerging adults

Tiffany N. Ryan^{*}, Sanna J. Thompson¹

The University of Texas at Austin, USA

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ABSTRACT

Homeless emerging adults need the safety and stability of housing programs if they are to avoid the elements and victimization of the streets, however, barriers to obtaining housing are numerous. This study identified factors associated with perspectives of housing services among 29 homeless emerging adults (ages 18–23 years) through one-on-one interviews. Data were gathered and analyzed using grounded theory methodology for qualitative information. Major themes of peer support and positive personal and programmatic interactions in the context of emerging adult development were noted as important factors in housing service utilization. These major themes should be taken into consideration for current housing programs, due to homeless emerging adults' oscillation between their desire for formal support and personal independence. Greater emphasis on services that do not require long term commitments and are more flexible in addressing specific barriers to housing for homeless emerging adults may increase use.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Emerging adulthood

Emerging adulthood is a critical developmental period that focuses on opportunities to explore self-conceptions and independence from parents. It is a time of exploration when young adults define themselves, determine a suitable identity, and explore future roles and expectations (Arnett, 2000). This developmental period, between adolescence and adulthood (ages 18–25), has recently been identified as the stage of life marked by transitions from physical maturity to developing readiness for committed relationships, parenthood and stable careers (Arnett, 2004). Changes in American culture over the past forty years have altered the experience of maturation among this age group; emerging adults often continue being supported by parents well into their twenties or until they determine a stable direction for their lives (Arnett, 2004). Role transitions, such as getting married and becoming parents previously identified the beginning of adulthood; in contemporary culture, these roles are delayed in favor of a more idiosyncratic focus (Kins & Beyers, 2010). As a result, moving into adulthood has become a more gradual process that may span many years before traditional roles of being a spouse or parent are

formed. Transitions to adulthood are also more ambiguous in current society, as emerging adults may feel the independence of adult decision making but continue to rely heavily on parental support (Arnett, 2004).

1.2. Emerging adults and homelessness

One particular group of emerging adults, those who are homeless, does not have the luxury of exploring their identity while supported by families. Each year there are approximately 550,000 youth and young adults between 16 and 24 years of age who are identified as homeless. Homelessness is defined as living outside; in abandoned buildings, cars or other places not meant for human habitation; in shelters; or doubled up with others (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2012). Homeless young people often become homeless during adolescence in response to high levels of family conflict and maltreatment that leads them to run away; others are forced to leave by parents who can or will no longer provide care (Thompson, Bender, Windsor, Cooke, & Williams, 2010). Not only do these young people face difficulties associated with living on the streets, they experience challenges associated with their developmental stage. For example, emerging adulthood is typically marked by uncertainty concerning future life choices and exploration of potential roles and paths. Homeless young adults experience this uncertainty without the parental and social supports that enable general young adult populations to access health care, education, employment, and stable housing (Ammerman et al., 2004).

Homelessness also introduces young people to an extreme form of autonomy often not experienced even in adulthood. They must

^{*} Corresponding author at: University of Texas at Austin, School of Social Work, 1925 San Jacinto Blvd., Austin, TX 78712, USA. Tel.: +1 512 964 0299.

E-mail addresses: Tiffany.ryan@utexas.edu (T.N. Ryan), sannathompson@utexas.edu (S.J. Thompson).

¹ Tel.: +1 512 731 1679.

become self-reliant in meeting basic needs for food, shelter and safety, similar to other emerging adults (Arnett, 2000); however, the homelessness lifestyle creates tremendous freedom and flexibility among those not utilizing formal services that often dictate rules and regulations. These young people demonstrate their independence through exploration of new locations by moving frequently; they travel from city to city while living on the streets instead of utilizing formal housing services or relying on familial supports (Ferguson, Jun, Bender, Thompson, & Pollio, 2010).

1.3. Homeless emerging adults and housing

Housing options for homeless emerging adults may be informal (i.e. temporary shelters) or formal (transitional/supportive residential). Housing services available for homeless emerging adults include temporary and supportive/transitional housing programs. Community-based emergency shelters are the primary source of temporary housing for homeless young people and provide a variety of short-term crisis and custodial services (Greene, Ringwalt, & Iachan, 1997; Thompson, Safyer, & Pollio, 2001). Supportive or transitional living programs typically provide longer term residential services and serve the average participant for approximately one year; offering skills training and educational/employment opportunities while providing stable housing (De Rosa et al., 1999).

Regardless of housing service type, stable housing is essential for the safety and stability of homeless young adults who are vulnerable to weather conditions and victimization that occurs on the streets (Baron, 2003). These young people develop a high level of independence, which is not easily relinquished once they have grown accustomed to making their own decisions, being free of constraints, and living independently (De Rosa et al., 1999). Homeless young people struggle with issues associated with transitioning off the streets; at times they may seek assistance from formal housing services, but freedom of movement and choices are often more important than comfort (de Winter & Noom, 2003).

While desiring independence is common among homeless populations, emerging adults have yet to become deeply entrenched in homeless culture due to their age and length of time on the streets. Many young people who are highly transient view their homelessness as a temporary situation and believe they will re-enter conventional society when their adventures have been completed (Thompson et al., 2010). Therefore, homeless emerging adults ready to move from the streets may be more receptive to utilizing formal housing services than homeless adults.

1.4. Barriers to housing

Barriers to seeking housing services are often related to strict requirements for admission and regulations for remaining in services. For example, programs often have curfews, drug/alcohol/tobacco restrictions, required chores and attendance at meetings. A criminal record or outstanding tickets, lack of documented personal identification, and limited knowledge of service options are common barriers to homeless emerging adults accessing or using housing services (Nichols, 2008).

Once connected with services, barriers to successful outcomes remain. For example, low motivation for participation is likely in services that are highly structured, regulated, and requires long term commitments (de Winter & Noom, 2003). Participants who challenge rules and regulations are at risk of being expelled from services (de Winter & Noom, 2003; Joniak, 2005; Karabanow & Rains, 1997). The combination of distrust of formal staff, unrealistic

expectations, and unsafe environments (Garrett et al., 2008; Heinze, Jozefowicz, & Toro, 2010; Karabanow & Rains, 1997; Thompson, McManus, Lantry, Windsor, & Flynn, 2006) decrease the likelihood of successful housing outcomes (Ensign, 2004).

Homeless emerging adults' utilization of housing/shelter programs is a relatively understudied subject. To date, four studies were found that focused on elements of housing services to homeless young people (De Rosa et al., 1999; Garrett et al., 2008; Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004; Thompson et al., 2006). All previous studies found themes indicating the importance of caring relationships and creating more flexibility in service rules/regulations; other themes that emerged in these studies were associated with substance abuse, internal motivation and desires to re-enter mainstream culture. The age groups included in previous research were not limited to emerging adults, as in the current study (18–24 years of age), and focused on a broad view of service utilization from the perspective of service providers. Kidd, Miner, Walker, and Davidson (2007) suggested that a component of service provision that has received minimal attention is perceptions of housing services by homeless emerging adults. To address this gap and build on current understanding of service utilization among homeless young people, this study employed grounded theory to elicit the views of homeless emerging adults concerning housing options and reasons they may or may not utilize these services. This qualitative study explored factors that influenced homeless emerging adults' perceptions of housing and shelter services, their needs and limited experiences with these services, and what factors deterred them from transitioning off the streets into stable housing.

2. Methods

2.1. Setting and sample

Participants were recruited from two agencies providing basic services to homeless youth in different locations in a city in the southwestern United States. One agency offered formal drop-in center services. Services included: outreach and support services to homeless/runaway youth ranging in age from 16 to 23 years, a safe environment for young people during the day, case management options, hygiene supplies, laundry facilities, food, clothing, General Educational Development (GED) preparation, educational groups, transportation services, medical care, immunizations, HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) testing/counseling, and pregnancy testing. The other agency was less formal and staffed completely by volunteers who offered basic food and hygiene supplies, with limited outreach. These two agencies were the primary sources of services to homeless emerging adults in the city.

A purposive sample of 29 homeless emerging adults with housing/shelter utilization history was recruited. As standard practice by the agencies, staff members made the determination whether a particular individual was eligible for recruitment into the study and invited the individual to speak with interviewers. At both agency locations, staff facilitated introductions between potential participants and interviewers by approaching those they believed were 18–23 years of age. If the individual confirmed being the appropriate age and reported ever using housing services, the study was described briefly. Young adults were subjectively evaluated for intoxication or being under the influence of drugs. Those deemed impaired enough to hinder their ability to communicate with the interviewer were not referred to the study.

Those who agreed to learn more about the study were taken to a private location at the agency where interviewers fully explained the study and described consent forms. All consent procedures and human subjects' protocol were approved by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at the investigator's university and

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