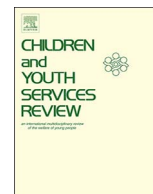




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## Asking for Change: Feasibility, acceptability, and preliminary outcomes of a manualized photovoice intervention with youth experiencing homelessness



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### ABSTRACT

Photovoice is a participatory action research method that empowers participants to photograph their everyday lives as a means of documenting and advocating for their needs; it has rarely been utilized with young people experiencing homelessness. The current study examined the feasibility, accessibility, and preliminary outcomes associated with participation in Asking for Change, a manualized Photovoice intervention, among youth (ages 18–21) staying in a homeless shelter ( $N = 22$ ). Multiple sources of data, including field observation, standardized pre-post measures, and qualitative exit interviews were collected across two cohorts of Asking for Change. Results suggest the intervention was feasible and highly acceptable to many young people, created new opportunities to connect with young people, and, among those surveyed pre and post intervention ( $n = 9$ ), was associated with improvements in communication skills, social connectedness, resiliency, and well-being. This article discusses the challenges and benefits inherent in doing this work and outlines a robust research agenda to move this knowledge base forward.

### 1. Introduction

Numbering 1.6 million in the United States (Molino, McBride, & Kekwaletswe, 2007; Ringwalt, Greene, Robertson, & McPheeters, 1998; Whitbeck, 2009), homeless youth are defined as persons under age 25 who lack regular, fixed, and adequate nighttime residence, including youth in transitional or emergency shelters (42 USC § 11434a [2][B]). These young people experience many stressors, including physical and sexual victimization, mental health challenges, and engagement in risky sexual and drug use behaviors (Slesnick, Dashora, Letcher, Erdem, & Serovich, 2009). Despite the clear need for services and treatment (Gwadz et al., 2010), youth experiencing homelessness are often poorly linked to service providers (Feldmann & Middleman, 2003) and reluctant to engage in services (Hudson et al., 2010; Kurtz, Lindsey, Jarvis, & Nackerud, 2000) due, in part, to distrust of formal and informal support systems (Auerswald & Eyre, 2002).

Researchers have increasingly emphasized the need for using novel methods to better engage and empower this population; exploring youths' unique perspectives is critical to developing culturally

appropriate interventions tailored to their needs (Hieftje, Duncan, & Fiellin, 2014). Photovoice is one such innovative participatory action research method that empowers participants to photograph their everyday lives as a means of documenting and advocating for their needs, concerns, and struggles (Wang, Burris, & Xiang, 1996; Baker & Wang, 2006). This study examined the feasibility, accessibility, and preliminary outcomes associated with homeless youths' participation in *Asking for Change*, a Photovoice intervention guided by a structured manual.

### 2. Background literature

Photovoice is a participatory action research (PAR) method grounded in empowerment education, feminist theory, and documentary photography. The approach involves providing participants with cameras so they can document their everyday lives and identify shared strengths and concerns in their communities (Wang & Burris, 1997). Participants then use their photos to create awareness via

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critical group dialogue and ultimately advocate for social change (Wang & Burris, 1997). In doing so, participants build skills by working together, learning visual methodologies and sharing their voices with decision-makers through collaborative group projects. Photovoice is designed to empower populations with marginalized voices in decision-making (Wang & Burris, 1997).

Despite many strengths, youth experiencing homelessness are among the most marginalized and disempowered of youth populations. The longer youth are unstably housed, the more estranged from formal institutions and disaffiliated with mainstream society they become (Piliavin, Sosin, Westerfelt, & Matsueda, 1993; Sosin & Bruni, 2000). Such estrangement is associated with a range of adverse experiences, including increased arrests, victimization (Thompson, Jun, Bender, Ferguson, & Pollio, 2010) and substance use (Chassin, 2008). These adversities create further barriers to formal employment or continued education, missed opportunities to re-affiliate with prosocial institutions (Ferguson, Bender, Thompson, Maccio, & Pollio, 2012). This population would thus benefit from interventions that disrupt such narratives of disaffiliation and marginalization.

Although Photovoice has been used broadly with a variety of populations to address an array of public health concerns and social justice issues (Wang & Burris, 1997), few studies have investigated the approach with youth experiencing homelessness. Preliminary assessment of a Photovoice project conducted in a primary health care agency serving homeless young people in Australia found initial success in recruiting and retaining youth (Dixon & Hadjialexiou, 2005). This 6-week Photovoice pilot workshop engaged youth in a health needs assessment, with participants reporting that they formed new relationships and felt rewarded as they worked with others to create a printed postcard to disseminate their message (Dixon & Hadjialexiou, 2005). While the project successfully engaged youth in the project overall, it struggled to engage them in social action as originally intended, suggesting implementation is feasible, but further research is needed to refine the approach and determine whether such projects can lead to collective action.

Photovoice has received greater empirical attention for its utility with homeless adults, however. Both within the U.S. and internationally, Photovoice has actively engaged homeless adults in projects advocating for health and housing issues important to them (Bukowski & Buetow, 2011; Wang, Cash, & Powers, 2000). As a seminal example, Wang et al. (2000) studied Photovoice workshops focused on health promotion with adult men and women living in shelters. Provided over a one-month period, the project successfully engaged participants in recording the strengths and issues in their community, and facilitated critical group discussions of everyday difficulties. Participants then engaged in advocacy efforts with decision makers, contributed to newspaper articles, and narrated photos at a theatre to an audience of hundreds of community members. Despite significant hardships, participants attended regular sessions and reported increased peer support, self-esteem, and quality of life as a result of having an opportunity to express their perspectives (Wang et al., 2000). This preliminary evidence suggests Photovoice may be an engaging and beneficial approach to connecting with, empowering, and building strengths among homeless populations.

Previous work does suggest that young people experiencing homelessness are interested in having greater voice in regards to agency services and in the broader community (Ferguson, Kim, & McCoy, 2011). Service approaches that provide opportunities for youth to have input and participate in governance are associated with greater engagement in programming (Leonard et al., 2017), and young people who feel empowered report lower distress levels and greater satisfaction in emergency shelters (Heinze & Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni, 2009).

The current study builds on limited evidence investigating the utility of Photovoice with young people experiencing homelessness by examining the feasibility, acceptability, and preliminary outcomes

associated with youths' participation in a manualized Photovoice project, titled Asking for Change. Asking for Change involved two cohorts of young people residing in a homeless youth shelter in documenting issues most important to them, dialoging about those issues, and creating awareness via community exhibits. The study also analyzes youths' rates of recruitment, retention, satisfaction, perceived benefits, and changes on key outcomes from pre- to post-project. Building on these results, the paper proposes a conceptual model and research agenda for advancing the study of Photovoice with youth experiencing homelessness.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Sample and recruitment

The study sample ( $N = 22$ ) was comprised of young people staying in an emergency homeless youth shelter that provides overnight stay, meals, and referrals for other services to 40 youth ages 18–21. The shelter aims to provide short-term stays (approximately 40 days); however, with long waitlists for transitional housing and no official limit restricting length of stay other than aging out at age 22, young peoples' stays at the shelter varied from a day to several months. Purposive sampling was used to recruit youth who were interested in participating in a pilot Photovoice project. Youth entered the study in two ways: 1) shelter staff were asked to nominate youth, via a list solicited during a shelter staff meeting, identifying youth they thought would be interested in/benefit from participating in the project; and 2) youth self-nominated themselves after reading Photovoice fliers posted in common areas at the shelter.

Once youth were staff- or self-nominated, a team of four trained interviewers conducted individual screening interviews with nominated youth in private offices. Screening interviews were designed to select youth invested and committed to the project. Semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 45 min and asked youth about their interests and motivations for being involved in the project, the social issues important to them, their ability to remain committed to project over time, and their abilities and strategies for discussing difficult topics with their peers. Youth were given a \$10 gift card to a local food vendor to compensate them for their time. In total, two rounds of interviews were conducted (about 3 months apart) to select youth for two separate cohorts of the Asking for Change project. Twelve youth interviewed in the first round and 10 interviewed in the second round, and all youth interviewed screened into inclusion in the Photovoice pilot intervention. All study procedures were approved by the PIs' institutional review board (IRB).

The total sample consisted of 22 youth ages 18–20, identifying racially/ethnically as White ( $n = 3$ ; 14%), Black ( $n = 6$ ; 27%), Latino ( $n = 6$ ; 27%), Native American ( $n = 1$ ; 5%) and multiracial ( $n = 6$ ; 27%). Youths' self-identified gender included 10 males (45%) and 12 females (55%), and youth reported diversity in regards to sexual orientation, including 18 straight youth (82%), 2 lesbian youth (9%) and 1 bisexual youth (5%) with 1 youth not reporting sexual orientation. Youth had varying education levels, with most having achieved their GED ( $n = 6$ ; 27%) or currently enrolled in high school ( $n = 6$ ; 27%), while others had graduated from high school ( $n = 3$ , 14%), dropped out of high school ( $n = 1$ ; 5%), were currently enrolled in college ( $n = 2$ ; 9%) or other educational status ( $n = 4$ ; 18%).

#### 3.2. The 'asking for change' intervention

The Asking for Change Photovoice intervention aimed to bring together a group of homeless youth and adult facilitators in a structured project that served to (1) build relationships and connection, (2) teach social, emotional, leadership, and photography skills, and (3) empower youth to be social change agents. The intervention was guided by a positive youth development and youth empowerment framework,

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