



## Emerging adult homelessness in geographic perspective: A view from the Rust Belt



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### ABSTRACT

This study provides a place-centered analysis of homelessness among emerging adults (age 18–24) by examining this issue in the context of the U.S. Rust Belt. In-depth interviews were conducted with a diverse sample of 30 homeless young adults in the small post-industrial city of Buffalo, New York. Our qualitative analysis focused on how place intersects with other factors to shape participants' experiences of homelessness and their views of the city and local social services. Participants described a sense of limited opportunity in Buffalo as well as the frustration that the service spectrum was too small, yet confusing to navigate. These findings point to directions for expanding employment prospects and housing and service options for homeless young adults in small cities.

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### 1. Introduction

“Homeless youth” is a broad term referencing young people up to age 24 who do not have a safe, stable place to stay (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2013). Within this population is a subgroup of homeless emerging adults, defined as those 18 to 24 years old (Zerger, Strehlow, & Gundlapalli, 2008). According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) annual point-in-time count, the majority of unaccompanied homeless youth are young adults between 18 and 24, with nearly 53,000 young adults experiencing homelessness in the United States on a given evening (HUD, 2015).

Homeless emerging adults face particular vulnerabilities. Due to having reached the age of majority, they may find themselves ineligible for resources that benefitted them when they were younger, such as school-based health services (Zerger et al., 2008). At the same time, homeless emerging adults are often not well served by programs targeted at the general homeless adult population. Some homeless emerging adults perceive shelters to be unsafe, while others resist the strict rules associated with many housing programs, or do not know how to access them (Gharabaghi & Stuart, 2010; Ryan & Thompson, 2013). Consequently, homeless emerging adults remain an underserved population that faces a number of health risks, including elevated rates of substance use, sexually transmitted infections, mental health

conditions, and food insecurity (Eidin, Ganim, Hunter, & Karnik, 2012; Tarasuk, Dachner, Poland, & Gaetz, 2009).

Much of the research on emerging adult homelessness adopts a developmental perspective. Studies have noted the need for programs that balance homeless young adults' developmentally appropriate desire for both support and independence (Ryan & Thompson, 2013; Stewart, Reutter, LeTourneau, Makwarimba, & Hungler, 2010). However, it can be argued that the problem of emerging adult homelessness and the solutions to ending it are rooted in place as well as in developmental time. This study sought to integrate a geographic perspective by looking at the issue of young adult homelessness in a particular place context—that of a small city in the U.S. Rust Belt—and understanding emerging adults' views of their city and of local services in this setting.

#### 1.1. Homelessness in geographic perspective

Although the problem of homelessness is global in scope, it can also be argued that homelessness is a fundamentally local problem, such that trends in populations affected, living conditions, and community responses vary significantly between geographic locations (Hudson & Vissing, 2010). Florida, Mellander, and Witt (2012) note that climate, area housing costs, and population density are among the strongest predictors of per capita homelessness rates, even when controlling for community-level poverty. Metropolitan areas in the United States with warmer climates and steep housing costs tend to have disproportionately higher rates of homelessness, as well as greater resources for addressing this issue (Esparza, 2009; Florida et al., 2012). Conversely,

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rural communities report lower rates of homelessness, but face unique challenges conducting outreach and delivering services to the homeless population in general and to homeless young people specifically (Edwards, Torgerson, & Sattlem, 2009; Shamblin, Williams, & Bellaw, 2012).

Another important geographical dimension of homelessness pertaining to youth and young adults is the role of migration. “Travelers” are a subgroup of homeless young people who migrate to different areas of the United States via hopping trains, hitchhiking, and other means, often congregating in cities that have mild climates and are perceived as hip, such as Denver, Seattle, San Francisco and New Orleans (Chang, 2010; Covarrubias, 2014). Thus, youth homelessness may be more visible in cities that attract large populations of travelers, and cities’ responses may vary accordingly.

Despite the geographical variations in youth and young adult homelessness and related services, geography does not appear to figure strongly in research on this topic. Due to the challenges of recruiting samples of homeless young people, studies often rely on a single location (Edidin et al., 2012). Though a few multi-site studies have noted geographic variations in homeless young adults’ demographics and behavior profiles (Ferguson, Bender, Thompson, Maccio, & Pollio, 2012; Ferguson, Jun, Bender, Thompson, & Pollio, 2010), little research has examined how regional economic contexts or local service availability contribute to these differences. Further, since many prominent studies have been conducted in large cities with well-developed service networks such as Los Angeles (Rice, Milburn, Barman-Adhikari, & Monro, 2012; Wenzel et al., 2012), Houston (Ha, Narendorf, Santa Maria, & Bezette-Flores, 2015), and New York City (Ream & Forge, 2014), comparatively less is known about homeless youth and young adults in rural areas or mid-sized cities. In addition, though some studies have noted that travelers may differ from other homeless youth in terms of their behaviors and service needs (Martino et al., 2011; Sanders, Lankenau, Jackson-Bloom, & Hathazi, 2008), most studies fail to differentiate between traveling and local homeless youth and young adults.

### 1.2. Current study: emerging adult homelessness in a Rust Belt context

The current study addresses some of the gaps in the young adult homelessness literature by exploring this issue in a specific geographic context: the U.S. Rust Belt. The term “Rust Belt” refers to a band of post-industrial cities stretching from the Midwestern to the Northeastern United States. The Rust Belt moniker derives from the decline of industry in this region, often represented by the presence of abandoned factories literally turning to rust (McClelland, 2013). The setting for this study was the Rust Belt city of Buffalo, situated along Lake Erie in western New York.

Like most Rust Belt cities, Buffalo’s 20th century history is one marked by a steep decline in manufacturing employment, precipitating a decline in population; the city’s 2015 population estimate of 258,703 is less than half of the peak population of 580,132 at midcentury (McNeil, 2015; Partnership for the Public Good [PPG], 2011). Though Buffalo is regularly ranked as among the poorest cities in the United States based on its overall poverty rate of 30.1% (PPG, 2014), this figure does not convey the racial disparities present nor the geographic concentration of poverty. The Buffalo-Niagara metropolitan region is the sixth most segregated in the U.S., with approximately 80% of African Americans living in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, compared with 10% of whites (PPG, 2016). Many of these neighborhoods are on Buffalo’s East Side, a predominantly African American section of the city marked by elevated crime and police presence, economic distress, and an abundance of vacant lots (Arnade, 2016; Vogel, 2015).

Though some gains have been made following the 2008 recession, Buffalo’s job market remains lagging. Unemployment in Buffalo is consistently higher than national and New York state averages, with greater disparities for people of color (PPG, 2016). These gaps are particularly

pronounced for young workers. In 2013, unemployment among white young adults age 20–24 was 8.2%, compared with 20.5% for African American and 14.8% for Latino workers of the same age (PPG, 2016). Average weekly wages in Erie County of \$893 fall well below the national average of \$1043, reflecting the predominance of low-wage service sector jobs in the region (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Following national trends, these low-wages jobs disproportionately employ people of color (PPG, 2016).

The Rust Belt story is not entirely one of loss. Buffalo and other Rust Belt cities such as Pittsburgh and Cleveland have recently featured in well-publicized comeback narratives. Buffalo’s comeback story has included economic growth, particularly in the city’s medical corridor; a heralded increase in the number of educated millennials moving to the region; and a celebrated arts and cultural scene (Robinson & Epstein, 2015; Teicher, 2015). The city’s redevelopment has been uneven, however, with some neighborhood rapidly gentrifying while others remain entrenched in poverty. One reflection of this is the growing gap in home values; in 2014 homes in the trendy Elmwood Village neighborhood sold for an average of \$282,098, in comparison to an average of \$35,188 on Buffalo’s lower East Side, just a few miles away (Epstein, 2015).

Per official count, 531 young adults age 18–24 were homeless in federal fiscal year 2015 in the five-county region where the Homeless Alliance of Western New York (HAWNY) coordinates services for homeless-serving agencies that receive HUD funding (HAWNY, 2016a). As greater Erie County and the surrounding counties are primarily rural, both the homeless population and homelessness-related services are concentrated in Buffalo. HAWNY’s annual inventory lists 44 organizations in the region that receive HUD funding to support a variety of housing and affiliated social services programs, including emergency shelters, transitional housing, and long-term supportive housing (HAWNY, 2016b). The region has very few services targeted to homeless youth or young adults. Buffalo has one shelter for homeless or runaway youth up to age 17, but no emergency shelters specifically for young adults. The city has one resource center that provides a space where young people up to age 24 who are homeless or at risk of homelessness can use a kitchen and laundry facilities, watch television, or speak with a case manager. The greater Buffalo region does not have any drop-in programs for homeless youth or young adults that provide shower facilities or are open outside of regular daytime business hours.

Within this setting of a small and unevenly redeveloping Rust Belt city, this study examined two central research questions: (1) How do homeless emerging adults in Buffalo view their city, including their local employment and housing prospects? and (2) What are homeless emerging adults’ perspectives on local housing and social services? In answering these questions, our analysis applied a place-focused lens, assuming that participants’ responses would be shaped by the study’s geographic setting and participants’ construction of place meaning, along with other identity factors including race and class (Collins et al., 2016; Keene & Padilla, 2010). We did not suppose that participants’ responses would necessarily generalize to homeless young adults in other locales, but rather that these responses could offer insights into how place characteristics influence homelessness in a particular geographic context.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Design, setting, and sample

This study employed a qualitative research design, guided by principles of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Eligibility criteria for the study were: (1) being age 18–24 and (2) not having a stable place to live. This broad definition of homelessness allowed the study to include young adults in a variety of housing situations, including shelters, places not meant for human habitation, and couch surfing. Individuals in

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