



## What do homeless transition-age youth want from housing interventions?

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### A B S T R A C T

Housing-led interventions have become recognized as a best practice for addressing homelessness among adults, yet whether and how they apply to transition-age youth (TAY) is less clear. The purpose of the present study is to expand on a burgeoning literature that has provided marginalized TAY an opportunity to voice their perspectives on housing-led program design. The goal of the study is to build on the existing literature that has predominantly used individual qualitative interviewing by using a focus group methodology in which group interaction can generate data and insights that may not emerge in individual interviews. Focus groups ( $n = 4$ ) were conducted with 18 youth. Thematic analysis of focus group transcripts was conducted using independent and co-coding procedures. Three overarching and interrelated themes emerged from the focus groups: (a) personal responsibility and deservedness, (b) rising and falling together, and (c) needing individualized support. These findings suggest that TAY preferences for housing and services are not necessarily consistent with the homeless adult population and that youth may be looking for a more supportive housing environment.

### 1. Introduction

In the United States, there are an estimated 3.48 million young adults aged 18–25 experiencing homelessness in a given year (Morton et al., 2018). These transition-age youth (TAY) are at increased risk of substance use, mental illness (Halley & English, 2008), victimization (Rattelade, Farrell, Aubry, & Klodawsky, 2014), and chronic health conditions including HIV (Rice, Milburn, & Rotheram-Borus, 2007). Without intervention, they may become a new generation to experience chronic homelessness (Culhane, Metraux, Byrne, Stino, & Bainbridge, 2013). Housing-led interventions such as housing first and rapid re-housing have become recognized as best practices for addressing homelessness among adults (Padgett, Henwood, & Tsemberis, 2015). Whether and how such housing programs apply to TAY is less clear (Gaetz, 2014).

Some aspects of housing-led program implementation clearly need to be tailored to youth and young adults, such as the types of support services offered (Gilmer et al., 2013). However, whether most TAY prefer living alone, as is the case with homeless adults (Tsemberis, Moran, Shinn, Asmussen, & Shern, 2003), or with roommates, as is typical of college students living in dormitories, is less clear with current research suggesting mixed findings. For example, a significant minority of the 187 youth interviewed by Forchuk et al. (2013) felt that living alone would be too isolating and that a treatment setting would be preferable to independent housing due to mental health and addiction issues. Based on qualitative interviews with 29 homeless youth

between the ages of 18–23, Ryan and Thompson (2013) found that youth may be reluctant to access housing programs based on distrust of providers, excessive requirements for admission, and restrictive rules and regulations once housed that include requirements to dissociate from established “street family.” Curry and Petering (2017) found, however, that in a sample of 16 youth between the ages of 19 and 22 who were currently living in a housing program that most wanted housing providers and program rules that would prevent residents who were “just hanging out” or “being lazy” from negatively impacting residents who were “handling their business.” Findings from these studies suggest that more research on youth perspectives is needed.

The purpose of the present study is to expand on a burgeoning literature that has provided marginalized TAY an opportunity to voice their perspectives on housing-led program design. The goal of the study is to build on the existing literature that has predominantly used individual qualitative interviewing by using a focus group methodology in which group interaction can generate data and insights that may not emerge in individual interviews (Kreuger & Casey, 2009).

### 2. Methods

#### 2.1. Participants and data collection

In December 2014, 18 youth were recruited using convenience sampling from either a drop-in center or emergency shelter located in Los Angeles, CA to participate in focus groups. While ideally focus

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groups would include 5 to 8 participants (Kreuger & Casey, 2009), one of the 4 focus group only had 2 participants (the 3 others had either 5 or 6 participants). Two focus group were conducted at the drop-in center where the homeless youth population served is two-thirds male and over one-third African American. Two focus groups (including the one with 2 participants) were conducted at the emergency shelter that almost exclusively serves males who are predominantly Latino. Across the four groups, four youth were female and 14 were male; eight were African American, four were White, and four were Latino, which roughly approximated the homeless youth population served at each site. The focus group discussions, which lasted 45 to 60 min and were conducted in a private space at the recruitment sites, consisted of conversations about housing prioritization and needs among homeless youth. The same moderator, who has extensive experience conducting research with this population, conducted all groups using a minimally structured script that included the study's three research questions because the intent was to have youth generate much of the discussion. The questions were: Who should be prioritized in housing? What type of housing would be best for youth? What type of support services would be most helpful? The focus groups were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and entered into ATLAS.ti software for data management and analysis. Participants received a \$30 incentive. All study protocols were approved by the affiliated human subjects protection committee.

## 2.2. Data analysis

Focus group transcripts were analyzed using constant comparative methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to understand youth perspectives on housing and service needs and preferences. This process involved both open and template-style coding. Open coding refers to a technique in which codes are derived inductively from the data (Charmaz, 2006). By contrast, a template approach involves using predetermined codes in an area of interest and then organizing and coding transcripts based on these codes (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). For example, template codes included housing preferences, housing prioritization, and social relationships. Open codes included previous housing experiences, goal setting, and motivation. Initially, two authors independently coded an initial transcript and then compared results to reach consensus about the list of codes. Then they independently coded all four transcripts using the agreed-upon codes and compared the appropriateness of assigning a particular code to a given passage or quote. Any discrepancies were resolved through consensus, and an initial set of themes was identified by reviewing coded material. Themes were finalized through discussion with all authors, including the focus group facilitator.

## 3. Results

Largely in response to the three main research questions posed during the focus groups, the following overarching and interrelated themes were identified: (a) personal responsibility and deservedness, (b) rising and falling together, and (c) needing individualized support.

### 3.1. Personal responsibility and deservedness

Youth stated that a primary consideration when allocating housing resources should be whether an individual shows initiative and has the motivation for self-betterment. This was based primarily on the idea that someone who desires self-betterment is likely to benefit more from housing than someone who is just "sitting there." As one participant expressed:

It should be for people like that are trying to get somewhere. It shouldn't be people that are just doing, just for like the night, or just doing it to stay there but they're still going out and doing dumb stuff then coming back just to sleep there.

In another discussion, one participant stated:

I definitely think there should be a heavy interview process because like at the last shelter I was at... it's like they've done nothing in their lives to help themselves. They're sort of just jumping from housing to housing to housing to housing and it's just like you know...I think it's unfair to other people because that's one more bed that's being taken up by someone else who's trying to like right their lives or at least trying to get shit together. And here's so-and-so who's wasting their time just doing nothing...

The concept of prioritizing people who are in a position to take responsibility for their current behaviors was also discussed in relation to being judged for past actions. As one participant described when talking about a typical intake process: "It seem like you're trying to reflect me off my past. Why you asking me about past things instead of asking me about my present goals or what I'm trying to do instead of what I used to do?"

Despite widespread agreement that motivation and personal responsibility should serve as criteria for allocating housing, youth generally agreed that there should be exceptions for two specific groups: individuals with severe disabilities and women with young children. Exceptions for women with young children involved a belief that "children don't deserve to be on the streets," regardless of a mother's choices. As discussed in one group:

Parents I think most definitely should be off the streets...because that's two lives really when you think about it...women with children...but over that I think homeless people with disabilities...like full-fledged either like paraplegic or...wheelchairs.

Discussions of individuals with disabilities focused mostly on physical disabilities, with one participant explaining:

If they were, they had surgery and they can't put much weight on the foot for so long, I don't know. They're in a wheelchair or something, that would be appropriate. If you're disabled, I'm not too sure, like ... I don't know. I think it would be understandable if they got like special treatment.

When discussing psychiatric disabilities, youth were concerned that people would feign mental illness to "play the system" as described in the following exchange:

Participant 1: Well, so it is a touchy subject. What we already know is that people with depression are being prioritized. People with mental health qualifications are being prioritized. And what I've seen a lot of is people like youth are sort of encouraged to say that they have mental health issues to go through...

Participant 2: To play the system kind of thing

Participant 1: DMH [Department of Mental Health]...Yeah, yeah, to play the system basically. To go through DMH or other services and just go through therapy on a regular basis and say "I'm depressed" or this and that. And in essence, they're really just regular people."

In another group, one participant admitted to pretending to be "crazy" to get welfare benefits after having been turned down on four previous attempts. Others reported that they witnessed providers encouraging youth to fake or exaggerate mental health symptoms to qualify for services. To combat this, youth suggested having a narrower definition of who might qualify for housing based on mental health need and a more intensive interview process for determining that need:

So it's tough, but I would probably lean toward less prioritization and trying to make the circumstances under which you prioritize someone stricter, so that you have more overall units available to the general homeless youth population, which is already like a subset of a larger homeless population. And then those people who really, really, really are in need, who we can tell are in need, they get what they need. But there's not like this long line of people like

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