



Service and policy considerations when working with highly mobile homeless youth: Perspectives from the frontlines

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A B S T R A C T

This qualitative study explores providers' experiences working with geographically mobile homeless youth in an area comprising small cities, suburban towns, and rural communities. In-depth interviews were conducted with eight homeless service providers in New York's Capital Region. The analysis centered on how providers understand the mobility of homeless youth and how the homeless service system impacts this mobility. Participants described mobility as an impulsive coping strategy, a process greatly influenced by service system and policy limitations, and a phenomenon that challenges traditional engagement strategies. Findings suggest opportunities for strengthening the service system through trauma-informed programming and policy, increased coordination with government entities, and assessing gaps in key services.

1. Introduction

Homelessness among unaccompanied minors (ages 13 to 17) and transition age youth (ages 18 to 24) is a concern to many communities. Homeless young people present unique challenges in terms of meeting service needs (Thompson, Bender, Windsor, Cook, & Williams, 2010) and can be quite mobile, moving between cities, counties, and states (Ferguson, Bender, & Thompson, 2014; Ferguson, Helderop, Bender, & Grubestic, 2016). Research on the geographic mobility of homeless youth has focused primarily on urban areas and describing the frequency of and reasons for moving. Little is known about how mobility matters in the context of service provision. Further, studies examining the service use of homeless youth consistently overlook the role of mobility, though some of the barriers to service provision—lack of flexible services, poor inter-agency coordination, inadequate outreach, and lack of an awareness of services (Brooks, Milburn, Jane Rotheram-Borus, & Witkin, 2004)—may be especially challenging when working with highly mobile youth. Previous studies have also excluded providers as experts in understanding the service and policy implications of mobility. This exploratory qualitative study addresses a gap in the literature by exploring provider experiences working with highly mobile youth in an area defined by small cities nested within a predominantly rural region.

The perspectives of frontlines providers are often overlooked in homelessness research and in studies of the geographic mobility of people experiencing homelessness. Providers can offer insight into service design and delivery, what strategies are useful for outreach and engagement, and the kinds of skills necessitated by the work. They

cannot speak directly to the experiences of their clients; however, they have a deep understanding of the system and policy context in which services are provided, as well as the limits of the service system. Qualitative studies of providers working with homeless youth have looked at attitudes toward and barriers to delivering smoking cessation services (Shadel, Tucker, Mullins, & Staplefoote, 2014), promising practices and service gaps for LGBTQ homeless youth (Ferguson & Maccio, 2015), and successful transitions from shelter to home (Nebbitt, House, Thompson, & Pollio, 2007). Of particular relevance to the current study are Edwards, Torgerson, and Sattem's (2009) study of the challenges to providing services to homeless youth in rural places and Karabanow, Naylor, and Aube's (2014) study of perceived risks for homeless youth who migrate from rural communities to urban centers.

1.1. Mobility and homeless youth

Studies of homeless youth have found geographic mobility to be associated with limited education, homelessness history, illegal activity and criminal justice involvement, and substance use (Ferguson et al., 2014; Ferguson et al., 2016; Ferguson, Jun, Bender, Thompson, & Pollio, 2010; Hahn, Page-Shafer, Ford, Paciorek, & Lum, 2008; Sanders, Lankenau, Jackson-Bloom, & Hathazi, 2008). In a study of transience among homeless youth in Los Angeles, Austin, and Denver, a greater number of inter-city moves was associated with recent homelessness, more time homeless, more lifetime arrests, earning informal income, substance addiction, and having substance using peers (Ferguson et al., 2016).

In addition to risk factors like substance use (Ferguson et al., 2010;

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Hahn et al., 2008; Sanders et al., 2008), research suggests that higher mobility is associated with resilience (Ferguson et al., 2014; Ferguson et al., 2016). Young people have described leaving home with a sense of agency, suggesting that perhaps some youth are more self-reliant than others, which may contribute to the decision to leave home (Hyde, 2005). At the same time, youth's self-reliance might develop as a by-product of living a more transient life in which they need to develop survival skills to meet basic needs. Ferguson et al. (2016) found that higher self-reliance was a consistent predictor of mobility. In a qualitative study of homeless youth in London, successfully moving to a new location was facilitated by certain life skills, such as the ability to quickly acquire knowledge of a new location. At the same time, mobility often served as a response tactic when facing conflict with peers or police (Jackson, 2012).

Homeless youth's reasons for moving from one location to another point to factors that contribute to mobility. Although it is often assumed that homeless individuals are drawn to communities with robust services, the evidence for why homeless youth move from one place to another reflects a range of reasons. Among homeless youth across three cities, reasons for moving included pursuing education, locating safe shelter, escaping legal problems, pursuing income, escaping victimization, escaping problems related to substance use, and wanting to end drug use (Ferguson et al., 2014). In a study of homeless youth moving from a rural to an urban area, participants described moving to gain or maintain anonymity, to establish an identity as homeless, and to access supports the rural area lacked (Karabanow et al., 2014).

1.2. Mobility and service use

Homeless youth may interact with a variety of service providers and systems, with service engagement challenges varying between urban and rural communities (Edwards et al., 2009). However, it is not clear if and how mobility affects service use and delivery. Studies have yet to explore this relationship or the attitudes of, and strategies used by, providers when working with highly mobile young people. Some scholars have speculated that homeless service providers aim to prevent maladaptive moves (e.g., escaping legal problems) and support adaptive ones (e.g., moving closer to family) (Ferguson et al., 2016). However, providers may not consider all instances of mobility equal, as youth may move between communities frequently and sporadically without clearly defined intentions. Further, not all mobility is entirely voluntary and goal driven (Ali, 2010; DeVerteuil, May, & von Mahs, 2009; Kawash, 1998; Murphy, 2009). It is also not clear if effectively working with highly mobile homeless youth necessitates a certain skill set or approach to service planning that differs from working with other homeless youth.

2. Conceptual framework

Three conceptual lenses evident in the homelessness literature are useful for understanding the mobility of people experiencing homelessness – framing mobility as part of the homeless lifestyle, as part of a coping process, and as resulting from social control forces.

2.1. Mobility as a lifestyle choice

Research viewing mobility as part of the homeless lifestyle typically conceptualizes mobility as a voluntary behavior that is a natural part of the homeless experience. Traditional ideas of the homeless traveler align with this view. In fact, Hyde (2005) found that some youth left home to travel, even using the word “travelers” to distinguish themselves from other homeless people. When mobility is understood as part of the homeless lifestyle, it may be seen as deviant, as a symbol of carefree living, or associated with the culture of a group. Mobility has also been used to offer insight into the homeless experience, illustrating mobility narratives (May, 2000), describing mobility patterns and the

personal characteristics of migrant individuals (Parker & Dykema, 2013; Tompkins, Wright, Sheard, & Allgar, 2003), and identifying behaviors and consequences associated with mobility (Hahn et al., 2008; Pollio, 1997).

2.2. Mobility as part of a coping process

Framing mobility as part of a coping process followed findings that mobility among homeless people was associated with meeting basic needs, maintaining social connections, accessing services, and pursuing economic and housing opportunities (Rahimian, Woich, & Koegel, 1992; Wolch & Rowe, 1992). The traditional coping model assumes mobility to be related to a person's “level of access to resources necessary for daily survival” (Rahimian et al., 1992, p. 1318). This view assumes homeless people move to increase their access to shelter, services and supports, or opportunities as a way better cope with being homeless. Even if improving coping is not the reason for moving, mobility has a potential impact on coping status and coping strategies (Ferguson, Bender, Thompson, Xie, & Pollio, 2011; Rahimian et al., 1992). More recently, studies have framed mobility as a stress response (Ferguson et al., 2014; Jackson, 2012). Rather than considering mobility as simply an act that can impact a person's ability to cope with the experience of being homeless, mobility itself can be a coping strategy used in response to unsatisfactory, stressful, or unsafe life circumstances.

2.3. Mobility as connected to social control forces

The mobility of homeless people is not always voluntary. Social, political, and systemic factors can force or coerce movement. Some research has framed mobility as influenced by social control mechanisms that target homeless people. In this way, even the autonomous movements of homeless people are limited, so that seemingly rational choices to move are made under significant restriction. In other words, even when mobility is voluntary, the choices for when, where, how far, and how to move are limited (Ali, 2010; Kawash, 1998; Murphy, 2009).

It has been argued that negotiating power dynamics puts homeless people in a state of constant motion (Cloke, May, & Johnsen, 2008; Jackson, 2012; Kawash, 1998; May, 2003; Murphy, 2009). Jackson (2012) calls this being “fixed in mobility”. In her study of homeless youth in London, she notes that mobility was at times influenced, limited, or forced by police and restrictive policies. The mobility of people experiencing homelessness is also affected by criminalization strategies that limit access to public space, with the intention of promoting public safety and economic vitality (Mitchell, 1997; Smith, 1994; Smith, 1996). While homeless people's ability to move in and out of public spaces is increasingly regulated, their circulation through institutional settings has increased (DeVerteuil et al., 2009). Thus, the relationship between mobility and power varies by group. For the homeless, sometimes power is the ability to be mobile and sometimes power is the ability to stay in place (Jocoy & Del Casino, 2010).

These three views informed the conceptualization of this qualitative study of homeless service providers in New York's Capital Region. The data collect here were intended to explore provider perceptions of mobility and its implication for homeless youth service provision. The participants' position as representatives of the service system also provided an opportunity to consider social control mechanisms influencing mobility. Since prior homelessness research on mobility and service use has focused mostly on urban centers, this study's geographic setting, which comprises small cities, suburban towns, and rural communities, provides an opportunity to explore these topics in a less urban context. The research questions explored are as follows: 1) How do providers understand the mobility of homeless youth? and 2) How do providers understand the relationship between the mobility of homeless youth and the service system?

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