



“Project awareness:” Fostering social justice youth development to counter youth experiences of housing instability, trauma and injustice^{☆, ☆, ☆}



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ABSTRACT

Housing instability poses a challenge for the positive developmental trajectories of youth. Nevertheless, youth possess the knowledge, fortitude and resiliency to meet the needs and challenges of navigating housing instability. Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) methods coupled with Social Justice Youth Development (SJYD) were utilized with 6 youth experiencing housing instability accessing educational, life skill, and developmental services from a drop-in center. Participants were active members of youth-centered research workshops. Findings reveal the need for increased funding that secures community-based, positive youth development services; an open, fluid workshop structure to offer consistency, yet flexibility for highly mobile youth; and safe spaces in which youth can explore and analyze the socio-political contexts shaping their experiences to inform their approaches in navigating various social systems and structures.

Overcoming poverty is not a task of charity, it is an act of justice.

Nelson Mandela

If we work together, if we commit ourselves, if we challenge an unjust and illogical status quo we can bring about positive change. The problem of homelessness is largely a man-made problem that is susceptible to man-made solutions. We control our destiny. We hold within our hands the power to make better the lives of those who are homeless.

The Honorable Eric Holder, Attorney General of the United States, 2009–15

1. Introduction

The number of youth experiencing housing instability (YEHI) and homelessness continues to grow (National Center for Homeless Education, 2016). Youth are in need of adult support, consistency and stability as they mature from adolescence to adulthood (Mayberry, Shinn, Gibbons-Benton, & Wise, 2014). We recognize youth possess the knowledge, fortitude and resiliency to meet the needs and challenges of navigating housing instability (Heinze, 2013), however adultism, the notion that “behaviors and attitudes based on the assumption that adults are better than young people, and entitled to act upon young people without their agreement” (Bell, 2003, 1), often minimizes or

ignores youth voices, perspectives and expertise. We believe it is in the best interest of youth workers, developmental specialists, educators and all others concerned about the well-being and positive development of youth experiencing housing instability to listen to, and learn from the knowledge youth possess to inform programming and service delivery aimed at addressing their needs. To this end, we employ a Social Justice Youth Development model (see description in Section 2) to foster socio-political analytical tools that support youth in their analysis of conditions impacting their lived experiences.

In our efforts to facilitate a centering of youth voices, the authors worked with a youth drop-in center during an 8-week summer program. The program serves youths aged 14–24, providing a comprehensive continuum of services to young people who are unstably housed or experiencing homelessness. There are several programs offered by Youth Support Services (YSS) (pseudonym), including emergency and transitional housing. The drop-in center “provides a safe, welcoming, and non-judgmental space for vulnerable young adults... [the program provides] a full continuum of services available under one roof, including housing placement and life skills programming; employment support and financial literacy; primary health care; mental health and substance use assessment and treatment; and child care.” (Fieldnotes, 5/11/15).

This paper aims to highlight the knowledge generated and gained by

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group participants (including the authors) as we engaged an exploratory youth participatory action research (YPAR) project. Our work sought to address the following questions:

1. In what ways do current youth programs and policies support and/or limit positive youth development among unaccompanied youth experiencing housing instability?
2. How might a youth participatory action research approach support positive youth development of youth experiencing housing instability?
3. How do factors of housing instability, trauma and race shape the developmental trajectories of unaccompanied youth aged 18–24?

In an effort to address these questions and contextual dynamics, the authors provide an overview of the literature on youth instability and present data that documents the processes of a youth participatory action project in which youth experiencing housing instability (YEHI) generated and participated in workshops and research pertaining to their lived experiences. Further, this work documents the nuanced understandings and adaptive responses YEHI develop as they work to survive and thrive the developmental (physical, cognitive, emotional, etc.) milestones of adolescence; all while seeking to obtain stability in their lives. This work situates youth experiences within contexts and systems that have the ability to further harm and/or mitigate the negative effects housing instability has on a young person's transition from adolescence to adulthood. Lastly, our work seeks to contribute to the disruption of common narratives surrounding poor/unstably housed youth of color as lazy, apathetic, violent, victims, etc. (see Hill (2016) *Nobody: Casualties of America's War on the Vulnerable, From Ferguson to Flint and beyond*; Alexander (2010) *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*; and Laura (2014) *Being Bad: My Baby Brother and the School-to-Prison Pipeline*) offering a more complex discussion of the dynamics contributing to social conditions that significantly shape the opportunities and material lives of youth of color. This includes situating these narratives and dynamics within programs, policies and practices ideally meant to create systems that support and nurture positive youth development among YEHI. Finally, the paper provides insights and reflections on lessons learned, policy/programming recommendations, and future efforts.

2. Literature review

2.1. Impact of housing instability on youth

It is estimated that there are between 1 million and 1.7 million youth experiencing homelessness across the United States (National Coalition for the Homeless, <http://nationalhomeless.org/issues/youth/>). Youth report becoming housing unstable due to a parent/guardian asking them to leave home or running away from home due to abuse/neglect (Murphy & Tobin, 2011). Due to the tumultuous dynamics that often lead to housing instability for youth their relationships with consistent, stable adults are often tenuous. Positive youth development is shaped by young people's interactions with peers, adults and various educational, social and health institutions (Heinze, Hernandez-Jozefowicz, & Toro, 2010). Limited or scant access to safe, stable conditions (both physical and emotional) places youth in precarious situations, and for far too many, often leads to further marginalization, harm and instability.

Youth experiencing housing instability report high rates of mental health challenges such as depression (61.8%), trauma such as physical/sexual abuse (71.7%), and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms (79.5%) persisting for more than a month (Family & Youth Services Bureau, 2014). In addition to mental health concerns, youth are often at higher risk for repeated trauma while couch surfing, living in shelters/abandoned buildings and other inadequate housing situations (McKenzie-Mohr, Coates, & McLeod, 2012). Rates of mental

health problems are high among children and youth experiencing homelessness in the United States (Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness [ICPH], 2015). Violence in the home and mental illness among parents are identified as risk factors both for homelessness and mental illness among unstably housed youth (ICPH, 2015; Vostanis, 1999). The complexity of issues YEHI face (e.g., abuse and involvement in the child welfare system) is related to underlying psychosocial factors (Vostanis, Grattan, & Cumella, 1998). Mental health problems have a negative stigma attached to them; therefore, youth are less likely to seek out mental health services often self-medicating with street drugs, rather than attempting to obtain needed mental health services (ICPH, 2017; Johnson, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2005).

Youth experiencing housing instability are a medically at-risk and underserved population in the U.S. (Ensign, 2004). They are also at great risk for physical abuse, injuries, homicide, and suicide (ICPH, 2015; Murphy & Tobin, 2011); approximately 5000 youth per year die from illness, suicide, and assault (Klein et al., 2000). Common health problems identified by youth experiencing housing instability include, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), sexually transmitted infections (STIs), pregnancy, malnutrition, injuries, and dermatologic problems (Ensign & Gittelsohn, 1998; ICPH, 2015; Murphy & Tobin, 2011). Unstably housed youth have significantly greater obstacles blocking their access to health care than all other age groups, despite being at greater risk for illness (Klein et al., 2000). Youth who are consistently able to access health care are often not afforded the opportunity to speak with their health care provider privately to discuss sensitive issues such as pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, and STIs (Ensign & Gittelsohn, 1998; ICPH, 2015). Further, unstably housed youth often rely on emergency rooms for their health care needs, and are often their only access to care due to lack of insurance, confidentiality, and embarrassment at their status as unstably housed youth (American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP], 1996; ICPH, 2015; Klein et al., 2000).

When youth do not have access to safe, stable housing, this impacts their ability to engage in other stable opportunities such as school and employment. Unaccompanied youth are also at increased risk for harm, as many experience street victimization (physical/sexual assault, robbery, etc.). Further, youth engagement in survival activities and their increased public presence often leads to interface with police enforcement (Snyder et al., 2016), placing YEHI at increased risk for citations, fines, court appearances and incarceration. These experiences place youth at a further disadvantage, as these encounters may limit their access to housing, financial aid/scholarships and other opportunities that are not available to individuals with “marks” on their record (Alexander, 2010).

Unstable housing is more than lacking access to a consistent, stable environment; it leads to instability in many other areas, creating significant barriers to positive youth development and ultimately a fluid transition into adulthood (Morton, Dworsky, & Samuels, 2017). It is critical to address the issues young people experiencing housing instability face—individually, systemically and in the areas of social policy. The adolescent years are a critical time; youth are expected to become more independent as they transition into adulthood. Identifying mitigating factors that support the resilience of youth is vital to their academic and overall life success. “Many adolescent development specialists have advocated the need to look beyond fixing youth problems to developing in youth the broad range of capacities they need to transition successfully into productive adulthood, and to actively engage youth in this process” (Fulbright-Anderson, Lawrence, Sutton, Susi, & Kubisch, 2005, p. 5). It is critical that policy makers, researchers, and advocates speak with unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness regarding their material lives, social conditions and physical/emotional well-being to create spaces that appreciate and understand the value of youth's active participation in addressing the myriad of issues regularly encountered as they navigate their transition into adulthood. Youth informed initiatives and interventions serve to

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