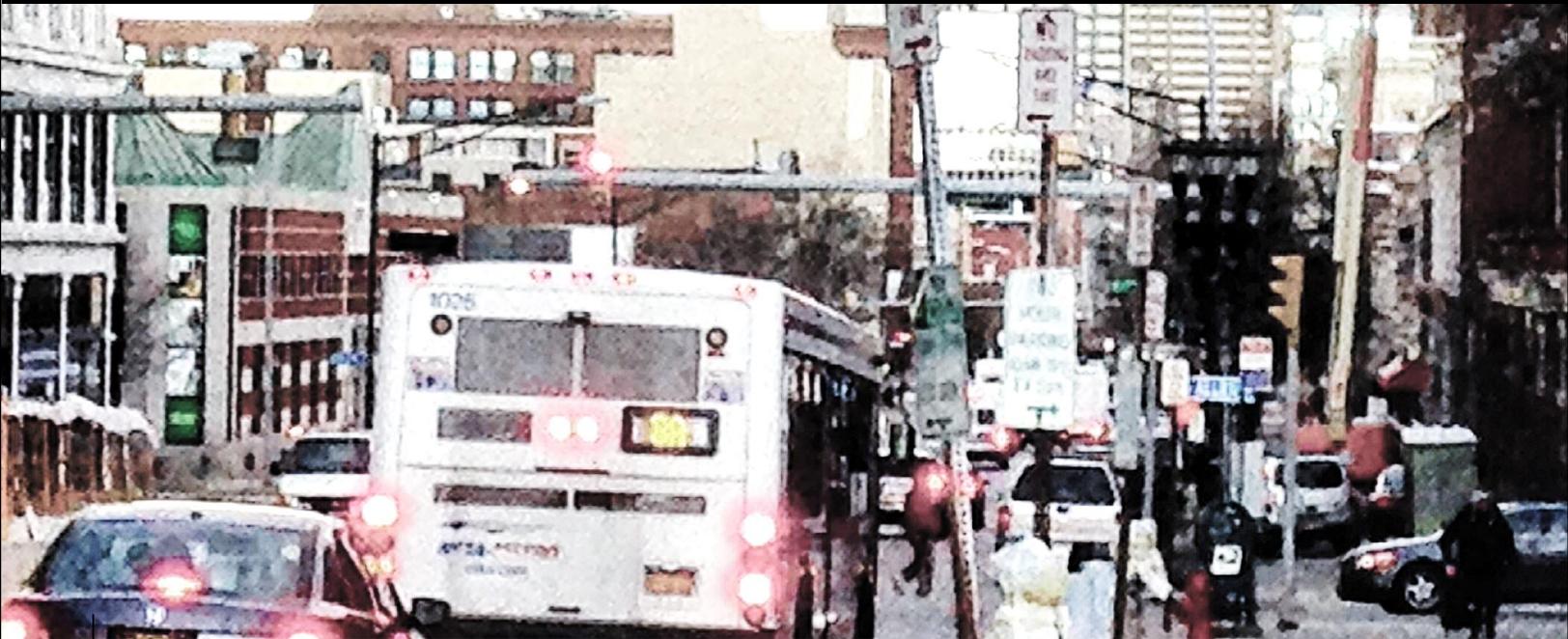




Homelessness among Young Adults in Buffalo:

A Research Report Highlighting Youth Voices



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Language Warning:

This report contains numerous direct quotes from the young adults we interviewed for our study. Some quotes contain profanity. We did not edit this language, in order to allow our participants to speak for themselves in their own words.

Cover photo by Christine Slocum.

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Introduction

This reports summarizes the results of a study about homelessness among young adults (age 18-24), conducted by researchers from the University at Buffalo (UB) School of Social Work, in collaboration with the Homeless Alliance of Western New York (HAWNY), Compass House Resource Center, and other community partners.

Background on Homeless Young Adults

There is growing concern about young people in the United States who experience homelessness, meaning they do not have a safe, stable place to sleep at night. “Homeless youth” up to age 24 includes young people who run away from home, those who are kicked out of their houses or have to leave due to violence and abuse, young people whose parents or families may be experiencing homelessness, and youth who become homeless after leaving systems and institutions, such as juvenile justice institutions or foster care. Homeless youth may sleep in a variety of places, including on the street, in cars, in emergency shelters, and “couch-surfing,” which is staying temporarily with friends, family members, acquaintances and in some cases strangers.

Within this broader group of homeless youth is a subgroup known as homeless young adults, encompassing those who are 18-24 years of age. Due to the fact that they are legally considered to be adults, these young people may not be eligible for some of the resources and services they accessed as minors. But with limited support from families and institutions, many homeless young adults struggle to find stable housing and employment, and otherwise make their way in the world as adults.

According to the 2015 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report Part I (which is the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s most recent national estimate), on a given night in January in 2015, 34,909 unaccompanied 18-24 year olds and 18,064 parents aged 18-24 were homeless. HAWNY reports that on its most recent point-in-time count in January 2016, 28 parents and 47 childless adults aged 18-24 were homeless, and 570 people of that age were homeless over the 2015 federal fiscal year in the five county area for which it collects statistics (Erie, Genesee, Niagara, Orleans, and Wyoming Counties). Given the challenges of locating homeless youth and young adults, particularly those who may be couch-surfing and are not connected to services, these figures are likely underestimates. It is very difficult to get an accurate count of the true number of young people who are experiencing homelessness.

The Current Study

Purpose

The purpose of our study was to learn more about homelessness among young adults in the greater Buffalo region. We were especially interested in learning about homeless young adults’ views on housing services and other services, so that the service system might be able to be improved to better meet their needs.

Our research questions included:

- What circumstances contribute to young people in greater Buffalo becoming homeless?
- Where do homeless young adults in greater Buffalo actually live? For example, are they couch-surfing with friends or family, living on the street, or staying in shelters?
- How do homeless young adults feel about their housing circumstances? Is there anything they like about where they live or stay? What do they perceive as the negatives to being homeless?
- What risks do homeless young adults face as a result of not having stable housing? For example, are they exposed to violence or other criminal activities?
- What do homeless young adults do to stay healthy, take care of themselves, and try to create more stable futures?
- What do homeless young adults think about housing services and social services in Buffalo? How do they think these services could be improved?

Research Approach

We used a qualitative methods approach to learning about homelessness among young adults in Buffalo. Qualitative research involves looking in-depth at data such as interviews or observations to identify key themes. In contrast to other types of research such as surveys that are conducted with a large number of people, qualitative research typically involves gathering more detailed data from a small sample of participants. The main source of data for this study was one-on-one interviews with homeless young adults. The interviews were conducted using an interview guide created with input from the UB researchers, HAWNY staff, Compass House staff, and other service providers in the community. As we recruited participants to interview (described further below), our research team also had the chance to observe interactions at some of the service programs that homeless young people use, such as a drop-in center and programs that provide free meals. We took notes on these observations and consider this to be part of our data as well.

Participant Recruitment and Interviewing

To be eligible for the study, a person had to be (1) between 18-24 years of age and (2) currently not have a stable place to live. Using a broad definition of homelessness allowed us to find and interview young people in a variety of housing situations, such as those living on the street, staying in shelters, or couch surfers. We did not interview youth in transitional housing or supportive housing programs, as we considered these youth as having a semi-stable place to stay.

We used a number of strategies to recruit a diverse group of young people for the study. Compass House Resource Center was a major partner in the recruiting and interviewing process. Case managers at Compass House told their clients about the study and invited them to participate, and we also posted flyers there. This is how our first participants were recruited. We encouraged participants to take flyers to give to friends or acquaintances who were also homeless, and recruited some additional participants in this way. In addition, we visited places where we thought homeless young people might be likely to gather, primarily programs that

provide free meals. Members of our research team visited several free meal programs, including Friends of Night People in Allentown and Hearts for the Homeless and Food Not Bombs in downtown Buffalo. We were able to recruit several participants at these locations.

Through these methods, we completed interviews with 30 individuals. Most of the interviews took place in private rooms at Compass House, even for participants who were not already Compass House clients. Prior to doing the interviews, we explained the study in detail to participants and they provided informed consent to participate. Participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire, followed by the interview. All interviews were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. We took several steps to protect participants' confidentiality. Participants did not have to show ID or provide other personal information such as their name or birthdate to participate in the study. In this and other reports, participants are referred to by an anonymous participant number, i.e. "P09" or "P23." Participants received \$20 as compensation for participating in the study.

Qualitative Analysis

The transcribed interviews were coded by two UB School of Social Work researchers to look for major themes related to participants' housing, family circumstances, relationships, health and wellbeing, and service use. The two researchers coded the transcripts independently, meeting weekly to discuss their codes and identify key themes emerging from the transcripts. They then completed a process called member checking, in which they shared the emerging themes with a group of homeless young adults to get further feedback. Major themes related to the study's research questions are described in the next sections of this report.

Who Are Homeless Young Adults? A Description of Our Sample

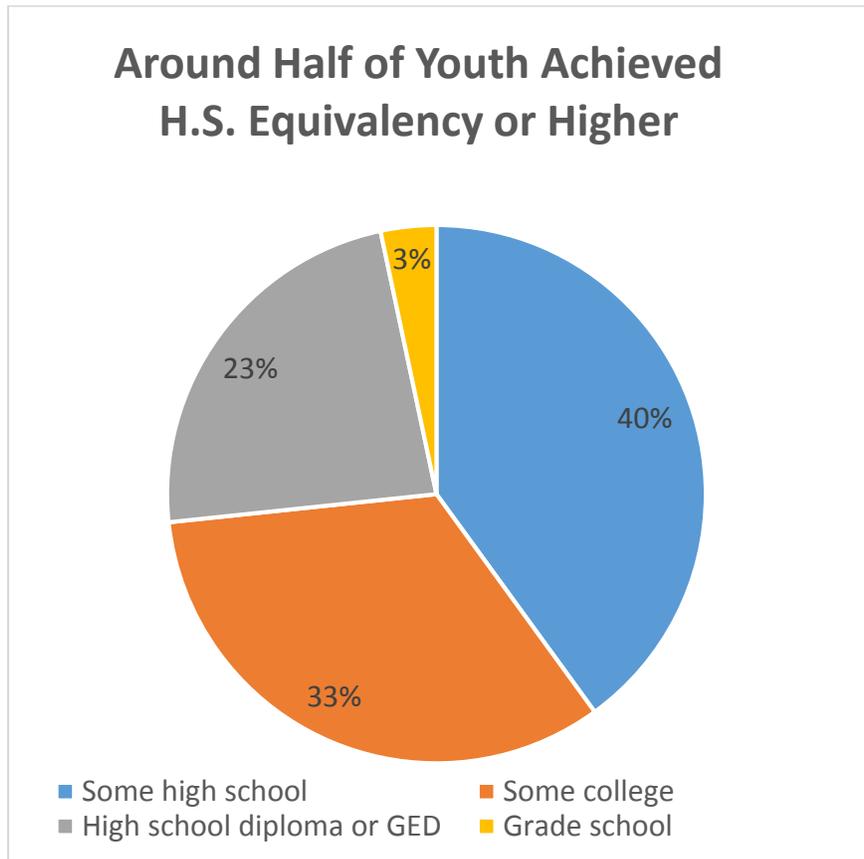
Table 1 summarizes the demographics of our sample of 30 young adults. Half of respondents were male, 43% were female and two participants identified as other gender identities, including gender fluid and transgender. Most respondents identified as African American (50%) or White (33%), with 17% identifying as either multiracial or another race. In addition, 13% identified as Latino/a.

There was a high incidence of past incarceration among respondents (73%) and a similarly high level of involvement with the child welfare system (63%).

	Number (%)
Gender	
Male	16 (50)
Female	13 (43)
Other: Gender Fluid, Transgender (female to male)	2 (6)
Race	
African American	15 (50)
White	10 (33)
Other race/more than one race	5 (17)
Latino/a	4 (13)
Sexual orientation	
Straight	23 (77)
Bisexual	4 (13)
Other sexual orientation	3 (10)
Traveler	6 (20)
In a long-term relationship	12 (40)
Has children	11 (37)
Currently employed	6 (20)
Ever involved in child welfare system	19 (63)
Ever incarcerated	22 (73)

Six participants in the study (20%) identified as travelers. Travelers are a sub-group of homeless youth who migrate from place to place, often sleeping outdoors or in cars and usually not staying in any one location for an extended period of time.

There were notable differences in education levels among participants:



Perhaps related to participants' generally low educational attainment levels, employment rates were very low among the sample, with only 20% of participants currently employed in a wage-earning full or part-time job. Several participants did report earning money from under-the-table employment, such as babysitting or doing hair/makeup, panhandling, busking, and/or illicit activities such as selling drugs.

Where Do Homeless Emerging Adults Live?

At 63%, youth who were couch-surfing made up the bulk of our sample, followed by youth who primarily slept outdoors or used overnight shelters (30%). One participant was staying in a rooming house and one participant used a variety of housing strategies, without a clear predominant pattern.

Couch Surfing

Couch surfers predominated in our study sample. Rather than occupying a shelter or sleeping outdoors, these youths leveraged their social networks to find housing, often alternating between multiple residences each week. Couch surfers drew on a variety of different sources to find a place to sleep each night. In particular, friends or family members typically represented the most stable, although admittedly intermittent, sources of lodging. “Luckily, my best friend, he just moved a couple streets over, so it's a little relief. I know I could just go to his house” a young man explained (P05). Another participant split his time between several friends’ homes, allowing him (with some exceptions) to have a place to sleep each night of the week. “I have a lot of friends. I don’t know what I would do in life if I didn’t have the good friends I had in high school” he stated (P08).

“If you ask people, especially around Buffalo,” one traveler noted, “there is a big community of people that are very supportive and willing to help out” (P19). But couch surfers’ experiences with hosts were not unanimously welcoming. Living in another’s home could sometimes feel overly restrictive. “At the end of the day I can’t walk around and do what I want. It’s not my house” a 21-year-old couch surfer reasoned (P02). When friends or family members were unable to host youth, many turned to strangers, shelters, spent the night on the street, or slept in vehicles:

A lot of times I could find a friend that would let me crash. But sometimes I didn’t and then you always end up in like a parking lot. Like it was handy having a truck anyways, cause I had some sort of shelter. But I could sleep in Walmart parking lot, or I could like park in front of like a park or something (P09).

Some couch surfers relied upon the generosity of strangers, although their experiences with unfamiliar hosts varied substantially (discussed further below in the section “What Risks and Challenges Do Homeless Young Adults Face”). For instance, a young woman whom we interviewed sometimes used websites or social media tailored to couch surfers, but her interactions with the website endorsed hosts had, on occasion, been distressing. She explained:

You never know like, like somebody is going to be like, “Oh yeah cool come crash with me for X amount of time.” And then you're going to get there, and they're going to like get you drunk and like pull some crazy moves (P09).

Sleeping Outdoors and Other Places Not Meant for Human Habitation

Some youth in the sample slept outdoors or in other locations not intended for human habitation. Youth described finding places that shielded them from the elements and afforded them some degree of privacy from the public, potential thieves, and police officers. One young man chose a drainage tunnel and one young woman described sleeping in a relative’s garage (without the relative’s permission or knowledge), while others slept in cars, tents, under bridges or at bus stops, in parks or alongside highways. A few participants, particularly travelers, related that their absence of a traditional shelter enabled them to feel free. “Well it sucks running out of gas” one traveler admitted, “and it sucks getting stuck in bad weather...But

besides that it's fun just being able to travel" (P10). Another participant disclosed that he and his fellow travelers "kind of like sleeping outside...If you're outside it kind of just like naturally wakes you up...And you wake up to like nice scenery" adding "you don't have to worry about like waking up around a bunch of strangers in a shelter or something" (P12). These safety concerns were shared by several other respondents. A local participant who preferred to stay in tunnels over shelters (when possible) had this to say: "It's a lot better than having to sit there with 40-plus men snoring [in a shelter] and then the person you're bunking with you don't even know if they're a murderer or who they are" (P13).

Although several youths spoke to the benefits of nontraditional forms of shelter (e.g. enhanced privacy, a connection to nature), considerable drawbacks were also noted. As an example, a young woman who frequently slept in a vehicle stated that each morning "the sun will come up and we'll just start cooking [getting hot]," a fact that made sleeping during the early morning hours extremely difficult. However, tent usage had its own considerable shortcomings:

Tents are kind of like a red flag. You don't really want to put those up when you're homeless you know...like 85 percent of people aren't going to do anything about it...But you know, sometimes like people will call the cops on you (P09).

Temperature drops and inclement weather were also mentioned as difficulties. A traveler described a particularly challenging night on the street:

It was Christmas I spent underneath a bridge and some, yeah, some bums and kind of hung out. I mean we were freezing...we were bouncing from roof to roof just trying to find somewhere to get out of the rain. And nobody would take us in...so we just crawled up under a bridge and just kind of like huddled together (P12).

During the winter, a few participants were able to survive outside of the shelter system using tools such as subzero sleeping bags and all-season tents. And while theft was a frequent occurrence for youth who stayed outside, one respondent reported that thanks to his connections with outreach workers who visit tunnels and other known locations where homeless people sleep, getting new provisions such as blankets and sleeping bags was not very difficult.

Shelters

Many of our participants saw shelters as a last resort—only to be used when all other options (i.e. staying with friends, family, or even outdoors) had been exhausted. "If I lost everything I was traveling with, had nothing and no other options, no one to take me in, no money, no anything, then yeah, I would have to go there [a shelter]" an 18-year-old traveler concluded. Feelings of insecurity were a recurring concern among current and prospective shelter consumers. Shelters "will give you a place to stay, and you will get fed, but it's not an environment you will want to be in because people in there might steal your things when you leave" a couch-surfing participant said (P05). Some participants had concerns about going to shelters with children. "I would never put them in a shelter" a mother in the sample said of her children, "They would be with my mom" (P07). In addition, safety nets of friends and fellow

travelers might, as one participant suggested, preclude the need for some young people to use formal shelter services. Maintaining that he did not want for shelter, the youth stated, “No, no, there is community that takes care of that (P11).

Though many young people in the sample discussed avoiding shelters, some youth did use shelters regularly or occasionally. At least one young person perceived shelters as a safer alternative to sleeping outdoors, saying, “I’d be afraid of being alone, sleeping outside; someone would kidnap me or something” (P18). A few participants described seeking out specific shelters based on prior positive experiences. “I was homeless again, because we [my girlfriend and I] broke up. And what did I do?” a couch surfing youth recalled. “I went to the City Mission because I know all the pastors down there. I was in the disciple program down there. I don’t have to worry. I can go down there at 5:00 and get a bed, and I’m good for the night” (P04).

This young man was drawn to the shelter expressly because of its inclusion of spiritual elements. “I was homeless, and it was really religious-based. That's when I joined the disciple program... It gives you more hope. It helps clear your mind a little, not to worry about all that's going on” (P04). Another youth spoke positive about outreach workers from a local church, but tended to avoid shelters. “They come from churches and stuff, so they show they’re more caring” he elaborated of the outreach workers. “They treat you like a human being, but at a shelter they treat you like a bunch of monkeys” (P13).

How Do Homeless Young Adults Become Homeless?

No two participants shared the same story for becoming homeless, as a variety of historical and current factors and events shaped participants' unique housing circumstances. However, the reasons underlying participants' homelessness fell into two major categories: volatile and violent relationships, including family and intimate partner relationships; and financial hardship.

Volatile and Violent Relationships

For many young people in our study, homelessness was connected to experiences of violence, including violence and abuse in youths' families of origin and violence in intimate partner relationships. "He was like very controlling" a young woman remembered, referencing an abusive former partner. "And he was acting as if he was my father instead of my spouse" (P28). Eventually, wanting to distance herself from her abusive partner, she entered a nearby domestic violence shelter. She appreciated the support that she received there:

When I went to the DV I actually liked it, because I was pregnant with my son at the time, and I really did need that help. They really did help me. At that time I didn't care, I was like I need my own place, I'm not going back to that man's house. So I liked it, because they helped me with everything (P28).

One young woman described that she was forced to leave home by her mother, who disapproved of her relationship with a partner who became abusive: "My mother. Well, again, the domestic relationship was one of the reasons why my mom didn't want me in the house anymore. She wanted us both out, so she kicked us out" (P23). Afterwards, she drifted from one friend or family member's home to the next, eventually finding herself both homeless and in an increasingly violent romantic relationship. In spite of her situation, she resisted calling social services or the police for help. "I was too afraid to call" she recounted. "I'm not going to lie to you. He was the type he might have killed me before the phone call was over" (P23).

Another young man described how fights with his partner led to him sometimes not having a place to stay: "I would stay with her, she would call the police on me, they would tell me to leave, and we would end up getting back – it's kind of like make up, break up, make up, break up," he said (P14).

Many youth had lived with parents, guardians, and/or other family members prior to becoming homeless. In many cases, violence or abuse were related to participants' reasons for leaving home or becoming homeless. For instance, one young man reflected on how a dispute and ensuing physical brawl profoundly altered his relationship with his father, leading to his ejection from the home and the severance of his father's financial support. "We used to be riding, do everything, go everywhere together. And it was all gone" he lamented (P05). Sexual violence also occurred within the home. As one young woman described:

I lived with my dad. He was always hitting me and making me have sex with people so he could get his drugs. He ended up moving some guy in and he did stuff to me. I wanted out and my dad said no. My dad went after me (P06).

Parental substance abuse was sometimes linked to participants' reasons for not being able to stay with their parents or caregivers. "Let's put it like this, when your parents is on a little drugs, it's hard to stay home. I have a lot of family and friends. So what I do is go from house to house," one participant explained (P08). "Me and my dad would kind of, cause he drinks a lot and we'd kind of get into it sometimes. Cause I drank too, I'd come home you know, drunk," another participant described (P12).

Some participants reported long histories of neglect from their parents or guardians. Looking back to when his mother encouraged him to emancipate himself, a homeless youth reasoned, "I just had to take it for what it was. You know what I mean? Really, I kind of raised myself from age 14, 13, 15" (P14). The participant continued: "My mom, she's been evicted in the past, her and her boyfriend, for leaving houses under bad conditions...It might not be the most stable or most luxurious situation; but I'm glad that some nights I can go to my mom, and I don't have to sleep on the street" (P14).

For many participants, family situations were complicated by involvement in the child welfare system. Almost two-thirds of the sample had been involved with Child Protective Services at some point, or at multiple points, in their childhood or adolescence. This included participants who aged out of foster care, as well as participants who remained with their birth parents or were adopted, but for whom family instability lingered. "All I remember was around like 9 I got [taken] from my mother and got put into foster care and group homes until the age of 17-1/2 until I decided to sign myself out. Well, my son's grandmother signed me out," one young woman recalled (P22). Another young man described his experiences growing up:

My mom, she struggled with an addiction; and her drug of choice was crack cocaine, so she wasn't stable enough to take care of me and my sister. We would move from home to home... like foster care but actually it was always a friend of the family. Being in foster home we were abused and neglected. You know what I mean? The lady or our guardian just seemed like all she wanted was our money. She would make us wear knock-offs and no-name brand stuff just so she pocket our money. (P14)

Financial Hardship

Only 20% of the sample was currently employed in a full or part-time job and participants' monthly incomes averaged a little over \$400 per month, which included income from under-the-table and illicit sources. Thus, many participants' homelessness was linked to the fact that they couldn't afford independent housing on their own. One participant described the difficulty he encountered finding work and paying the rent on his apartment when returning to Buffalo after a short-term move to Syracuse:

I decided to make an impulse decision and moved to Syracuse and because I have family out there, found a job out there and everything. Because I feel like things in Buffalo is too rough, I wanted to get away for a while. I came back and now I obviously got evicted because I couldn't pay the rent. I wasn't paying rent while I was gone. (P25)

Another participant described having a job as a patient care assistant and being able to afford her own apartment, but then lost her housing after being fired from the job due to calling off work too many times because of her own health or in order to care for her children:

Yeah, I lost my job because they were like oh, it's too many call-offs. I'm like this is crazy. And then me losing my apartment because I lost my job, and I couldn't afford the rent anymore. So I had to move all my furniture, I had no one to help me move my stuff, so all that stuff that I worked so hard for was gone. (P28)

Other participants described that it was difficult to save money because family members or partners would ask for or take their money. While almost all of the participants in the sample described wanting to live in their own apartments, saving enough money afford a security deposit and other move-in costs and then to pay monthly rent on an ongoing basis was a formidable challenge. "The guy wasn't real happy about it," one participant said of a prospective landlord. "He was too worried about the first of this month or the first of next month I mean. '\$650; you're going to have \$650?' he kept telling me. I said, 'I can't tell, no, because I don't know' " (P16).

Educational challenges were tied to participants' difficulties securing the steady income that they would need to afford independent housing. While some participants described that they had done well in school or had enjoyed certain classes or other school-based activities, many described difficulties, including academic struggles, disciplinary actions, and trouble with peers. "I didn't have a lot of clothes and everything so people would come and pick on me, so that's why I didn't want to go to school," one participant explained (P02). Similarly, Participant 15 remarked, "The reason I really dropped out because I really didn't have no outfits; and I'm like I don't really want to go to school looking all crazy. Everybody else looking all presentable for their class." Another participant added: "I was slow. I was in the special ed class; my whole school life I was in the screw-ups class. I got teased about that too" (P04). One young woman who still hoped to obtain her GED explained the combination of factors that had made staying in school so difficult for her:

Before he [my son] came I wasn't even going to school just because how everything was set up as me coming out of foster care on my own, looking for work, just giving up on school work because the fact the schools I used to go to, I felt like I wasn't getting the help where I was understanding the problem or the work that was given to me. At the grade of 10th, I just said forget it; and I tried GED, but I just think I need to find that one perfect tutor or that one perfect program that helps me with something for me to go back to school. (P22)

Despite these difficulties, many young people were taking active steps toward finding stable employment and being able to afford their own housing, including taking classes to obtain a GED; pursuing higher education or job training; and actively seeking employment opportunities. One participant described her perseverance during a job search: "The first step I'm basically doing job hunting right now, waiting for callbacks. I'm calling them all the time. I'm getting

ready to figure out if I'm going to get a babysitter or have my mom or put her [the participant's infant daughter] in daycare as far as working because I have to work" (P23). Participant 5 spoke with enthusiasm about applying for employment and training programs: "I'm trying to get into AmeriCorps. I'm trying to get into Job Corps. I'm trying to at least all of this stuff while I'm eligible, while I'm at that age."

What Risks and Challenges Do Homeless Young Adults Face?

The homeless young adults we interviewed reported facing many risky and challenging situations due to their unstable housing, regardless of whether they were living on the streets, staying in shelters, or couch surfing.

Involvement with the Criminal Justice System and Interactions with Police

Many homeless youth have had involvement with the criminal justice system. Almost three-fourths (77%) of young adults in our sample reported being arrested at some point in their lives, (either as a minor, an adult, or both), and nearly as many (73%) had been incarcerated as a juvenile and/or as an adult. Some participants' involvement with the justice system was directly tied to their unstable housing or homeless circumstances. One young person remarked: "You have to worry about the Buffalo police because they constantly mess with homeless people...they come and harass you and then they run your name and then you get aggravated, and you start mouthing off to them and that's when they arrest you" (P13).

Homeless youth with a criminal record sometimes avoided any contact with the police, for fear of possible arrest or re-incarceration. One young man cited fear of arrest to explain why he did not resist sexual assault by another client at a shelter: "I didn't want to hit him or fight him [the perpetrator] because I didn't want to go to jail because I'm trying to keep out of jail and get my life back together" (P03).

Still others spoke of being arrested for behaviors that they did not realize would warrant arrest. For example, one participant talked about how he had been arrested six months previously for trespassing, after falling asleep in the hallway of an apartment building while waiting to meet a date that never answered the door: "...I was sitting in the hallway though, I mean black hoodie on, with a hat and they like, 'Oh yeah I'm going to take you to jail.' I'm like, 'I didn't even do nothing, I'm just sleeping, I'm waiting for the girl to come to the door.'" (P25). Other participants described having difficulty complying with probation or parole conditions due to their unstable housing, such as a participant who said he missed a home visit from his probation officer because he had given his mother's address as his home address but couldn't actually stay there long-term (P05).

Theft and Financial Exploitation

Theft and loss of belongings was a concern for youth in different housing situations, including those staying shelters, sleeping outdoors, or couch-surfing. Several youth expressed a general preference for sleeping outdoors or in public places over staying in a shelter. One 22-year-old man who slept in a tent said, "Being on the street? It's calm and nobody really messes with you" (P13). Yet he also reported experiences of theft: "I've lost my birth certificate. I've lost my driving license. I've lost everything on the street because other people would come and take my stuff" (P13). Theft was not solely the concern of homeless youth that were living on the streets. Participants also reported concerns about the safety of both their belongings and their physical person in couch-surfing and shelter situations.

For some participants, theft was related to their reasons for leaving home or not staying with their parents or guardians. This included participants reporting that their parents or guardians would apply for food stamps or benefits in the participants' names, but then would not share these resources. One participant explained, "I was told [by the Department of Social Services] that I had to go back home with my dad because my dad had food stamps and everything opened in my name. They said they weren't able to open another case for me, and that I was denied" (P06). Another participant described, "[My mom] would give the food stamps to her boyfriend, and we still in the house hungry" (P15). This participant also reported that he had difficulty saving money from his job to get his own place because others in the household would take his earnings: "It's a lot of people at my grandma's house anywhere, coming in and out... so I just feel like before somebody steal my money I'm going to go out there and spend it; and that's what I do" (P15).

Sexual Exploitation and Physical Violence

Numerous participants also reported sexual coercion as a result of their unstable housing. One Queer-identified traveling youth reported being sexually assaulted while couch-surfing at the home of someone found on a couch surfing website with positive reviews (P11). The young adult did not resist the assault for fear of being physically attacked. Another young woman spoke of receiving unwanted sexual advances: "They think that because they gave me a few dollars that I'm so desperate that they can take advantage of me or I owe them something..." (P18). Moreover, some respondents grew to not only expect harassment and exploitation as an inevitable consequence of housing instability, but also to feel as if they deserved it. One young woman who reported that the brother of a friend with whom she was temporarily staying had tried to rape her said, "I wouldn't have made no report because I just feel like...That's what supposed to happen, because I'm out here in the streets" (P30).

Numerous young adults who participated in our interviews felt unsafe in their current or recent housing situations. One domestic violence survivor reported that her current housing environment in a rooming house was far from ideal. "There's always people fighting in the hallways," she recounted, "There's strange people. Sex offenders. There's over seven sex offenders that live on my floor alone. So I'm kind of scared to leave my room unless I'm leaving the building" (P06). Another participant shared that he had spent time living in a drug house, which he referred to as a "trap house," where he witnessed shootings and other violence. He noted, though, that other people in the house tried to shield him from the violence, because of his age: "I was so young, and the people there, they'd be like make sure nothing happened to me at all" (P15).

How Do Homeless Young Adults Try to Stay Healthy, Take Care of Themselves, and Work Toward Better Futures?

Young adults in the study exhibited a variety of strengths as well as strategies for maintaining their well-being and achieving their goals, despite the challenging circumstances in which they were living. Some strengths took the form of a mindset while others were actions directed toward positive change or daily self-care.

An Optimistic Attitude

Almost all of the sample saw their homelessness as a temporary situation, and were confident that they would obtain permanent housing as well as employment, educational opportunities, or a stable family life in the near future. This sense of conviction motivated young adults to apply for jobs, search for apartments, and take other immediate, practical steps to achieve the lives that they aspired towards. One participant said, "At first I was like fuck this shit, I don't even want to be here. And then it went from that to like, let me just take advantage of this situation. I'm here for a reason. Everything happens for a reason" (P05). Although some young adults felt depressed and discouraged at times as a result of their homelessness, more framed their situation as something from which they would in some way benefit. As Participant 21 stated: "...the way I was living before, I was just like, ugh. Even though I don't have a lot of money or a permanent place to stay, at least I'm happy with me and at least I can smile and stuff like that."

Flexible Support Systems

Many participants had fairly wide informal support networks composed of friends, family members, and acquaintances, which they leveraged for a variety of purposes. A majority of the sample primarily found a place to stay by couch surfing, or temporarily staying with someone that they know. Couch surfing lengths varied, with some young adults rotating weekly while others remained at the same residence for months at a time. Participant 8 had four friends whose homes he rotated between on a weekly basis:

I live house to house. I have four good friends. One of my friends is my best friend. I stay at his house maybe three days out of the week. The other four days, I have three other friends that let me stay at their house once a week. Those are my good friends.

Others found support in romantic relationships: "Well, when I'm really stressed out I like to just cuddle with my boyfriend and watch TV and talk or sleep," Participant 7 stated. "Well, actually, perfect example -- today. We've been feuding for a week. We even broke up a couple of days ago. I couldn't take it anymore.... I called him this morning, and I'm like, 'Babe, how about I just take you out for lunch today?'" Still others found support from family members, even when they could not live with them due to conflict, abuse, and their own family members' risk of eviction. One participant (P13) primarily slept outdoors or in tunnels, but met weekly with his

grandparents and his father, who would provide him with a meal and a ride to wherever he needed to go. Further, for some young people, social media presented a way of connecting with others and finding a place to sleep, both for local homeless youth and travelers alike.

Maintaining Health and Well-Being

Young adults in the study also shared a range of strategies used to care for their health and to relax. Participants talked about trying to eat well, drink water, and get regular exercise. One explained "All I drink is water. I don't drink pop, juice, none of that shit" (P05). He was among numerous participants who paid attention to nutrition. Participant 21, who self-described as a "spiritual guru type," said, "I would rather fast than eat food that I don't want to eat or food that's really just not beneficial to me." When asked what he did to take care of himself, one participant answered, "I do push-ups and sit-ups" (P03). A few participants talked about obtaining regular medical care for chronic conditions, such as an eye condition and high blood pressure. Others named aspects of personal hygiene as part of the ways that they practice self-care.

Some participants discussed struggling with mental health challenges. These included diagnosed conditions such as depression or bipolar disorder, as well as feelings of sadness, anger, and anxiety, often related to their housing situations. Many participants took steps to take care of their mental health and emotional wellbeing. This included accessing counseling or mental health treatment, though several participants reported access barriers. Participant 6, for example, explained, "I'm trying to get counseling, but every time I get an appointment, it get cancelled because of transportation, or they cancel on me when I get transportation." Another young adult remarked, "I've been trying to find a psychiatrist but nobody wanted to take my Medicaid" (P16). One participant commented that she had previously received counseling and health education services through her high school that she found to be helpful, but she lost access to these services when she graduated (P24).

Participants also often described using self-care strategies to cope with different emotions. For example, music, creative arts, and trying to appreciate time outdoors or in nature were popular ways of dealing with stress and negative emotions. "That's been so hard lately, because sometimes I've been flipping out, out here," said one participant (P26). "So mostly I'm just either just trying to enjoy the fresh air or I'm just writing, trying to stay calm." In other cases, substances such as marijuana were part of participants' coping strategies (described below).

Substance Use

Most of the sample that used substances restricted their consumption to alcohol and marijuana, and some participants chose not to use substances at all. Several persons talked about avoiding harder drugs. Participant 23 avoided accidental consumption of harder drugs by preparing his own marijuana consumption: "I roll my own blunts. I don't have anybody else do it for me."

A couple of participants asserted the use of marijuana as a healthy way of coping with stress and trauma. Participant 5 spoke positively about the effects of marijuana on his well-being, saying, "If I feel I'm going to do some dumb shit, and I can't get nobody to talk to, that shit will have me relaxed. That shit saved my life. People say to stay away from marijuana, but that shit saved my life." Many talked about working to reducing their substance use: "It's just because right now at this point in my life I'm trying to better my situation. I'm trying to change it, and I don't even have money right now to support or supply my habit; so it's a waste of money. It doesn't really deal with the problems. I realize that after I come down from my little high, from my marijuana high or whatever, I'm still upset, I'm still depressed, I'm still angry" (P14). A couple of participants were receiving treatment at a methadone clinic in order to quit heroin use. Participant 17 credited the methadone clinic with saving his life.

What Services Do Homeless Young Adults Use and How Do They Think Services Could Be Improved?

Homeless young adults in Buffalo use a variety of services to help them achieve their goals and find housing stability. In the past year, 47% of our sample had received services from the Compass House Resource Center, 53% reported using housing services (such as emergency shelters, transitional housing programs, or subsidized housing), 90% reported using programs that provide free meals or other basic necessities, 47% used employment or education services, and 43% used services that helped them access health care, mental health care, or substance abuse treatment.

Service Barriers

Although a range of services exist to help homeless young adults and many of these young people are accessing them, participants also reported experiencing a number of barriers in accessing services to help them find affordable housing and achieve other goals related to their education, employment, and health and wellbeing. These barriers included homeless young adults' sense of pride and desire for independence; lack of information about service access and availability; the perception that there are not enough resources to go around; perceptions of existing services as being of poor quality; age-related barriers; and bureaucratic barriers.

A Sense of Pride and a Desire for Independence

Many young people were uncomfortable with the idea of accepting housing assistance and other forms of aid. One participant reasoned, "I'm a man. I've got to stand on my own two [feet]. I can't be dependent on nobody for nothing" (P05). Others described potential embarrassment if they were spotted by individuals they knew accepting assistance at shelters or food pantries. Generally, participants wanted to feel as independent as possible and did not want to be tied down by programs that would require compliance with a lot of rules, and also sought to avoid the stigma often associated with identifying as homeless and using homelessness-related services.

Youth sometimes adopted a number of resourceful techniques to avoid using shelters and other supportive services. "I think that if you really need something there is other ways to go out and get it," said one participant, describing his tactic of earning money by performing music on the street and his preference for squatting in abandoned houses to avoid using shelters (P10). Many participants depended on support from friends, family, and acquaintances to meet their basic needs such as food and a place to stay. Such support, however, could often be intermittent or unpredictable.

Lack of Information About Services

For many participants, a barrier to accessing services was simply not knowing where or how to find assistance such as shelters, other housing support programs, or food pantries and

programs serving free meals. One participant who was a traveler stated, “I can’t find info when I look it up and it’s a lot easier to just like walk up to somebody’s house and knock on the door and be like, ‘Hey, can I sleep in your backyard for the night?’” (P19). Some participants mentioned that it was difficult to keep track of which programs served meals on which days and at which times. Several of the participants who had not accessed the Compass House Resource Center mentioned that they did not know it existed, prior to meeting there for their study interview.

Not Enough to Go Around

Participants described that it was frustrating to go to a shelter or free meal program—sometimes walking a considering distance to get there—only to learn that the program was out of beds or out of meals for the night. “It seems kind of a waste of time to walk all the way there if they’re not going to be able to help you out. So yeah, if the availability was there I probably would have used that [an existing shelter]” a young man reasoned (P19). Another respondent explained, “They’re [local shelters] filled not even 20 minutes after [they open] and there are no beds left. So if it’s like if I’m 30 minutes away what’s the point of walking 30 minutes away to find out there’s no more beds left?”.

Other participants described a feeling that other people were more hard off and more in need of resources and services than they were. “I’ve seen so many homeless people,” stated one participant, “and frankly, I feel like someone else needs it [services] more than I do” (P21). “I’d rather have all that go to people who literally have no other option” another participant concluded (P18).

Low Quality of Services

Some participants felt that shelters and other services were not worth accessing, due to quality concerns. For example, staying at one local men’s shelter meant sleeping in a crowded room alongside many other men, mostly considerably older than the young people in our study. Further, participants reported that one drop-in program (which was primarily for homeless adults with serious mental health conditions) was a place where people could stay overnight, but as this program was not an actual shelter, people had to sleep sitting up at tables or in the hallways with no mats or sleeping bags. Personal hygiene and the cleanliness of existing shower facilities emerged as another important issue, as one participant who was couch surfing described. “I like to take showers every day and smell clean and just feel good...you had to share the same bathroom [at a shelter] and you never know like what people—they could have diseases and stuff like that; you never know what they have,” he stated (P03). Furthermore, fights were reported at some shelters, threatening participants’ feelings of physical safety.

Problems with staff at various service-providing agencies were also frequently reported. Over the course of our interviews, respondents described a number of occasions during which staff came across to them as rude, demeaning or callous. One participant described interacting with social services staff as, “you get slapped in the face” (P02). When it came to interactions with

shelter staff, this participant stated: “Half of the time the people, the staff and everything talk to you any type of way because they have that job and they know they’re homeless [the shelter patrons] and they’re, so-called, better than you” (P02).

Wait times at area providers could be substantial according to several respondents. One young woman described of trying to apply for different social services: “You could be sitting there from 9:00 AM to 4:00 just waiting for a number to be called and then they tell you it’s too late in the afternoon; so you have to come back tomorrow” (P23). After encountering long waits, staff behavior that was perceived as rude could be very discouraging to homeless young adults. “They’re rude. Some of them have attitudes, like really bad attitudes” a participant explained, “Some of them just ignore you, and they’re just trying to get you in and out” (P13). Though participants also acknowledged positive interactions with particular staff at various agencies, negative interactions with staff were a common theme that in many cases discouraged participants from seeking different types of housing and social assistance.

Age Restrictions Placed on Emerging Adults

Though all participants in the study were over age 18 and therefore generally considered to be adults, participants sometimes reported difficulty applying for certain benefits or resources due to their continued “dependent” status on their parent or guardian’s benefits. For example, a 20-year-old woman recalled her experience of being turned away from the Department of Social Services, saying, “I was told that I had to go back home with my dad because my dad had food stamps and everything opened in my name. They said they weren’t able to open another case for me, and I was denied” (P06). Another young woman, this one 18-years old, was deeply frustrated by the fact that, as a legal adult she was told she needed to go through her grandmother to access her food stamps benefits: “I’m grown as hell, so I got to go ask my grandmother for my food stamp card. She got to put my grown ass on her case. You get what I’m saying?” (P30).

Many participants felt that they did not get as much respect as older adults, due to their young age. For example, one participant stated: “...they think because I’m young, I’m young-minded, I don’t know what I want...They don’t treat me like an adult, and I wish they would treat younger ones [unstably housed youth] more like adults because young kids go through more stuff than adults sometimes” (P23).

Bureaucratic Barriers

Participants reported a range of bureaucratic barriers to service access, including difficulty with paperwork, restrictive curfews, burdens on time and excessive program obligations, difficulty with program entry and compliance with rules, and barriers with obtaining support for the transition to long-term independent housing.

The complexities of paperwork. The subtleties and complexity of the paperwork required to apply for aid sometimes presented an imposing barrier to service access. A 20-year-old traveler

replayed one of his recent interactions with a worker saying, “ ‘Yeah, we have a job employment program, just fill out these papers, submit them to this place, have an address that you have to give to get the application mail[ed] back to you at.’ It’s like, what address?” (P19).

Keeping track of important documents was very challenging for some participants. “The documents. It’s hard to get the points...I went through hell to get just the little—that piece of paper [social security card]. And then I lost it,” described one young woman (P30). Though not all programs require participants to provide identification, this participant believed that her lack of an ID card would prevent her from accessing different services: “I’m not able to get a house because I don’t have my ID, I’m not able to go to the food pantry because I don’t have my ID. Like it’s always ID, ID...I can’t even go to a shelter because I don’t have a ID?”

Restrictive curfews. Curfews and other residency rules at shelters and other housing programs presented their own set of challenges. One participant secured a job only to have to resign shortly afterwards, implicating her shelter’s 9 p.m. curfew and the limitations placed on her by local public transit routes (P06). Other participants reported that some shelters did offer a degree of flexibility in working residents’ nightly check-in times. “Since I’m working, they let me come in a couple of minutes after 10:30 [the shelter’s curfew]...It depends on what time I get off work, so...If you don’t have a job, you come in late, you don’t have a room no more,” explained one participant (P29). In general, participants perceived curfews and other rules as restricting their social and recreational freedoms. As a couch surfing woman explained of a previous program, “It was like I still had that mind state of I didn’t want to sit still. I didn’t want to come in at nine o’clock...and on the weekends you’re not able to stay out” (P28).

Burdens on time and excessive requirements. Time-intensive social service follow-up appointments sometimes exerted a strain on participants. A female participant trying to regain custody of her children was required by the court to attend such frequent appointments that it conflicted with her ability to get a job. “They have me doing a lot, so if I do get a job, it will have to be like 11 to 7, like overnights. But then again, it’ll be like—how am I going to sleep?” she pondered (P28). In other cases, participants felt that program deadlines could be unnecessarily onerous. One participant enrolled in a job-hunting class outlined some of her qualms with the program: “How—after we get off the class that’s when we supposed to go job hunting and get the application. We supposed to fill out four applications a day and bring them in...But even still the managers—everybody is gone out the store. It seem like they make it harder” (P30).

Service entry and compliance with rules. In other instances, initial access and enrollment were the largest barriers to service access. Some participants described needing a referral from DSS to access shelters, and found this to be overly burdensome (P13). Getting this referral or other support sometimes felt like an uphill battle. “They come up with the littlest thing,” one participant said of social services, “They’ll find the littlest detail not to give you social services, and they’ll deny you,” (P13). This same youth described the difficulty of complying with rules, one he did access the shelter: “You do the stupidest little thing there, they kick you out...they manipulate the clients and then everybody that’s staying there, they harass them to the point to where they can get them kicked out.” Another participant felt that there were not enough

services for young men: “They [local programs] do emergencies for mothers and kids, but not always mothers and kids are the ones that are in trouble. There’s young men out there who are choosing to live on the street because nobody else is going to help them” (P07).

Transition to long-term housing and difficulty with security deposits. Finally, many participants described challenges and barriers with programs intended to help them transition to long-term housing. One participant expressed frustration with his perception that most supportive housing programs appeared to require that a person must have a disability or mental health diagnosis to qualify for housing support (P14). “Can we base the guidelines on something else?” he asked. “Can we base it on a trauma, on experience? Can we base it on financial [need]? I don’t understand.”

Moreover, following their attempts to obtain housing with landlords throughout the city, a few participants suggested that security deposits were particularly financially burdensome. While the Department of Social Services was able to assist some respondents with paying for their first month’s rent, participants reported having difficulty finding assistance paying for security deposits. The Department of Social Services will negotiate security agreements with clients’ landlords under some conditions, but as these agreements do not provide any money up front (only security against future damages), our participants reported that many landlords would not accept them.

Youth Perspectives on Service System Improvement

The young adults in our sample also had a lot of ideas for how services could be improved. These ideas included maximizing flexibility in service provision, ensuring that available programs were advertised to young adults, expanding the range and quality of services, expanding resources for long-term housing support, finding program staff who are trustworthy and compassionate, providing navigation and advocacy assistance, and providing more youth-only or youth-focused service programming.

Flexible Assistance

Many youth appreciated the flexibility that programs like Compass House Resource Center provided. Compass House is Buffalo’s only resource center for homeless or at-risk young people (up to age 24). Participants appreciated that Compass House offered quick, easy access to a variety of much-needed resources, including laundry facilities, clothes, food, and toiletries, or simply a safe place to relax. Some participants positively described other resource centers or drop-in programs that they had visited in other cities. A traveler reflected fondly on her experience with a drop-in program in New Orleans: “Yeah, like you go and you can get food, and you can like watch the tube. Or like get on the computer, or take a shower, you know, do your laundry in exchange for going and like using the facilities you just like do a chore” (P09).

Maintaining personal hygiene remained an important priority for youth. As a result, facilities that provided easy access to showers were viewed as a valuable resource. “It’s a spot that’s like, ‘Oh I think I want to take a shower.’ I know I can, and if you want to plan other things

around needing to be hygienic, you know, you can do that,” said one participant (P11). This participant added that it is important that services are provided in a friendly, casual environment: “People don’t want to [reach out to service providers], especially if they like hate the cops or they don’t like the state...they’re not going to want to go and talk to somebody in a place that feels sterile and cold,” the participant explained (P11).

All in all, young adults desired a place where they could relax and be safe and undisturbed while retaining the freedom to make decisions. “None of us have a problem sleeping outside” a young female traveler concluded, “so wouldn’t even have to be a house or something. But something that was free where you could go and get some sleep and feel like pretty safe” (P09).

Resources for Overcoming Homelessness in the Long Term

Some participants expressed a need for more services that would help support their independence and stability in the long term. “They help you with food and clothes” a woman noted, “but let’s just say if the rent ain’t paid, they ain’t going to help me find a place to stay” (P06). One participant (P22) suggested that programs assisting prospective tenants with obtaining security deposits would be helpful, while another suggested that homeless young adults needed greater access to subsidized housing, with rent fixed at a low amount or based on an affordable percentage of participants’ incomes (P23). Another participant suggested that homeless young adults would benefit from life skills training programs, which could teach young people how to live independently and care for their homes as renters or homeowners (P04).

Make Sure People Know About Programs and Services

Many of our respondents simply were unaware of the full range of services available to them in the area. “They’re hidden...it be like the programs that’s most helpful, they’re not really out there,” one participant said of the difficulty of locating available services (P30). Participants suggested that both travelers and local homeless youth needed to be made aware of how to access available resources and support. “These guys aren’t going to be seeking out the resources but they need help anyway, and so those traveling kids could use those kinds of support services, but they’d need to find some way to get them there,” one traveler commented (P19). Some participants commented that even area providers are not always fully aware of other providers’ service offerings. Overall, respondents believed that several local providers had a lot to offer consumers, but that they needed to take additional steps to engage a larger homeless youth population.

More or Better Quality Resources

Several participants expressed that Buffalo did not have enough shelters or other resources to adequately address homelessness in the region. “There just needs to be more. There needs to be more to offer to people because even one person sleeping on the street is just too many. Housing is a necessity. It’s a basic human necessity” a participant concluded (P21). Another participant remarked: “I’ve never met so many homeless people in my life downtown...and my age at that” (P16). Other participants expressed a need for higher-quality services. For example,

one participant expressed that although the food served at shelters was “better than nothing,” it fell short of being desirable (P12). Participants also suggested that the service system needed more funding. “A lot of them [shelters] need more funding, and a lot of them are struggling” one participant noted.

Recommendations for Staff: Trust, Confidentiality and Empathy

Participants articulated that it was critical that they be able to trust the staff with whom they interact in housing and social service programs. One participant commented: “These workers; every worker here, every worker in Compass House, I would trust them. I would trust them literally. If I had \$5 million and somebody told my worker at home, I have money...I would trust them” adding, “Everybody has a good heart in there. Everybody does their job more than they should” (P02). In some cases, participants did not have this high level of trust in their service providers. For example, one participant described being concerned that her case manager might discuss her personal affairs with other clients or staff from the program.

In other instances, youth felt that staff members jumped to unfounded conclusions without contextualizing their respective cases; as one respondent explicated, “Don’t be so much down on them [homeless youth], because maybe the mistakes they’ve made in their life. Sometimes they should just sit down and understand what we go through” (P08). One participant positively described the empathic response he felt he received from volunteers from a local church-based outreach program: “All the churches that come together are the best. They really, really do care...They actually sit there, and they talk to you. They ask you how your day is going, and they give you supplies” (P13). He added, referring to the predictability of the outreach services: “They give you times of where they’re coming back out and what they’re going to give out to people.” Participants also valued staff who acted proactively. As one participant described of interacting with a staff member, whom she was not originally assigned to work with her: “She sent me down to the neighborhood legal services, she gave me the bus fare, she was on her shit. I feel like if people going to be hired to be a case worker...we need people like her” (P30).

Participants expressed that it was important that they felt a sense of respect from the staff with whom they interacted. “First thing is they could watch how they talk to people” a participant stated. “Secondly they could get the job done a little better...I’m not going to keep going up there, people taking advantage of us and laughing at us and stuff” (P26). In sum, many participants believed that appropriate staff hiring and training along with efforts to decrease wait times could potentially bolster young adults’ utilization of housing and social services.

Navigation and Advocacy

Though participants placed a priority on choice and independence, many also expressed a desire for help and advocacy in navigating the complex web of local housing and social service programs. For example, some respondents suggested that some programs placed young people in independent housing too quickly and without the necessary guidance and follow-up. One young man commented that one program “has a habit of they’ll put you in a place and then they won’t keep track of you after that. They won’t keep up to date with you” (P13). This participant felt that long-term support in terms of home visits from case managers were helpful

in ensuring that young adults were able to stay on top of their appointments and access other support that they needed.

Some participants, recalling childhoods that required them to mature too quickly, felt that they were presently under-equipped to navigate the pressures and responsibilities of adulthood alone. “It was like I lost my childhood being grown, but now that I’m grown I’m still not grown” a young woman reflected, adding, “Now I’m 18 or whatever, but I don’t know the first step to take, like as far as looking for a house. And I just feel like they should have programs or services or whatever to like help people” (P30). Moreover, some respondents explained that they did not want to simply be given referrals by service delivery staff—they wanted staff who would walk them through the process needed to obtain services in a more hands-on way. As an 18-year-old participant related: “When I first went there [a local shelter], I asked them can they help me do—with independent living, and all they told me was that go to Belmont [Belmont Housing Resources, a local nonprofit affordable housing developer], go to Belmont. And I’m like, well, I don’t want to go to Belmont, I just want someone to sit there and just help me” (P29).

Several participants expressed that they appreciated when their case managers or other staff with whom they interacted were able to accompany them to court dates and other appointments. In addition, at least one respondent struggled with the complexity of paperwork in applying for services and believed that additional assistance from agency staff could help (P06). Other seemingly small but meaningful gestures included workers helping youth to learn the bus schedules so that they could make it to appointments on time (P03).

Youth-Only or Youth-Focused Services

Many participants strongly expressed interest in youth-only or youth-focused services, especially in terms of housing. For some, the preference for youth-only housing was connected to the fact that they did not connect with older homeless adults. One participant explained:

When the older kids, they’re all mixed in so it’s kind of like they’re young and they’re trying to stay out of trouble, some of the older people don’t want to stay out of trouble so it’s kind of a little hard for the younger kids to get adapted to the older people who came out of prison or maybe don’t care about their life or they want to go back (P03).

Safety concerns about sharing shelter space with older individuals were another factor. A young woman added: “All older people, creepy old men I don’t want to be staying with, so in the future I want to see shelters where young adults and just young adults” (P20).

The preference for youth-only services extended to programs that provide access to basic necessities, such as food and clothing. Some participants described that it was preferable to prepare something simple in the common kitchen at Compass House Resource Center than to visit one of the city’s soup kitchen or free meal programs, where there may be only “two or three people like [their] age” (P25). Another participant commented that finding clothing was a challenge. “Us young people are now stealing from stores because we have no clothes to

wear...by the time we get the clothes they're all old people's clothes and stuff like that" a 19-year-old explained (P20). This participant suggested that programs give away free clothes divided into sections based on age groups.

Participants emphasized the importance of targeting youth to fill a gap in accessible services. Participant 27 commented that it would be strategic to reach out to youth because of their potential to regain housing stability relatively quickly: "Eighteen to twenty-four [year-olds] they could probably get them on the right path right away. I mean job wise and apartment wise. They can just get right on to it." Another participant spoke to youths' unmet housing needs, saying that youth deserved suitable housing programs as much as any other homeless population:

I think they should come up with a program for the kids here that needs help with landlords that don't take our security agreement. Not because we're kids, just because of the simple fact that we're in this program...I think they should at least try to do something to help us with that again because it's a lot of us teen parents or just young people out here, period, that needs help with it.
(P22)

Recommendations and Conclusions

Based on these interviews with homeless young adults in Buffalo, our professional knowledge, previous research, and learning from how other cities have addressed youth homelessness, the research team has outlined several recommendations for how the City of Buffalo and Western New York region could better serve homeless young adults.

Recommendations

Better Collaboration and Communication between Systems

Most of the youth in our sample interacted with a number of inter-related social systems, including the child welfare system, the justice system (both juvenile and adult), and the social services system. This is consistent with national findings (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2013). It is clear that some young people “slipped between the cracks,” resulting in problems such as youth who became homeless after aging out of foster care and independent living programs, or young adults who tried to open benefits in their own names but were told by Social Services that they could not because they were still listed on a parent or guardian’s application (even though youth reported they were no longer living with or receiving support from these parents or guardians).

Service systems should work together to prevent such barriers. This could include the following actions: (1) thorough discharge planning to ensure that youth exiting incarceration in the juvenile or adult justice system or youth exiting the foster care system have a stable housing option; (2) long-term follow-up through Child Protective Services to see that youth who become adopted remain stably housed as they transition to adulthood; (3) training for Department of Social Services staff on the process for young adults to become eligible for their own benefits (i.e. SNAP), when they are listed on a parent or guardian’s application but are no longer living with or receiving support from that parent or guardian; and (4) the integration of shared data systems to track referrals, services access, and outcomes for youth who are involved in multiple systems.

Flexible Short-Term and Long-Term Support

Overall, the young adults in our sample seemed to desire an age-appropriate level of flexible support. They wanted to be as independent as possible and resisted programs that restricted their freedom through the enforcement of curfews and other rules, but also acknowledged that in many instances they needed adult support, both in terms of day-to-day survival and finding long-term stability. In the short term, participants seemed to appreciate programs that they could access without jumping through too many hoops. One example is resource centers or drop-in programs. Many participants in the sample clearly appreciated Compass Housing Resource Center, which offered participants access to immediate resources such as hygiene products and a food pantry, as well as helping to connect young people with other benefits and

resources. However, Compass House Resource Center is the only such program for homeless youth in Buffalo and does not provide all the features of drop-in programs (i.e. is not open outside of regular business hours, does not provide some facilities such as shower access or a place to nap; see Slesnick et al., 2008 for a description of ideal drop-in center program elements).

Homeless youth and young adults in Western New York would benefit from access to drop-in programs that offer services such as shower and laundry facilities; kitchen/food pantries; studying, socializing, and sleeping space; access to toiletries and other basic necessities; and the chance to work with staff on applying for benefits and other services. To expand access, ideally drop-in programs would have expanded hours (evenings/overnight) and also be geographically dispersed, i.e. open satellite locations in areas of need, which may include high-poverty Buffalo neighborhoods, suburbs, and/or rural locations. An alternative and cost-effective approach would be to expand the use of mobile outreach services. Outreach teams operating out of a van could address youths' basic needs such as food, medical care, and hygiene products, while also making use of the van to transport youth to shelters and resource centers when needed. Mobile outreach vans should be on a fixed schedule and make appearances in neighborhoods or places where young people gather.

In terms of longer-term housing support, many communities nationally have implemented rapid rehousing programs to serve homeless youth and young adults. These programs typically offer assistance in locating housing and then provide up to two years of rental assistance, along with case management and referrals to services (HAWNY, 2014). The findings from our study suggest that many homeless young adults want access to a higher level of support, and for a longer duration (i.e. not limited to two years), than what rapid rehousing typically offers. On the other hand, many young adults do not necessarily need or want the intensive case management associated with most permanent supportive housing models, which are designed to meet the needs of adults with serious mental or physical health conditions (Rog et al., 2014).

It seems that homeless young adults would benefit from long-term rental assistance combined with on-demand support from an adult advocate or navigator, who at the young adult's request could help with activities such as developing life skills to live independently (communicating with landlords, cooking, cleaning, etc.), applying for benefits, pursuing education, finding employment, establishing credit, and following up on appointments related to health care and legal system obligations. Many young adults routinely get such assistance from their parents or other family members; programming to link homeless young adults with an adult advocate or mentor could assist these young people in the absence of such family support.

It is apparent that for some homeless young adults, simply making a referral to a service is not enough, as they may also need help from a navigator with follow-up steps such as transportation to an appointment or completing paperwork. This type of navigation could be provided onsite (i.e. based out of an office in an apartment building where young adults have their own apartments) or offsite using a home-visiting model. In either case, navigators would need to have relatively small caseloads, in order to provide individualized services based on

each client's desires and needs. The goal for such assistance should be for young adults to develop the income, skills, and resources that they need to live independently—which was the expressed goal of almost all participants in our study. Ideally, young adults should be able to receive this assistance for as long as they need to transition to independent living in market rate or subsidized affordable housing. For some young adults, a few months of assistance may be sufficient, whereas others might need multiple years of support.

Housing First

It is also important that such programs do not place excessive rules or restrictions on young people, such as restricting young adults' ability to host visitors in their living spaces or requiring youth to abstain from substances in order to be housed. A "Housing First" model, which applies a harm reduction philosophy and aims to remove common barriers to housing such as sobriety requirements (Padgett, Stanhope, Henwood, & Stefancic, 2011), is recommended for meeting homeless young adults' housing needs while respecting their desires for independence and freedom.

Youth-Only or Youth-Focused Services

Most young adults in the study indicated a strong preference for services offered exclusively to youth (i.e. those age 24 and younger), and expressed discomfort accessing services alongside the general homeless adult population. The Buffalo region has one shelter for homeless youth under age 18, but does not have any shelters specifically for young adults. While it may not be possible to open a young adult-only shelter, having a "youth area" that is a separate space within existing shelters could help to increase young adults' comfort. Similarly, offering meal times at shelters or soup kitchens that are specifically for youth/young adults might also be helpful. Young adults may also feel more comfortable accessing services if they are not required to self-identify as homeless. Therefore it may be helpful to provide information on housing and social services at neighborhood centers, adult learning classes, and other non-homeless-specific locations.

Trauma-Informed Services

Many young people in our sample had endured traumatic experiences, including physical abuse, sexual assault, and witnessing acts of violence--both while living with their families of origin and during their periods of homelessness. Trauma-informed care is a model of service provision that shifts the focus from "What is wrong with you?" to "What has happened to you?" and aims to prevent retraumatization (Wolf, Green, Nochajski, Mendel, & Kusmaul, 2014). Homeless young adults would benefit from trauma-informed services, not only in terms of mental health care but in all aspects of services (i.e. physical health care, social services, employment and benefit assistance, etc.). Many young adults commented that feeling disrespected or misunderstood by staff at any particular housing or social service program made them less likely to want to seek help again. Ideally, all agencies and institutions that work

with homeless youth and young adults in any capacity would adopt a trauma-informed model and would train staff in the principles of trauma-informed care.

Support for Homeless Young Adults Who Are Parenting

Approximately one-third of the young adults in our sample had children themselves. Though not all our participants currently had physical custody of their children, the vast majority of young men and young women who were parents described wanting to provide a better and more stable life for their children, and many were taking active steps to regain custody through the child welfare system. Some participants even remarked on the irony that they themselves were involved in the child welfare system as children, and now were experiencing involvement as parents. Homeless young adults who are parents need support to create stable environments for themselves and their children. This may include supportive housing programs, where homeless young adults could access affordable housing for themselves and their children—as single parents or as couples, depending on circumstances—and also access services such as child care and parenting education classes. It is also important that homeless young adults have access to a variety of contraception options and have the opportunity to make informed choices about their sexual health and reproduction.

More Listening to Youth Voices

Many of the young people in our study were excited to have the opportunity to share their stories and their ideas about how services and policies could be improved. However, even as they shared their experiences and recommendations, some participants expressed skepticism, such as, “Is anyone really going to listen to us?” or “Are things really going to change?” Youth and young adults experiencing homelessness need a meaningful channel for expressing their opinions and ideas, such as a community-wide youth advisory board. It is critical that service providers, funding agencies, and other institutions within the service system respect these youth voices and let them guide efforts to change policies and programming. Individual agencies that serve homeless youth should also consider creating their own youth advisory boards, or adding at least one youth representative to their board of directors, if they have not done so already. In addition, youth not serving on such boards should have ongoing opportunities to shape policy and provide feedback, such as through regular surveys or focus groups that are widely advertised in the community.

Further Research

Further research using qualitative and quantitative approaches should continue to examine the needs, strengths, and daily realities of youth who are homeless, and to examine the effects of different housing and social service interventions intended to help this population. Research should examine if national evidence-based practice models are effective locally, and if and how they are effective for different subgroups of homeless youth (i.e. younger youth compared with older youth/young adults; traveling and non-traveling homeless youth). It is also important for research to examine different types of outcomes, such as housing stability, income and

educational gains, and mental and physical health and wellbeing. Lastly, further research on youth and young adult homelessness should integrate community-based and participatory approaches, in which research is conducted in partnership with young people experiencing homelessness.

Conclusions

Homelessness among young adults is a complex issue to prevent and address. We recognize that many of the recommendations described here would require significant time, resources, and support from multiple institutions and systems in order to implement. We also recognize that our study's findings and recommendations should not be considered the "last word" in ending young adult homelessness. It is important to continue to seek information from diverse homeless young adults about their experiences and perspectives, and also to elicit perspectives from other stakeholders such as families and service providers.

Better addressing and preventing homelessness among youth and young adults can be seen as an investment in the lives of these young people, as well as an investment in the wellbeing of the entire region. The ongoing support of many partners including government agencies; employment training programs; early childhood and parent support services; health, mental health and substance abuse agencies; legal assistance programs; businesses and employers; educational institutions; and families and individuals in Western New York is needed to accomplish this task.

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