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Improving program implementation and client engagement in interventions addressing youth homelessness: A meta-synthesis

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ABSTRACT

Background: Evidence on the effectiveness of programs serving unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness remains limited and mixed, and we know little about the factors that contribute to participant engagement and program implementation across contexts.

Objective: In this meta-synthesis of current findings on youth interventions, we explore the following research questions: (1) What are common programmatic or contextual factors that researchers and/or practitioners identify as contributing to the successful implementation of an intervention for homeless and unstably housed youth? and (2) What programmatic or contextual factors do youth and practitioners identify as hindering successful implementation of an intervention for these youth?

Methods: Through systematic searches of academic databases for articles and reports published between 2008 and 2018—as well as identifying unpublished concurrent studies through professional outreach, hand-searching reference lists, and searches of websites—we screened 1602 studies through two levels of blind review. We then inductively coded the resulting 47 studies that met our inclusion criteria to identify patterns and gaps in the existing literature about implementation and engagement in these programs.

Results: Most of the studies analyzed took place in urban settings, were based on programs located in the United States, and included a variety of interventions from behavioral health treatment to street outreach and case management. The 47 eligible studies included 3112 youth and 495 staff participants. Only 3 out of the 47 studies explicitly focused on racial or LGBTQ equity. Two primary themes regarding factors that support successful implementation and engagement were identified: (1) Organizational and system-wide policies can shape the quality and duration of interventions, and (2) Staff behaviors and training are paramount to the success of many interventions. With respect to organizational and system-wide policies, many studies highlighted the importance of fostering a developmentally appropriate balance between structure and flexibility; considerations to access including low-barrier options when appropriate; concerns regarding the physical space of the program; and coordination with other agencies, particularly for effective referrals. With respect to staffing behaviors and training, studies highlighted that engagement with youth experiencing homelessness requires strong communication, a youth-centered approach, and a “flexible, non-judgmental orientation,” that allows youth a substantial level of self-determination.

Conclusions: Given these findings, this review supports services that emphasize empowerment and anti-paternalism, and increased attention to racial and LGBTQ equity in future exploration of implementation and engagement within programs designed for youth experiencing homelessness.

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1. Introduction

Homelessness and housing instability among unaccompanied youth in the United States is a growing social problem. Recent evidence suggests that 1 in 10 young adults (generally defined as ages 18 through 25) experience some form of homelessness in the U.S. at some point in a 12-month period, and 1 in 30 unaccompanied adolescents (ages 13 through 17) do as well (Morton, Dworsky, & Samuels, 2017). While youth facing homelessness can demonstrate resilience, adaptability, and many other strengths (Bender, Thompson, McManus, Lantry, & Flynn, 2007), they also face significant risks, including challenges maintaining employment, violence, transactional/exchange sex, incarceration, exacerbation of mental and physical health conditions, and early mortality (Aratani, 2009; Cleverley & Kidd, 2011; Tucker, Edelen, Ellickson, & Klein, 2011). However, youth in these situations have varying life experiences and needs, often linked to the specific precipitating factors that contributed to their homelessness.

1.1. Interventions to address youth homelessness

Various interventions and programs currently address youth homelessness in the U.S. Some are tailored specifically for adolescents under the age of 18 who, for example, have run away or been pushed out from their homes, and are living on the streets. Programs often attempt to provide young people a 'safe haven' from the hazards of street living or unsafe couch surfing. Many youth programs combine shelters with case management and counseling services to assess, and if possible, engage in family intervention to stabilize relationships and facilitate youth's return home. Other programs focus more broadly on helping older youth experiencing homelessness successfully transition to adulthood and independence. Given the renewed attention to the transition to adulthood (Osgood, Foster, & Courtney 2010), several funding initiatives have instigated the growth of supportive and transitional services for young people. These interventions often vary in name and scope given the specific population served (e.g., former foster youth, or transitional-aged youth more generally), and the funding source (e.g., HUD, the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act, etc.). Nonetheless, most interventions share similar goals to help young people stabilize their housing situations, access community resources, and better navigate the challenges of young adulthood under precarious circumstances.

1.2. Evidence regarding intervention outcomes

Evidence on the effectiveness of programs serving unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness remains limited and mixed. Only seven published systematic reviews of interventions related to youth homelessness, running away, and/or housing instability among youth exist (for a review, see Morton et al. 2020). Altena et al.'s (2010) initial systematic review of outcome evaluations of youth programs from 1985 to 2008 found little evidence that these interventions positively impacted youth, in part, due to limitations in the design and quality of the studies conducted. Nonetheless, the researchers noted some promising evidence among studies examining cognitive-behavioral interventions for youth experiencing homelessness (Altena, Brilleslijper-Kater, & Wolf, 2010).

More recently, three reviews published in 2016 assessed interventions across different countries specifically examining mental health outcomes among youth experiencing homelessness and family-based interventions (Pergamit et al., 2016; Vojt et al., 2016; Watters & O'Callaghan, 2016). Pergamit et al. (2016) identified key family-based interventions that have robust, limited, or no evidence of effectiveness, and highlighted an absence in the literature of rigorous studies of family-based interventions that address homelessness among youth and intervention efficacy with LGBTQ youth, racial and ethnic minority youth, and in school-based interventions. Lastly, they identified challenges in implementation of family-based interventions. Vojt et al.

(2016) conducted a review of systematic reviews related to interventions that address mental health outcomes among youth who would be considered vulnerable to poor outcomes, which included youth who were experiencing homelessness. They identified that some evidence exists, highlighting that practical support services and psychological approaches such as cognitive behavioral therapy may be beneficial. Finally, Watters and O'Callaghan's (2016) review of psychological and health interventions for youth living on the street in low and middle-income countries found few studies that provided credible evidence for intervention effectiveness.

1.3. The present study

A review by Morton and colleagues explored more recent evidence regarding outcome evaluations of youth interventions (Morton et al., 2020). The work of Morton et al. (2020) represents a systematic effort to synthesize the extant evidence on the effects of interventions serving youth experiencing homelessness or evaluated against preventing youth homelessness, and examine how different interventions vary in their impacts across subpopulations of youth. Parallel to Morton et al., (2020) work, the present study addresses a related question about how interventions are implemented. That is, while the review by Morton and colleagues assessed evidence related to outcomes and impact of interventions (hereafter referred to as the "outcomes companion study") this study synthesizes the evidence of contextual and programmatic factors that impede or contribute to successful implementation of an intervention. To date, no systematic reviews of program evaluations, qualitative case studies, or report briefs explicitly explore this question. The current review addresses the procedural and contextual questions of *why, where, and how* interventions may be effective. This review is structured by two research questions:

- (1) What are common programmatic or contextual factors that researchers and/or practitioners identify as contributing to the successful implementation of an intervention for homeless and unstably housed youth?
- (2) What programmatic or contextual factors do researchers and/or practitioners identify as hindering implementation of an intervention for homeless and unstably housed youth?

2. Methods

2.1. Qualitative systematic reviews

The goal of this meta-synthesis is to identify research that evaluates programs and interventions for youth ages 13–25 who are unaccompanied and experiencing or at risk of homelessness, with particular focus on aspects of program implementation which are identified by the researchers as *barriers* or *facilitators* of successful implementation.

In this section, we describe the methods for identifying and selecting studies, extracting and coding data, and data synthesis. The protocol for this meta-synthesis, and for the outcomes companion study of interventions for homeless and unstably housed youth was registered in 2017 with the National Institute for Health Research International prospective register of systematic reviews (PROSPERO CRD #420170621).

2.2. Search strategy

We searched electronic databases and websites using hand-searching and professional outreach to identify potentially relevant publications. Search retrievals were exported into EndNote® (Thomson Reuters, New York, NY). The research team conducted comprehensive and systematic searches for evidence on interventions for homeless and unstably housed youth as part of the outcomes companion study. The initial search was conducted in February 2017 and the final update was conducted in

March 2019. The first search focused on outcomes studies and retained any records that addressed implementation for the qualitative synthesis. Searches identified more than 4,000 records, from which 42 were identified as potentially relevant to the present study. Searches were repeated for the outcomes companion study in March 2019 to identify publications available after the initial search. For a detailed description of the search strategy and retrieval for the outcomes companion study, screening procedures, and disposition of screened records see Morton et al. (2020).

The research team also conducted supplemental searches in June and July 2018 to identify studies relevant to the present study that could have been missed in the search process for the outcomes companion study due to differing search terms. We conducted searches using

Table 1
Search strategy concepts and associated terms and phrases for supplemental search.

Concept	Terms/Phrases
Population	youth OR youths OR "transition-aged" OR "transition aged" OR "transition-aged youth" OR "transition aged youth" OR "TAY" OR "Young adults" OR "young adults" OR young OR adolescent OR adolescents OR adolescence OR child OR children OR students OR student OR "school-age" OR "school-aged" OR LGBT OR LGBTQ OR LGBTQIA OR LGBT + OR LGBTQ + OR queer OR trans OR transgender OR "gender non-binary" OR "gender non-conforming" OR "gender presentation" OR Foster OR "foster care" OR "foster youth" OR "former foster youth" OR "aged out" OR "aged-out" OR "ageing out" OR "ageing-out" OR "child welfare" OR "emancipated foster youth" OR emancipated OR emancipate OR "emancipated youth"
Housing/ Homelessness	house OR housing OR home OR homeless OR homelessness OR "housing instability" OR "unstably housed" OR runaway OR "unaccompanied youth" OR "street-dwelling" OR "street child"
Intervention	"Housing first" OR "transitional housing" OR "independent living" OR "transitional living" OR outreach OR CBT or "Cognitive Behavioral therapy" or "behavioral therapy" OR therapy OR counseling OR rehabilitation OR recovery OR rehabilitative OR "mental health" OR "crisis intervention" OR "case management" OR "alcohol and other drug" OR AOD OR "alcohol treatment" OR "drug treatment" OR employment OR vocation OR vocational OR "employment services" OR "vocation services" OR "vocational services" OR "job training" OR "employment training" OR "vocation trainings" OR "vocational training" OR "ecologically-based family therapy" OR "motivational enhancement therapy" OR "community reinforcement approach"
Study Design	Qualitative OR ethnography OR ethnographic OR interview OR interviews OR "motivational interviewing" OR "motivational interview" OR qualitative OR (focus AND groups) OR narrative OR "performance narrative" OR "grounded theory" OR "inductive" OR "stakeholder analysis" OR "appreciative inquiry"
Process Evaluation	challenges OR barriers OR inhibitors OR predictor* OR context OR "contextual factors" OR enabler* OR process OR processes OR empowerment OR engagement OR participation OR implementation OR implement OR "service delivery" OR facilitate OR facilitator OR perception OR perceptions
Outcome Evaluation	"Feasibility Studies" OR "Feasibility Study" OR "efficacy study" OR acceptability OR "intent-to-treat analysis" OR "intent to treat analysis" OR "intention-to-treat analysis" OR "intention to treat analysis" OR "intent-to-treat" OR "intent to treat" OR "intention-to-treat" OR "intention to treat" OR EBP OR "evidence-based practice" OR "evidence-based practices" OR "evidence based practice" OR "evidence based practices" OR "evidence-based" OR "evidence based" OR pilot OR "pilot project" OR "Treatment outcome" OR outcome OR outcomes OR "outcome assessment" OR "treatment effectiveness" OR "impact evaluation" OR "impact analysis" OR effective OR effectiveness OR efficacy OR impact OR impacts OR impacted OR evaluate OR evaluated OR evaluation OR retention OR attendance OR maintain OR maintenance

Search Query: #1 AND #2 AND #3 AND #4 AND (#5 OR #6).

varying combinations of terms (Table 1) in EBSCOhost Academic Search Complete, which catalogues over 6,000 full-text journals and magazines in various fields of study, and in ProQuest Social Service Abstracts, covering a wide variety of social service subjects. From search strategies that retrieved more than 550 results, we retained the top 50 ranked by relevance by the database only.

As was done in the initial and updated searches conducted for the outcomes companion study (see Morton et al., 2020), the supplemental search selected websites and contacted individuals and organizations who had expertise in the field of youth homelessness to identify studies of implementation facilitators and barriers for interventions for youth experiencing homelessness. These leaders in the field, including researchers and non-researchers, were originally identified through the *Voices of Youth Count* technical advisors board, other relevant researchers known to the research team, and others who may be aware of major related studies or relevant reviews.

2.3. Screening

Records were assessed for eligibility using predetermined criteria and were subject to a two-tiered systematic approach for screening relevant studies for this project. Upon preliminary assessment of the initial retrieval, we recognized that some records were unrelated to our research question, thus we adopted a pre-screening process to assess titles broadly for relevance, with particular attention to studies of interventions. Subsequently, we conducted screening of the titles and abstracts (Level 1) and full-text (Level 2) using Rayyan (Qatar Computing Research Institute), a web application which allows researchers to independently review articles. At the start of the Level 1 process, a Co-PI and a research assistant screened titles and abstracts of the studies that were found in the initial search using predetermined criteria (see Table 2). Articles were excluded if they were determined to be ineligible by both of the initial screeners. After this blind screening process, the second Co-PI reviewed those articles that were inconsistently screened and made a final determination. This second Co-PI also screened a random sample of 10% of the Level 1 titles and abstracts and, in cases where there was inconsistency, the three screeners discussed and reached a conclusion. If both raters could not determine whether a study met criteria, the study was promoted for full-text review. For records that met criteria for inclusion from the title and abstract screening process, we obtained the full text and conducted a second screening process wherein the two Co-PIs screened all full-text articles according to the same six criteria (see Table 2).

2.3.1. Screening criteria for full-text

Table 2
Criteria for inclusion in the qualitative meta-synthesis

1. The target population is youth.
2. The target population is homeless.
3. The study was conducted in an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) country.
4. The study describes a program, service, or intervention to improve outcomes among youth experiencing homelessness.
5. The study reports implementation of a program, service, or intervention.
6. The study reports programmatic or contextual factors that inhibited or enabled the implementation of an intervention

To be included in the review, studies had to have been of interventions that served youth ages 13–25 who were currently homeless as defined by the study. In studies that included a wider age range, 75% of the study population had to be within ages 13–25 in order to be

included. Studies had to have taken place in an OECD¹ country to align with the outcomes companion study. The rationale for including only OECD studies is that institutions and resources in OECD countries are different than those in low and middle-income countries, and thus reviews of programs for youth experiencing homelessness in these contexts should be distinct (see Morton et al., 2020 for more details). Studies with multiple countries, including OECD and non-OECD countries, were only included if results could be disaggregated by country.

Eligible studies evaluated, examined, or otherwise assessed interventions intended to support or improve outcomes for youth experiencing homelessness. In order to be included in the review, studies had to report programmatic or contextual factors that helped or hindered implementation of an intervention designed to improve outcomes among youth experiencing homelessness. We included both published and unpublished research articles that were published from 2008 to 2018. The year 2008 was selected to align with the outcome companion study (Morton et al., 2020), to identify articles that had not been published in a previous review of outcomes studies (Altena et al., 2010).

We included qualitative, mixed methods, and quantitative study types. Qualitative studies using in-depth interviews, focus groups, observations, or a combination of qualitative approaches were included. Mixed methods studies that included both qualitative and quantitative studies were also eligible. Three quantitative studies were included due to their relevance to the study questions.

2.4. Quality and certainty of findings in included studies

We assessed the quality of included studies using the ten items in the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Tool for Qualitative Studies (CASP, 2018).² The list of these ten items can be found on the CASP website (<https://casp-uk.net/casp-tools-checklists/>). Two research assistants independently rated each study according to these ten criteria. The first author served as a third rater to resolve discrepancies and all study assessments were discussed with the entire research team. Because there is no consensus regarding what constitutes a “low quality” study using appraisal tools such as CASP, ratings in this study were not used to exclude studies. Rather CASP ratings were used to weigh the relative confidence in the evidence of each study as we engaged in the thematic synthesis process. In other words, the CASP ratings were used as part of the Confidence in the Evidence from Reviews of Qualitative Research (CERQual) approach (see Glenton et al., 2013 for a discussion of these approaches).

For the ten criteria in the CASP tool (for example, “Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research”; item #4) “each article was rated “yes,” “no,” or “can’t tell.” In scoring the CASP rating for each article, a “yes” was scored as 1 and “no” or “can’t tell” were scored as zero. Our CASP reviewers agreed that 11 articles met full CASP criteria with scores of 10, thirteen articles met 9 criteria, twelve articles met 8 criteria, six articles met 7 criteria, and five articles met 6 criteria. Articles scored less than 7 were further scrutinized and weighted less heavily during the thematic synthesis process (ratings available upon request).

¹ OECD countries currently include Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Latvia, Luxembourg, Mexico, Netherland, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom, and United States.

² Following protocol outlined in a recent Cochrane Collaboration meta-synthesis, this meta-synthesis did not include an assessment of the risk of bias, as that assessment is inappropriate for qualitative studies (Glenton, 2013).

2.5. Analytical approach

All studies were uploaded to QSR International’s NVivo 12 Pro qualitative software for data management. Two research assistants coded each article for a set of pre-determined characteristics: article purpose (evaluation or non-evaluation); qualitative methodology; country; level of urbanicity; number of data collection sites; setting of data collection; intervention type; sample size; youth ages (as applicable); peer-reviewed versus grey literature; issue of equity considered (yes/no); and approach of the study (i.e., did it focus on implementation, engagement, satisfaction, and/or aspirations). Assignment in each category was then reviewed by the two research assistants in cases where the assignment within a category was unclear, until consensus was reached. When consensus could not be reached, the first author reviewed the disagreements and served as an adjudicator. Then, the first and second author reviewed the findings section of each article and engaged in thematic synthesis (Booth, 2016), which involved inductive coding line-by-line; development of descriptive themes; and ultimately development of analytical themes that reflect new explanations (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

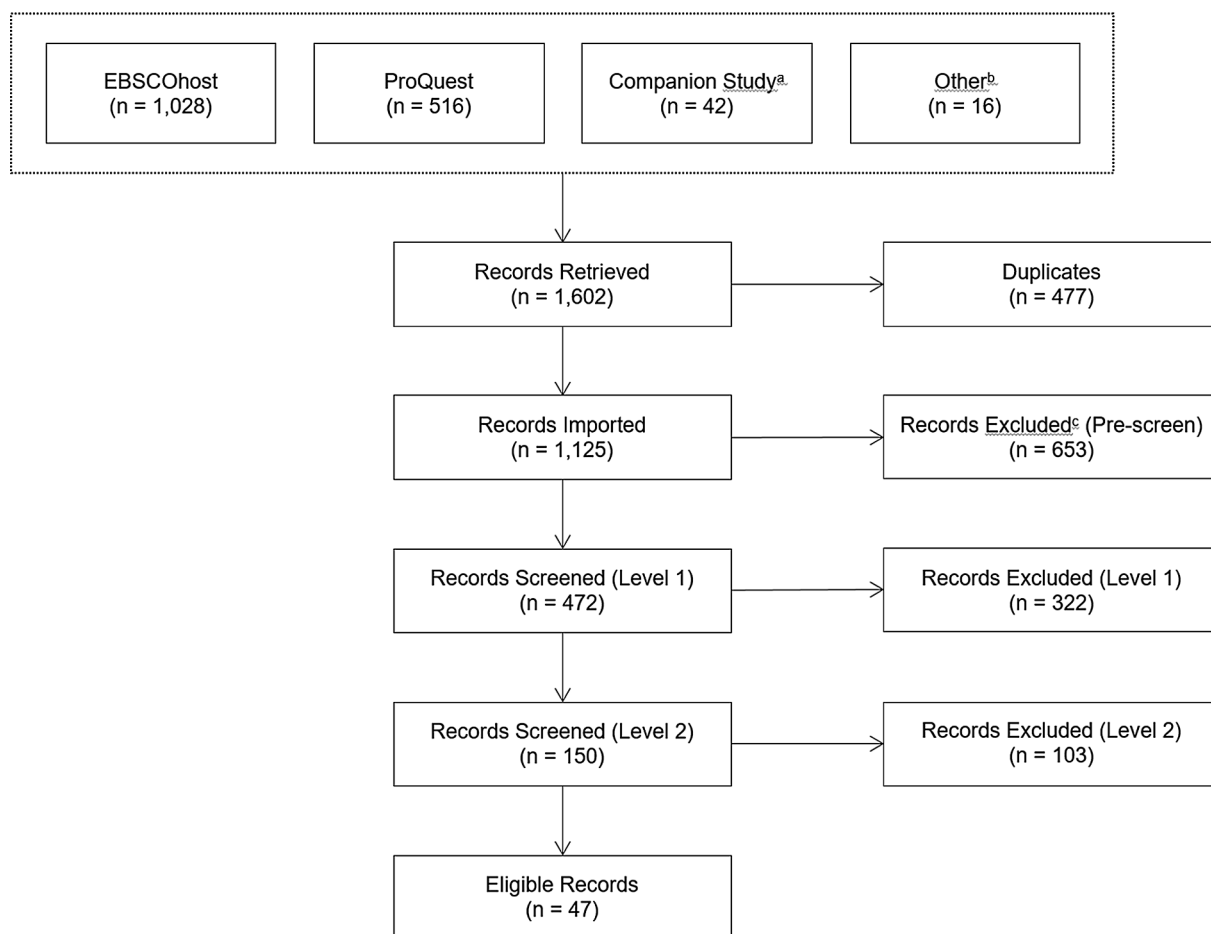
The research team used an inductive or “data-driven approach” to identify the common themes in the findings reported across studies related to implementation barriers and facilitators. This multi-stage process of analysis included: a) identifying specific sections of the studies that reported implementation findings, b) inductively generating a list of initial codes to describe the general nature of the finding, c) organizing and refining codes by general themes, and d) applying the themes back to the studies to ensure that our constructs were accurate as well as specific to type of implementation issue. Throughout this iterative process the research team continually met to assess the reliability of the themes through a collaborative, consensus-agreement approach (Patton, 2005; Syed & Nelson, 2015). Moreover, the team employed a strategy similar to what grounded theorists describe as the constant comparison method (Charmaz, 2001; Glaser, 1992), which involved applying the thematic codes across different empirical examples, to assess the specificity of codes to capture similarities and differences throughout the sample.

3. Results

Searches identified 1,602 potentially relevant records from EBSCO-Host (n = 1,028), ProQuest (n = 516), the outcomes companion study search (n = 42) and other sources (n = 16). After discarding duplicates (n = 477), we retained 1,125 records for eligibility screening. We identified and excluded records that did not include discussion of an intervention clearly or were published before 2008 (n = 653). Based on the information available in the titles and abstracts, two researchers independently agreed to exclude 322 records. Researchers assessed the full text of 150 records and identified 47 as eligible for inclusion in the analysis. In Fig. 1, we present a flowchart illustrating the number of records identified, retrieved, and screened at each stage of the search and screen process.

3.1. Characteristics of studies

Studies included in this review were either conducted in the context of a single program as a case study or assessed various program types. Among studies of single program types (30 out of the 47 studies), the most common interventions were behavioral health (Bozinoff et al., 2017; Chaturvedi, 2016; Cormack, 2009; Dixon et al., 2011; Hartman et al., 2008; Krabbenborg et al., 2015; McCay et al., 2016) and case management interventions (Bender et al., 2017; Bender et al., 2015; Grace et al., 2012; Garrett et al., 2008; Gibbs et al., 2015; Manno et al., 2014). Five focused on most effective strategies of engaging youth in programs (Huffman, 2017; Lynch et al., 2017; Pederson et al., 2018; Garvey et al., 2018; Ungar & Ikeda, 2017) and four focused solely on



^a Records identified by the outcomes companions study literature search as potentially relevant for this review.

^b Hand-searching, websites, and professional outreach.

^c Published before 2008 or did not address an intervention.

Fig. 1. Literature search and screen flowchart.

housing interventions (Ferguson et al., 2011; Holtschneider, 2016; Schelbe, 2018; Spiro et al., 2009). Three studied college support programming (Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010; Huang et al., 2018; Schelbe, Randolph, Yelick, Cheatham & Groton, 2018), two focused on McKinney-Vento services for K-12 school settings (Clemens et al., 2018; Hallett et al., 2015), and two focused on educational supports more generally (Tierney et al., 2008; Cooper et al., 2009). One focused on family therapy (Marchionda & Slesnick, 2013); and one on medical and dental services (Rowan et al., 2013). The remaining seventeen studies examined implementation across a range of program types, including one or more of the following interventions: drop-in services, shelter/emergency shelter, outreach services, mental health, Positive Youth Development, independent living programs, financial support, housing, educational services, transportation, employment services, and legal advice (list of specific focus areas of each article available upon request).

The majority of studies included were published in peer-reviewed journals ($n = 43$), while four were considered “grey” literature (Cooper et al., 2009; Manno et al., 2014; Salomon et al., 2014; Tierney et al., 2008). While just over half of the 47 studies were from the United States ($n = 26$), the remaining studies took place in Canada ($n = 6$), Australia ($n = 4$), the United Kingdom ($n = 4$), Israel ($n = 2$), the Netherlands ($n = 2$), Turkey ($n = 1$), and unknown locations ($n = 2$). About one-third ($n = 15$) were based on an intervention taking place in one site or location, about one-third ($n = 16$) were based on 2–10 sites,

four were based on more than 10 sites, and 12 were unknown or not applicable. The majority were studies based in urban locations ($n = 30$), while eight were based on a mix of urban and suburban, or urban and rural locations. Nine did not provide information about urbanicity. Most used individual interviews as the primary method of qualitative data collection ($n = 19$), while 13 used mixed methods, four used focus groups, one used a case study approach, and three used purely quantitative methods. Seven used other qualitative approaches and two were unable to determine. The setting for data collection included a wide range of places, including multi-service settings ($n = 13$), housing or residential programs ($n = 8$), schools or a school district ($n = 7$), shelters ($n = 6$), drop-in centers ($n = 5$), medical clinic ($n = 1$), mental health program ($n = 1$), multiple types of programs ($n = 4$), and unknown settings ($n = 2$). In 17 studies, youth under 18 were sampled, in 13 studies ages ranged between 18 and 25. One included youth over age 20, and five did not specify youth ages. Only one study (Gibbs et al., 2015) focused exclusively on youth under age 18. Most studies included a study sample of less than 20 ($n = 14$), while ten included 21–30 participants, eight included 30–100 participants, and seven included over 100 participants (these were primarily mixed methods or quantitative studies). Eight did not specify the number of participants. Twenty-five studies included only youth in their sample, six included only provider/staff, and fourteen included both youth and provider perspectives.

3.2. Approach of studies

All articles included in this review studied programs that serve youth experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness, yet our analysis revealed that studies differed in focus and we categorized each in terms of emphasizing implementation, engagement, satisfaction, and aspirations. The implementation studies took a more evaluative lens that focused on implementation of a single program, or set of programs, targeting youth ($n = 26$). The engagement studies were less-strictly evaluative and also focused on organizational, staff, or youth-related factors that influenced engagement of youth in a program or set of programs ($n = 19$). The satisfaction articles had elements of evaluation but were mostly focused on youths' or staff satisfaction, or level of comfort in the program, and did not directly tie satisfaction with engagement or barriers/facilitators to implementation ($n = 13$). Lastly, the aspirational articles were focused on recommended future changes for a program ($n = 8$). These categories were not mutually exclusive; of the 47 articles, thirteen fit into more than one category. These categories can be found as part of [Appendix A](#). The majority of studies focused on both barriers and facilitators ($n = 42$), while four focused on facilitators only and one focused only on barriers.

3.3. Findings from the qualitative synthesis

Through discussion and further analysis of descriptive themes in the 47 included studies, two primary analytical themes emerged. These themes included: 1) Organizational and system policies impact implementation, engagement, and satisfaction; 2) Staffing behaviors and training are paramount to successful implementation, engagement, and satisfaction. Below, we discuss each theme in detail.

3.3.1. Organizational and system policies impact implementation and Engagement.

Youth and staff described that a number of organizational and system policies impact program implementation, youth engagement, or youth satisfaction with services. These policies are discussed in-depth below.

3.3.1.1. Balance between structure and Flexibility. One of the most salient themes related to the appropriate level of structure, rules, and enforcement of rules within programs serving youth experiencing homelessness. The state of the evidence on findings related to rules and rule enforcement is mostly solid, with primarily high-quality articles according to CASP scores. Across the eleven articles that contributed to this sub-theme, the average CASP rating was 9/10 ($SD = 1.13$). Youth in at least five studies described feeling as if program rules were annoying, offensive, and/or conflicted with program goals of assisting youth in becoming independent adults (Curry & Petering, 2017; Munson et al., 2017; Schwartz-Tayri & Spiro, 2017; Ungar & Ikeda, 2017). For example, Munson and colleagues (2017) noted that, "Participants described receiving mixed messages from the program structure and staff which both communicated expectations around moving towards independence but also exerted control over residents with extensive rules and procedures" (p. 433). In two studies, youth expressed even stronger views, noting that the level of restrictiveness in the program made them feel as if they had to prove their deservingness of help (Ryan & Thompson, 2013) or made them feel like criminals (Ungar & Ikeda, 2017). Staff and youth described that restrictive rules as influence the type of youth who could access the program. For example, "high risk" youth may not be able to or want to enter programs that are overly structured (Rowan, 2013), and youth with backgrounds in institutions such as foster care may not want to engage in programs that remind them of childhood experiences associated with being surveilled and controlled (Curry & Petering, 2017; Ryan & Thompson, 2012).

In some programs, youth and staff saw flexible enforcement of rules as a way to engage youth more effectively (Hartmann, 2008). Studies

noted that the "one-size-fits-all" approach to service provision (Leonard et al., 2017) and rigidity in program structure (Aykanian, 2018; Hartman, 2018) are less appropriate to meet youth's needs. Sometimes this involved low-barrier or harm-reduction approaches involving flexibility in the enforcement of rules, eliminating "zero-tolerance" policies, and incorporating fluidity in the way the program can address differing needs. Some programs described the need (or attempts) to set more realistic expectations of youth and incorporate a recognition that youth need time; that, as one staff member expressed it, "we can't expect them to just turn their lives around immediately" (Aykanian, 2018, p. 14). This included providing youth multiple opportunities to be involved in the program, even after breaking rules (Leonard et al., 2017), or flexibility in expectations to be mindful of what youth can realistically handle while simultaneously receiving treatment (Bozinoff, 2017). These steps were seen by staff as a way to improve youth engagement in the program (Hartman, 2008) and one program described refusing funding from agencies that required restrictive policies (Leonard et al., 2017).

At the same time, youth in multiple studies indicated a desire for age-appropriate levels of consistency in service provision and structure. In a program serving minor youth, participants indicated that they appreciated some structure and consequences (Ungar & Ikeda, 2017). In several studies based in residential or transitional housing programs, young adults described feeling that they had an opportunity to build skills and needed to be pushed a bit to be more independent and productive (Munson et al., 2017; Curry & Petering, 2017; Holtschneider, 2015).

3.3.1.2. Access to and duration of services. Other important aspects of effective implementation and engagement of youth in programs included clear guidelines for access and thoughtful consideration to eligibility requirements, time limits, and assistance with transitions out of the program. The state of the evidence regarding access to and duration of services is broad, rather than in-depth, as with the findings on structure and flexibility above, these studies also received high-quality CASP scores. Among the six articles that informed this sub-theme, the average CASP score was 8.5/10 ($SD = 1.4$).

Youth and staff in several studies indicated challenges accessing programs or confusion about how to get help. For example, in Black and colleagues' (2018) study, one youth discussed challenges with abrupt discharges and lack of guidance in finding a program,

"I went to [homelessness services agency] because it was right on the corner and I talked to them and they wouldn't help me find a place... I just remember them saying that I had to call this after-hours number and I called and it was like a message bank and they wouldn't help me..." (p. 9).

Other studies indicated similar challenges associated with waitlists and barriers to access such as limitations for youth who want to stay with their partner, or residency requirements (Aykanian, 2018; Bozinoff et al., 2017). Staff identified challenges to access for youth under age 18, such as finding the requirements around engaging with youths' parents problematic (Aykanian, 2018; Salomon, 2018). For example, in Aykanian's (2018) work, providers noted for some youth, returning home is not the best choice, despite the traditional process in which the Department of Social Services contacts the parents of youth under the age of 18 to inquire about the possibility of the youth going home.

Time limits were also of concern among staff and youth. In particular, several studies suggested that the length of stay for youth in shelter or housing programs felt arbitrary (Aykanian, 2018), rushed (Black et al., 2018), and insufficient for "positioning themselves for independent living" (Shelton, 2015, p.16). Specifically, Shelton (2015) described the particular challenges a 30-day limit in a shelter can pose to youth who identify as transgender or gender expansive in regard to obtaining proper identification and clothing that fits their gender

presentation.

3.3.1.3. Conditions and organization of physical space, location, and context. Conditions and organization of physical space also seemed to influence effective implementation and youth engagement. Here again, the evidence related to physical space and location provides an array of findings with limited depth for each, particularly limited for neighborhood location. The CASP scores indicated primarily high-quality articles; out of the 15 studies included in this sub-theme, the average CASP score was 8.5/10 (SD = 1.4). In terms of the physical condition of the buildings and neighborhood, youth described buildings as “dodgy,” “a piece of crap,” run-down, less than satisfactory, and negative (Altena et al., 2014; Black et al., 2018; Bozinoff, 2017; Spiro et al., 2009). On program premises, youth described feeling unsafe, including concerns about lack of privacy and theft, while neighborhoods raised youth concerns about violence and drug use (Bozinoff et al., 2017; Garrett et al., 2008; Shelton, 2015). Findings related to service co-location were mixed, as reported by program staff across studies. One study that interviewed youth described the difficulties associated with co-location of services for youth with differing levels of need at one site (Curry & Petering, 2017). In contrast, two studies that focused on staff perceptions described the benefit of co-locating services due to the better coordinated referral processes, ability to encourage greater service utilization, and make in-person introductions to a new provider (Dixon et al., 2011; Gibbs et al., 2015). In Spiro et al. (2009), the authors hypothesized a correlation between satisfaction and the physical space of the housing program; the program was organized around a central kitchen and a housemother, where nourishing ‘youngsters’ (84% of whom were under age 18) was emphasized in an attempt to recreate an experience of home.

Two studies discussed the role of neighborhood location for program implementation, with one focusing on challenges associated with neighborhood location, and another highlighting a successful location. Bozinoff et al. (2017) noted the conundrum of the service location,

“Young people were routinely caught between the need to access services that are, by and large, only available in downtown Vancouver...and a desire to leave downtown Vancouver to reduce the harms they associated with that area.” (p. 8)

Alternatively, Leonard et al. (2017) described a situation in which the program analyzed intentionally located in an area considered “neutral” by youth. In contrast to other clear gang boundaries in the small city, this neutral location allowed youth to feel safe in receiving in-person services. Besides these two studies, however, neighborhood location was not discussed as a facilitator or barrier to program implementation. Another study discussed contextual factors more broadly, including the potential challenges and benefits associated with rural versus urban locations for youth experiences with and access to services (Manno et al., 2014).

Five studies discussed the issue of program implementation in the context of community systems. Two studies noted that inter-agency coordination is challenging and affects the ability to meet youth needs (Black et al., 2018; Grace et al., 2012). Three others noted the lack of clarity around appropriate referrals to other agencies or need for additional work to coordinate agencies and build relationships between providers (Aykanian, 2018; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010), particularly between schools and community programs (Tierney, 2018). One study noted policy barriers regarding youth who traveled between adjacent or nearby counties, particularly around residency requirements to access shelter (Aykanian, 2018).

3.3.2. Staffing behaviors and training are paramount

The majority of studies highlighted the critical role that staff—in particular front-line staff who interact with youth on a day-to-day basis—play in implementing the key components of programs serving

young people experiencing homelessness. Findings frequently described the importance that the provision of services be supportive, nonjudgmental, compassionate, and empathetic. We elaborate below.

3.3.2.1. The role of staff relationships in participant outreach and engagement. A key component, or implementation process, of any intervention working with youth experiencing homelessness entails the consistent outreach and continual engagement that staff must facilitate with youth targeted for their program. The state of the evidence on findings related to outreach and engagement is strong, with primarily high-quality articles according to CASP scores, however, with some exceptions. Among the 17 articles informing this sub-theme, CASP ratings ranged from 6 to 10 on a ten-point scale, with a high overall average of 8.7/10 (SD = 1.4). As nearly every study reviewed highlights, most programs must overcome considerable distrust and ambivalence on the part of youth clients, who are at times resistant and exhibit varying levels of willingness to engage with any service or intervention. As various interview-based studies highlight, the fears of being judged, labelled, and looked down upon were commonly cited reasons that some youth voiced for not having previously accessed services in the community (Black et al., 2018; Clemens et al., 2018; Dixon et al., 2011; Garret et al., 2008; Leonard et al., 2017; Ryan & Thompson, 2013; Shelton, 2015; Tierney, Gupton, & Hallett, 2008). Similarly, studies also noted that many youth exhibit a persistent distrust of service providers given that many “have been failed, neglected and traumatized by significant adults” (Leonard et al., 2017, p. 450).

Given the understandable distrust and tenuous forms of engagement that many youth clients have with programs and services, studies illustrated that how staff initiate their first encounters with youth, whether on the streets or during an intake, can have lasting first impressions on youths’ decisions to continue with a program or intervention over time. Some studies specifically identify consistent communication as one of the more critical staff practices that contributed to greater engagement with clients (Black et al., 2018; Chaturvedi, 2016; Dixon et al., 2011; Huffman, 2017; Garret et al., 2008; Grace, Coventry, & Batterham, 2012; Rowan et al., 2013; Salomon et al., 2014). Drawing from interviews with both staff and youth, studies highlighted the strategic value of staff communicating clearly, and honestly, about the practical and pragmatic benefits of their program or intervention in their first encounters with youth. As discussed within the context of Salomon and colleagues’ (2014) evaluation of street outreach interventions and drop-in centers, youth reported being most responsive to initial staff interactions that were primarily focused on their “basic needs items” (e.g., food, clothing, hygiene products)—or just simply “building a trusting relationship”—but emphasized delivering on these items. Other studies stressed the importance that staff convey that they are “knowledgeable of available services” in the community (Grace et al., 2012; Black et al., 2018). Across multiple studies conducted in the context of street outreach programs, or other services for youth who are still homeless, both frequent and consistent communication were identified as critical elements of effective engagement (Chaturvedi, 2016; Garrett et al., 2008; Gibbs et al., 2015; Grace et al., 2012; Huffman, 2017;), though many of these studies also warned that it was important for staff to not overwhelm or be too persistent with youth. As Garrett and colleagues (2008) found in their interviews with youth who had recently transitioned into a housing program, engagement was most successful when staff were perceived as “welcoming” but also “unobtrusive and not approaching people too soon or too often.”

Similarly, in their interview sample of young people who were homeless and also victims of sex trafficking, Gibbs and colleagues (2015) noted that clients still living and working on the streets were particularly sensitive to outreach workers asking detailed questions about their lives and needed boundaries. Indeed, respondents in the study noted that effective outreach workers were those who could successfully establish an “atmosphere of trust and respect” in their very first conversations

with them; that these first encounters resembled more of a “conversation” rather than just “completing intake forms.”

Beyond effective communication, the majority of studies—across a broader segment of interventions—emphasized trusting and supportive staff relationships as another key determinant of client engagement. Accordingly, successful client engagement—but also reengagement and long-term retention was predicated on staff cultivating empathetic relationships with clients that were perceived as genuine, well-intentioned, consistent, as well as collaborative³ (Aykanian, 2018; Bender et al., 2015; Black et al., 2018; Chaturvedi, 2016; Dixon et al., 2011; Garrett et al., 2008; Gibbs et al., 2015; Grace et al., 2012; Huffman, 2017; Leonard et al., 2017; Munson et al., 2017; Ryan & Thompson, 2013). Studies used slight variations of these terms to describe similar dynamics. For example, Munson and colleagues (2017) discussed the importance of staff-client relationships having “authenticity,” while Ryan and Thompson (2013) described effective relationships as being those that were perceived as “sincere and caring.” However, nearly every study pointed to the critical practice—and emotional labor—of taking careful effort to establish an empathetic rapport with youth clients. This is because, as many of the studies illustrated, youth will often draw on these supportive relationships during times of acute crises that invariably occur during the course of a program or intervention, thereby legitimizing the value of the program in the view of youth. Indeed, interviews with youth across studies often highlighted that many viewed the program or intervention primarily through the lens of the staff relationships and emotional support that they could draw on during difficult times. As Garrett and colleagues (2008) reported, youth sometimes described these relationships as even more important to them than the actual services provided in the program.

Relatedly, a number of studies quote young people framing their willingness to eventually access services as a type of “turning point” in their lives (Black et al., 2018)—that engaging with services was often framed as a prolonged decision to come to terms with certain life challenges. According to several youth interviewed in the study, reaching this turning point was only possible because staff had been “trusting, supportive and non-judgmental.” Moreover, studies indicated that long-term engagement with most programs was rarely linear and sequential. Youth can not only be ambivalent to engage with services initially, but many were also prone to periodically dis-engage from programs when things became difficult or they felt psychologically unsafe. Consequently, most studies highlighted the importance that youth feel a connection to at least one staff member in a program who they could return to after periodic setbacks or excursions back to the streets; a trusting relationship that resembles an “open door policy” for future reengagement, as described by Gibbs and colleagues (2015).

3.3.2.2. Challenge of implementing strength-based and empowerment services. Many programs and interventions addressing youth homelessness are underpinned by an explicit practice model, or general orientation, associated with empowerment, solution-focused, strength-based, and or client-centered practice (see Greene & Lee, 2011; Rapp & Goscha, 2006; Lee, 2001; Saleebey, 2009). Program goals are not only to support the strengths and independence of youth but also empower them to advocate for their own interests and self-determination. However, findings from several studies highlight that these practices can be difficult for staff to implement consistently over time—ultimately undermining their benefits to youth. The state of evidence for findings on challenges of implementation is strong, with primarily high-quality articles according to CASP scores, albeit with some exceptions. Among the 21 articles that informed this sub-theme, the average CASP score was

³ Some studies also stress the importance that these relationships be based on a collaborative, shared, vision about the specific goals that youth see for themselves within programs and interventions (Grace et al., 2012)—that youth feel understood within these relationships (Leonard et al., 2017).

8.3/10 (SD = 1.6).

One contextual challenge cited in multiple studies is the subtle tendencies of some staff to overly focus on the problems and challenges faced by youth—in effect defining youth solely by their challenges. Indeed, several qualitative analyses highlighted that preconceived societal notions associated with homelessness (and other stigmas) can implicitly permeate the culture of a social service organization, and as consequence, perpetuate subtle, taken-for-granted practices and language that inadvertently objectify and frame youth as deviants (Bademici, 2012; Ferguson, Kin, & McCoy, 2011; Hartman et al., 2008; Huffman, 2017; Shelton, 2015). For example, studies noted that frontline staff can often rely on taken-for-granted stereotypes to conflate challenging behaviors with a youth’s inherent rebellious nature or deviant predisposition (Hartman et al., 2008; Krabbenborg et al., 2015; Leonard et al., 2017; Schelbe et al., 2018). Hartman and colleagues (2008) also cited the reliance of a common provider perspective that “unilaterally defines a youth’s problem and then reifies that construction of the youth as the problem through the artifacts of treatment (reports, conversations, case notes)” (p. 52–53).

Not surprisingly, studies that drew from interviews with youth themselves, reported a common concern that they will be “labeled” as problematic and troublemakers simply by virtue of engaging with these services (Black et al., 2018; Chaturvedi, 2016; Clemens et al., 2018; Dixon et al., 2011; Garret et al., 2018; Hartman et al., 2008; Leonard et al., 2017; Ryan & Thompson, 2013; Shelton, 2015; Tierney et al., 2008). In particular, one youth participant interviewed within the context of a mental health intervention (Black et al., 2016) reflected that documentation of their challenges in “case files” maintained by staff further reified their objectified status in the program,

“They just hand over your case files, so as I said, it just feels like you’re a number...you know you’ve got your life on a piece of paper... Which I dunno, it just feels really depressing sometimes.” (p. 9).

Given these stigmatizing dynamics, a number of studies cited examples of programs implementing explicit policies and staff trainings focused on more strength-based practices and communication (Hartman et al., 2008; Krabbenborg et al., 2015; Schelbe et al., 2018). For example, Hartman and colleagues (2015) noted an example of one community-based organization explicitly training staff to use “people-first language” and other “non-labeling” communication to describe the challenges faced by their clients (e.g., describing a youth who uses drugs as opposed to identifying them as a drug user). Similarly, this and other studies (Leonard et al., 2017) cited trainings in which staff learn to re-center interventions and service plans to focus on youth’s strengths as opposed to solely on their deficits or problems. Hartman and colleagues (2015) cited a concerted effort by the community-based organization they studied to intentionally facilitate “space” and regular supervision times for staff to critically reflect and de-construct their preconceived notions of clients and their behaviors. But as Leonard and colleagues (2017) also noted these trainings are not consistently available across levels of staff within an organization. While licensed therapists may have been formally trained in these approaches, and receive regular updated workshops on these topics, frontline staff working with youth on a day-to-day basis are sometimes overlooked and/or receive trainings inconsistently. Given the high turnover in some organizations, it is also unclear how thoroughly staff are trained in these approaches over time. As Ferguson and colleagues (2011) noted, this can be reflected in the inconsistent “buy in” felt by many staff about these approaches, as well as little consensus that everyone is “on the same page” about the empowerment goals of the intervention.

Krabbenborg and colleagues (2015) similarly found that some social service organizations that do facilitate consistent strengths-based or empowerment trainings rarely provide sufficient leadership or supervision with frontline staff to help them maintain these practices over

time. Indeed, these studies highlight that without consistent supervision and coaching staff can revert to implicitly de-empowering orientations when stressful situations arise. In particular, studies noted that it can be natural for staff to try and assert control and their expertise in situations in which youth seem disengaged from services—which can run counter to the empowerment goals of self-determination. As Krabbenborg and colleagues (2015) noted, empowerment requires that that staff “let go of their control over service delivery and the working relationship,” and strive “to become a co-participant rather than the expert in the recovery process of homeless young adults” (p. 474). However, studies cited several examples in which staff can become frustrated with what they perceive as an unengaged youth and insert their own assumptions into the assessment process (Aykanian, 2018; Ferguson et al., 2011; Krabbenborg et al., 2015; Ungar & Ikeda, 2017). One supervisor interviewed at a transitional housing program (Aykanian, 2018) discussed that this was one of the most persistent coaching issues she had to remind her staff; that “we can’t want something more than they do.” Empowering youth to be co-participant in services can also be challenging when youth define goals that staff may feel are unrealistic or are misaligned with their own internal expectations for the youth (Krabbenborg et al., 2015).

The issue of staff resisting the temptation to exert too much control over service provision was also reflected in how programs articulated and reinforced the formal rules of the program—particularly a housing program. As already discussed above, how staff discern the implementation of rules is a continuous source of tension described by many youth and staff interviewed in these studies (Curry & Petering, 2017; Munson et al., 2017; Schwartz-Tayri & Spiro, 2017; Ungar & Ikeda, 2017). As a number of analyses revealed, staff in these programs sometimes struggle to navigate a delicate balance between enforcing rules consistently while also allowing some level of flexibility and openness for youth to define their own set of routines and structure. While resisting the rigidity of rules can be normative and developmentally appropriate for young adults to do, staff ultimately play a key role in how resulting disagreements are resolved and interpreted by youth.

A final challenge that studies reported with respect to implementing empowerment-based services are formal mechanisms that agencies use in an attempt to institutionalize youths’ perspectives and voices in the provision of services, referred to as advisory boards or resident councils (Heinze, Jozefowicz & Toro, 2010; Ferguson et al., 2011; Leonard et al., 2017; Schelbe et al., 2018). While youth in these studies generally indicated a strong preference for having input into how services are provided to them (Heinze et al., 2010), some also expressed concerns that their viewpoints were easily dismissed and that few of their suggestions or concerns were ever addressed by the program (Ferguson et al., 2011; Leonard et al., 2017; Schelbe et al., 2018). Some studies found that youth often feel that discussions made in these forums are rarely taken seriously or heard by an organization’s administration (Ferguson et al., 2011). Some youth also report feeling somewhat distrustful and worried that these types of cooperative councils might give certain youth in the program, particularly those that are outspoken, too much relative influence. Nonetheless, most youth appreciated having some voice in the organization and expressed the view that these processes increased their ownership and investment in the program.

4. Discussion

To our knowledge, this *meta*-synthesis represents the first review of literature exploring implementation of programs serving youth experiencing homelessness and strategies used to engage youth in these settings. This review aligned and coordinated with a companion study that explored the recent evidence regarding effectiveness of interventions (Morton et al., 2020). Through a process of thematic synthesis of the 47 studies included in the review, we arrived at two primary themes regarding factors that support implementation and engagement.

The first theme related to how programs developed and enforced

rules and structure, providing insight into the factors that youth and staff identify as hindering or supporting the consistency of services and the level of engagement with youth. Some studies reported on organizational factors that negatively shape youths’ experience in programs, suggesting a need for more anti-paternalistic policies and empowerment-based practices. Some qualitative studies included youth perspectives that the rules in their program were overly rigid, offensive, or conflicted with goals of supporting independence, and needed further flexibility. Youth also highlighted the need for clear guidelines for access to, time limits within, and transitions out of programs, expressing the ways in which program waitlists, residency requirements, or other access issues decreased willingness to engage in a particular service. Some studies also mentioned the role that physical space played in youth’s experiences with, or effective implementation of programs, such as poor building conditions and lack of safety within programs and in program neighborhoods. Based on our review, both building and neighborhood conditions require further investigation as related to youth engagement and program implementation. Notably, few studies included or focused on resources or supports that youth needed to support a successful transition out of the program. These organizational policies do not take place in a vacuum, but are rather influenced by broader laws, resources and societal norms.

In contrast, studies also highlighted ways in which organizational factors were viewed by youth and staff as supporting implementation or engagement. For example, flexible enforcement of policies, low-barrier approaches, harm-reduction, elimination of “zero tolerance” policies, youth voice through formalized leadership bodies, and incorporation of fluidity in policy approaches may play a role in youth engagement and effectiveness of program implementation for youth experiencing homelessness. These concepts reflect recent principles guiding Housing First approaches that meet the unique needs of youth (“HF4Y”), including “a right to housing with no preconditions,” “youth choice, youth voice and self-determination,” and “individualized, client-driven supports with no time limits” (Gaetz, 2017, p. 4). In other contexts, such as in programs for survivors of intimate partner violence, studies suggest organizational practices that emphasize top-down and restrictive approaches disempower clients and may impact engagement negatively (Nnawulezi, Godsay, Sullivan, Marcus, & HacsKaylo, 2018). Further, strict rules enforcement, such as curfew, has been found in other settings to impact interactions and trusting relationships between staff and clients, whereas rule-reduction practices may be beneficial (Kulkarni, Stylianou, & Wood, 2019). In contrast, younger youth in the studies reviewed indicated the need for age-appropriate structure, consistency, and consequences (Ungar & Ikeda, 2017), which align with the expressed needs of LGB, transgender, and gender-expansive youth residing in transitional living programs for whom these program attributes increased a sense of safety (Dettlaff et al., 2017; Lykes, Weber, & Bettencourt, 2017). Further, many youth discussed frustrations with youth advisory boards, resident councils, or other related leadership bodies intended to provide youth voice to organizations; recent work by organizations such as the National Network for Youth, A Way Home America, and True Colors United have aimed to uplift and center youth perspectives to address this concern. As CoCs and agencies seek to incorporate youth voice, “user centered design” which involves end-users of a product or service in every aspect of design from idea inception through service delivery (Abrams, Maloney-Krichmar, & Preece, 2004), may improve future youth engagement and program or service implementation.

Evidence-based design or client-centered design literature identifies low-cost interior design (e.g. images of nature, use of color, plants, etc.) and ambient interventions (e.g. lighting, sound, smells, etc.) that reduce stress and support engagement in mental health and addiction treatment settings (Jovanovic, Campbell, & Priebe, 2019; Novotna, Urbanoski, & Rush, 2011) and may serve as references for engagement in programs serving youth experiencing homelessness. Literature on LGBTQ youth engagement also supports attention to design in that incorporating

visual cues, such as rainbow flags or posters of LGBTQ leaders or historical events, in communal program and private office spaces signals to youth that the program and staff are safe and affirming (Davis, Saltzberg, & Locke, 2009; Dettlaff, McCoy, Holzman, Washburn, & Pearson, 2017). This same design literature, suggests that selection of program location may be especially pertinent to LGBTQ youth due to the threats to safety they experience regularly (Dettlaff et al., 2017).

Prior research suggests that the mere anticipation that staff in formal services will treat them in a discriminatory way impacts clients' willingness to engage with services (Abramovich, 2013; Dettlaff et al., 2017; Page, 2017; Samuels et al., 2018), whereas positive staff attitudes and trust-building with clients facilitate engagement (Rickwood, Deane, & Wilson, 2007). In the current review, the second primary theme across studies was that staffing behaviors and training are paramount to implementation and engagement in programs serving youth experiencing homelessness. Other research highlights the salience of this finding for staff working with LGBTQ youth (Dettlaff et al., 2017; Lykes et al., 2017). Negative interactions with staff, particularly through "power struggles" served as a primary challenge for implementation and engagement. These findings suggest that training around trauma-informed care, building trust, and the needs of youth at varying stages of transition, may support program implementation, however further research is warranted. It is also important to note that these challenges within organizations related to staff behaviors reflect broader societal stereotypes and attitudes regarding youth experiencing homelessness, particularly BIPOC and LGBTQ youth. Further, this review supported the notion that staff need to be able to address misconceptions that youth may have about what programs can actually deliver. This level of communication can build trust between youth and staff.

The frequent reference to supportive relationships in nearly every study was often discussed in the context of the difficult transition that some youth experience as they engage with services or a housing program over time. More than just an issue of overcoming the stigma of homelessness, ongoing engagement with a program was often described in these studies as a sometimes tumultuous transition with new challenges and tensions for youth to navigate. Sub-groups of youth, such as youth of color and LGBTQ youth, face greater risk for experiencing homelessness, and when youths' identities intersect, such as for transgender women of color, youth face greater vulnerability while homeless (Abramovich, 2013; Ensign & Panke, 2002; Morton, Samuels & Dworsky, 2017). Further, prior research suggests that risk for stigma or discrimination within social service settings increases for LGBTQ youth, complicating both service engagement and relationship-building with program staff (Abramovich, 2017; Dettlaff et al., 2017; Lykes et al., 2017; Samuels, Cerven, Curry & Robinson, 2018). Two reports from the 3/40 Blueprint Project add to our knowledge-base by providing youth-informed guidance on creating safe, affirming spaces for LGBTQ youth in transitional living programs (TLPs) (Dettlaff et al., 2017; Lykes et al., 2017). Both reports emphasize, among other factors, the importance of youth seeing themselves reflected in TLP staff and affirmed across their intersectional identities including race, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation, and gender expression. Youths' prior experiences in foster care or the juvenile justice system may also play a role in engagement with or interactions within programs serving youth (Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

Findings from a forthcoming process evaluation about implementation of programs funded through the HHS Transitional Living Program Special Population Demonstration Project, launched in 2016 with foci on services for both LGBTQ youth, and youth exiting foster care who are still in need of support, may help fill these knowledge gaps further. In our review, articles with a specific focus on factors that influence engagement of youth from an equity perspective were rare; only 3 out of the 47 studies focused on the needs of youth with a marginalized status. It is also notable that in Morton et al., (2020) recent review of the evidence regarding outcomes in programs serving youth experiencing homelessness, there was also a dearth of studies regarding interventions designed for or evaluated for specific subpopulations. Specifically,

studies of service engagement and implementation of programs for youth experiencing homelessness that focus on Black youths' perspectives are lacking and constitute a major research gap. Further study, that builds on the 3/40 Blueprint reports focused on LGBTQ youth (Dettlaff et al., 2017; Lykes et al., 2017) would build greater knowledge about specific needs and equitable policies in these settings.

Notably, most studies included in the review focused on programmatic factors, and few noted contextual factors that influenced implementation and engagement. For example, few studies discussed the role of cultural context of the community or region, availability of housing or other resources for youth in the community (Dettlaff et al., 2017), the local Continuum of Care's orientation to, or resources for youth specifically, or the local housing market in hindering or promoting successful implementation of programs or engagement of youth. However, some studies did touch on issues related to system coordination. Although further understanding of how systems can be successful is warranted for youth in general, specific focus needs to be given to Black youth, Indigenous youth, LGBTQ youth and other youth at greater risk (Dettlaff et al., 2017; Lykes et al., 2017); youth need fully developed coordinated systems of care that provide clear entry points and access to options within the continuum. Relatedly, time limits are important beyond the programmatic level; time-limited programs impact youth largely when access to housing resources are limited during their transition out of the program. Thus, systems should consider time limits within the local housing context. It is possible that studies regarding other contextual factors such as the local housing market or Continuum of Care's orientation to youth were simply missed in the search process, but nonetheless this gap in knowledge regarding contextual factors should be addressed through future research.

4.1. Limitations

The focus of this synthesis was on studies that primarily used a qualitative or mixed-methods approach (with three exceptions) and our analysis used meta-synthesis methods to identify patterns within and across studies. This focus was intentional to retain a feasible scope and depth for our review. Yet, a focus on mostly qualitative evidence may have limited our understanding of factors that support or hinder successful implementation or youth engagement that may have explored these factors through quantitative methods. While quantitative studies were not explicitly excluded in our search or review criteria, with the exception of three studies (Altena et al. 2014; Pederson et al., 2018; Spiro et al., 2009), other quantitative studies did not meet other requirements for inclusion in the review (i.e. they did not include programmatic or contextual factors that influence implementation). We therefore encourage follow-up research that includes, or focuses on, quantitative evidence regarding these factors, in addition to the recent work of Morton et al. (2020).

Further, all of the studies we included were conducted in English, primarily took place in the United States, and were peer-reviewed; thus, we may be missing important, relevant studies in other languages, or which took place in other developed countries. The process of identifying unpublished research outside of the U.S. was more limited due to our search methods and professional contacts. For example, grey literature and some scholarly articles regarding housing or service models, such as those regarding the foyer model, may have been missed.

Additionally, to keep the review focused, we explicitly chose not to include articles that did not explicitly explore a program that served youth experiencing homelessness. Some articles excluded in the Level 1 or Level 2 screening process likely served some youth who were unstably housed or homeless, in addition to youth in stable housing. These studies may have helped broaden our understanding of engagement and implementation for youth experiencing homelessness, yet our intentional requirement that studies explicitly mention youth homelessness meant that these studies would not have met criteria for inclusion.

5. Conclusion

This review suggests that the most important factors influencing implementation of, and engagement in programs addressing youth homelessness are organizational and system factors, and staff training and behaviors when interacting with youth. In particular, this review supports flexibility in rules and structure, such as elimination of “zero tolerance” policies; clear guidelines regarding access to and time limits within programs; consideration of low-barrier approaches; attention to the ways in which physical space are attuned to youth needs; and integration of harm reduction and trauma-informed practice. Attention to ways in which staff can support youth engagement, such as through building trust and attunement to varying needs, can be supported through more staff training and supervision across staffing lines. We contextualize these findings in our discussion by noting that organizational and staff behaviors are influenced by structural factors such as societal expectations and stereotypes about youth experiencing homelessness that shape broader policy and funding decisions.

Though this review provides insight into our current understanding from youth and staff views expressed in qualitative evidence, it is clear that key gaps exist in our knowledge about factors that influence youth engagement and effective implementation in programs serving youth experiencing homelessness. In particular, there was a gap in studies that addressed factors related to program implementation and youth engagement strategies for youth of color, LGBTQ youth, and youth with foster care histories who are overrepresented in these programs. Indeed, youth have identities that introduce risk for stigma or discrimination within social service settings while homeless, and further understanding of organizational and staff practices that support equity in programs is necessary. Further, studies based in non-urban settings were rare, limiting generalizability of this review to rural or suburban settings.

Process evaluations and other research regarding implementation of programs and engagement of youth within services for youth experiencing homelessness to date have primarily focused on interventions implemented in urban locations within the United States. Most of the evidence is generally high or good quality, though there was variation across studies. In order to move the research regarding implementation and engagement in interventions to address youth homelessness, we recommend further evaluation in non-urban areas, more focus on sub-populations (in particular, those using a racial and/or LGBTQ equity lens), further understanding about implementation and engagement in housing interventions, and further work around factors within systems (such as Continuums of Care) that influence implementation and engagement. These advances, if developed using high-quality methodology, may help better inform policy and practice regarding implementation and engagement.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Susanna R. Curry: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing - original draft, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition. **Arturo Baiocchi:** Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing - original draft, Conceptualization, Funding acquisition. **Brenda A. Tully:** Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing - review & editing. **Nathan Garst:** Methodology, Formal analysis, Visualization, Writing - original draft. **Samantha Bielz:** Methodology. **Shannon Kugley:** Methodology, Visualization, Writing - review & editing, Validation, Conceptualization, Investigation. **Matthew H. Morton:** Conceptualization, Writing - review & editing, Supervision, Funding acquisition.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Availability of Data and Materials

The data supporting the findings are provided in [Appendix A](#).

Ethics

Prior to beginning research, the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration and Chapin Hall Institutional Review Board issued a non-human subjects determination for this study (IRB18-0847).

Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2020.105691>.

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