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# Who Is Couch-Surfing and Who Is on the Streets? Disparities Among Racial and Sexual Minority Youth in Experiences of Homelessness


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 A B S T R A C T

**Purpose:** Youth experiencing homelessness (YEH) often engage in “couch-surfing,” or frequently moving from one tenuous living arrangement to another. Understanding the characteristics and risk factors associated with couch-surfing is necessary to designing adequate responses to youth homelessness. The present study aims to investigate factors associated with youth at risk of couch-surfing or sleeping on the streets relative to staying in a shelter.

**Methods:** The present study used Homeless Management Information System administrative data sourced from 16 communities across the U.S. between January 2015 and February 2017 (n = 9,417). Multinomial logistic regression models were used to explore correlates (e.g., demographics, homeless histories, risk and victimization, behavioral health, and self-sufficiency) of couch-surfing or sleeping on the streets relative to staying in an emergency shelter program.

**Results:** YEH identifying as female; Black or another non-Latinx youth of color; or as lesbian, gay, bisexual, questioning, or another sexual orientation (LGBQ+) were at greater risk of couch-surfing relative to staying in a shelter. YEH who threatened to harm themselves or others in the preceding 12 months or who attributed their homelessness to an abusive relationship were significantly more likely to either be couch-surfing or on the streets.

**Discussion:** Service providers must recognize and validate the vulnerabilities and risks experienced by couch-surfing YEH in order to help reduce barriers to accessing services faced by this population. Federal definitions of homelessness should be aligned to correct systemic biases and more accurately reflect the realities of how youth experience homelessness.

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**IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION**

The present study offers unique insights into a chronically understudied segment of youth experiencing homelessness: those who engage in “couch-surfing.” Service providers should focus on building trust among couch-surfing youth and federal agencies should align definitions of homelessness to correct systemic biases against racial and sexual minority youth.

An estimated 4.2 million unaccompanied youth between the ages of 13 and 25 experience homelessness in the U.S. each year. Most of these youth rely on couch-surfing [1,2], defined as

frequently moving from one insecure housing situation to another. Despite the prevalence of couch-surfing among youth experiencing homelessness (YEH), research on the population employs inconsistent definitions of homelessness [3] and rarely distinguishes couch-surfing youth from youth sleeping on the streets or residing in shelter programs. Operationalizations of homelessness often meant to encompass the variety of settings in which YEH live inadvertently homogenize these three types of homeless experiences. Not only does this practice obscure the

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complex effects of environment on the social, health, and housing trajectories of youth [4–7], but it misses a critical opportunity to inform long-standing policy issues affecting YEH. Thus, this study seeks to investigate the life experiences and vulnerabilities of couch-surfing YEH compared to youth who are unsheltered and youth who are staying in emergency shelter programs.

Various U.S. government agencies and programs establish definitions of homelessness to determine eligibility for resources, including educational assistance, crisis intervention, and housing. Definitions of homelessness applied to youth are primarily found within the federal departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Housing and Urban Development (HUD). It should be noted that this study only offers a cursory summary of the most commonly applied definitions; the discussion and debate over these definitions are well-documented elsewhere [2,3,8–11].

Established by the McKinney-Vento Act, the Department of Education definition of homelessness includes families and unaccompanied youth living in unsheltered settings, emergency shelter and transitional programs, motels and hotels, and “doubled-up” situations (i.e., residing with other households) [12]. As the administrator of funding provided by the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, which provides for drop-in center as well as emergency shelter and transitional housing services, the Department of Health and Human Services defines YEH as “a youth...for whom it is not possible to live in a safe environment with a relative, and who has no other safe alternative living arrangement” [13]. The Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act outlines four different categories of homelessness used by HUD [14]. However, HUD programs most commonly prioritize “people who are living in a place not meant for human habitation, in emergency shelter, in transitional housing, or are exiting an institution where they temporarily resided” and those at imminent risk of losing their housing. In essence, in order to establish eligibility for HUD-funded housing resources, including permanent and temporary rental subsidies, youth must either be on the streets or in shelter for an extended period of time or else be able to document an imminent housing loss. According to this definition, “couch-surfing” youth are not considered to be experiencing homelessness.

Meanwhile, researchers and practitioners alike acknowledge the volatility of living arrangements employed by YEH. Instead of residing in one location for extended periods of time, youth frequently cycle through various settings, including the streets, emergency shelters, motel rooms, staying temporarily with family or friends, or spending the night with strangers [15,16]. Indeed, recent research suggests that the living arrangements of YEH can change almost daily [17]. Couch-surfing is frequently conceived as a housing strategy utilized by youth during an initial housing loss and a precursor to street homelessness [18,19]. However, longitudinal and retrospective studies suggest that couch-surfing can be part of diverse and complex trajectories of homelessness characteristic of YEH [15,20] and intertwined with young people’s identity, social relationships, and vulnerabilities [6]. Couch-surfing youth may also be at uniquely higher risk of poor housing outcomes. In a recent survival analysis, couch-surfing youth receiving short-term rental assistance reported worse housing outcomes compared to their peers who had been sleeping on the streets or residing in emergency shelter or transitional housing [21].

Couch-surfing youth and youth sleeping on the streets experience similarly low levels of family support and high rates of substance use, childhood abuse and neglect, and criminal justice system involvement [22,23]. Further evidence suggests

that youth of color and youth identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, or as another sexual or gender minority are more likely to couch-surf compared to other YEH [2]. Service providers have also noted that sexual and gender minority youth often prefer couch-surfing to youth shelters, even when it means engaging in survival sex [24]. Precarious housing has been associated with the early onset of sexual behavior among young sexual minority men [25,26] and with a higher risk of sexual victimization [23]. These findings prompt further investigation into the levels of risk and victimization present in couch-surfing environments.

The present study aims to (1) investigate potential factors associated with young people’s risk of couch-surfing or sleeping on the streets relative to staying in a shelter; and (2) assess the experiences and vulnerabilities of couch-surfing YEH within the context of other living situations.

## Methods

### Study sample

The present study utilized administrative data obtained from the Homeless Management Information System databases of 16 communities across the U.S. Communities volunteered to share deidentified data for research purposes and thus represent a convenience sample. All data were collected and entered into local Homeless Management Information Systems by service providers between January 2015 and February 2017, and feature demographic and vulnerability assessment data on 10,922 YEH. Data were prepared by and acquired from OrgCode Consulting, Inc. These data have previously been used in published studies [21,27].

In the present study, “youth” is defined as young people under the age of 25 and is further conceived as consisting of two distinct age groups: young people under the age of 18 (minors) and those between the ages of 18 and 24 (young adults). Youth living in transitional housing at the time of assessment ( $n = 1,505$ ) were excluded from the study sample in order to focus on youth living in more precarious housing situations. This exclusion resulted in a total of 9,417 youth in the analytic dataset. This study was determined to be exempt from Institutional Review Board review at the University of Southern California.

### Measures

The present study features individual responses to the Next Step Tool, an assessment tool designed to measure the level of vulnerability of young people experiencing homelessness and to help communities prioritize limited housing resources. The Next Step Tool was designed in 2015 by OrgCode Consulting, Inc., Corporation for Supportive Housing, Community Solutions, and Eric Rice [28]. The 28-item tool features multiple choice, dichotomous, and frequency questions that solicit information on a young person’s housing and homeless history, physical and mental health challenges, previous and current substance use, and individual risk behaviors [27].

In the present study, housing situation at the time of assessment served as the dependent variable. From a list of possible options, youth identified the type of place where they slept most frequently at the time of assessment. Options included *shelter*, *transitional housing*, *couch-surfing*, and *streets*. Independent variables belonged to one of five categories: (1) *demographic*

characteristics; (2) homeless history; (3) risk and victimization; (4) behavioral health; and (5) self-sufficiency. Demographic characteristics included self-reported age, gender, race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, and pregnancy status; however, it should be noted that gender was collected as a binary variable and thus does not represent transgender or gender diverse youth. Homeless history variables included experiencing first-time homelessness, duration of current homeless episode, and reason(s) for homelessness (e.g., running away, religious or cultural differences with family or caregivers, abusive relationship, or violence at home).

Risk and victimization measures included engagement in risky behavior (e.g., exchange sex for money, have unprotected sex with a stranger, run drugs for someone, or share a needle), being forced or tricked to do things, and being physically attacked since becoming homeless. Behavioral health was captured using self-reports of previous or current challenges related to drinking or drug use and mental health, as well as of threats of harming themselves or others in the previous 12 months. Finally, indicators of self-sufficiency included receiving any form of income (e.g., employment, public benefits, or under-the-table) and the ability to take care of basic needs (e.g., hygiene, clothing, and sustenance).

Given the variability in local populations of YEH and the services available to the population, control variables representing each of the 16 communities were included in all models.

### Statistical analysis

Multinomial logistic regression models were employed to determine whether demographic characteristics, homeless history, risk and victimization, behavioral health, or self-sufficiency indicators were associated with couch-surfing or sleeping on the streets relative to staying in a shelter. A full correlation matrix of all variables and an examination of the variance inflation factor led to identifying two highly correlated variables: identifying as LGBQ+ and attributing homelessness to the rejection of one's sexual or gender identity by family. To avoid issues of multicollinearity, LGBQ+ identity was retained and homelessness due to conflicts around sexual or gender identity was removed in constructing any model. A sensitivity analysis revealed that substituting in the removed variable did not change the substantive results. Beginning with demographic characteristics, blocks of independent variables were added iteratively to the model according to the aforementioned categories. With the addition of each block, likelihood ratio tests were conducted to evaluate whether the variables contributed significantly to the model. These procedures were also applied to three additional models stratified by age group, race and ethnicity, and sexuality.

## Results

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for the study sample. Youth predominantly identified as male and over half identified as youth of color. Youth identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, questioning, or with another sexual minority group (LGBQ+) comprised approximately 30% of the sample. The majority of youth represented young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 and reported staying in an emergency shelter at the time of assessment.

Table 2 displays the multinomial logistic regression model for the overall study population. In general, compared to their

**Table 1**  
Respondent characteristics (n = 9,417)

	n (mean)	% (SD)
Demographics		
Age		
Minors (under 18)	16.02	.88
Young adults (18–24)	20.49	1.93
Gender		
Female	2,164	22.99
Male	7,247	77.01
Race		
White	4,538	48.19
Black	2,918	30.99
Latinx	1,385	14.71
Another race	576	6.12
LGBQ+	2,854	30.31
Pregnant	871	9.25
Current living situation		
Couch-surfing	665	7.06
Streets	1,564	16.61
Emergency shelter	7,188	76.33
Homeless history		
First episode	6,115	64.94
Duration of current episode in months	(8.43)	(11.16)
Reason for homelessness		
Ran away	6,932	73.61
Religious/cultural differences	2,447	25.98
Abusive relationship	2,204	23.40
Violence at home	2,922	31.03
Risk and victimization		
Engaged in risky behavior	2,502	25.57
Forced or tricked to do things	1,422	15.10
Attacked since homeless	4,015	42.64
Behavioral health		
Substance use issue	2,130	22.62
Mental health issue	1,085	11.52
Threatened to harm self/others	1,830	19.43
Self-sufficiency		
Have income source	2,556	27.14
Able to meet basic needs	8,006	85.02

SD = standard deviation.

male, White, and heterosexual counterparts, youth identifying as female, Black, non-Latinx youth of color, or LGBQ+ were at greater risk of couch-surfing relative to staying in a shelter. Female-identified and LGBQ+ youth were also at greater risk of sleeping on the streets. First-time homelessness was positively associated with couch-surfing while the length of current homeless episode was negatively associated; the inverse of these trends was significantly associated with sleeping on the streets.

Homelessness due to an abusive relationship was associated with an increased risk of couch-surfing. Although all surveyed reasons for homelessness were significant for youth sleeping on the streets, youth reporting an abusive relationship experienced the greatest magnitude of risk, facing over 20 times the risk of being on the streets rather than in a shelter. Overall, youth who reported threatening to harm themselves or others in the preceding 12 months were significantly more likely to either be couch-surfing or on the streets. Finally, youth were more likely to be couch-surfing or on the streets if they reported some form of income but were less likely to report either of these living situations if they were able to meet their basic needs.

Table 3 displays regression models for minors under the age of 18 and young adults between the ages of 18 and 24. Across

**Table 2**

Relative risk of couch-surfing or sleeping on the streets relative to staying in a shelter (n = 9,411)

	Couch-surfing versus shelter RRR (95% CI)	Streets versus shelter RRR (95% CI)
<b>Demographics</b>		
Age	.90 (.86–.94)***	1.48 (1.40–1.56)***
Female (ref. male)	4.21 (3.54–5.02)***	.55 (.42–.73)***
<b>Race (ref. White)</b>		
Black	1.99 (1.62–2.43)***	.92 (.72–1.17)
Latinx	.97 (.72–1.30)	.70 (.51–.97)*
Another race	2.03 (1.43–2.88)***	1.22 (.80–1.84)
LGBQ+	1.25 (1.04–1.52)*	6.13 (4.95–7.59)***
Pregnant	1.23 (.85–.93)	3.18 (2.54–4.70)***
<b>Homeless history</b>		
First episode	2.55 (1.98–3.28)***	.38 (.31–.47)***
Duration of current episode	.91 (.89–.93)***	1.01 (1.01–1.02)**
<b>Reason for homelessness</b>		
Ran away	1.04 (.80–1.35)	1.53 (1.18–2.00)***
Religious/cultural differences	.81 (.65–1.02)	4.77 (3.86–5.90)***
Abusive relationship	1.80 (1.46–2.24)***	22.31 (17.38–28.62)***
Violence at home	.61 (.50–.75)***	4.49 (3.59–5.62)***
<b>Risk and victimization</b>		
Engaged in risky behavior	.58 (.47–.72)***	2.28 (1.83–2.84)***
Forced or tricked to do things	1.11 (.86–1.43)	2.94 (2.29–3.79)***
Attacked since homeless	.85 (.69–1.03)	3.40 (2.74–4.23)***
<b>Behavioral health</b>		
Substance use issue	.95 (.73–1.23)	7.03 (5.67–8.73)***
Mental health issue	.59 (.41–.86)**	2.78 (2.10–3.69)***
Threatened to harm self/others	1.36 (1.02–1.80)*	4.23 (3.36–5.33)***
<b>Self-sufficiency</b>		
Income	1.92 (1.58–2.34)***	3.39 (2.73–4.20)***
Able to meet basic needs	.64 (.49–.83)**	.17 (.13–.22)***

CI = confidence interval; RRR = relative risk ratio.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

both age groups, identifying as female, Black, or as another non-Latinx youth of color remained significantly and positively associated with couch-surfing. LGBQ+ minors were at significantly less risk of couch-surfing but LGBQ+ young adults were at greater risk. Identifying as LGBQ+ was also significantly associated with a higher risk of sleeping on the streets across both age groups. Pregnant minors were at significantly higher risk of either couch-surfing or sleeping on the streets; pregnant young adults were significantly more likely to be on the streets. First-time homelessness was positively associated with couch-surfing for both age groups, but the magnitude was greater among minors. Minors whose homelessness was attributed to running away were at significantly higher risk of couch-surfing, as were young adults who were homeless due to running away, an abusive relationship, or violence at home. Minors reporting to threaten to harm themselves or others were nearly

twice as likely to be couch-surfing, but this variable was not significant among young adults.

Table 4 displays regression models stratified by race and ethnicity. Most of the results are consistent across racial and ethnic groups. In particular, across all four groups, identifying as female was associated with an increased risk of couch-surfing, relative to staying in a shelter. In addition, older age, identifying as LGBQ+, experiencing violence at home, engaging in risky behavior, being forced or tricked to do things, being attacked since becoming homeless, having substance use issues, and threatening to harm oneself or others were all associated with an increased risk of staying on the streets relative to being in shelter. In addition, key homeless history items were consistent across most racial and ethnic categories. For Black, White, and Latinx youth, first-time homelessness was associated with an increased risk of couch-surfing relative to staying in shelter. Conversely, for Black, White, and Latinx youth, duration of current episode of homelessness was negatively associated with risk of couch-surfing relative to staying in shelter.

Table 5 displays regression models stratified by sexual orientation and shows a great deal of consistency with respect to associations with housing when looking across sexual orientation. For both LGBQ+ and heterosexual youth, identifying as female or as Black was associated with an increased risk of couch-surfing. Likewise, regardless of sexual orientation, first-time homelessness and homelessness due to an abusive relationship were both associated with an increase in the risk of couch-surfing. Meanwhile, duration of current homeless episode and violence at home were each negatively associated with the risk of couch-surfing for both LGBQ+ and heterosexual youth. In addition, there was a great deal of consistency in the variables associated with staying on the streets relative to shelter for both LGBQ+ and heterosexual youth. Older age; homelessness due to religious differences, abusive relationships, or violence at home; engaging in risky behavior; being forced or tricked into doing things; being attacked since becoming homeless; and income are all positively associated with risk of staying on the streets relative to in shelter. Moreover, first-time homelessness and being able to meet basic needs were negatively associated with the risk of staying on the streets relative to staying in shelter among both heterosexual and LGBQ+ youth.

## Discussion

Several key findings emerge from the present study. First, youth of color and LGBQ+ youth were at an overall significantly higher risk of couch-surfing relative to staying in a shelter. LGBQ+ youth were also more likely to sleep on the streets compared to staying in a shelter. These findings are consistent with previous studies and underscore important disparities in how young people experience homelessness. Lack of youth-specific shelters, absence of culturally competent and LGBQ+ inclusive shelter spaces, prior negative experiences with staff and other youth in shelter environments, and the stigma of homelessness can all contribute to youth avoiding shelter programs to either rely on couch-surfing or retreat to the streets [29–31]. Couch-surfing youth have indicated especially poor perceptions of support from community-based organizations compared to other YEH [22], perhaps in part due to being considered lower priority and thus being denied services

**Table 3**  
Relative risk of couch-surfing or sleeping on the streets relative to staying in a shelter, by age group

	Minors, age <18 (n = 2,800)		Young adults, age 18–24 (n = 6,611)	
	Couch-surfing versus shelter RRR (95% CI)	Streets versus shelter RRR (95% CI)	Couch-surfing versus shelter RRR (95% CI)	Streets versus shelter RRR (95% CI)
<b>Demographics</b>				
Age	.40 (.32–.48)***	2.90 (1.97–4.26)***	1.50 (1.37–1.63)***	1.27 (1.18–1.37)***
Female (ref. male)	3.54 (2.75–4.56)***	.64 (.34–1.21)	4.73 (3.57–6.26)***	.69 (.50–.96)*
<b>Race (ref. White)</b>				
Black	2.23 (1.66–2.99)***	1.39 (.75–2.57)	1.80 (1.30–2.48)***	.77 (.58–1.03)
Latinx	1.17 (.77–1.76)	.52 (.23–1.19)	.83 (.51–1.34)	.64 (.44–.94)*
Another race	2.56 (1.51–4.36)**	1.41 (.56–3.51)	1.90 (1.10–3.29)*	1.07 (.64–1.77)
LGBQ+	.71 (.54–.92)**	6.08 (3.50–10.54)***	2.60 (1.91–3.54)***	7.74 (6.01–9.96)***
Pregnant	2.50 (1.20–5.25)*	6.55 (3.00–14.30)***	1.44 (.90–2.31)	2.68 (1.93–3.71)***
<b>Homeless history</b>				
First episode	6.45 (3.19–13.06)***	.46 (.28–.91)**	1.54 (1.14–2.10)**	.41 (.32–.52)***
Duration of current episode	.82 (3.19–13.06)***	1.08 (1.04–1.11)***	.93 (.91–.95)***	1.01 (1.00–1.02)
<b>Reason for homelessness</b>				
Ran away	1.21 (.64–2.28)	.89 (.28–2.91)	1.68 (1.19–2.37)**	1.30 (.97–1.73)
Religious/cultural differences	.80 (.57–1.12)	2.41 (1.43–4.04)**	1.33 (.94–1.88)	6.35 (4.93–8.18)***
Abusive relationship	1.02 (.78–1.33)	14.78 (8.22–26.59)***	4.12 (2.73–6.22)***	33.73 (25.06–45.41)***
Violence at home	.35 (.26–.46)***	1.57 (.93–2.66)	2.31 (1.64–3.25)***	7.32 (5.64–9.49)***
<b>Risk and victimization</b>				
Engaged in risky behavior	.71 (.54–.95)*	4.93 (2.90–8.40)***	.30 (.19–.46)***	1.94 (1.48–2.53)***
Forced or tricked to do things	1.30 (.92–1.84)	3.32 (1.87–5.92)***	.70 (.44–1.11)	2.90 (2.13–3.94)***
Attacked since homeless	1.04 (.79–1.37)	3.09 (1.83–5.21)***	.62 (.45–1.23)	3.45 (2.67–4.45)***
<b>Behavioral health</b>				
Substance use issue	1.72 (1.01–2.92)*	8.44 (4.81–14.79)***	1.23 (.88–1.72)	6.09 (4.75–7.81)***
Mental health issue	.57 (.30–1.08)	2.23 (1.09–4.57)*	.74 (.45–1.23)	2.79 (2.01–3.88)***
Threatened to harm self/others	1.78 (1.18–2.68)**	3.18 (1.51–6.69)**	.63 (.39–1.02)	4.40 (3.38–5.72)***
<b>Self-sufficiency</b>				
Income	1.54 (1.07–2.20)*	1.34 (.67–2.67)	3.79 (2.85–5.03)***	3.39 (2.65–4.33)***
Able to meet basic needs	.73 (.48–1.13)	.10 (.56–.17)***	.45 (.32–.65)***	.18 (.14–.25)***

CI = confidence interval; RRR = relative risk ratio.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

by homeless system “gatekeepers” [18]. Alternatively, youth of color and LGBQ+ youth may have social networks that are generally more supportive of couch-surfing compared to other YEH, pointing to potential protective factors that may be bolstered with additional supports.

Second, although age was negatively associated with couch-surfing and positively associated with sleeping on the streets overall, minors were less likely to couch-surf as they approached 18 and young adults were more likely to couch-surf as they grew older. These divergent trends may be a product of the networks YEH leverage during couch-surfing and their developmental timing. As couch-surfing serves as a protective factor for school enrollment [25], minors may find temporary places to stay through their peers [19]. Extended family members may also be more inclined to temporarily house a younger minor, but compounding factors like overcrowding, poverty, and substance use can push older teens out of family homes [18].

Third, homelessness due to an abusive relationship was consistently and significantly associated with an increased risk of either couch-surfing or sleeping on the streets. The magnitude of risk associated with sleeping on the streets was especially notable, with youth reporting an abusive relationship facing nearly 21 times the risk of sleeping outside compared to nearly twice the risk of couch-surfing. This finding held for all subgroups in all three stratified analyses. Given that couch-surfing frequently manifests in the homeless trajectories of YEH [2] and that the survey measure only inquired where youth slept most frequently, future research should disentangle the

temporal patterning of abusive relationships and forms of homelessness. Prior research establishing that couch-surfing and exchange sex are intertwined [26] and that couch-surfing youth are especially vulnerable to sexual victimization [23,24] point toward the need to further understand with whom youth are couch-surfing, the nature of these relationships, and how these interactions fit into young people’s homeless trajectories.

Fourth, threatening to harm oneself or others was significantly correlated with either couch-surfing or sleeping on the streets, underscoring potential gaps in mental health supports for YEH not connected to shelter. Although mental health issues magnified the risk of sleeping on the streets, they were negatively associated with couch-surfing. Although the relationship between sleeping on the streets and poor mental health is well established [3], prior literature regarding the mental health of couch-surfing youth is somewhat mixed. One study of youth in Australia reported higher levels of diagnosed mental health concerns among couch-surfing youth compared to other YEH and that severity of self-harm increased the likelihood of couch-surfing [22]. Meanwhile, a study of YEH in two Midwestern cities indicated that youth who stayed with a friend or significant other experienced fewer days depressed [17]. It is possible that the persons with whom couch-surfing YEH stay may mitigate their assessment of their overall mental health, but that the psychological distress that can accompany couch-surfing [18] may overwhelm a young person’s ability to engage healthy coping strategies.

Fifth, YEH couch-surfing or sleeping outside were significantly more likely to report an income than YEH in shelter, yet

**Table 4**  
Relative risk of couch-surfing or sleeping on the streets relative to staying in a shelter, by race and ethnicity

	White (n = 4,534)		Black (n = 2,918)	
	Couch-surfing versus shelter RRR (95% CI)	Streets versus shelter RRR (95% CI)	Couch-surfing versus shelter RRR (95% CI)	Streets versus shelter RRR (95% CI)
<b>Demographics</b>				
Age	.91 (.85–.97)**	1.51 (1.39–1.63)***	.89 (.83–.96)**	1.40 (1.27–1.55)***
Female (ref. male)	4.10 (3.15–5.33)***	.51 (.34–.78)**	4.50 (3.32–6.08)***	.54 (.33–.86)*
LGBQ+	1.28 (.96–1.70)	5.68 (4.15–7.77)***	1.25 (.90–1.75)	6.44 (4.38–9.47)***
Pregnant	1.49 (.83–2.67)	4.23 (2.72–6.56)***	1.07 (.59–1.94)	3.35 (2.04–5.52)***
<b>Homeless history</b>				
First episode	3.55 (2.31–5.45)***	.37 (.27–.50)***	2.23 (1.49–3.35)***	.53 (.36–.77)**
Duration of current episode	.91 (.88–.94)***	1.02 (1.00–1.03)**	.92 (.89–.95)***	1.00 (.99–1.02)
<b>Reason for homelessness</b>				
Ran away	.87 (.59–1.28)	1.43 (.97–2.12)	1.07 (.68–1.67)	1.28 (.79–2.06)
Religious/cultural differences	.72 (.51–1.02)	4.49 (3.30–6.12)***	.93 (.65–1.35)	6.18 (4.17–9.16)***
Abusive relationship	1.73 (1.26–2.36)**	26.06 (17.93–37.87)***	1.72 (1.17–2.51)**	22.30 (14.01–35.50)***
Violence at home	.71 (.52–.96)*	4.87 (3.50–6.79)***	.74 (.52–1.05)	5.31 (3.50–8.06)***
<b>Risk and victimization</b>				
Engaged in risky behavior	.58 (.42–.81)**	2.14 (1.55–2.95)***	.54 (.37–.78)**	2.57 (1.72–3.84)***
Forced or tricked to do things	1.20 (.83–1.74)	2.81 (1.95–4.06)***	.83 (.52–1.31)	2.14 (1.31–3.50)**
Attacked since homeless	1.06 (.79–1.42)	4.24 (3.07–5.86)***	.62 (.44–.87)**	2.92 (1.97–4.34)***
<b>Behavioral health</b>				
Substance use issue	1.06 (.72–1.57)	6.46 (4.68–8.93)***	.82 (.52–1.29)	9.36 (6.28–13.95)***
Mental health issue	.80 (.48–1.32)	3.53 (2.34–5.31)***	.20 (.08–.51)**	2.25 (1.33–3.82)**
Threatened to harm self/others	1.64 (1.06–2.53)	4.10 (2.92–5.76)***	.91 (.56–1.48)	4.71 (3.07–7.23)***
<b>Self-sufficiency</b>				
Income	1.78 (1.33–2.39)***	4.07 (2.97–5.58)***	2.05 (1.46–2.88)***	2.81 (1.90–4.17)***
Able to meet basic needs	.67 (.46–.99)*	.15 (.11–.22)***	.61 (.38–.96)*	.19 (.12–.31)***
<b>Latinx (n = 1,384)</b>				
<b>Another race (n = 575)</b>				
<b>Demographics</b>				
Age	.87 (.76–1.01)	1.60 (1.34–1.90)***	.88 (.73–1.07)	1.57 (1.24–2.01)***
Female (ref. male)	4.38 (2.53–7.59)***	.59 (.23–1.54)	4.42 (2.14–9.14)***	.50 (.17–1.46)
LGBQ+	1.39 (.77–2.51)	12.70 (6.05–26.65)***	.68 (.28–1.61)	8.09 (3.05–21.43)***
Pregnant	1.12 (.32–3.95)	3.47 (1.23–9.77)*	.50 (.09–2.71)	.49 (.13–1.76)
<b>Homeless history</b>				
First episode	3.03 (1.34–6.88)**	.16 (.08–.32)***	1.51 (.64–3.56)	.19 (.08–.47)***
Duration of current episode	.87 (.80–.94)**	1.02 (.98–1.05)	.95 (.89–1.01)	1.05 (1.01–1.08)**
<b>Reason for homelessness</b>				
Ran away	2.01 (.74–5.46)	2.36 (1.03–5.40)*	.98 (.33–2.91)	3.27 (1.01–10.62)*
Religious/cultural differences	.60 (.27–1.29)	3.72 (1.86–7.45)***	.78 (.33–1.83)	5.47 (2.23–13.47)***
Abusive relationship	1.26 (.61–2.59)	63.01 (26.05–152.38)***	5.17 (2.10–12.79)***	15.16 (5.38–42.73)***
Violence at home	.34 (.17–.69)**	2.94 (1.47–5.89)**	.33 (.12–.81)*	5.12 (2.01–13.03)**
<b>Risk and victimization</b>				
Engaged in risky behavior	.84 (.44–1.59)	3.18 (1.52–6.61)**	.37 (.14–1.01)	4.53 (1.68–12.22)**
Forced or tricked to do things	1.80 (.81–4.02)	13.47 (5.68–31.92)***	.67 (.20–2.21)	4.90 (1.52–15.83)**
Attacked since homeless	.94 (.50–1.76)	2.10 (1.06–4.18)*	.78 (.35–1.74)	4.95 (1.99–12.31)**
<b>Behavioral health</b>				
Substance use issue	.63 (.25–1.58)	9.38 (4.61–19.07)***	2.09 (.76–5.72)	9.37 (3.71–23.70)***
Mental health issue	.82 (.31–2.17)	1.22 (.45–3.32)	.50 (.12–2.15)	6.44 (2.09–19.86)**
Threatened to harm self/others	2.87 (1.28–6.43)*	10.06 (4.66–21.73)***	.46 (.15–1.42)	3.81 (1.40–10.37)**
<b>Self-sufficiency</b>				
Income	2.26 (1.24–4.11)**	6.26 (2.99–13.09)***	1.32 (.56–3.09)	2.35 (.93–5.93)
Able to meet basic needs	.32 (.15–.66)**	.14 (.06–.29)***	.48 (.15–1.55)	.05 (.01–.18)***

RRR = relative risk ratio.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

less likely to report meeting basic needs. These findings indicate the ability of shelters to provide for the basic physical needs of YEH. Moreover, they emphasize that even with a tenuous housing arrangement, couch-surfing youth still struggle to sufficiently sustain themselves—to a degree on par with their unsheltered peers.

Sixth, although LGBQ+ and Black youth couch-surf at higher rates, the stratified models reveal that largely the same associations as found in the total sample hold across racial/ethnic

groups and across sexual orientation. In the stratified analyses, first-time homelessness was associated with an increased risk of couch-surfing and decreased risk of sleeping on the streets; duration of homelessness was associated with an increased risk of sleeping outside. Age was also negatively associated with couch-surfing and positively associated with sleeping on the streets. Generally, risky behaviors, being forced or tricked into doing things, or being attacked since becoming homeless were associated with an increased risk of sleeping on the streets, as

**Table 5**

Relative risk of couch-surfing or sleeping on the streets relative to staying in a shelter, by sexual orientation

	LGBQ+ (n = 2,853)		Heterosexual (n = 6,558)	
	Couch-surfing versus shelter RRR (95% CI)	Streets versus shelter RRR (95% CI)	Couch-surfing versus shelter RRR (95% CI)	Streets versus shelter RRR (95% CI)
<b>Demographics</b>				
Age	1.01 (.94–1.10)	1.49 (1.38–1.62)***	.85 (.80–.90)***	1.49 (1.38–1.61)***
Female (ref. male)	4.58 (3.34–6.29)***	.43 (.28–.66)***	4.10 (3.32–5.08)***	.70 (.48–1.01)
<b>Race (ref. White)</b>				
Black	2.08 (1.45–2.99)***	1.01 (.71–1.45)	2.02 (1.58–2.60)***	.86 (.61–1.22)
Latinx	.95 (.57–1.59)	.77 (.48–1.23)	.98 (.68–1.40)	.61 (.38–.98)*
Another race	1.55 (.80–3.00)	1.22 (.65–2.27)	2.36 (1.55–3.60)***	1.12 (.63–1.98)
Pregnant	1.92 (.97–3.78)	4.42 (2.79–7.00)	1.03 (.65–1.63)	2.25 (1.50–3.36)***
<b>Homeless history</b>				
First episode	3.05 (1.89–4.93)***	.37 (.27–.51)***	2.36 (1.75–3.19)***	.37 (.27–.49)***
Duration of current episode	.89 (.85–.92)***	1.02 (1.01–1.03)**	.93 (.90–.95)***	1.01 (1.00–1.02)
<b>Reason for homelessness</b>				
Ran away	.67 (.42–1.09)	1.41 (.94–2.12)	1.21 (.88–1.67)	1.69 (1.17–2.43)**
Religious/cultural differences	.95 (.66–1.38)	3.43 (2.49–4.72)***	.72 (.54–.95)*	6.76 (5.02–9.11)***
Abusive relationship	1.97 (1.37–2.84)***	18.35 (12.69–26.54)***	1.72 (1.32–2.25)***	27.67 (19.51–39.25)***
Violence at home	.51 (.36–.74)***	3.85 (2.76–5.37)***	.66 (.51–.85)**	5.31 (3.88–7.27)***
<b>Risk and victimization</b>				
Engaged in risky behavior	.53 (.36–.79)**	1.70 (1.22–2.37)**	.59 (.45–.76)***	2.85 (2.10–3.86)***
Forced or tricked to do things	1.32 (.85–2.07)	4.23 (2.88–6.20)***	1.00 (.72–1.37)	2.19 (1.53–3.14)***
Attacked since homeless	.97 (.68–1.39)	3.81 (2.78–5.23)***	.80 (.63–1.02)	3.23 (2.38–4.39)***
<b>Behavioral health</b>				
Substance use issue	1.21 (.76–1.91)	7.98 (5.71–11.16)***	.83 (.60–1.15)	6.69 (4.99–8.98)***
Mental health issue	.46 (.22–.96)*	3.05 (1.96–4.76)***	.67 (.43–1.03)	2.56 (1.74–3.76)***
Threatened to harm self/others	1.61 (.96–2.68)	3.33 (2.34–4.75)***	1.27 (.90–1.78)	5.66 (4.13–7.77)***
<b>Self-sufficiency</b>				
Income	1.45 (1.00–2.12)	2.66 (1.90–3.72)***	2.12 (1.68–2.69)***	4.29 (3.20–5.75)***
Able to meet basic needs	.52 (.33–.82)	.122 (.08–.18)***	.68 (.49–.94)*	.20 (.15–.28)***

CI = confidence interval.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

were self-reported substance use issues, mental health issues, and threats to harm self or others.

Although data were sourced from 16 diverse communities across the U.S., the study is limited in its generalizability due to communities voluntarily opting in to share their data for research purposes. The present study is prevented from establishing causality due to the cross-sectional nature of the data and is further constrained by shortcomings commonly associated with administrative data (e.g., lack of control over data collected, absence of documentation regarding data quality, and underrepresentation of certain subgroups). Given that data collected were intimately tied to establishing eligibility for limited housing resources, social desirability bias may have impacted respondents' answers to particularly sensitive questions pertaining to mental health, substance use, and risky behaviors. These concerns are heightened among minors, who may even withhold certain details regarding their living situation due to fears of involvement with child protective services. It should also be noted that gender was originally collected as a binary variable, thus obscuring the experiences and vulnerabilities of transgender, nonbinary, and other gender diverse YEH.

The present study holds critical implications for practice and policy by challenging preconceptions that couch-surfing youth are less vulnerable than youth on the streets or in shelter programs. For service providers, it is important to recognize that the physical and mental health risks faced by couch-surfing YEH may be less immediately apparent than for youth coming off the streets. Service providers need to build trust with couch-surfing YEH and fully explore the relationships that are intertwined with their couch-surfing in order to accurately assess their

vulnerability. Service providers must begin to view couch-surfing as being homeless and not as being housed—especially for minoritized YEH. This change in perception will enable service providers to fully assess the vulnerabilities of YEH and how best to deliver permanent housing solutions to address their homelessness.

At a policy level, aligning federal definitions of homelessness to include couch-surfing would not only more accurately reflect the complex homeless and housing trajectories of YEH, but it would correct systemic biases against youth of color and sexual minority youth who are more likely to couch-surf. Although minoritized youth (i.e., youth of color and LGBQ+ youth) who are couch-surfing may not experience “literal homelessness” on a consistent basis due to their ability to temporarily find housing off the streets, couch-surfing alone is not a good option for housing many YEH. The risks associated with couch-surfing should thus be taken into account in how homelessness is defined and how housing resources are allocated for YEH. In aligning federal definitions of homelessness, funding could be made available to communities to help youth seeking to transition out of precarious housing situations. Assisting these YEH in transitioning to safe and stable housing and supporting families who house YEH through couch-surfing could ultimately reduce the number of minoritized youth returning to homelessness or entering literal homelessness.

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