

Fatherhood Among Youth Experiencing Homelessness

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Abstract

Research on young parents experiencing homelessness has typically focused on mothers and pregnant women. Young homeless fathers' tendencies to decline involvement throughout pregnancy and in their children's lives have been documented and condemned; however, little is known about young men's perspectives on these situations. This exploratory study engaged homeless young men in qualitative interviews regarding their perceptions and experiences of fathering. Respondents often viewed fatherhood as solely representing breadwinner responsibilities and as a burden that one dutifully carries or shamefully (yet commonly) shirks. Homeless young men's beliefs about fathering, often steeped in guilt and shame, may suggest that encouraging alternative conceptions of competent fathering while young and homeless is an important area for further research, intervention development, and service provision.

Keywords

youth homelessness, fatherhood, abortion, gender, pregnancy, parenting, coparenting

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Introduction

Around 2 million males, ages 18 to 25, experience homelessness or housing instability each year in the United States (Morton et al., 2018). Between 22% and 43% of young males experiencing homelessness report being involved in at least one pregnancy of which they are aware (Wagner et al., 2001; Winetrobe et al., 2013). Although generalizable information regarding fatherhood among street-involved young men is limited (Begun et al., 2019), these figures are consistent with research showing that between 30% and 60% of females who experience homelessness between the ages of 18 and 25 report at least one past or current pregnancy (Begun, 2017; Crawford et al., 2011; Halcón & Lifson, 2004; Wagner et al., 2001; Winetrobe et al., 2013).

Research has so far focused on the pregnant street-involved young women, with not enough known and understood about homeless young

fathers (Begun et al., 2019). Street-involved youth pregnancies present the pregnant young women with multiple stressors, risks, and vulnerabilities (Baggett et al., 2010; Weinreb et al., 1998). These result from various factors such as risk behaviors (e.g., substance misuse) and unsafe spaces associated with street involvement (Thompson et al., 2008); insufficient access to health care, prenatal care, and screenings (Baggett et al., 2010); and self-harm due to insufficient access to family planning information and services (Begun et al., 2018).

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Another and equally critical set of stressors and vulnerabilities result from the fact that young street-involved pregnant women, who carry a pregnancy to term and parent a child, all too often end up doing so alone. The limited existing evidence suggests that young men who experience homelessness do not tend to stay and support pregnancies they father nor do they coparent the child (Smid et al., 2010). Or as one young female resident of a youth homeless shelter succinctly put it, “baby daddy always splits” (Begun et al., 2019).

At the same time, in the general population, fathers’ involvement in child rearing has increased dramatically and unprecedentedly in the last generation, as gender-specific parental roles have overall gradually given way to nongender-specific conceptions and ideals of parenting (Cabrera & Tamis-LeMonda, 2013; Fass, 2017; Lamb, 2000). This epochal transformation is eroding the previous division of labor between a breadwinning father and a parenting mother (Cooper, 2019). However, within the older, gender-specific (and overtly gender-binary) parental role context of the father as first and foremost providing materially for his family, street-involved young men are rendered “unsuitable” for fathering given the barriers they often face accessing and sustaining gainful employment. Such inability to provide financially for one’s children may result in a sense of inadequacy and failure to fulfill one’s obligations as a “real” man, findings which have repeatedly been reported by fathers (above age 18) experiencing homelessness (Roche et al., 2018; Schindler & Coley, 2007). Although fathers experiencing homelessness typically report a strained relationship with services such as child-protection services (Fagan & Lee, 2011), services for noncustodial fathers who experience homelessness are mostly employment-related, with almost no interventions aimed at facilitating increased involvement of the father with his children (Barker, 2012; Castillo & Sarver, 2012; Rogers & Rogers, 2019).

The turn from gender-specific parenting roles to nongender-specific coparenting (Saini et al., 2019) has also led fathers going through

a divorce or separation to demand shared child custody as the default arrangement, rather than the formerly prevailing default arrangement of full maternal child custody (Alschech & Saini, 2019). While the child’s best interests justly remain the overwhelming concern in court decisions on child-custody arrangements, in the last generation a crystallizing recognition of a right to parent, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, may be emerging (Brighouse & Swift, 2016).

This transformation in the meaning and practice of fathering in the last generation is especially noteworthy given that research shows that many young women experiencing homelessness actively desire to become pregnant (Begun, 2015, 2017; Winetrobe et al., 2013). Among the envisioned positive consequences of a pregnancy reported by street-involved youth are motivation for getting one’s life in order, reducing risk behaviors and securing stable housing and employment (Crawford et al., 2011; Hathazi et al., 2009; Smid et al., 2010), an opportunity to demonstrate parenting skills and maturity (Begun et al., 2019; Smid et al., 2010), and greater access to better supports and services (Begun et al., 2019; Hathazi et al., 2009; Ruttan et al., 2012). Youth experiencing homelessness have also shared being motivated to become pregnant so as to create familial relations not otherwise available, and to alleviate loneliness, by bringing into the world someone to love and care so that they may also be loved in return (Begun, 2015; Begun et al., 2019).

The loneliness and perceived lack of family among youth who experience homelessness is commonly elucidated through the concept of social capital (e.g., Barker, 2012; Stablein, 2011). As social capital, relationships with significant others are viewed as means for various needed and desired goods, such as instrumental support (e.g., money and other tangible resources), emotional support, and access to prosocial networks and supports (Stablein, 2011), all of which are resources that aid in navigating life’s challenges. Becoming pregnant specifically to create a new significant other to love and be loved by, or to mend fractured relationships

with family and others, represents tensions and complexities with regard to aspects of the social capital framework. Street-involved pregnancies may, in some cases, be misguided and even harmful ways of seeking to address one's lack of social capital, and perhaps also do not ultimately result in youths' experiences of actually obtaining any "authentic" form of social capital or true emotional or social support. However, such motivations for having a baby are nonetheless understandable when we acknowledge that emotionally supportive relationships with significant others indeed have clear intrinsic value. Relationships with significant others are a pivotal good in their own right; far from ignorant about the difference between social relationships that open up spaces of opportunities and social relationships that may only do so (if at all) in a much later stage, street-involved youth seem to understand the desire to become pregnant as rooted in the intrinsic good that is a parenting relationship. This motivation is conceptualized as the desire for "relationship goods" (Brighouse & Swift, 2016), which constitutes the right to parent, within the constraints of the child's overweighing right to be competently parented (B. D. Johnson et al., 2014).

None of these envisioned advantages of pregnancy and subsequent parenthood are gender-specific. Yet, research has not widely explored whether young street-involved men also actively desire to become involved in a pregnancy. One large study of more than 1,000 young people under the age of 25 experiencing homelessness found that about 40% of youth in the sample endorsed pro-pregnancy attitudes, and there were no statistically significant differences among young men versus women with regard to their attitudinal endorsements (Begun, 2017). Seemingly contrary, empirical evidence has consistently showed that most street-involved young men end up fleeing rather than staying involved and support the pregnant women; as such, it may be implicitly assumed that such young men only desire engagement in sexual relationships and behaviors (Smid et al., 2010). This, however, is merely an unexamined

assumption because little is actually known and understood about why young street-involved men commonly do not shoulder their responsibilities for pregnancies they are involved in. Specifically, we do not properly understand how such personal choices to unceremoniously abandon the pregnant young women are conditioned and constrained by structural and contextual factors.

In view of the effects of such common disappearances on the pregnant young women, who unlike their male counterparts cannot as easily flee the pregnancy, these young street-involved men are routinely condemned for their behavior. These condemnations implicitly suggest that the right thing to do for these young men would be to stay and remain involved. However, it is far from clear that encouraging them, let alone forcing them, to stay and remain involved is in the interest of the pregnant young women and the child if carried to term. Given some of the views voiced by such young men regarding abortions (Begun et al., 2018), as well as the prevalence of gender-based violence among homeless youth (e.g., Slesnick et al., 2010), one significant concern is that greater involvement of these young men may in some cases circumscribe the agency of the young women in deciding whether to terminate the pregnancy or give up the child for adoption.

The following exploratory study of the perceptions of fatherhood and fathering, among young men experiencing homelessness, aimed to explore such themes so as to better our understanding of these issues, guide the design of future studies of the needs and vulnerabilities of pregnant and parenting youth experiencing homelessness, and inform the development of adequate interventions.

Method

Exploratory qualitative interviews were collected from 13 youth (aged 18–20) identifying as men (11 cisgender males, one transgender male, one genderqueer) who were residing in a large youth-serving shelter in a major North American City. The phenomenon examined through the larger project

from which these themes emerged was experiencing homelessness specifically as a young person while grappling with barriers and choices regarding reproductive and sexual health while accessing shelter-based services. Results highlighted in the current study focus more narrowly on male-identified youths' perceptions and experiences of pregnancy involvement and fathering.

Criterion sampling (Saldaña, 2013) was used to identify youth, who were approached in the shelter milieu by the study's Principal Investigator (PI), a social work researcher; youth were asked if they would like to participate after being given an overview of the study's purpose. Respondents were required to provide written informed consent. All youth who were informed about the study elected to engage in a research interview. Youth were notified that study participation was voluntary and could be discontinued with no penalty at any time. Study details were approved by the PI's university-based Institutional Review Board. Permission to audio-record interviews was requested and obtained from all participants. After youth consented to study participation, respondents were engaged in individual interviews, lasting 45 to 60 min, and facilitated in a private office in the shelter by the study PI. Respondents received a US\$25 gift card to a general retailer or local food vendor. A semistructured interview guide was developed to explore youths' attitudes and experiences regarding pregnancy, family planning, and other topics of reproductive and sexual health. Youths' insights dictated the flow of the interviews, but the semistructured guide offered a framework for asking study participants consistent questions. Sampling concluded after thematic saturation was achieved.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and open-coded for emerging themes. Transcript data were analyzed using Microsoft Word. A social work doctoral student and the study PI engaged in coding to increase rigor and reduce bias in analyses. Coders independently engaged in initial coding of all 13 transcripts, and then convened to compare codes

generated and applied to transcripts, discuss the appropriateness of the coding structure developed, resolve discrepancies, and establish consensus in analyses. Higher level codes were mutually agreed upon by both authors on the basis of the coded transcripts.

Results

The 13 interviewees were diverse in their racial/ethnic identity: six identified as White, three identified as mixed race (one Latino + White, one Native American + White, and one Black + White), two identified as Black, one identified as Latino, and one identified as Hawaiian. The youngest participants were 18 years old (three interviewees), and the oldest were 20 years old (five interviewees). Duration of time experiencing homelessness was between 1 and 36 months with the mean length of time experiencing homelessness being 9.76 months. Two of the interviewees reported prior foster care involvement. One interviewee identified as genderqueer, another interviewee identified as a transgender man, and 11 interviewees identified as cisgender men. Ten interviewees identified as straight, two interviewees identified as gay, and one interviewee identified as pansexual.

As detailed in the following sections, the interviewees described young street-involved men as rarely staying in the picture to support pregnancies and coparent children they fathered. At the same time, the interviewees stressed that they themselves are not like everybody else in such regards. They either clarified that they had not disappeared when they learned of a pregnancy, or that they are certain that they will do "the right thing" should the situation arise. The interviewees explained their determination to take responsibility, support and father their children when and if needed, in terms of individual virtue, condemning those who do flee as lacking in such virtue. Fatherhood for the interviewed street-involved young men meant first and foremost breadwinning, and it was their perceived lack of capacity for breadwinning that made the prospect of fatherhood so threatening.

“*[N]ot Just Jet Out of the Picture Like Most Men Do*”

The interviewed young men reiterated the common portrayal of young street-involved men as rarely staying in the picture to support pregnancies and coparent children they fathered. For example, one interviewee said,

I think the mom, or the pregnant chick, they seem to get their acts together, um, you know, most of the time. But everyone else basically leaves them in the dust. Like “girl bye!” after she tells them she’s expecting a baby. I think that’s sad. I would never do that to [girlfriend]. I can’t even imagine being so heartless, so evil to someone, you know? Especially if I was part of what happened to cause that. (Interviewee PID 9)

Or, as another interviewee said more succinctly: “I would support her and definitely not just jet out of the picture like most men do” (Interviewee PID 24).

As these quotes already show, the interviewed young men stressed that they are not like “most men” in these circumstances. They either clarified that they had not disappeared when they learned of a pregnancy, or that they do not envision themselves shirking their responsibilities, should the situation arise. They explained their determination to take responsibility, support and father when and if needed, in terms of individual virtue. The overall male tendency to flee was framed as lack of virtue in such men, who fail to shoulder their responsibilities. One resident of the shelter said,

The girl could have an abortion, could give up the child for adoption, could ask family to raise the baby, could co-parent the child with me. I would support whatever she wanted, really. Then or today, that’s always how I would have felt. I take responsibility for my actions in life. (Interviewee PID 16)

And another interviewee stated,

I would want her, whoever she is, to know that I am in it with her. That we’re in that together, that she’s not alone. So many pregnant girls feel really alone, and I’ve seen that. It’s really just. I

don’t know. It’s really just. It’s tragic, I guess. That you’d be going through all that. Like without anyone else making you feel you’re in that together. (Interviewee PID 19)

One interviewee observed that young street-involved men tend to flee from pregnancies because they panic. This interviewee is a father who resided at the time of the interview in a youth homeless shelter claiming he could not afford accommodations for himself because he is supporting his daughter and her mother (from whom he is separated). He also expressed his disdain and disapproval of fathers who abandon the child and the mother:

when my girlfriend found out she was pregnant, I felt immediately just as affected or in the situation with her as she was feeling. You know, I wanted to take on my responsibility as a father and as a husband. Well, we’re not married, but you know. But I think for some girls, it feels like everything is falling on them. And some guys panic and don’t stay involved. I have, um, really no respect for that. It took two people to make the baby, you know? It’s no excuse for the guy to leave, just because he isn’t carrying the baby around himself. (Interviewee PID 6)

The same interviewee, when asked about his reaction should his daughter’s mother become pregnant again, answered: “it would be stressful, but I think we’d want a brother or sister for [daughter’s name] and I would just keep trying harder and harder to get better paying jobs to make it all work out for everyone” (Interviewee PID 6).

This young father’s commitment to his daughter’s well-being and willingness to double his efforts so as to somehow financially support yet another child serve as a noteworthy counterexample to the common portrayal of young street-involved men as “deadbeat dads” (Fagan & Lee, 2011; Rogers & Rogers, 2019). At the same time, by stating that he will keep on trying “harder and harder,” this young father exemplifies what young street-involved fathers might be panicking about when they do flee from such scenarios. Keeping in mind that this

father is already residing in a homeless shelter because he cannot afford both child support and independent housing for himself, his commitment to support any kids he fathers may prove insufficient given the rigors of life as a working poor who fathers (E. S. Johnson et al., 1999; Roy, 2004; Summers et al., 2006).

Fatherhood for the interviewed street-involved young men meant first and foremost breadwinning, and it was their perceived lack of capacity for breadwinning that made the prospect of fatherhood so threatening. As one interviewee said,

I'd probably be in shock, freaking out, and trying to figure out how I'm supposed to sustain my pregnant wife, or girlfriend . . . and have a house for the baby plus have money for all the extra stuff. Like diapers. And food. And bills. (Interviewee PID 27)

Another interviewee observed that, though most street-involved young fathers do sooner or later disappear, "Some tend to stay for different reasons. Maybe feeling guilty for getting that girl pregnant or maybe just feeling, like, a sense of commitment now that they have a kid. There's a lot to it" (Interviewee PID 24). Guilt and conscientiousness can indeed be powerful motivating feelings and doubtless have served as the reason for which people decided to parent children. Yet, individualistic and moralizing, they exclude all reference to structural and contextual factors that in fact condition and constrain the personal choices made by young street-involved men when they hear they are responsible for a pregnancy.

As opposed to the common framing of the issue in individualistic moralizing terms, one interviewee, identifying as a gay man, suggested a more critical view of the issue:

It is so all about, and only about, the girl involved. Just another example of bullshit feminism-hating that goes throughout our society. We, well not "we" but like asshole republicans and shit, like to control every possible thing about women. Oppress them, take away their rights. Then when something

major in life happens, like a pregnancy, they control all of that shit too. (Interviewee PID 13)

Rather than a story of young men, lacking in virtue and hence not doing the "right" thing, this interviewee suggests that it is society that constructs these types of pregnancies as only the problem of the young pregnant woman. In his view, society is addressing street-involved pregnancies as solely a problem of the pregnant young women, as a means of control and oppression, rather than merely an adaptive reaction to the fact that the young men mostly flee. Society (or: "feminist-hating . . . asshole republican shit"), determined to keep on controlling female sexuality and bodies, views street-involved pregnancies as only involving the mother and the fetus, and if born, child. Although society is harshly condemning men for fleeing their responsibilities (Rogers & Rogers, 2019), it is meant as a deterring message for young women about the risks of non-marital sex, young street-involved men are neither encouraged to stay and father nor supported if they do try to do so.

Although criticizing the oppressive effects of addressing street-involved pregnancies as the only problem of the pregnant women, the above interviewee nevertheless clarified that as far as decision making is concerned, it lay only with the pregnant woman, overriding all other interests and desires even that of the father to parent the child:

I actually kinda like the idea of being a parent. But I feel stronger in my feminism, if you know what I mean, that the only thing I would really care much about in the end is making sure the girl got to make decisions on all of her own terms. (Interviewee PID 13)

This conviction was shared by another interviewee who stated: "I mean, my female partner would definitely be driving the decision making. I would likely be on board with any decision that she was okay with, since I really view this as more the woman's choice" (Interviewee PID 24), and another who said, "I would probably say her judgment matters most. Because she is the mother. The person really bringing in that life" (Interviewee PID 19).

However, one interviewee felt, "I should have had a say in this because it's as much my baby as it is yours, and you took that right away from me. Man, that would be such a disgusting thing for someone to do to someone. Not even ask? What horrible person would do such a thing? Maybe I want to be a dad, you know?" (Interviewee PID 27).

"I Couldn't Just Ditch Everyone, the Way He Did"

Some of the interviewees reported growing up with a single mother and hence intimately familiar with the harms and hardships a father may inflict on his family when shirking his responsibilities. For example, one interviewee stated,

If she did [decide to keep the baby], then I'd be better than my father and I'd take care of the child to the best of my abilities. I couldn't just ditch everyone, the way he did. That has caused a lot of issues in my life and I could never turn around and do that to another human being. (Interviewee PID 27)

Angry at his father for leaving his mother and ditching his obligations, this interviewee views his father as lacking in virtue and himself as determined to be better in the narrowest of individualistic moral formulae—don't do unto others what you don't want done unto you. However, structural and contextual factors, conditioning and constraining one's personal choices, may have been responsible for his father's disappearance. These same factors may also end up preventing him from doing better than his own dad. Should this be the case, he may feel more able to forgive his dad, but it may also burden him with guilt and self-loathing. In a later stage in his interview, he shared that "they would be disappointed in me if I ended up some deadbeat baby daddy. They would be really angry about that, I know" (Interviewee PID 27).

And indeed, another interviewee disclosed a more anxious doubt about his ability to be better than his own abusive parents:

My mom had me when she was sixteen in Indiana. Six months later we were moved to [Midwest town name blinded]. And she was fine for a few years and then she started getting into drugs, so she'd make the drugs, put them in syringes and test them on me. She would put them into my body and test the side-effects and stuff from that. I was literally a lab rat. And they abused me. They broke sixteen of my bones before I was four years old. I have a scar on my face right here from a dog fight they were having, with three pit bulls. Two years later they had my little sister. We were actually adopted together and they did the same stuff to her and she was two. She doesn't remember the stuff, but like, they sexually abused us, drugs, alcohol, physically, verbally, emotionally, all of it. And it's just, I'm afraid, I know I'm not, but it's always in the back of my mind that there are chances of me turning out like my parents. (Interviewee PID 23)

Sensitized by his and his sister's childhood traumas to the risks and harms of abusive parenting, this interviewee shared the anxieties that the prospect of parenting may bring to many street-involved young men. Not merely panicking about the enormity of the challenge and the length of the commitment, at least some young fathers may be too traumatized to contemplate parenting, hence they flee.

At the other extreme, one interviewee shared his lifelong dream of being like his late father:

I always saw myself as becoming a dad someday, though. And I would want to be a lot like my dad. How my dad was . . . My dad was great. He passed away when I was 12. And he was my best friend. He really understood me, in a world that so often doesn't really understand me. (Interviewee PID 19)

Another interviewee described shelter romances as a legitimate family tradition:

I think they'd all [the interviewee's parents] be like "are you sure you're ready for this?" but they were all really young parents too so they can probably relate to us and what we'd be thinking about, since it would be a lot like how

their lives were. My parents met at a shelter, just like she and I did. (Interviewee PID 15)

Rather than viewing his own housing insecurity as an indication of the risks and trans-generational disadvantages that may result from starting a family while young and homeless, this interviewee used his parents' past trajectory to normalize street-involved pregnancies and fatherhood. This brings attention to the class bias involved in opposing and pathologizing young street-involved pregnancies and parenting.

“[I]t’s a Way to Get Out of That Loneliness”

As opposed to the image of young street-involved men as unwilling to father and in the rare cases in which they do stay to shoulder their responsibilities, doing it out of guilt and conscientiousness, some interviewees shared an explicit desire to father. One interviewee said, “I actually would love to be a father, so this is probably one of the best ways that could really happen” (Interviewee PID 16), and another declared, “Yeah, like, I’d be a great dad” (Interviewee PID 23). One interviewee felt, “having a child would be like a lot of pride, and something other people would see you, see good in you, for doing.” Later in the interview, he shared, “when we’re playing with nephews and nieces, people are always commenting on how I’m going to be such a great father someday because I have a great time with kids and kids love me” (Interviewee PID 15).

Another interviewee was more cautious, believing he will be a better parental option than foster care:

I don’t think things end up very happy for so many people who go to like foster care, or who get adopted. For some I guess it works out. I guess I would be sort of hopeful that I could be a dad. And show my, or our, I guess, child the same kind of love my dad did to me. (Interviewee PID 19)

The interviewed young men also shared observing pregnancies having positive effects on those involved in them. One interviewee said,

I think it forces them to grow up, or at least some of them. Some don’t grow up. Some just keep on. With the drugs, with the irresponsible actions. But I’ve seen a lot of pregnant people really use it to get their lives together. (Interviewee PID 9)

This interviewee continued to share that he believed many of the pregnancies were purposely procured:

Intentionally? Yeah, I think some people do do that and it’s all about that bond. Feeling that love from someone else . . . a lot of them grew up without that love, always feeling like their life is on eggshells you know? Always wondering if their family loves them, if their family will physically or emotionally hurt them, and it’s a way to get out of that loneliness. (Interviewee PID 9)

This same theme, becoming pregnant so as to create for oneself the family one lacks, to generate a relationship of unconditional love, was often voiced by others as well. Another interviewee observed,

There are so many lonely people here. Who think they have no family. Or who don’t have family, like literally, anymore. Either because of bad relationships. Or because of family members dying, or getting killed, and things like that. So I think having a baby, like bringing a child in the world, makes you suddenly have that family, and that feeling of family, again. (Interviewee PID 19)

One interviewee poignantly explained how becoming pregnant may appear the most appropriate thing to do when experiencing homelessness:

It’s just a miserable existence, being homeless. Getting pregnant would seem like there was a point to it all . . . I think just, like, feeling like you’re capable of creating life, and that you love what you created, and that it loves you too. (Interviewee PID 16)

“I Can Be a Great Parent, Even If You Think I’m Like Homeless Trash”

The interviewees repeatedly brought up an assumed relation between becoming a father

and homeless stigma. For one interviewee being a father would magnify his stigmatization as a homeless person:

I don't need people in my business or trying to judge me or trying to, you know, tell me, "Hey, you're homeless. Why the fuck do you have a kid?" Yeah. I don't need that bullshit. The reason I'm homeless has nothing to do with being an irresponsible, freeloading type of person like most people probably think. I like to think I'm really smart and motivated, but I've just had a really hard upbringing. (Interviewee PID 26)

Another interviewee, however, felt that the mere adding of an identity moderates and alleviates the stigma of homelessness: "you have, like, a different label on you other than homeless. Like now you're a mother, a father, a daughter, a son, things like that. Not just homeless" (Interviewee PID 16). A different interviewee felt that being a father was an opportunity to prove "the world" wrong:

Having a kid could be a really lovely responsibility for some. Like someone to feel likes needs you and is loyal to. Sort of middle finger to the world, too, like, "I can be a great parent, even if you think I'm like homeless trash." (Interviewee PID 24)

Yet another interviewee felt that even by merely becoming a parent as such, regardless of demonstrated competence, one gains respect: "People start to show them more respect, like 'you're going to be a parent, that's important' rather than seeing them as some dumb, homeless kid" (Interviewee PID 15).

Some interviewees suggested a somewhat different version of this motivating dynamic, arguing that being a parent does not negate homelessness stigma as much as it shows one is different from how homeless young people are seen. For example, this interviewee shared,

I don't think either of us would even think about anything other than having the baby and giving it as good of a life as we possibly can. We're actually really responsible people, with goals and motivations. I don't think that's always how homeless people are seen. Or young people who stay at a shelter some. And many aren't that much like us. But we're different and I think

those goals and that hope that we can have good lives is probably what has made [girlfriend name] and I such a strong relationship all this time. (Interviewee PID 9)

Discussion

The findings of this study present us with a baffling paradox. These young street-involved men stated their deep commitment to shouldering all responsibilities toward a pregnant partner or ex-partner in relationship to fathering a child, some expressing explicit hope of becoming fathers, some sharing a life of loving sacrifice for a child already fathered, and all condemning those who flee as unvirtuous. At the same time, both research (e.g., Begun, 2015; Begun et al., 2019; Smid et al., 2010) and the interviewed young men themselves claim that most young men do not end up supporting pregnancies and coparenting the children they father.

This inconsistency is perhaps best explained as indicative of the stigma against what some of the interviewees termed: "deadbeat dads" (Cassiman, 2008). On top of selection bias due to the stigma against "deadbeat dads" (the youth volunteering to participate may have been those eager to demonstrate their defiance of stigma rather than those who are aversive to the subject because of the stigma), the interviewees were reluctant to identify as or even merely empathize with fathers who flee pregnancies. They preferred to voice what they perceive to be the right thing to say. None of the interviewees explicitly described young street-involved men who flee pregnancies they are responsible for as stigmatized. And yet, it is reasonable to interpret their comments as enacting stigma against so-called "deadbeat" homeless dads.

The interviewees did explicitly talk about their homeless stigma. Some interviewees believed that becoming a parent will defy and alleviate the homeless stigma they are currently forced to navigate (Kidd, 2007; Kidd & Shahar, 2008). The opposite behavior, fleeing upon learning of a pregnancy, would, however, exactly be what society condemnably expects a street-involved young man to do.

The burden of stigma in the lives of youth experiencing homelessness is considerable and a constant disruptive presence. This was well exemplified by the interviewees understanding of the desire to be a parent as a means to defying homelessness stigma and in their efforts to distance themselves from such stigmatized behaviors.

The interviewees framed the issue as a matter of individual virtue, some sharing a determination to do better than their own fathers who abandoned their mothers, while others voicing their commitment to a life of relentless toil so as to support their child and its mother. This assumption of the “knight in shining armor” role—chivalrous posturing—included an almost unqualified recognition of the pregnant woman’s right to decide about the fate of the child, both with regard to abortion (Begun et al., 2018) and with regard to parenting the born child. None of the interviewees expressed any empathy toward fathers who abandon their children, even when talking about their own fathers. And none speculated on any structural and contextual factors that may condition and constrain the personal choices street-involved men make when confronted with a pregnancy.

Chivalrous posturing, appropriate and consistent with their securely housed male peers (Kimmel, 2009), is also genuine and sincere, and, though not false, is a pretense. At the same time, it provides those who hold such pretenses very little support once they discover they fail to “man up” and shoulder their responsibilities. It is, we suggest, comparable with young women reporting that young women who get pregnant are unchaste and that they themselves are sure they will not behave in such a fashion (“it will not happen to me”) because they are virtuous and chaste. Such conceptions are dangerous because they misrepresent the real motivations and dynamics that lead to street-involved pregnancies or male behaviors in response to learning of their involvement in a pregnancy. Rather than providing vulnerable youth with the literacy and tools needed to navigate the possible consequences of unprotected sexual relations, such moralizing and stigmatizing conceptions

merely burden such youth with unhelpful guilt and shame, further entrenching their sense of inadequacy and worthlessness.

Interviewees presented a simple dichotomy between fleeing once learning of a pregnancy one is responsible for and a vision of fatherhood as foremost breadwinning, whatever this may entail in terms of efforts and sacrifice. This alternative is false, however, as there are many in-between options, in which the pregnant young woman is not abandoned abruptly to her own devices, yet does not mean at least 18 years of providing for a family without stable housing and on a minimum wage salary. Yet, such options are seldom properly articulated and without sufficient literacy about what such options may look like or services that might effectively support street-involved youth in exploring such options, all that remains is an impossible alternative between shouldering a near-impossible burden and a shameful irresponsible escape.

Limitations and Future Research

The study reported in this article has several limitations. This exploratory study was based on a small sample that is not representative of all young men who experience homelessness. Most notably, as the recruitment strategy targeted young men who reside in a youth homeless shelter, the sample excluded those who choose not to reside in a shelter or prevented from residing in shelter (e.g., due to substance use or lack of immigration status) and may significantly differ in their outlook and perceptions on the subject than those interviewed in this study. Second, due to the transitory nature of the study population, member-checking, in which the participants are given an opportunity to review the transcripts of their interviews and comment on the final findings of the analysis, was not feasible. This limits the rigor of the study, as some of the interviewees may have misspoken or inaccurately conveyed their thoughts and were not provided with an opportunity to set the record straight.

The findings of this exploratory study confirm the need for further research. More

interviews with street-involved young men concerning their experiences and perceptions of street-involved pregnancies are needed. Specifically, the stigmatization of “deadbeat dads” and its effects on them should be explored, as well as their notions about what may condition and constrain their personal choices on such matters. Specifically, more research is needed on barriers to remaining involved and supportive of the young pregnant women is needed, such as concerns about the legal and financial implications (i.e., child support) of acknowledging fatherhood; implicit expectations of the pregnant young women as well as agencies and services providing support for her; doubts about the identity of the father and limitations to clarifying such concerns; and misconceptions about the available options, rights, and available supports.

More research is also needed about how service providers supporting street-involved pregnancies view the fathers, their possible involvement, and the tools available to them for encouraging and supporting greater and better father involvement. In view of the current transformation of parenting and the turn to nongender-specific parenting roles, more research is needed concerning the ways in which social services as well as the legal system and child-protection services are still structured around gender-specific parental roles and how these may impose and perpetuate such gender-specific parental roles. Specifically, with regard to street-involved pregnancies, the difference between street-involved young mothering and street-involved young fathering needs to be explored and potentials for moving past such rigid gender-specific parenting roles identified.

Implications for Practice

While the findings of this exploratory study are limited by its small sample size and exploratory nature, several implications for practice may already be identified, first of which is a need for cultivating awareness about the unhelpful effects of the prevailing stigmatization of young street-involved men

who flee pregnancies they are involved in. Recognizing that this common stigmatization does not encourage such men to stay and is in fact merely toxic to such vulnerable young men once they are confronted with the situation only to discover that personal virtue cannot always countervail other conditions and constrains, all expressions of such stigma should be avoided. Instead, young street-involved youth should be encouraged to explore and voice their concerns and beliefs about the subject as well as cultivate awareness of the structural and contextual factors conditioning and constraining personal choices in such regards.

Services for youth experiencing homelessness should be more aware of the needs and experiences of street-involved fathers, acknowledging their presence and unique needs, specifically exploring their willingness to become more involved with their children and support their relationships with the mothers and child-protection services involved. Destigmatizing these young men may open up more space for them to share their losses, guilt, and shame about past events, as well as explore options for reconnecting and becoming involved when appropriate and possible.

The findings of this study also point out the urgent need to design and develop better services for supporting young insecurely housed fathers and their families. Current emergency shelters and transitional housing services for families (in themselves insufficiently available and underfunded) almost exclusively serve mothers with children. These shelters and facilities are reluctant to provide shelter for fathers with children (or even for the adolescent children of mothers seeking shelter), as this may render the place unsafe for some of the residents, who are fleeing abusive relationships and gender-based violence. Transitional housing solutions for young insecurely housed fathers and their families should hence be established, yet without undermining safe service provision for mothers and their children fleeing gender-based violence. Also needed are services that will guide and support young insecurely housed fathers as they navigate the challenges of parenting and

coparenting, support young insecurely housed fathers in their interactions with child-protection services and in negotiating child-custody and child-support arrangements, that do not perpetuate gender-specific assumptions about parental roles and abilities.

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