

On the fringes: How youth experiencing homelessness conceptualize social and economic inequality—A Photovoice study

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Abstract

This study used Photovoice methods with young adults experiencing homelessness to collaboratively identify issues that are of greatest importance in an open-ended, exploratory, and inductive manner. Participants selected two concepts to focus their inquiry: freedom and prosperity. Within these concepts, participants discussed nature as a source of inspiration, a desire to better themselves and to change their situations, and passion for contributing to social change by exposing economic inequality and raising awareness about homelessness. These findings demonstrate that young people are keenly aware of the structural and macro-level factors that have contributed to their risks of social exclusion and marginalization.

1.1 | Homeless youth: Profiles of risk or resilience?

In any given year in the United States, approximately 3.5 million young adults experience homelessness (Morton, Dworsky & Samuels, 2017). Young people who experience homelessness are individuals younger than 25 years of age who lack regular, fixed, and adequate nighttime residence, which includes youth in transitional or emergency shelters, and are street involved (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2013).

In contrast to common misperceptions of this population as rebellious or adventuresome, only a small proportion of youth choose to leave home to seek adventure or novel social experiences (Lindsey, Kurtz, Jarvis, Williams, & Nackerud, 2000). Rather, most young people leave home when they see few other options to avoid family conflict, abuse, and neglect (Lindsey et al., 2000; Rosenthal, Mallett, & Myers, 2006). For some young people, becoming homeless is not a choice, as their families kick them out or abandon them (Dadds, Braddock, Cuers, Elliott, & Kelly, 1993), or, in some

cases, child welfare authorities place youth in foster care where youth then run away from their placements (MacLean, Embry, & Cauce, 1999). Youth homelessness, in the United States, is therefore most often the result of youth leaving unstable or unbearable living situations and having few alternative options for housing.

Once they leave home, young people face new adversities and challenges. Youth often struggle to find safe places to sleep and to maintain connections to stable formal systems (Thompson, Safyer, & Pollio, 2001). This makes acquiring formal employment challenging and leads many young people to turn to informal, and sometimes risky, forms of income generation to survive (Ferguson, Bender, Thompson, Maccio, & Pollio, 2012). In navigating scarce resources, young people are exposed to discrimination and marginalization by the broader public where they may be treated harshly or invisibly on the streets (Kidd, 2007).

Literature on young people who lack permanent or stable shelter is largely focused on health and social consequences of unstable housing, drug and alcohol misuse, and young people's participation in frequent at-risk behaviors, such as criminal or risky sexual activities. Existing research reveals that these young people experience higher rates of victimization and trauma, sexual risk, discrimination, and systems involvement than their housed peers (Bender, Thompson, Ferguson, Yoder, & DePrince, 2015; Snyder et al., 2016; Tierney & Hallett, 2010).

As these young people seek to survive life on the streets, they often employ many high-risk strategies, such as selling drugs, trading sex for money, and substance abuse (Ferguson, Bender, Thompson, Xie, & Pollio, 2011; Perlman, Willard, Herbers, Cutuli, & Eyrich Garg, 2014). These strategies often cast dark shadows on their health and safety and they are often exposed to higher rates of arrests and crime (Yoder, Bender, Thompson, Ferguson, & Haffejee, 2014; Chapple, Johnson, & Whitbeck, 2004). Their time on the streets increases the risk of developing emotional and behavioral problems (Keeshin & Campbell, 2011) and increases barriers to formal employment, services, and other support systems (Ferguson et al., 2012).

1.2 | The use of top-down research approaches

Identifying and engaging young people who are homeless in research is difficult because of issues related to safety, stigma, and poor resource or service provision (U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development, 2017; Tierney & Hallett, 2010). Most research conducted with this group of young people has focused on specifying the myriad challenges and vulnerabilities faced by this group. These studies have often been conducted using top-down approaches (i.e., designed and carried out by academic researchers who are not part of the community) that attempt to assess the linkages between homelessness and a range of mostly risk (e.g., sexual risk, substance use, violence) and fewer protective behaviors (e.g., resilience, future aspirations, hope). Participants or members of the community who are a focus of the research are frequently kept out of the process of actually producing the knowledge about their experiences and needs (Hagger-Johnson, Hegarty, Barker & Richards, 2013).

This top-down research approach often uses survey or experimental methodology and deductive reasoning (i.e., using a predetermined set of hypotheses) to guide selection of variables and relationships to study. The researchers without any meaningful involvement in the community being studied often generate the research questions and hypotheses. Although this approach has increased an awareness of the specific challenges and vulnerabilities that these unstably housed young people experience, leading to opportunities to inform social policy, practice, and service provision, top-down research is less revealing about the issues most central to, and identified by, youth experiencing homelessness. Consequently, less attention has been paid to the strengths and resilience these young people embody as they navigate life on the streets. More research using alternative methodologies is needed to expand awareness beyond risk and vulnerabilities to elicit more understanding of the resiliency and wisdom developed by young people experiencing homelessness.

1.3 | Photovoice: An arts-based and participatory approach to research

Research with community engagement at the center of the process is on the rise and scholars across the social sciences, in particular, are calling for research methods that are more participant driven and that empower

participants, especially marginalized youth participants, to co-create knowledge (Anyon & Fernández, 2007; Anyon & Naughton, 2003; Ozer & Douglas, 2015). Community-based participatory research (CBPR) has received growing attention from researchers because it involves the community as genuine partners in the research process (Garcia, Minkler, Cardenas, Grills, & Porter, 2014). More importantly, among marginalized youth, the use of CBPR has been associated with beneficial outcomes, such as increased self-efficacy and confidence, a desire to engage in subsequent civic activities, and reduced engagement in risk behaviors (Garcia et al., 2014).

Photovoice is a visual method of CBPR that is rooted in feminist theory, education for critical consciousness, and documentary photography (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang, Burris, & Ping, 1996). In Photovoice, participants are provided cameras and asked to take pictures representing their everyday life, engage in intentional dialogue and reflection on the images they share, and use their pictures and stories to inform policymakers of community-based issues they identified (Wang, 2006; Wang, Cash, & Powers, 2000). Since its inception, Photovoice has been used as an important vehicle for the empowerment of a range of vulnerable groups across disciplines in national and international settings (Carlson, Engebretson, & Chamberlain, 2006; Evans-Agnew & Rosemberg, 2016; Rania, Migliorini, Rebora, & Cardinali, 2014).

Photovoice has been used with both homeless adults and a variety of youth populations (Strack, Magill, & McDonagh, 2004; Streng et al., 2004; Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchinson, Bell, & Pestronk, 2004; Wilson et al., 2007), resulting in opportunities for the most marginalized voices to speak from their experiences to change the discussion and advocate for themselves (Wang et al., 2000). For example, the Language of Light Photovoice project engaged men and women living in shelters to improve self-esteem, peer status, and quality of life (Wang et al., 2000). The project emphasized the importance of planning, targeting, and involving community leaders before the project formally started and documented how participant voice is one part of taking advocacy to the next level.

Pritzker, LaChapelle, and Tatum (2012) used Photovoice when exploring adolescent civic engagement among Latino youth in low-income communities. In their study, Pritzker and colleagues (2012) shared how youth reported increased self-efficacy and empowerment as well as community attachment and awareness through their involvement with the project. Fournier, Bridge, Kennedy, Alibhai, and Konde-Lule (2014) conducted a Photovoice project with orphaned children with HIV living in a Uganda group home and reported risk and protective factors delineated by position within and outside of the home. Each of these projects provides preliminary evidence for the role of Photovoice to offer an engaging and useful approach for connecting with the resiliency and wisdom held by marginalized populations, such as young people experiencing homelessness.

Few studies have used a participant-driven, youth-led approach with *youth experiencing homelessness* (Dixon & Hadjilalexou, 2005); the use of Photovoice provides a unique opportunity to understand the experiences of, and insights held by, this group of young people who often find themselves without a voice or an outlet to channel their concerns (Ensign & Panke, 2002). The identity of being homeless shapes a large part of the lives of youth who experience homelessness and many report the shame and anxiety that accompanies this identity perpetuates their invisibility on the fringes of society (Tierney & Hallett, 2010). Additionally, these young people often face exclusion and marginalization, which produce a reluctance to engage in traditional research methods as well as services; they often hold a distrust of others that acts as a barrier to seeking help and staying engaged in services (Collins & Barker, 2009; Hudson et al., 2010).

Photovoice increases the ability to develop innovative and culturally appropriate services by engaging the community of interest around social action to develop, plan, and implement interventions aimed at addressing specific community needs (Wilson, Minkler, Dasho, Wallerstein, & Martin, 2008; Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice is especially relevant for understanding the perspectives and issues of youth experiencing homelessness because the content and outcomes are youth driven, organic, and inductive.

The visual methodology of Photovoice is appealing to youth and is able to sustain their interest over time, despite transiency (Bender, Begun, Dunn, MacKay, & DeChants, 2018). As demonstrated in other Photovoice studies (Strack et al., 2004; Streng et al., 2004; Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchison, Bell, & Pestronk, 2004; Wilson et al., 2007), the approach increases participants' sense of self-efficacy and affords an opportunity for an underrepresented, stigmatized, and underserved group to come together around an issue that is pertinent to them, use photography to document their lens of the issue, and engage in dialogue to promote advocacy and social change.

1.4 | Current study

The goal of our Photovoice project was to (a) empower young people experiencing homelessness to identify the issues of the greatest importance to them and (b) create social action by helping youth in raising awareness and advocating for change around this issue. To do this, we used an important CBPR principle of community and participant self-determination (Hergenrath, Rhodes, Cowan, Bardhoshi, & Pula, 2009) to allow young people to collectively identify the “issue” that was of most significant to their community instead of using the more “traditional” and “top-down” approach of researchers preselecting an issue for them to focus on.

By using such inductive and open-ended exploratory methods to investigate their lived experiences, we hoped to elevate and amplify the perspectives and voices of young adults into the research process, an important tenet of both CBPR and the Photovoice process. In addition to empowering our participants and respectfully honoring their lived experiences, we hoped these findings could be used to plan future research projects and inform the scientific and service communities of the needs and perspectives of young people experiencing homelessness.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Recruitment

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board at the (University of Denver and Denver). We conducted recruitment at an emergency shelter in Colorado. The shelter provides overnight stay, meals, and referrals for other services for 40 homeless youth aged 18–21 years. Purposive sampling was employed to recruit youth who were interested in being a part of a pilot Photovoice project. Inclusion criteria required participants to be (a) staying at the shelter at the time of recruitment, (b) between 18 and 21 years of age, (c) able to speak and communicate in English, and (d) able to provide consent on their own.

Fliers for the study were posted in common areas across the shelter describing and advertising the study. Participants could enter the study in two ways: (a) We encouraged agency staff to nominate youth who would be interested in joining and contributing to a Photovoice project and (b) youth could self-nominate themselves. A team of trained interviewers interviewed staff- or self-nominated youth by asking them open-ended questions about their motivation and interest in being a part of the project. Youth were given a \$10 gift card to a local food vendor to compensate them for their time spent doing the interview. These interviews were used as a way to select youth invested in and committed to the project. All 10 youth who were interviewed were screened into the Photovoice project based on this process.

2.2 | Participants

Of the 10 youth recruited for the study, seven youth stayed on for the duration of the 8-week project and participated in the photography exhibit, where their work was disseminated to the public. The seven participants who stayed on for the duration of the project were between 18 and 21 years of age and three self-identified as male and four as female. Three identified as Latino, one as African American, one as White, and one identified their race as other. Six participants who completed the study identified their sexual orientation as straight and one identified as bisexual. Two participants who completed the study had graduated from high school, two were enrolled in high school at the time of the study, two were enrolled in college, and one had dropped out of school.

Three youth began the study but did not complete it. One youth expressed an interest in the project and completed a pretest interview but never attended a group session, one youth was incarcerated during the study, and one youth left the shelter and the study for unknown reasons. There were no clear demographic differences between youth who completed the study and those who did not. Of the three youth who did not complete the study, two identified as female and one identified as male; two identified as straight and one declined to identify

their sexual orientation; and two identified their race as “other” and one identified as Black or African American. Of the three youth who did not complete the study, one had graduated from high school, one had completed their GED, and one was enrolled in high school.

2.3 | Research team

The research team comprised three people: two master's-level facilitators and one observer, who is a social work faculty member. These three members represented diverse racial and ethnic and gender identities. The team received rigorous training in conducting interviews and facilitating group discussions and intervention work. The research team had weekly meetings to debrief about their experiences, plan for future sessions, make necessary adaptations, and problem solve to improve the project.

2.4 | Engaging photovoice in documenting shared narratives

The data analyzed here were gathered as part of a larger Photovoice intervention called “Asking for Change” (for more detail, see Bender et al., 2017) that was conducted over 8 weeks. Participants met for 2 hours every week for the duration of the project. To honor participants' time in contributing to the groups, they were paid \$20 in gift cards per group meeting attended, enjoyed a group meal during each session, and were given their project tablets upon completing the project.

The Asking for Change intervention was conducted over 8 weeks and included the following phases: community building and group norm setting (weeks 1 and 2), skill development (weeks 3 and 4), information gathering via photography (weeks 5, 6 and 7), and social action public exhibit (week 8). Youth Photovoice participants were asked to discuss the most pressing issue for their community, to explore that topic with their photography, and to prepare an exhibit for the general public with their photos. In this study, we are reporting only on the themes that were discussed during sessions five, six, and seven, in which youth engaged in critical reflection and dialogue around their photos and formed a basis for their photographs and the community exhibit.

Participants were given tablets (with built-in cameras) so they could take pictures of their community and document, through their photographs, the issues they felt were significant in their communities. Additionally, the tablets also served as an incentive for continued participation. Participants who attended a majority of sessions were allowed to keep their tablets at the end of the study.

Weeks 1–2 focused on building rapport and a sense of community among the participants. During weeks 3–4, participants attended two 2-hour training sessions, one facilitated by a professional photographer and the other led by a Photovoice expert. These sessions were geared toward increasing the participant's understanding of the concept of Photovoice and providing them with logistical training regarding the use of cameras.

The Week 3 session focused on both the technical aspects (e.g., how to use the camera on their tablets and the photograph editing features that often come with these built-in cameras) and the aesthetic aspects (e.g., using lighting to create a mood and using angles to make a point) of photography. This session included hands-on training in which participants got an opportunity to take pictures with their tablets and get advice and feedback from the photography expert. They also learned basic aspects of personal safety and ethics of photography such as obtaining consent to take pictures of other people (e.g., how to avoid people's faces to maintain privacy) and situations when not to take pictures (e.g., if there is a situation where they might feel threatened or a crime might be occurring).

The Week 4 session focused more on the symbolic aspects of Photovoice. To accomplish this, the facilitator brought photos from other projects to provide examples of how photos have meaning beyond the physical dimensions of these pictures. However, we intentionally refrained from providing any explicit instructions about what photos participants should take because we wanted to stay true to the participant-driven nature of Photovoice and reduce our influence on the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The only instruction participants were given was as follows: “For next week, bring and discuss at least one photo of something you care about; and bring and discuss at least one photo of something you wish you could change.”

During weeks 5–7, youth took pictures of people, places, and things they believed were important to them. The different locations included the shelter, the neighborhood surrounding the shelter, and the places that served as their hangout spaces. Participants discussed and analyzed the photos. In Week 8, the community exhibit with the selected photos and the social action plan were presented.

2.5 | Visual and data analysis

Participants in Photovoice projects are not just passive actors who provide data; rather, they are active agents who make choices and analyze data that influence the findings and advocacy plan of the study (Given, Opryshko, Julie, & Smith, 2011). Photovoice offers a novel way through which to triangulate findings as multiple sources of data are used. These data sources are as follows: the participants' photos; individual reflection in taking and analyzing their photos; group discussion about the photos and what they represent; and group consensus about choosing an issue around which the participants will plan their social action strategy (Given, Opryshko, Julien, & Smith, 2011). In the spirit of this participant-driven approach, the youth in this study participated in data analysis in the following ways: Youth (a) selected the photos they brought to group each week, (b) reflected on these photos individually and as a group, (c) used these photos to choose topics that they collectively felt were most important to their community and wanted to advocate for, and (d) reflected on the causes and consequences of these important community issues.

The three-phase Photovoice analytic process suggested by Wang and Burris (1997) was used as a framework for shaping the critical dialogues that participants engaged in when reflecting on and discussing their pictures. This included having participants (a) select pictures for discussions, (b) describe the narratives around their pictures to provide context and meaning for their photos (this included both their individual and collective voices), and (c) identify preliminary themes that emerge from these discussions.

2.6 | Participant photograph selection, group discussions, and data analysis

The first dialogue (Week 5) followed the steps outlined by Wang and Burris (1997), wherein youth were first asked to select one or two photos they liked the most or felt had most meaning to their life. Participants were then asked to do some free writing using the mnemonic "SHOWeD" (Wang & Burris, 1997), which comprises the following questions: What do you **See** here? What is really **Happening**? How does this relate to **Our** lives? **Why** does this problem or strength exist? What can we **Do** about it?"

After engaging in this individual reflection, participants came together as a group to analyze their pictures together. The goal was to move from the individual voice to the shared voice, allowing youth to dialogue about what they see in the photograph, their thoughts on what the photographer has shared, how they can relate to that story, or how their impressions differ.

Once youth photos and stories were shared, youth were asked to identify themes across photos and stories. Youth chose two themes to describe their shared vision from the discussion of their pictures. The first was *freedom* and the second was *prosperity*. Youth felt these two concepts described their own situations and communities and were the issues that needed to be tackled through both micro and macro initiatives.

We also used the "roots and branches" activity (Asomugha et al., 2009) to further explore the connections between the two participant-identified concepts—the social, community, and individual factors that shape how freedom and prosperity are experienced by these young adults and the ways in which the broader society facilitates or impedes their ability to achieve both freedom and prosperity. Some of the root causes youth identified were "a lack of empathy," "greed," "a lack of awareness," and "a government that responds to special interests." After identifying these factors, participants were asked to take pictures of the things they thought best symbolized these root causes.

In the second dialogue (Week 6), participants shared the photos they had taken to represent their idea of the root causes identified in the first focus group. In particular, youth were asked to come up with recommendations that could address these root causes. In the third dialogue (Week 7), each participant selected one or two photos to display in the

exhibit. Youth also chose captions for these photographs, brainstormed who they should invite to the exhibit, and where these photos should be exhibited. Participants then participated in a photography exhibit at a local coffee shop to display and describe their pictures and engage community members through discussions and dialogues.

2.7 | Further data analysis by research team

The dialogues about the photographs were audio-recorded using digital recorders and then transcribed. As is common practice in Photovoice studies, we used the broader themes, freedom and prosperity, as chosen by the participants, to guide the coding of the transcripts. Analysis progressed with the rereading of transcripts and the identification of codes that best represented the two broader themes. Using a content analysis approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), we read transcripts, took notes on initial impressions, and created a preliminary codebook. These coding schemes were then used to label the transcripts. Three members of the research team coded independently, and then met to discuss their impressions and reach consensus.

We also used multiple strategies to ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of our analysis. We generated an audit trail comprising analytical memos and meeting notes, to track our collective decision-making process and ensure consistency. The three coders were also the two facilitators and one observer of the Photovoice process, which granted the coders prolonged engagement with the participants and increased the opportunities to understand young people's perspectives. Finally, we triangulated the research transcripts with both the visual data (participant photos) and the narrative data (participant-authored photograph captions), looking for consistency and patterns across data sources (Padgett, 1998).

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | General overview of results

As mentioned above, the youth team generated two major themes based on the focus groups: freedom and prosperity. These discussions included youths' personal experiences of economic vulnerability and housing instability and their opinions and observations about society in general. While exploring these themes, youth frequently took pictures of nature, scenes that reminded them of personal memories, and sources of inspiration. Many of our participants expressed a desire to grow, to better themselves, and to change their situations. Youth were also very passionate about contributing to social change by exposing economic inequality, raising awareness about homelessness, and asking members of the public to take action. The following section presents these themes as well as subthemes associated with the broader themes in more detail.

3.2 | Freedom

To the young people in our study, freedom represented the opportunity to explore the wider world and be free of material worries and constraints. They portrayed this desire by using their photos to capture natural scenery and contrast it with urban structures. This desire for freedom also aligns with their desire for personal growth and their frustration at feeling stuck in their current situations.

3.2.1 | Using nature as a way of representing freedom

Participants took many photos of nature and natural beauty, as a means of symbolizing what freedom meant to them. A participant contrasted the beauty of nature with the manmade urban environment: "They call it Garden of the Gods for a reason—because ... the mountains there are just so ginormous, like, I don't think a human can make that." Participants found nature's beauty to be a source of inspiration for their own lives and during their own struggles. One youth noted: "Looking at a beautiful view like that makes me start thinking about this whole world ...

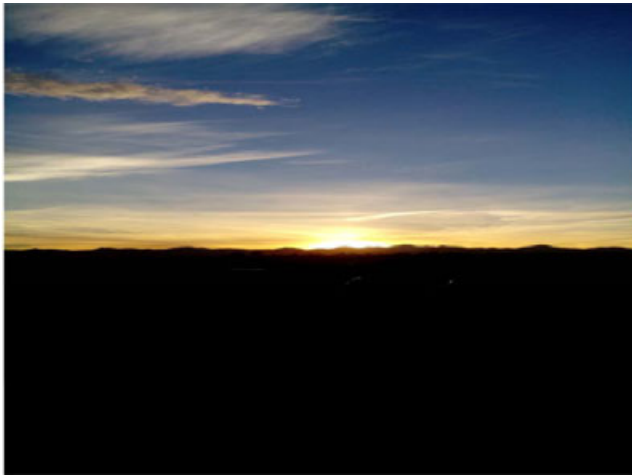


FIGURE 1 Beauty of nature—Possibility

looking at better things in life instead of looking at ... things we get caught up in life and struggling and everything.” Another participant described their photograph (Figure 1):

I took it because ... [of] the mountains in the background and then there was a mist there, with the clouds, like, floating over the mountains tops. So, it shows that there's a lot of stuff out there for us to explore.

Nature was also a source of spirituality and hence a source of personal freedom. Several participants drew a distinction between the natural world being created by God or another force and the urban environment created by humans. One youth stated (Figure 2): “You get so stuck up in the city and everything and actually coming up here you realize that this is actually what God really did create—He didn't create the city, humans did.”

One youth said of a photograph (Figure 3): “And then ... the clouds are like hands. So there's like two hands there. So ... for me, I looked at the picture and it's like somebody's praying.”

Overall, youth took photos of nature to show what inspired them to overcome obstacles, whether it be through a sense of possibility, a sign from a divine presence, or a sense of connection with the earth.



FIGURE 2 Beauty of nature--Urban contrasts



FIGURE 3 Beauty of nature--Divine presence

3.2.2 | Freedom expressed as agency, resilience, and hope

Despite feeling stuck or negative about their lives, youth demonstrated resilience and expressed hope about their futures. Such resilience and hope were vehicles of freedom for them. One participant shared: "The sky's the limit. The world's the limit. You can do anything you want if you just put your mind to it." They cited both memories and spirituality as sources of positivity. One participant reminisced: "So, everywhere I go, I take those memories no matter how far I am or ... yeah, no matter how far I go. They will always be right there." She also said: "Okay, my happiness is my spiritual side. That's why I'm not caught up in this world. I'm in my own spiritual place."

Most of the youth also expressed a fierce sense of determination. Despite feeling challenged by stereotypes and unfamiliar challenges of living away from their home communities, the youth conveyed realistic and positive views of their lives and development. They demonstrated this determination through visual imagery in their photographs. One youth described the symbolism of a photograph of a bridge (Figure 4):

Think of the bridge as what's stopping you and the bridge is what you have to conquer, so you have to find a way over the bridge... And like think if it's like a wobbly rope bridge, old and busted, it's gonna take a challenge to get over the bridge without you thinking ... Oh my God, this thing is gonna break and I'm gonna fall.

Another image in the youths' photos was the horizon, representing the pursuit of their goals. One participant stated (Figure 5):

There was like ... a hill and a lot of trash all over the place and ... there were rocks and just stuff like laying on the ground and everything, and so the way I see this picture is that is the horizon. The horizon never stops. There will always be a horizon, no matter how far you go and everyone is heading for their horizon... They're always gonna have a horizon.

Participants' determination was coupled with a desire for personal growth. They continued to use the image of a bridge to express this desire. A participant described it this way: "You want to build that bridge that will get you to that greener side." For these young people, personal growth frequently meant reflecting on the challenges in

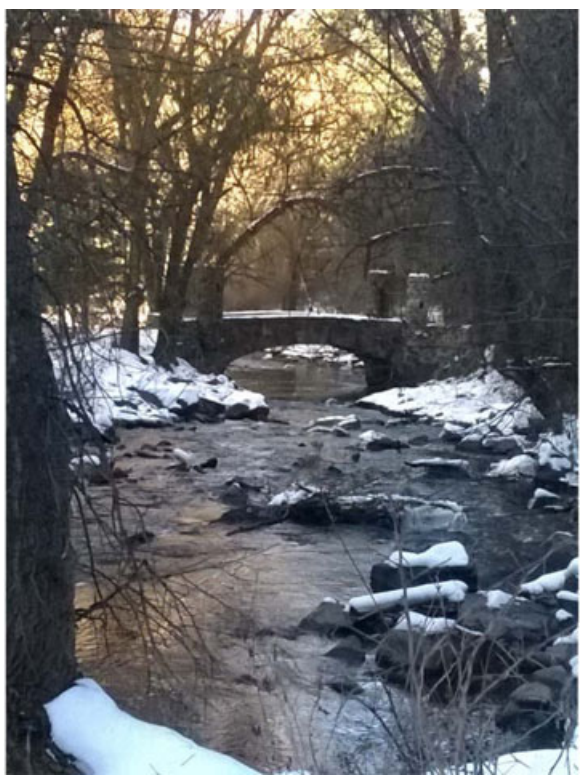


FIGURE 4 "The bridge is what you have to conquer."



FIGURE 5 "There will always be a horizon."

their past, as one participant explained: "I used to do a lot of drugs and so my world would be like really dark and no color and so I chose to take the picture that way because it just reminded me of my past and stuff."

One youth succinctly summarized her desire to change: "I gotta get out of this place guys. It's killing me. I gotta start new memories." Despite the feeling of being stuck, youths' photos conveyed their deep sense of resilience, contrasting the struggles of their past with their hope for the future. One youth summed it up this way:

It's like take ... the old memories, leave that right there on the side, and if you ever want to look back with your old memories, look back. And, you know, create it a little bit. Create the memories you had back then and create the good ones that are gonna happen in your future.

3.2.3 | Connections to others: Both a facilitator and a barrier to freedom

Youth had a spirited debate about the benefits and perils of having deep connections with other people. Generally, youth reported having positive and supportive relationships with friends and family. One young person described times with their friends who also lived on the streets: "We were a family. Because we trusted each other." Another said that he wished he had brought his camera to a family event to capture a happy time with them: "And I recently visited family ... there was just wonderful things that we were doing."

However, youth also discussed the dangers of letting people into their lives. One youth in particular shared that other people had caused tremendous pain in her life. When other members of the group said that she should try to connect with others to share happiness, she pushed back and said that her happiness wasn't something she could share:

I've been in and out of the system for a long-ass time, alright? Since I was 3 years old. The way I had to build my wall was in a terrible way, and for me to break that down is very very hard for me, okay? And I know a lot of people have been going through a lot of shit and I know they have the courage to break down their wall, well, I can't. I can't. And I want to, I want to, I really want to but I can't. I can't trust nobody. I can't spread happiness like I used to because all I got back was hurt.

She explained that her wall was her way of protecting herself: "I don't trust. I forgive but I don't forget. I don't spread everything. Yes, I build a wall and my wall would never be broken." Another youth shared that he used to feel how she did, but he countered that walls also serve to isolate and trap:

Hold on, my thing is, when you build walls, it becomes a well and you get trapped in this well. You don't want to get trapped in that well because if you're blocking things ... like blocking out other opportunities for you to succeed.

This dialogue resonated with many participants and speaks to the complicated personal relationships, which many young people experiencing homelessness have with family, peers, and service providers.

3.3 | Prosperity or (Lack of It)

Unlike freedom, which was conceptualized as more of an emotional and spiritual experience, youth considered prosperity to be more of an economic concern. Youth viewed "prosperity or the lack of it" predominantly through the lens of social determinants. They reflected on the "causes or roots of these disparities," which ranged from macro factors, such as flawed social and economic policies, to micro factors, such as personal traits (greed, lack of empathy, and awareness that partially explain the widening disparities between the rich and the poor and also their own housing and economic situation). In terms of the consequences of these disparities, they described how these inequities affected their lives personally and the community that they live in. Below, we further describe findings sorted by these categories.

3.4 | Causes of disparities

3.4.1 | Socioeconomic policies

In discussing the causes of social and economic disparities, many of these young people spoke about flawed governmental policies they believed had contributed to their own socioeconomic marginalization. For example, most youth agreed that homelessness is a structural problem caused by a lack of housing policies that support housing for all, especially the most vulnerable in our society. One youth's comment encapsulated this sentiment:

Like, everyone at (location redacted for review) you just see not many people have housing. That's why they're at the [shelter]. They don't have houses. That's why people are out on the street because they don't have houses.

Another participant mentioned the decline of unions and corporate greed and how that affected her own family's housing and economic situation:

Yeah, because he's with the union, that's how he got the job—through the union. And, um, they, like, screwed him over for his pension, like, he didn't get very much. He was expecting, like—and he also wanted to retire from there and it was kind of just last minute. That's how we ended up homeless.

Two of the young people also got into a spirited discussion about the role of tax policy and its impact on income and economic inequality. One participant said: "People who are poor, we have to pay the most taxes. Where people who have the most money in the world are paying less taxes and taking more stuff than what we have." These comments demonstrate youths' abilities to connect their personal struggles with larger societal and political realities.

3.4.2 | Lack of societal awareness and empathy

In their discussions of economic inequality, youth attributed these inequalities to a lack of empathy and awareness among the more affluent and prosperous members of society. One youth stated: "Like, someone who always had a silver spoon in their mouth, they have a place to go they call home and can't start from the beginning on their own and see how hard it is or like examine it." Another youth made the connection between lack of awareness and economic disparity: "People are unaware, so then the disparities can get worse."

Our participants also contrasted their own altruism with the apathy that some of the more affluent members of society show toward people experiencing homelessness. One participant illustrates these shared feelings well:

It's, like, if you see a homeless person standing on the side of the street. Hundreds of cars will pass him by and maybe somebody just went to McDonald's or something. Bought some hamburgers and a drink but they just look at him and don't do anything. And, I mean, for me, as an example, like, I can say that if I have something in my bag, I walk up to him and I roll down the window and I say, "Hey, come and get this."

Youth were quick to observe a lack of empathy around homelessness in their community and noted that challenging that apathy was part of their message to the public at the photography gallery event.

3.5 | Consequences of disparities

3.5.1 | Community decay and despair

In regards to how disparities affect their lives, youth referred to their impoverished neighborhoods. They discussed how the physical aspects of their communities, such as the large amounts of trash and litter in their neighborhoods, was symbolic of the neglect inflicted on them by the larger society and of the impossibility of improving their own lives. One participant's comment further illustrates this idea:

There's garbage, there's just graffiti, and it's so gross. And then you go into something ... so clean and you think, like, "Whoa, I live in a garbage can," and it's sad. And people, like, new people that come down here and everything, they're like, "Holy crap, am I really gonna live in a garbage."

These comments contrasted with how they captured and perceived other "prosperous" parts of the city. A participant said (Figure 6):

Um, okay, this one's for prosperity and this is that bridal shop we passed by. Yeah, so I thought that [a bridal shop] was prosperous because it's really fancy and stuff. So, it shows the greediness. We can't even share. We're so greedy with ourselves that we can't think about people who are on the street that don't have nowhere to go that are sitting outside freezing with a jacket on. Basically no shoes.

3.5.2 | Lack of opportunity and unequal access to resources

Most participants also felt that their housing and economic situation is exacerbated by the disparities in access to opportunities and resources available to them. Youth mentioned how difficult it was to obtain a job. One participant compared their own situation with that of homeless veterans, who suffer from the same lack of opportunities, even



FIGURE 6 Capturing "prosperity."

with their history of service to the country, thus demystifying the idea that people experiencing homelessness are lazy or have no personal responsibility. The following quote by a participant exemplifies this reaction:

They're, like, "Oh, you're at the bottom for whatever reason but you can get a job if you really wanted to" and some people can't do that. You know, we have veterans who cannot get a job and they're homeless and they're on the street and it's like people don't care. They fought for your country for you to be free, and for you to have stuff like this and you can't, you know, repay them for that—it's not cool.

Furthermore, participants discussed how hard it is to escape the cycle of poverty and homelessness. One youth stated:

Like, if you take a rich person and switch them with a poor person, they'll know what we go through on a daily basis. Instead of always having money and an easy way out. Like, "Oh, I'm in debt but I can drop \$100 there, \$1,000 there." But a poor person, like, "Wow, I'm so much in debt but I have no money" and they work it off but barely get out of it. It's like quicksand--once you're in it, you're stuck.

3.6 | Social action plan

Youth expressed a strong desire to contribute to social change around inequality and homelessness through two strategies: (a) addressing stereotypes about people who experience homelessness and (b) building empathy and awareness. Stereotypes of those experiencing homelessness as lazy drug users or persons who just do not want to work hard frequently surfaced in youths' discussions. Through their photos and the exhibit, participants wanted to challenge society's opinion and promote a critical reappraisal of people's attitudes as well as policies that affect the economic security and social inclusion and exclusion of people who experience homelessness.

Youth were particularly passionate about raising awareness about homelessness and inequality. They wanted to expose the public to their perspectives as young adults experiencing homelessness, specifically, and about economic inequality, more generally. One participant posited, "I think people need to start speaking up." Another commented: "Like, imagine if they were there and you were in their shoes. Just switch places. Think about it. How hard it would be for you and how easy it would be for them. They got the resources and other people don't." They discussed how hard it is to change minds. One youth described it this way:

Yeah, we can make them aware. We can tell them exactly what we see and exactly what we see that we can do to change it, but it's also gonna be hard to bring up this conversation when so many people—if they have lack of empathy—they're not gonna feel bad about it.

Youth noted that they themselves had compassion because of their own experiences with homelessness. One participant said: "We're also in the same situation so, you know, it's just sad how you have to be in that situation in order to, like, realize that those people need help, you know?"

They also wanted to motivate their audience to take action by giving of their time, attention, and resources. When we asked the youth what they would like to ask the people visiting their gallery exhibit to do, the youth responded:

Take initiative to help those in need.

Just be like being nice to people.

You just need to give your time.

Acknowledge people.

Follow through. Like, if you say you're gonna help the homeless people, help them. Don't, like, say, "Oh yeah, I'm gonna help them? and not do anything."

They also believed that action started with them and discussed strategies to combat inequality (e.g., giving food to others) and changing other people's minds through discussion. One young person stated, "It starts with ourselves."

4 | DISCUSSION

The present study demonstrates that youth experiencing homelessness have thoughtful ideas and critiques of American society and how it relates to their own lives and circumstances. Youth in this Photovoice study were eager to discuss issues of social inequality, justice, and their own personal ambitions. They engaged in complex and nuanced thinking about U.S. society, particularly in their observations about the gap between the wealthy and those experiencing homelessness. Youth displayed a remarkable degree of resilience, engaging in conversation and dialogue about abstract social concepts, despite the instability of their own lives and their struggle to meet basic needs.

Such insight and investment suggests the value of engaging young people more deeply in decision making. Policymakers, service providers, and researchers have often treated young people experiencing homelessness as *passive subjects* in decision-making processes (Kuskoff, 2018). Extant studies, however, have documented the benefits of involving clients in planning services, including better service retention and treatment outcomes (James & Meezan, 2002; Linhorst, Eckert, & Hamilton, 2005). Our findings suggest that youth experiencing homelessness can be engaged as *active agents* in contributing to various initiatives, including program planning or policymaking. Contrary to previous research that has found that young people experiencing homelessness are often reluctant to engage in services (Hudson et al., 2010; Kurtz, Lindsey, Jarvis, & Nackerud, 2000) and research (Collins & Barker, 2009), our findings indicate that when engaged in a way that empowers their participation, youth experiencing homelessness are willing and eager to participate in these endeavors.

Additionally, these findings demonstrate that these young people are keenly aware of the structural and larger macro factors that have contributed to their risks of social exclusion and marginalization. Much of the research that has focused on this group of young people relied on narratives that highlight individual pathology (e.g., substance use, sex risk, family violence) and did not rely enough on the structural factors (e.g., lack of economic opportunities, housing affordability) that operate to limit young people's robust participation in a society's economic system (Skattebol, 2011).

In many ways, the young people in this study are rightfully questioning the fallacy of the "American dream." America has long been viewed as a "land of opportunity"; however, rising inequalities have limited these opportunities to an elite few in society. Participants in this study recognize that the system is broken and their homelessness and economic marginalization cannot be chalked up to their personal failures, but the inability of the social system to respond to their needs. Case in point, the policy and service environment designed to assist the homeless has tended to emphasize the resilience and responsibility of the individual without a concomitant focus on alleviating the structural disadvantages that constrain these young people (Skattebol, 2011). Our findings indicate that policies and service approaches targeting this group of young people need to strike a more appropriate balance between their ability to be independent and the resources they need to help them transition out of homelessness (Kuskoff, 2018). Reaching this balance would also necessitate aligning both agency and governmental policies to consider the structural barriers faced by this group of young people.

Additionally, as addressed in their social action plan, participants in this study wanted researchers, policymakers, and society to acknowledge that homelessness is an issue that requires holistic and multifaceted solutions. If one does not address the root causes of homelessness, such as poverty and the country's degraded

social safety net system, then the cycle of homelessness and poverty will continue to affect future generations of young people. This includes basic income programs, education, equitable tax policies, and housing first, among others.

In contrast to existing service and policy priorities, youth in this study were motivated to change the society in which they live. They noted that many social inequalities are caused by a lack of empathy and understanding, and they were quick to address that through their photos and their public gallery event. Youth consistently stated that they wanted to teach people about how it feels to be a homeless young person so that others may have more empathy and compassion, not simply for homeless youth but also for all homeless community members. They were eager to share their experiences and perspectives with people who have never experienced homelessness in an effort to connect across difference and build mutual understanding. Therefore, it might be prudent for service organizations to embrace a "rights-based" approach to care, one that stresses social activism, advocacy, and community development practices (Wearing, 2011). This could include strategies such as community action groups comprising both adults and young people that address issues such as locality development and other forms of social action (Karabanow, 2004).

Indeed, youth participants' sense of social injustice often came from a deep sense of altruism. Youth participants in this study frequently discussed how they wanted to help other people experiencing homelessness, whether by helping out a friend who was going through a hard time or sharing money or clothing with a person who was panhandling. Despite their own stressful lives and limited resources, youth were quick to offer assistance to others in need. They lamented that people with more resources and wealth did not do more to share, but they also speculated that the cultural divide between the haves and the have-nots may prevent those with wealth from understanding the experiences of those living in poverty. This altruism offers an opportunity for service providers to engage youth experiencing homelessness. Although these young people may be hesitant to ask for help for themselves, they may be more motivated to engage in programs when asked to help other young people in similar situations.

Furthermore, youth reported that personal relationships were a source of not only agency and freedom but also strain. For young people experiencing homelessness, relationships are a way for youth to subsist as well as create a positive identity (Farrugia, 2011). It is well known that family conflict and/or abuse from their family members or other adult relationships is often one of the key reasons that young people become homeless (Ferguson, 2009), and these young people often find it difficult to trust people because of these traumatic experiences. Therefore, it is important that these young people are given the support that they need to cope with their trauma and connect them to positive sources of social support.

In addition to social relationships, nature emerged as an important element of conceptualizing agency and freedom for this group of young people. Participants seemed to use nature as a metaphor for freedom, belonging, and security, a yearning to be free of the material and emotional constraints that they inadvertently face in their day-to-day life. Extant research (Rohde & Kendle, 1994) has demonstrated that exposure to nature triggers positive responses, such as pleasure and relaxed wakefulness, and reduces negative emotions, such as anger and anxiety. Additionally, evidence around nature-assisted therapies (NATs) is growing. A recent systematic review (Annerstedt & Währborg, 2011) found that of the 35 NATs they reviewed, 30 showed low to moderate levels of health improvement. Therefore, taken together, these findings perhaps suggest examining the utility of NATs for this group of young people. Last, but not the least, our study indicates that although engaging young people who are transient can be tough and challenging, using visual techniques such as Photovoice can help sustain their engagement. Seven of 10 participants in our study stayed on for the duration of the study, making for a 70% retention rate. Studies have consistently noted the low rates of retention for this group given their transience and related problems (Nyamathi et al., 2012; Slesnick, Kang, & Aukward, 2008). Researchers have therefore advocated using more innovative methods to engage this group of young people. Even though these findings are preliminary, Photovoice and other participatory approaches might offer a potential avenue through which these young people can be engaged and retained in both research and services.

4.1 | Limitations

Certain limitations need to be considered when contemplating on these findings. First, we had just one Photovoice group of seven young people who participated in the study. Further themes might have been unearthed if we had more groups represented in our study. However, the purpose of our study was not to generalize but to offer these young people a means through which they can share their voices and provide us with a rich, contextualized understanding of their needs and experiences and empower them to take action around these issues.

Additionally, the ultimate goal of Photovoice is to generate social action that results in some form of social change as identified by the participants. Although youth in our project were given an opportunity to engage in discussions with community members, policymakers, and service providers during the community gallery, we quickly learned that given the goals these youths identified, that change would not be easily achieved. Noting that change can be incremental and slow, it is important that these projects plan for continued involvement beyond the study to continue to engage in these advocacy processes. Youth noted, to the research team, how this project had changed their perception of what they can accomplish and felt empowered presenting their narratives and stories to people who attended the community gallery and felt heard and acknowledged. There is a need for integrating these sorts of projects into traditional services so that a structure is available for continued involvement and greater youth advocacy.

4.2 | Conclusion

This study provides a starting point for examining the utility of Photovoice to engage and empower a group of young people who usually feel marginalized and stigmatized to share their perspectives and experiences. Young people experiencing homelessness embody resiliency and wisdom not captured by traditional research methods. Photovoice offers a vehicle for them to dialogue about the complex social issues they regularly encounter. Youth experiencing homelessness have demonstrated they are keen observers of American society, and Photovoice created a much-needed space for them to share their ideas for social action, informed by intimate experiences of street life. Engaging young people experiencing homelessness as active agents in program and service planning as well as research and policy development is paramount in our efforts to end homelessness.

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