



“Getting pregnant might make me seem more normal to them”: Attitudes, experiences, and gendered nuances regarding pregnancy and parenting among youths experiencing homelessness

Stephanie Begun^a, Michaela Torrie^a, Katie Massey Combs^b, and Cressida Frey^a

^aFactor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada; ^bUniversity of Denver, Denver, Colorado, USA

ABSTRACT

Homelessness among youths exacerbates an array of challenging life experiences, notable examples of which are pregnancy and parenting. Research is lacking on young men’s attitudes and experiences, and also the influences which homeless youths’ gender identities and sexualities may have on their pregnancy and parenting outcomes and trajectories. This study qualitatively explores gender differentials, including youths’ gender identities and sexual orientations, with regard to their attitudes and experiences of pregnancy and parenting while homeless. Qualitative data were obtained from interviews with a diverse sample of 30 female, male, and transgender homeless youths, ages 18 to 21. Findings revealed that topics of pregnancy and parenting represent a wide range of complexities, different standards, and threats for homeless youths. Although pregnancy is often viewed positively within this community, it is received and experienced differently for each gender and sexuality. Results demonstrate that youths’ unimpeded access to and knowledge of all available reproductive and sexual health care services is essential. These services must be designed and delivered for youths of *all* gender identities and sexual orientations. Interventions and resources on parenting and co-parenting, particularly models that more inclusively engage a greater diversity of young parents’ involvement, are also urgently needed.

KEYWORDS

parenting; qualitative methods; youth; transgender; parents

Introduction

More than three million young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 experience homelessness or housing instability each year in the United States (Morton et al., 2018; Morton, Dworsky, & Samuels, 2017). Youths’ precarious housing can exacerbate a range of already challenging life

experiences, notable examples of which are pregnancy and parenting. Pregnancy rates among youths experiencing homelessness have been documented as being up to 8 times higher compared to those of their housed counterparts (Cauce, Stewart, Whitbeck, Paradise, & Hoyt, 2005; Crawford, Trotter, Hartshorn, & Whitbeck, 2011; Greene & Ringwalt, 1998; Haley et al., 2002; Tucker et al., 2012; Winetrobe et al., 2013). There is limited research pertaining to the parenting experiences of this population, although studies have shown that up to 30% to 40% of homeless youths indicate they have at least one biological child (Crawford et al., 2011; Narendorf, Jennings, & Maria, 2016; Slesnick, Bartle-Haring, Glebova, & Glade, 2006).

Most studies of pregnancy and parenting among young adults, regardless of housing status, focus specifically on young women who identify as heterosexual and cisgender. Research is lacking on young men's attitudes and experiences, and the influences that youths' gender identity and sexuality may have on pregnancy and parenting outcomes and trajectories. This phenomenological study expands this area of research by qualitatively exploring gender differentials, including youths' diverse gender identities and sexualities/sexual orientations, with regard to their attitudes and experiences of pregnancy and parenting while homeless.

Literature review

As federally defined in the United States, *youth homelessness* includes any "individual who is less than 21 years of age, for whom it is not possible to live in a safe environment with a relative, and who has no other safe alternative living arrangement" (42 U.S.C. § 5732). Young people experiencing homelessness endure a wide array of challenging life circumstances, both prior to leaving home and after becoming homeless. A key example of one of these often-difficult situations is pregnancy. Pregnancies in adolescents and young adults in the United States have been steadily decreasing over the past few decades (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2016; Ventura, Curtin, Abma, & Henshaw, 2012). However, such rates are higher compared to most other industrialized nations (CDC, 2016). Moreover, homeless adolescents and young adults constitute a subgroup in which pregnancy rates are among the very highest in the United States. A large, nationally representative study documented that nearly half (48%) of young women living on the streets and one-third (33%) of young women staying in shelters had been pregnant at some point, compared to merely 7% of young women who were stably housed (Greene & Ringwalt, 1998). Other more recent regional studies consistently demonstrate similar findings, with 30% to 60% of female homeless youth samples reporting past or

current pregnancies (Begun, 2017; Cauce et al., 2005; Crawford et al., 2011; Halcón & Lifson, 2004; Haley et al., 2002; Wagner, Carlin, Cauce, & Tenner, 2001; Winetrobe et al., 2013).

Albeit far less studied, research has shown that 22% to 43% of young homeless male samples report being involved in at least one pregnancy of which they are aware (Wagner et al., 2001; Winetrobe et al., 2013). A dearth of accurate, empirical evidence exists pertaining to young adult fatherhood, in general, although such rates are thought to be higher than that of male youths from the U.S. general population. One reason behind this scarcity of knowledge stems partly from the fact that birth certificates for children born to teen and young adult mothers often include limited or no information pertaining to their birth fathers. The overall lack of research on young men's pregnancy involvement and subsequent parenting thus centers most discourse regarding pregnancy solely on the experiences of young women and young mothers.

Pregnancy among homeless youths is a critical concern for numerous reasons. Compared to housed women, homeless women of any age are less likely to receive prenatal health care and important health screenings (Baggett, O'Connell, Singer, & Rigotti, 2010). Pregnancies in teens and young adults are challenging, even among stably housed youths and those who may have strong social supports. However, evidence suggests that young homeless women and their children experience especially acute as well as chronic health problems due to their limited resources, the gendered nature of poverty, as well as social exclusion (Oliveira & Goldberg, 2002; Weinreb, Goldberg, & Perloff, 1998).

Research also documents that young women experiencing homelessness often become the sole caretakers of their child(ren), and the mental and physical stresses of both pregnancy and raising a child(ren) have been found to make these young women's departures from homelessness more difficult (Webb, Culhane, Metraux, Robbins, & Culhane, 2003). The challenges of raising a child(ren) in privacy-lacking, often chaotic shelter and drop-in settings has been shown to exacerbate mothers' depressive symptoms and feelings of inadequacy as parents and increase children's problem behaviors, and also prompts some mothers to misuse substances as an escape or stress-relieving strategy (Dworsky & Meehan, 2012; Meadows-Oliver, 2009; Ruttan, Laboucane-Benson, & Munro, 2012; Swick & Williams, 2010).

Perhaps surprisingly, many youths experiencing homelessness either actively desire to become pregnant or involved in a pregnancy (Begun, 2015, 2017; Cauce et al., 2005; Tucker et al., 2012; Winetrobe et al., 2013), or are ambivalent about the notion of pregnancy (Begun, 2015, 2017; Tucker et al., 2012; Winetrobe et al., 2013). Some homeless youths depict pregnancy as an opportunity for positive life changes, such as ceasing or

reducing substance misuse behaviors (Crawford et al., 2011; Dworsky & Meehan, 2012; Hathazi, Lankenau, Sanders, & Jackson Bloom, 2009; Ruttan et al., 2012; Smid, Bourgois, & Auerswald, 2010). Youths also describe pregnancy as a mechanism by which they may “reinvent” their images and how they are perceived by others (Crawford et al., 2011; Ruttan et al., 2012; Smid et al., 2010).

For some, pregnancies are viewed as means for creating interpersonal bonds, often in lieu of feelings of abandonment and relationship voids that these youths have often experienced in their families of origin (Crawford et al., 2011; Dworsky & Meehan, 2012; Smid et al., 2010; Thompson, Bender, Lewis, & Watkins, 2008). Homeless youths frequently characterize pregnancy as a connection for accessing needed services (Hathazi et al., 2009; Ruttan et al., 2012) and establishing housing (Crawford et al., 2011; Hathazi et al., 2009). Some youths believe that pregnancy may help them to create a new family unit and improve their relationships with romantic partners (Thrane & Chen, 2012; Tucker et al., 2012). Youths experiencing homelessness also at times note that having a child provides them with chances to show their positive parenting skills, and signifies an opportunity to be “better” parents in comparison to their own caregivers (Dworsky & Meehan, 2012; Ruttan et al., 2012; Smid et al., 2010; Tucker et al., 2012).

However, the news of a positive pregnancy result often prompts profound relationship strains among homeless youths, particularly among young women and their families, and/or young women and their male romantic partners. Discord frequently occurs as one member of the romantic partner dyad desires the pregnancy while the other does not, and also as pregnancy attitudes, intentions, prevention, and pregnancy options (if a pregnancy resulted) were simply not discussed or reconciled among romantic partners before the pregnancy occurred (Smid et al., 2010). More research efforts on young homeless men’s perspectives regarding pregnancy and parenting are greatly needed, particularly as this group is portrayed as one that is often involved in pregnancies but also rarely involved in active parenting (Combs, Begun, Rinehart, & Taussig, 2018; Tucker et al., 2012). There may be numerous myths embedded in these depictions; research would thus benefit from examining what occurs for young men upon learning of a pregnancy in which they were involved, and what their options and trajectories ultimately include within their relationships with their partners and also their potential child(ren).

Of importance, studies of pregnancy and parenting among youths experiencing homelessness should also expand beyond a lens that assumes pregnancies occur exclusively among male-female, cisgender, heterosexual-identifying dyads and contexts. As noted in the broader population, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youths become pregnant or

involved in pregnancy at equal or higher rates than those of their heterosexual-identifying peers (Charlton et al., 2013; Parkes et al., 2011; Saewyc, 2011; Saewyc, Poon, Homma, & Skay, 2008; Tornello, Riskind, & Patterson, 2014). LGBTQ youths also comprise a large proportion (up to 40%) of youths experiencing homelessness (Durso & Gates, 2012; Quintana, Rosenthal, & Kehely, 2010), with many of these youths entering homelessness specifically due to their family and friends failing to accept their identities. Accordingly, pregnancy and parenting are topics that should receive more attention among this subpopulation of youths experiencing homelessness. This group is often overlooked, not only due to their homelessness status in general, but also as these youths are frequently and incorrectly viewed as not being engaged in relationships and/or behaviors that introduce the possibility of pregnancy and parenting as becoming a part of their narratives.

That LGBTQ youths are at substantially higher risk than their straight and cisgender counterparts, for a constellation of difficult life experiences and outcomes, has been well-documented (Asakura & Craig, 2014). In comparison to their straight, cisgender-identifying peers, LGBTQ youths are significantly more likely to report depression (Marshal et al., 2011; Mustanski, Andrews, Herrick, Stall, & Schnarrs, 2014), substance misuse (Mustanski et al., 2014; Thiede et al., 2003), and engagement in risky sexual behaviors (Mustanski et al., 2014). LGBTQ youths are also more likely to attempt and complete suicide (Asakura & Craig, 2014; Hottes, Bogaert, Rhodes, Brennan, & Dionne, 2016; Marshal et al., 2011; Mustanski et al., 2014; Ream, 2018; Russel & Joyner, 2001), in part due to homophobic and transphobic verbal and physical abuse, lack of acceptance and validation from others, and minority stress (Asakura & Craig, 2014; Baams, Grossman, & Russell, 2015; Meyer, 2003). LGBTQ youths are also 2 to 13 times more likely to be homeless than their straight and cisgender counterparts, largely due to rejection and lack of acceptance of youths' sexual orientation and/or gender identity by their families of origin (Choi, Wilson, Shelton, & Gates, 2015; Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002). This social dislocation (Alexander, 2001) results either in LGBTQ youths being disowned by their family and kicked out of the house, or in physical abuse in the home, making it unsafe for youths to continue to reside with their family of origin (Choi et al., 2015; Cochran et al., 2002; Corliss, Goodenow, Nichols, & Austin, 2011; Durso & Gates, 2012; Ray, 2006).

Extant literature has found a paucity of LGBTQ-relevant supports regarding HIV, sexually transmitted infection (STI), and pregnancy prevention education and information present in U.S. schools (Demissie, Raspberry, Steiner, Brener, & McManus, 2018). This lack of contextualized resources may be a contributing factor to the disproportionately higher

rates of STIs and pregnancies among LGBTQ youths when compared to their straight and cisgender counterparts (Institute of Medicine, 2011). For LGBTQ youths, schools may additionally be places of victimization and bullying by peers; such experiences are linked to greater risks of suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts, and unexplained absences for LGBTQ youths (Robinson & Espelage, 2013). These experiences are also factors associated with heightened engagement in high-risk sexual health behaviors such as unprotected sex (Robinson & Espelage, 2013). In addition, lack of access to meaningful community and family support, including “loving care, a secure attachment, sufficient structure for healthy growth and development” (McNeil, 2010), has been linked to individuals’ increased desires for validation through sexual fulfillment (Torres & Gore-Felton, 2007) and inciting psychological distress that leads to unprotected sex (Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz, & Smith, 2001). A plethora of literature exists on the associations among youth homelessness, sexual victimization, sexual risk behaviors, and sexual assault (Flynn et al., 2018; Heerde & Hemphill, 2017; Heerde, Scholes-Balog, & Hemphill, 2015). A systematic review found that homeless youths regularly report being raped, targets of sexual victimization, and living with the fear of being sexually assaulted, and that high numbers of homeless youths engage in both survival sex and sex work (Heerde et al., 2015). Among a group of 6,100 homeless youths (ages 11 to 17), the odds of pregnancy in the next year were 1.67 higher when compared to their housed counterparts, and pregnancy likelihood climbed further among those with histories of sexual assault (Thrane & Chen, 2012). LGBTQ homeless youths are not only more likely to trade sex in order to support themselves than heterosexual or cisgender youths experiencing homelessness (Kipke, Montgomery, Simon, Unger, & Johnson, 1997), but in doing so, have also been found to experience elevated rates of sexual victimization (Tyler, Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Cauce, 2004; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). Just one potential by-product of such complex social realities, LGBTQ homeless youths thus face notably high risks for becoming pregnant or involved in pregnancies.

This study thus seeks to add knowledge to notable gaps in extant literature by exploring homeless youths’ attitudes and experiences of pregnancy and parenting, and how these may differ by youths’ gender identities and sexualities. By contributing additional knowledge in this area, our hope is to develop a more comprehensive picture of what types of challenges and opportunities exist for preventing unwanted pregnancies in this vulnerable population. These efforts also aim to identify strategies for better supporting youths (of all identities) who ultimately go on to become parents, such that they have the healthiest, happiest, most self-determined outcomes as possible for themselves and, if applicable, their children.

Methods

Phenomenological approaches are appropriate for examining under-researched themes, and also for more deeply understanding a set of experiences that a specific group shares in some regard (Padgett, 2011). The “phenomenon” studied was experiencing homelessness as a young person while grappling with choices regarding pregnancy and parenting.

Criterion sampling was utilized to identify young people (ages 18 to 21) staying at an overnight youth shelter in Denver, Colorado (Saldaña, 2013). To intentionally recruit a more diverse and inclusive sample than what is typically observed in research on topics of pregnancy and parenting, youths of all gender identities and sexual orientations were invited to participate. In the shelter milieu, youths were approached by the study’s principal investigator (PI). After being provided with an overview of the study’s purpose, youths were asked if they would like to participate in the study, with the PI specifically mentioning that *all* youths’ perspectives were welcomed and valued (100% recruitment rate). Youths were also required to provide written informed consent. Youths were notified that study participation was voluntary, could be discontinued at any time with no penalty, and that any information pertaining to current child abuse, suicide, or homicide would be reported to shelter case managers and any other pertinent authorities if disclosed. Study details were approved by the PI’s university-based Institutional Review Board (IRB). After youths consented to the study, they were engaged in one-time, individual interviews, lasting 45 to 60 minutes, and facilitated in a private office within the shelter. Youths were compensated with a \$25 gift card to a local food vendor in exchange for their time.

A semi-structured interview guide was used to facilitate conversation. Youths’ insights dictated interview progression, although the guide provided a framework for asking consistent questions in an effort to understand relevant themes across interviews. Youths were then asked to complete a voluntary paper-and-pencil survey to assist in characterizing the sample. Sampling was complete after 30 youths were interviewed, as thematic saturation was reached.

Data analyses

The first step in transcript analyses encompassed line-by-line open coding to initially examine data (Saldaña, 2013). A wide range of codes were identified in this phase, as data included the perspectives of a relatively large and diverse sample of 30 youths. Holistic coding was then used as a “middle-order” approach to more narrowly categorizing data (Saldaña, 2013). This abridged group of codes and emergent themes were again evaluated, and one final round of “focused coding” was employed, wherein the

most prominent themes were identified for clearly and authentically disseminating results (Saldaña, 2013).

In addition to the PI serving as a coder, a second coder (a social work doctoral student) and a third coder (a master's-level social work student) were employed to reduce bias and increase rigor in the analyses of transcript data. The PI and second coder engaged in the first phase of initial coding independent of each other. The pair then convened to compare codes independently generated and applied to transcripts, discussed the appropriateness of the codes and coding structure developed, and resolved discrepancies in their interpretative efforts. After establishing consensus in preliminary analyses, the PI continued in this iterative analytic process by engaging in the subsequent holistic round of coding. The PI and third coder then collaboratively engaged in the final round of focused coding, together discussing and narrowing results obtained into the most salient themes so that the “story” of youths’ experiences and perspectives regarding pregnancy and parenting could be concisely and clearly captured.

Results

Sociodemographic characteristics

As reported in Table 1, the study was comprised of 53.3% ($N=16$) of participants identifying as women, 33.3% ($N=10$) as men, and 13.3% ($N=4$) transgender. Youths were given opportunities to include additional information about their identities on a supplementary demographics form if they desired to do so. Of the four respondents who selected transgender identity, two wrote in “trans woman,” one indicated “trans man,” and one wrote “gender queer” as more specific self-descriptors. The sample was also diverse in terms of racial identity and sexual orientation; youths of color comprised 56.7% of the sample ($N=17$), and 40% of youths ($N=12$) identified with a sexual orientation other than “straight.” Respondents averaged 19.1 ($SD=0.8$) years of age, and had been homeless or experienced housing instability for an average of 8.9 ($SD=9.0$) months. Youths indicated they had lived in 2.5 ($SD=2.0$) cities, on average, since leaving home. Just under one-third of youths had ever been in foster care (30.0%; $N=9$). In addition, four young women (13.3%) in the sample disclosed that they were currently pregnant.

Differential reactions to pregnancy news among straight/cisgender youths

A major theme that emerged from transcript data was the polarized reactions of friends and family—differentially received by young straight,

Table 1. Sample characteristics of homeless youths in Denver, Colorado ($N = 30$).

Characteristic	N (%)	
Gender		
Man/Male	10	(33.3)
Transgender or gender-nonconforming (e.g., gender queer, trans man, trans woman)	4	(13.3)
Woman/Female	16	(53.3)
Race/Ethnicity		
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	(3.3)
Black	6	(20.0)
Latino/a	3	(10.0)
Multiracial	6	(20.0)
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1	(3.3)
White	13	(43.3)
Sexual Orientation		
Bisexual	2	(6.7)
Gay	2	(6.7)
Lesbian	2	(6.7)
Pansexual	4	(13.3)
Queer	1	(3.3)
Questioning	1	(3.3)
Straight	18	(60.0)
Foster Care History (yes)	9	(30.0)
Currently Pregnant (yes)	4	(13.3)
Pregnancy Attitudes		
Anti-pregnancy	12	(40.0)
Pro-pregnancy	18	(60.0)
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age (years)	19.1	0.8
Time Homeless (months)	8.9	9.0
Transience (number of cities lived in since leaving home)	2.5	2.0

cisgender women in comparison to young straight, cisgender men—to the news of them becoming pregnant or involved in pregnancy. Respondents explained that when homeless youths discover they are pregnant or involved in a pregnancy, there are notably quite different reactions to and implications for these young women and men involved. Respondents further observed that these youths also differently internalize their own roles and responsibilities in regard to their potential parenthood. Youths' most common descriptions of these nuanced reactions to the news of pregnancy are summarized through two primary themes: (a) "Girls get congratulated and boys get *that sucks*"; and (b) "The male realizes he can leave the life of the female anytime."

"Girls get congratulated and boys get *that sucks*." Respondents perceived that straight/cisgender young women are given a majority of the positive attention for the pregnancy, with newly pregnant young women receiving congratulatory responses from most people around them. Straight/cisgender young men involved in pregnancy, on the other hand, were widely described as being given negative attention for pregnancy involvement, most often in the form of being questioned about what steps they are going to take "to get out of" the situation. A straight/cisgender young woman explained this difference in reactions received:

Well, people are friendly to the girl. If they even know who the guy is and he's around, then it's like, "Oh man, that is the worst; how you gonna get out that?" to him if they know he the baby daddy.

This sort of sentiment was widely endorsed by straight, cisgender-identified young women and young men across the sample. Just a few youths had slightly different perceptions of these reactions, but these "exceptions" are nonetheless important to highlight. As one straight, cisgender young man noted, "Males get pissed. The girls are queens of the world. All the attention. They're loving it [being pregnant]. The guys, not so much. It's like a lot of responsibility." In this observation, although the reactions experienced by these young women were still congratulatory, the response received by straight/cisgender young men was not in how to avoid the situation, but rather one that connoted increased and unwanted responsibility.

"The male realizes he can leave the life of the female anytime." Straight, cisgender youths in the sample commonly explained that young men "always" have the option of leaving their female partners, as well as their roles as fathers. Some youths discussed that young fathers-to-be may be supportive of their partners as well as notions of pregnancy in general, for a period of time, yet without actually feeling the necessity of a long-term commitment to the partner nor an ongoing parental relationship with the child. As a straight/cisgender young man illustrated, when a male learns his partner is pregnant, he may feel a some sense of commitment but also recognizes he can leave at any point and with little consequence,

I mean, the male realizes they can leave the life of the female anytime and not have the baby in their life. And a lot of people end up doing that. Some tend to stay for different reasons, for a while anyways. Maybe feeling guilty for getting that girl pregnant or maybe just feeling, like, a sense of commitment now that they might have a kid.

In addition, a young straight, cisgender mother in the sample, who noted that she had two children with two different fathers, described her male partners' lack of involvement in their children's lives. She further stated that she believed it was perhaps better that both fathers left their children's lives early on:

I had two different baby daddies. One was who I was with for the baby I lost and then my first son who I got pregnant with right after that. And then another guy for my other son. And they were gone before either babies born. The second one, he actually left the state when I told him. Like two weeks after I told him and I never hear from him again.... With my second son, he [the father] brought him presents and visited for a while.... But then he sorta lost interest. Like I ran into him and I was like "Do you care to even talk to your son? Or see him? Or even know how he doing?" And so he has been no help. No money, not there for my son at all. Which is better that it happened early because at least my son never really knew him or doesn't miss him because he never know him anyway and can't remember because he so young then. Sorta like Dad just is not someone who is real.

Straight, cisgender young women and men in the sample similarly endorsed, perhaps subconsciously, relatively open options for a young man to leave after learning about the pregnancy. Although youths had what appeared to be an overall disapproving outlook on such phenomena, they were nonetheless mostly accepting of this reality.

Negative stereotypes of straight, cisgender male youths as fathers

Another dominant theme that emerged was overtly negative perceptions of straight/cisgender males' dedication to fatherhood following pregnancy. Most youths, regardless of gender identity, sexual orientation, and/or prior pregnancy experiences, believed that straight, cisgender young men take little responsibility for actively parenting their children. Respondents primarily perceived that these young men are not held accountable for their roles in their partners becoming pregnant, and that this lack of accountability was reinforced by their friends, family members, and typically even by the mother of the child(ren). In sum, "no one" expected that straight, cisgender young men had any true responsibility to seriously take on their roles as fathers following pregnancy. These concepts were summarized by youths' quotes, including (a) "Baby daddies *always* split" and (b) "I just view if that whole thing, if it worked, as a bonus."

"Baby daddies *always* split." All but a few youths in the sample (all identities) reported, and with noticeable conviction, that a straight, cisgender male involved in a given pregnancy "always" ends up leaving the mother and child(ren). Some youths explained that males feel a sense of pride or "conquest" from impregnating a partner, but then have little commitment to the subsequent responsibilities that then follow, thereby prompting them to exit the relationship and parenthood altogether. As highlighted by a straight, cisgender young man in the study,

Yeah, I think there's some macho stuff going on sometimes, like men have "conquered" and made offspring, but it's pretty convenient that most of them feel very little obligation to stick around in those kids' actual lives, you know, and so that's why they don't.

Many respondents noted that the young woman who is pregnant is then left to manage all of the decisions and commitments that come with parenthood. A straight, cisgender young woman in the sample underlined the difficulties faced by young women experiencing homelessness whom she had known to encounter such challenges. She concluded,

Oh, it all ends up falling on the girl, eventually. Baby daddies *always* split. Families can act excited but I dunno know how much they ever help or change anything in the end. So it's all on the girl. Lot of pressure, and she ends up taking all the blame,

like blame for getting pregnant, like for having an abortion, like giving it up for adoption, and even for like raising the child with her life situation and struggles.

However, a straight, cisgender young man provided insights that countered the narratives endorsed by much of the rest of the sample. He expressed that parenting and providing for his child were the most important aspects of his life, and he made noteworthy personal sacrifices to ensure doing so. Although he was no longer involved in a relationship with the child's mother, he offered a nuanced perspective of fatherhood and his commitment to his daughter's well-being:

I have a one year-old. A daughter. And it's hard keeping my head above water trying to support her and her mom. The two of them have an apartment and I help with expenses, which is hard. I work two jobs. There's not much left after that so that's why I am here at the shelter. I can't afford rent just yet. Trying to get things more stabilized and hopefully getting my own place in the next few months, after I have a bit more extra saved. We broke up when [daughter] was five months old. But both of them are the love of my life. I still hope that it'll work out for all of us to be back living together, as just one family. But for now, I'm doing everything I can to support [daughter]. I love being a dad. It's the best part of my life and I will do what it takes to give her a good life.

“I just view if that whole thing, if it worked, as a bonus.” As aforementioned, straight, cisgender young men taking on the role of fathers and partners was overall not expected, although with a few poignant exceptions. Some youths additionally referred to the idea of a young man/father-to be as actually committing to a positive relationship with his female partner and to active fatherhood as more like “icing on the cake” versus “essential” to raising a child. As such, some youths reflected on the role of the father in the child's life as an afterthought of sorts, something that was not “a necessity” but instead more of a “luxury.” Youths mostly conveyed that, of course, it would be helpful to have the involvement of a dedicated partner and father, but this concept was all but outlandish according to youths as they reflected on pregnancy and parenthood trends they had observed and/or experienced. As one straight, cisgender young woman described, becoming a mother was a priority of hers, but doing so with a supportive, dedicated partner would be an unexpected and unlikely “bonus” of sorts. She articulated,

Well, I think most people I know would be pretty shocked because I don't even have a boyfriend. So it would be pretty hard for me to be pregnant these days. Um, but I really want to meet someone great as soon as possible so I can start a family. I think about having a family, like, every day. Although, I have to say I'm way more interested in the babies part than the boyfriend or husband part. It's probably sad, but um, I just view if that whole thing, if it worked, as a bonus, like if the relationship thing actually worked. Maybe because I see people having such drama all the time with their boyfriends or with their baby daddies. It's all about the babies to me. But I do want the dad to be a kind person who cares about the babies. I guess that would be nice. Um, yeah.

Important considerations regarding pregnancy and parenthood among LGBTQ youths experiencing homelessness

Data revealed there are many important and overlooked aspects surrounding pregnancy and parenting in which LGBTQ homeless youths are held to different standards—and about which these youths hold nuanced feelings and fears—when compared to their straight, cisgender counterparts. Emergent findings were categorized into two themes: (a) “Getting pregnant might make me seem more normal to them” and (b) “I’d be judged more by people if that happened”.

“Getting pregnant might make me seem more normal to them.” The complexities of gender roles and sexual orientation in relationship to pregnancy and parenting were also reflected by youths in the sample who identified as LGBTQ. For some youths, the notion of pregnancy and parenting was actually seen as an aid in “performing” so-called expected, rigid, often heteronormative gender roles. Pregnancy and parenting were also perceived as potentially helpful tools for feeling more accepted by family members and social network members who had previously rejected them, most commonly due to their LGBTQ identities. In such cases, youths were not particularly motivated to become pregnant or parents, but rather, pregnancy and parenthood were hypothesized as useful conduits to gaining social acceptance by certain family members and friends. As a lesbian, cisgender young woman in the sample illustrated,

I think sometimes family takes the girl back. Like in a way it sort of makes the old problems seem less important. Like the fights were not that important maybe. I could actually see that with my family. I think they’d really be trying to get me to move back in if I got pregnant. They would want the baby to be raised there, in a house, in their house. And it would probably make them forgive me a bit, or make me fit in better. Like if I got pregnant, that’s something lots of girls do, and that’s something they can relate a lot more with than the “me being a lesbian” thing. Getting pregnant might make me seem more normal to them, like a normal girl, and things would be better. It’s not like it would make me not a lesbian but I think it would make me seem more mainstream to them again.

Another lesbian, cisgender young woman in the sample perceived her chances of becoming pregnant as quite unlikely, due to mostly having relationships with other lesbian, cisgender women. However, she thought overall positively, or at a minimum, was ambivalent about pregnancy and parenting. As she indicated,

It’s hard to imagine, but I guess I would probably just proceed. Like, have the baby. Because it would be cool to parent and I would make a good mom, so even if the timing isn’t right, you know, I think that’s just sort of how life works. What happens, happens, and sometimes the best things come when you are not expecting them. I would definitely need to find a doctor who I like, and one who gets how to

work with LGBT people. I mean, so many doctors don't. They're all weird like we have the plague or something. But I would also need housing, like pronto.

Gay young men discussed pregnancy and parenting in some similar and overlapping ways. For these youths, the likelihood of being involved in a pregnancy at this time seemed unlikely, yet there were aspects of parenting that felt attractive. One gay, cisgender man articulated,

This is really hard to imagine for me. [laughs] But I don't know. I would be kind of happy about being a dad. A dad-to-be, I guess you'd say. [laughs] I have a big heart. 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. [laughs] And that's when I really began to know that I was gay, like really owned it and began to be able to express that was who I was to others. And he was a big supporter of who I was, no matter who I was.

In addition, bisexual and pansexual youths in the sample discussed similar themes of ambivalence about pregnancy in tandem with positive views on becoming a parent. However, this group showed some nuances in comparison to most gay- and lesbian-identified youths, in that they could more tangibly see these outcomes as more distinct, possible realities. As one bisexual, cisgender young woman reported,

I'm a very sexual, open person, you know what I mean? Right now, though, I am in a pretty committed relationship with my girlfriend, but we have an open relationship. I have mostly dated guys in the past, actually. But I still sleep with both. Or open to it, anyway. I haven't been with anyone else for about eight months, though, so maybe my old ways are fading off. [laughs] I think I would be down with it, actually. At this point in my life, it wouldn't be that bad of news to get. At some points, I would have panicked. Well, actually, I have panicked in that situation. I had two abortions, actually, which I'm not at all proud of. But those pregnancies were just at the wrong time in my life, like it would have been a total disaster if I had become a mom then. And with the guys I was with. Not dad quality, you know what I mean? I just have my shit way more together now than I did a few years ago. I'm on the verge of a lot of good things in my life. I can't really imagine this particular situation very clearly because of my girlfriend. But whoever the guy was, he could definitely be involved as the dad. That would be great, actually. It would be better for the kid. But it's not like I'd marry him and move in together and be that kind of family or whatever. It would be just like we both have involvement with the kid. It's just that the kid would have a dad and two moms instead. [laughs]

"I'd be judged more by people if that happened." Some youths, however, commented on how unexpected and negative their involvement in pregnancy and parenting would be, perhaps also resulting in danger or violence waged upon them in response. Youths who identified as transgender or gender-nonconforming perceived the judgment of pregnancy or involvement in pregnancy as especially severe. These youths noted that they had

suffered a great deal of hardship to be recognized as their true gender identities. Involvement in pregnancy signified a threat that would counter these hardships, and could even lead to fearing for their safety and further exclusion by their social networks. As one transgender youth reflected, “I’d be judged more by people if that happened. Like I’m some tranny who got someone pregnant. People would tell me I’m a pervert. It’d be dangerous for me. And I could never be a parent this way either.” Another transgender youth also powerfully elaborated on this theme of violence:

I mean, this could happen to me. I’m a man, but I still have the “parts required” to get pregnant. I can’t even tell you how traumatic it would be to get pregnant as a trans man. I would be on suicide watch. Like no joke. I have the birth control thing in my arm right now because of that. I don’t have sex with men, but I keep it just in case I ever get raped.

Discussion

This research documents that youths experiencing homelessness possess a range of attitudes, experiences, and needs related to pregnancy and parenting, and that these vary by gender identity and sexual orientation. Respondents described that for straight, cisgender young women experiencing homelessness, pregnancy is initially met with congratulatory responses, and positive attention during pregnancy, yet becomes an inescapable burden that falls solely on her shoulders. Young women are perceived as being responsible for any decisions and all outcomes regarding the child, also receiving judgment and negativity regardless of the choices she makes. Conversely, youths described that for straight, cisgender young men, pregnancy is met with commiseration and is a situation that others expect him to avoid or “escape.” Youths indicated that fathers are celebrated for putting in minimal effort, whereas mothers are criticized for the difficulties that can arise when raising a child, particularly in such challenging precarious housing circumstances, and also for decisions to not raise a child/not continue with a pregnancy. Although not stated outright, participants described how it is “easy” to be considered a good father, and yet similarly “easy” to be considered a bad mother. Whereas straight, cisgender males’ lack of involvement in parenting was described as disappointing according to most youths in the sample, this was nonetheless discussed as an inevitable reality of sorts. Such differences in expectations regarding straight, cisgender males versus females point to broader societal sexism and heteronormative gender norms. Similar roles, expectations, and stigma have been documented in the general population (Begun & Walls, 2015; Eckes, 2002; Glick & Fiske, 1996, 1997, 2001), and these themes are certainly not isolated to occurring solely among youths experiencing homelessness.

However, the impact of such stigma is perhaps exacerbated among highly vulnerable groups who often lack basic needs and social supports.

Moreover, the experiences of pregnancy and parenting for straight, cisgender young women in the current study is similar to qualitative research describing lived experiences of young mothers who were in foster care, a group that frequently overlaps with that of homeless youth, and which experiences similar trauma and loss. Young women with experience in foster care often portray pregnancy through hopeful and meaning-making lenses, yet as pregnancy turns to parenting, young mothers describe the challenges of loneliness and difficulties in parenting a child(ren) almost completely on their own (Aparicio, Gioia, & Pecukonis, 2018; Aparicio, Pecukonis, & O'Neale, 2015). This positivity around pregnancy for females could also be linked to pregnancy ambivalence in this population more broadly, since pregnancy is so often described as a source of much-needed attention or "visibility" in a population that often feels forgotten and invisible (Aparicio et al., 2015, 2018).

The theme of "baby daddies always leave" is nuanced with stories of straight, cisgender young fathers who indeed do "step up" in taking on their roles as parents. This was evident in the example of the young man who was making noteworthy sacrifices to provide for his daughter, including living in a shelter himself. This example is supported once again by prior research among young adults with experience in foster care, which found that young men who had a child were more likely to have a job than females or males without children (Combs et al., 2018). Such findings challenge perceptions of young vulnerable fathers as "always" leaving or showing apathy regarding parenting and/or intimate partner relationship involvement, and suggest that another narrative may be present for some youths. In a similar vein, many youths did not have strong parental figures (particularly fathers) in their own lives, which may impact the expectations they now have of what parenting/co-parenting is or what it could look like. Such examples highlight the potential impact of modeling to youths the importance and possibility of positive fatherhood involvement, a plausible focus of future interventions with this population.

A poignant theme related to differences in pregnancy and parenting among homeless youths was the severe stigma, judgment, and even violence that such experiences would mean for youths who identify as transgender or gender nonconforming. For transgender youths in the sample, pregnancy and parenting were deemed threatening to the very core of who they are and how they desire to be seen by the world, and were considered overtly dangerous experiences. Fear of becoming pregnant, coupled with pervasive threats of physical and sexual violence in their surroundings as youths experiencing homelessness and also as transgender/gender-

nonconforming individuals, led some youths to discreetly use contraceptives to further ensure pregnancy prevention. Moreover, these youths spoke about the stakes associated with becoming pregnant as so high that they would consider hurting themselves in response to such transpiring. These insights point to an urgent need for the development of reproductive and sexual health care information, resources, and outreach strategies that are gender affirming, inclusive, and meet the specific needs of transgender and gender-nonconforming homeless youths.

In addition, LGBQ youths' attitudes and experiences regarding pregnancy and parenting demonstrated other distinctions. Although pregnancy may challenge some LGBQ homeless youths' identities in certain ways, the consequences were not described as severely as they were by transgender youths in the sample. In fact, for some LGBQ youths, pregnancy was conversely described as a way to regain acceptance from family and needed social supports, even if the pregnancy itself may not be desired. Here, pregnancy was depicted as a conduit to shifting toward social (and heteronormative) norms endorsed by family members who may have severed connections and supportive ties with the youth specifically because of the youth's sexuality. For other lesbian, gay, and pansexual youths in the sample, while pregnancy or pregnancy involvement was difficult for them to imagine as likely occurring near-term, many indicated quite positive thoughts about becoming a parent. Some of these youths noted that their present sexual behaviors could indeed result in pregnancy or pregnancy involvement; whereas others said their current same-sex relationships and/or behaviors would make pregnancy or pregnancy involvement highly unlikely. However, many youths noted that their behaviors and conceptualizations of their own sexualities had ranged in fluidity and experimentation in the past, particularly as they navigated their transitions to adulthood. As such, even for youths who were not currently engaging in behaviors that could result in pregnancy, such outcomes were not abstract for them to contemplate. Prevention efforts must also more consciously consider that youths' sexualities, behaviors, and identities are evolving and are far from "static." Moreover, reproductive and sexual health information and resources developed for youths experiencing homelessness must be crafted in far more LGBTQ-welcoming and competent ways.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted when considering these results. Social desirability bias may have influenced youths' under-reporting of details and information regarding pregnancy and parenting, often sensitive topics, particularly in the context of being experienced by youths and young adults.

The interviewer (study PI) underwent extensive training in ethical research and working with young people experiencing homelessness through a lens of cultural humility. Although thoughtful emphasis was placed on establishing rapport with respondents, and reiterating to youths the importance of their rights to privacy and confidentiality, such limitations are nearly impossible to fully eliminate.

Also, the sample consisted of only service-seeking young people; the attitudes and experiences of youths who are disconnected or disengaged with formal service provision may thus differ in some ways. Future research efforts in this area should more explicitly attempt to engage youths experiencing homelessness who are not linked to services and supports. Such research would also benefit from including youths in geographic regions in which services are limited or unavailable (e.g., smaller communities and/or rural areas with less service provision resources compared to that of the study's urban setting). Finally, some young people were particularly enthusiastic about study participation, and these youths noted personal interest in being a part of a study specific to topics of pregnancy and parenting. It is therefore possible that this study contains results that summarized the perspectives of youths who may be easiest to engage in outreach and prevention efforts pertaining to these topics. Research should also seek to uncover strategies for involving a wide array of youths experiencing homelessness, including ones who may perceive less value or be less interested in these topics, but who may nonetheless benefit from education and prevention resources pertaining to pregnancy and parenting.

Conclusion and implications

Results demonstrate opportunities for interventions to help homeless youths navigate an array of experiences regarding pregnancy and parenting. Pregnancy prevention and parenting interventions are needed that are tailored to the uniquely challenging and diverse contexts of homeless youths' lives. Interventions that effectively enable communication strategies among intimate partners about pregnancy prevention, intention, decision making, and options could potentially prevent pregnancies that are unwanted, strained or fractured relationships, and often sexist, homophobic, and transphobic experiences of poverty and social exclusion. Youths' unimpeded access to and knowledge of all available reproductive and sexual health care services is essential, and services must be inclusively designed and delivered for youths of *all* gender identities, sexualities, and sexual orientations. Service providers must also become fluent, comfortable, and far less stigmatizing in their approaches to engaging youths regarding these topics. Interventions and resources on parenting and co-parenting,

particularly models that further engage and encourage young fathers' and LGBTQ youths' involvement, are also needed.

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