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Identifying Strategic Entry Points for Services among Transition-aged Mothers who are Homeless

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Extensive research suggests that transition-age youth (TAY) disproportionately experience periods in which they are either homeless or precariously housed. However, less is understood on the experiences of homelessness

among female TAY who are parenting (TAY-M), a particularly vulnerable subgroup of TAY. In an effort to understand the characteristics and needs of TAY-M, this study conducted chi-squared tests to evaluate the differences between homeless and housed TAY-M on demographics, general functioning, and service use at age 21. Findings of this study emphasize the need for targeted interventions for TAY-M who experience homelessness.

Research suggests that across a 12-month period, nearly 4.2 million adolescents and young adults in America experience some form of homelessness (Chapin Hall, 2019). Homelessness, broadly defined as “sleeping in a place where people weren’t meant to sleep, or sleeping in a homeless shelter, or not having a regular residence in which to sleep” (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010), is particularly prevalent among adolescents and young adults with a history of child welfare involvement. For instance, nearly 30% of the 13- to-25-year-olds experiencing homelessness who completed the *Voices of Youth Count* brief youth survey (BYS) reported that they had spent time in foster care¹ (Chapin Hall, 2019).

The disproportionate rates of homelessness among youth with a history in foster care, or transition-aged youth (TAY), is a well-documented problem (Curry & Abrams, 2015). Findings from the Midwest Study, a longitudinal study following a sample of young people from Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois as they transition out of foster care into adulthood, indicate that by age 23 or 24, almost 30% of their sample had slept on the streets or in a shelter for at least one night (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010). This figure increases when including couch surfing in the definition of homelessness such that nearly 40% of the Midwest Study participants did not have a safe and stable place to live at some point during their transition to adulthood.

Less understood, however, is the prevalence and impact of homelessness among TAY who are parents. Research suggests a linkage between homelessness and parenting among TAY. For instance, studies indicate that TAY who enter stable housing from homelessness are more likely to be parents and are more likely to have new births between entrance and exit (John Burton Foundation, 2017). In California, TAY who entered a transitional housing program (THP) directly from homelessness or unstable housing were slightly more likely than youth who entered the

¹The *Voices of Youth Count* was a national Chapin Hall initiative from 2015–2017 which examined youth homelessness in 22 counties across the United States. A little over 4,000 youth between the ages of 13 and 25 completed the *Voices of Youth Count* brief youth survey (BYS).

program from stable housing to have given birth to or fathered a child (32% vs. 29%) and more likely to be custodial parents (18% vs. 16%) at entrance to the program. Youth who entered THP directly from homelessness or unstable housing were also more likely to have a new birth between entrance and exit (16%) when compared to youth who entered the program from stable housing (14%).

TAY who are parenting and who experience homelessness are an especially vulnerable subgroup of transition-age youth. For youth who are experiencing homelessness, the challenges of pregnancy and parenthood are compounded by major developmental implications for both the young parents and their children. Recent research finds that pregnancy and childbirth have a significant impact on educational outcomes of teen parents in the general population. By age 22, only around half of teen mothers have received a high school diploma and only 30% have earned a General Education Development (GED) certificate, whereas 90% of women who did not give birth during adolescence receive a high school diploma (Hoffman & Maynard, 2008). In addition, the health and well-being of children of mothers who are teens is affected throughout their lifetime. They are more likely to be born prematurely and to have low birth weight or experience infant death than children not born to mothers who are teens (Chen et al., 2007). Further, they are more likely to demonstrate lower cognitive proficiency and attainment scores when entering kindergarten, exhibit behavior problems, struggle with chronic medical conditions, be incarcerated as an adolescent or young adult, fail to complete high school, become a teen parent themselves, and either be unemployed or underemployed during young adulthood (Hoffman & Maynard, 2008). These outcomes are likely exacerbated for TAY who are homeless and are parenting.

It is important to note that TAY who are parenting are not a homogenous group. Their characteristics and needs may vary, especially when considering gender and experiences of homelessness. In the general population, women who are homeless are more likely to be caring for dependent children than men who are homeless (Calsyn &

Morse, 1990). Among youth who are homeless, studies have found gender differences in terms of income generation, stability of employment, and types of employment. One study found that youth who are male and homeless earned income from a greater variety of both legal and illegal sources than did their female counterparts (Ferguson, Bender, & Thompson, 2015). Gabriel and Schmitz (2006) found that youth who are male and homeless were more likely than their female counterparts to report a greater number of positions at one time, higher weekly earnings, and higher rates of full-time employment, findings that are consistent with housed youth as well. Additionally, research demonstrates that youth who are female and homeless are also more likely to work in customer service positions and in the sex trade economy than their male counterparts (O'Grady & Gaetz, 2004; Robinson & Baron, 2007).

The above studies indicate that mothers who are homeless are financially vulnerable, which may create challenges for them in becoming stably housed. This research also suggests that transition-age youth who are mothers (TAY-M) and who experience homelessness are especially vulnerable, yet their characteristics, general functioning, and needs have not been closely examined. In an effort to better understand the characteristics and needs of TAY-M, this study will evaluate differences between homeless and housed TAY-M on demographics, general functioning, and service use. This elucidation will better inform policymakers and service providers on how to uniquely outreach and serve the vulnerable population of TAY-M.

Methods

Data Source

The present study utilized data from the National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD). NYTD is a federal reporting system that tracks the independent living services states provide to youth transitioning out of foster care and collects outcomes information from youth transitioning out of foster care. Eligible youth are surveyed at ages 17, 19, and 21.

Sample Description

The sample included all 1,552 females in the NYTD FY 2014 cohort who were interviewed at age 21, who reported on their homelessness status, and who reported having at least one child at baseline (age 17), the first follow-up interview (age 19), or the second follow-up interview (age 21). All states, Washington DC, and Puerto Rico were represented in the final sample.

Measures

Three sets of variables were included in the present analyses: demographics, general functioning, and service use. General functioning and service use variables were drawn from the second follow-up interview when youth were 21 years old.

Demographics

Youth self-reported their race/ethnicity, level of education, and homelessness status. In terms of race/ethnicity, youth could select all that applied from a defined list. Each ethno-racial group was converted into a dummy variable (yes/no) and examined individually. Youth also indicated the highest educational certification they received which was collapsed into a binary variable that indicated whether or not youth had obtained a high school diploma or GED.

Youth were classified as homeless if they had experienced homelessness in the past two years. Homelessness was defined as having no regular or adequate place to live and included living in a car, living on the street, or staying in homeless or other temporary shelter.

General Functioning

Six indicators of general functioning at age 21 were included in the analyses. Four of the indicators—current school enrollment, employment status, employment skills, and having supportive adult—represented protective factors. Two of the indicators—substance abuse referral and incarceration—represented risk factors.

Current school enrollment referred to a youth's enrollment in high school, GED classes, vocational training, or college. Employment status referred to a youth's full- or part-time employment in one or multiple jobs. Employment skills indicated whether a youth had completed an apprenticeship, internship, or other on-the-job training, either paid or unpaid, during the past year. A supportive adult indicated that the youth had an adult they could go to for advice or guidance relating to problem solving or decision-making or for companionship. This included adult relatives, parents, or foster parents but excluded spouses, partners, and current caseworkers.

In terms of risk factors, substance abuse referral indicated whether a youth had ever been referred for an alcohol or drug abuse assessment or counseling. This included self-referral or referral by a social worker, school staff, physician, mental health worker, foster parent, or other adult. Incarceration referred to whether a youth had ever been confined in a jail, prison, correctional facility, or juvenile or community detention facility in connection with allegedly committing a crime.

Service Use

Youth utilization of six services at age 21—social security payments, educational financial aid, public financial assistance, public food assistance, public housing assistance, and other financial assistance—was included in the analyses.

Youth reported if they received Social Security—that is Social Security Insurance, Social Security Disability Insurance, or dependents' payments—either directly or as a dependent beneficiary. They noted if they used a scholarship, voucher, grant, stipend, student loan, or other type of educational financial aid to cover educational expenses. Youth also indicated if they received public financial assistance in the form of ongoing cash welfare payments from the government to cover some of their basic needs, public food assistance such as food stamps, or public housing assistance including living in government-funded public housing

or receiving a government-funded housing voucher. Lastly, the youth reported if they received periodic and/or significant financial resources or support from a source not otherwise listed. This includes support from a spouse or family member, child support, or funds from a legal settlement but does not include occasional gifts or child care subsidies.

Analysis

Given that the included variables were all categorical, chi-squared tests were used to evaluate differences between homeless and housed TAY-M on demographics, general functioning, and service use at age 21. A Bonferroni correction was used to correct for multiple comparisons within each group of outcomes (i.e., demographics, general functioning, service use) such that alpha was set at 0.008. As chi-squared tests are sensitive to sample size, effect sizes were also calculated using Cramer's $V(\phi_c)$ to assess if statistically significant findings were also substantively significant. Cohen's (1988) standards for interpreting effect size were used such that 0.10 indicates a small effect, 0.30 a medium effect, and 0.50 a large effect size.

Findings

Demographics

Over one-third (35%; $n = 528$) of TAY-M reported homelessness in the past two years. TAY-M who had experienced homelessness were statistically less likely than TAY-M who had not experienced homelessness to be Hispanic, $X^2(1, N = 1,487) = 10.48, p < .008$, although $\phi_c = 0.08$ indicating a weak association. TAY-M who had experienced homelessness were significantly less likely to have obtained a high school diploma or GED than their housed counterparts, $X^2(1, N = 1531) = 23.70, p < .001, \phi_c = 0.12$. See Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics of TAY-M who are Housed or Homeless

	% (N)		X^2	ϕ_c
	Housed (n = 1007)	Homeless (n = 545)		
Race/Ethnicity				
Native American or Alaska Native	4.07 (41)	7.16 (39)	6.86	
Asian	1.49 (15)	1.1 (6)	0.40	
Black or African American	32.87 (331)	39.08 (213)	5.93	
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.4 (4)	0.92 (5)	1.66	
White	62.36 (628)	59.27 (323)	1.58	
Hispanic	26.12 (263)	18.53 (101)	10.48*	0.08
Education				
High School Diploma or GED	75.17 (757)	63.30 (345)	23.70**	0.12

Notes: * < .008; ** = < .001.

General Functioning

TAY-M who had experienced homelessness were significantly less likely than TAY-M who had not experienced homelessness to be employed full time, $X^2(1, N = 1538) = 23.18, p < .001, \phi_c = 0.12$, and to have a supportive adult in their lives, $X^2(1, N = 1531) = 16.69, p < .001, \phi_c = 0.10$. They were more likely to have ever been referred to substance abuse services, $X^2(1, N = 1528) = 80.04, p < .001, \phi_c = 0.23$, and to have ever been incarcerated, $X^2(1, N = 1527) = 75.58, p < .001, \phi_c = 0.05$. See Table 2.

Service Use

Compared to TAY-M who had not experienced homelessness, TAY-M who had experienced homelessness were more likely to be currently receiving public food assistance, $X^2(1, N = 1270) = 6.97, p < 0.008, \phi_c = 0.08$. See Table 3.

Table 2. General Functioning of TAY-M who are Housed or Homeless

	% (N)		X^2	ϕ_c
	Housed (n = 1007)	Homeless (n = 545)		
General Functioning				
Current School Enrollment	24.93 (251)	21.47 (117)	2.21	
Full-time Employment	32.57 (328)	21.1 (115)	23.18**	0.12
Employment Skills	27.81 (280)	27.52 (150)	0.01	
Supportive Adult	90.57 (912)	82.94 (452)	16.69**	0.10
Substance Abuse Referral	6.65 (67)	22.02 (120)	80.04**	0.23
Incarceration	9.53 (96)	25.87 (141)	75.58**	0.05

Notes: * < .008; ** = < .001.

Discussion

Demographics

One-third of all TAY-M in this sample experienced homelessness between the ages of 19 and 21, which is in line with previous research that finds that about 30% of TAY who are parenting experience

Table 3. Service use of TAY-M who are Housed or Homeless

	% (N)		X^2	ϕ_c
	Housed (n = 1007)	Homeless (n = 545)		
Service Use				
Social Security	5.56 (56)	8.07 (44)	3.90	
Educational Aid	15 (151)	11.56 (63)	3.46	
Public Financial Assistance	14.2 (143)	19.08 (104)	2.65	
Public Food Assistance	43.59 (439)	55.23 (301)	6.97*	0.08
Public Housing Assistance	10.72 (108)	15.23 (83)	3.08	
Other Financial Support	15.49 (156)	13.94 (76)	0.48	

Notes: * < .008; ** = < .001.

homelessness prior to entering transitional housing (John Burton Foundation, 2017). In this study, TAY-M who experienced homelessness were more likely to be Native American or African American and less likely to be Hispanic than their housed counterparts. Previous studies on the prevalence of homelessness among youth present contradictory findings regarding race/ethnicity. Some have found that youth from ethno-racial minorities are overrepresented (Choi et al., 2015; Morton et al., 2017), while others find that youth experiencing homelessness reflect the ethno-racial composition of the surrounding area (Cauce et al., 2000; Burt, 2007). Our findings suggest that nationally, ethno-racial minorities are not overrepresented in the population of youth who are parenting and homeless. However, differences may emerge if the data were examined by region.

General Functioning

Compared to their housed counterparts, TAY-M who experienced homelessness between the ages of 19 and 21 demonstrated poorer general functioning. They were less likely to have completed high school and less likely to be employed full-time. These findings are supported by past research which indicates that in the general population, youth who are homeless report higher rates of missing school, repeating grades, and dropping out than their housed counterparts (Bassuk, DeCandia, Beach, & Berman, 2014; Hernandez & Naccarato, 2010). Research also demonstrates that lower levels of educational attainment present a barrier to securing and maintaining employment among TAY (Hook & Courtney, 2011). Unemployment, in turn, may hinder these youths' ability to live independently.

The overall low rates of full-time employment in the sample of TAY-M who experienced homelessness may be partially explained by participants' parenting status. Previous studies find that female TAY with children are 60% less likely to be employed than their counterparts (Hook & Courtney, 2011). It is unclear, however, if TAY-M in this sample chose not to pursue full-time employment or if they were

seeking but unable to obtain full-time employment. It may be that the TAY-M in this sample chose to be full-time caregivers or that their caregiving responsibilities prevent them from being employed full-time. They may also have a partner who is the family's primary breadwinner, or have extended family members that help financially support them. Without more information about participants' desired employment status, it is difficult to draw conclusions about what the observed low rates of full-time employment mean.

Securing and maintaining employment and housing are further complicated by histories of substance use and incarceration. TAY-M who experienced homelessness in the present study experienced substance abuse and incarceration at higher rates than their counterparts. Many jobs require applicants to pass a drug test, disqualifying applicants who use substances (Wozniak, 2015). Incarceration may disqualify applicants because many employers refuse to hire applicants with a history of criminal justice involvement, particularly applicants with drug related convictions (Leasure, 2019; Raphael, 2017). Experiences of incarceration may also create a gap in youth's employment history, affecting their ability to obtain employment when they return to the community (Raphael, 2017). Additionally, incarceration disrupts the relational ties transition-aged youth had prior to being incarceration. The absence or lack of supportive adults challenges their transition to the outside world and their efforts to be productive members of society. In line with the social estrangement model, which states that the experience of homelessness disconnects individuals from mainstream society (Thompson et al., 2010a), the social connections that TAY possessed prior to their experiences of homelessness and incarceration may be fragmented post-homelessness and post-incarceration.

Service Use

In this sample, TAY-M who experienced homelessness were not more likely than their housed counterparts to use most public services. The contrary may be expected for these youth given their lower levels of

education, low employment rates, and their lack of stable housing. However, findings do demonstrate that TAY-M who experienced homelessness are more likely to use public food assistance than their housed counterparts. Homelessness is associated with increased food insecurity (Gundersen, Weinreb, Wehler, & Hosmer, 2003), meaning that TAY-M who had experienced homelessness may utilize public food assistance at higher rates because they have a higher need for such assistance. Additionally, public food assistance programs do not require a permanent address and electronic benefits transfer cards are reloaded automatically (Social Security Administration, 2019), facilitating their use by youth who are homeless and/or transient.

TAY-M who experienced homelessness were not more likely than their housed counterparts to receive public housing assistance. A lack of housing for youth who are parenting may contribute to this trend. In a survey of service providers who serve youth who are homeless, only 38% of providers reported that at least one of their programs serves youth who are parenting (Chapin Hall, 2019). Eligibility criteria for public assistance programs may also be contributing to the observed trend. Youth in this sample who experienced homelessness may not qualify for public housing assistance for reasons that are related to this group's higher rates of incarceration, lack of full-time employment, and substance abuse history. Most public assistance programs require a federal background check and federal convictions can render individuals ineligible for assistance (Curtis et al., 2013; Mauer & McCalmont, 2014). For example, in the state of California, a criminal record does not automatically disqualify someone from receiving public housing assistance but landlords are given discretion to admit or exclude applicants with criminal records (CA Penal Code § 11105). Similarly, in some states, a felony conviction (namely a drug conviction) renders someone ineligible for public assistance but parents can still apply for TANF for their children.

Taken together, the present findings suggest that TAY-M who experienced homelessness have characteristics and experiences that compound to increase their vulnerability in comparison to their

housed counterparts. They are less likely to have graduated from high school and more likely to have been incarcerated and to have been referred to substance abuse treatment. These in turn may affect youths' ability to secure and maintain full-time employment. Despite reporting poorer general functioning outcomes, which may be indicative of a higher level of need, TAY-M who had experienced homelessness were not more likely than their housed counterparts to utilize most public services. As this study utilizes cross-sectional data, causation cannot be examined. It may be that TAY-M who had experienced homelessness are not using public assistance programs at higher rates because the combination of housing instability and personal vulnerabilities, such as substance abuse and an incarceration history, make it difficult to connect with services (Thompson et al., 2010b). However, it may also be that these youth have poorer general functioning outcomes because they are not connected with services. Longitudinal research is needed to further elucidate the nature of this relationship.

Limitations

In addition to the constraints that stem from the use of cross-sectional data, the present findings are limited by the definitions of "mother" and "homelessness" that the authors employed. First, the sample included youth who reported having a child either at age 17, 19, or 21; however, a youth who reported having a child at age 17 could be very different in terms of characteristics and outcomes compared to a youth who reported having a child at age 21. Given the small number of transition-age youth who were mothers in this study, we decided to include all TAY-M, regardless of when they birthed their first child. Second, the sample included all females who had given birth regardless of their parenting status. Our sample therefore included mothers who may not be actively parenting or have custody over their child. Third, homelessness was defined as "youth experienced homelessness within the last two years," but no additional information about the frequency or duration of homelessness in the last two years was available. In addition, reasons

for experiencing homelessness were also not available. Thus, there may be great variation in homelessness experiences in our sample, variation that likely impact general functioning and service use.

The present analyses also do not account for state differences in experiences of homelessness among TAY-M. Not all states offer extended foster care or transitional housing programs to TAY or to TAY-M, leading to regional variation in the need for public services such as those included in the present analyses. Future research should therefore examine state differences in experiences of homelessness among TAY-M. Finally, the measure of employment does not account for other ways in which youth may be earning an income (e.g., panhandling, selling plasma, sex work, etc.).

Conclusion & Recommendations

This study provides insight into the demographics, general functioning, service use, and outcomes of transition-aged youth who are mothers who did or did not experience homelessness. These findings corroborate previous research highlighting the important differences between homeless and housed mothers in the general population (Bassuk et al., 1996; Banyard & Graham-Bermann, 1998). The findings suggest that these two groups represent distinct populations with differences in their demographic characteristics and general functioning, differences which call for targeted interventions that address the multiple and compounding risks faced by TAY-M who are homeless. Although further research is needed to identify the best strategies for reaching and serving this high needs group, interventions that have shown promise with other homeless populations, such as housing-first models, or with TAY in general, such as THP programs, may also prove successful with this population.

Importantly, there are limited THP programs for TAY (John Burton Foundation, 2017), and even fewer for TAY who are parenting (Chapin Hall, 2019) and who have histories of homelessness, incarceration, and unemployment. It would be important to speak with service providers

and TAY-M with experiences of homelessness concerning the barriers to receiving social services, including public housing assistance and public financial assistance. For instance, it could be useful to look at Section 8 Housing utilization rates among TAY-M and the challenges to qualifying for Section 8 Housing. Importantly, this study demonstrated that TAY-M who experienced homelessness have multiple and compounding risk factors for being homeless. Furthermore, it is vital to explore the current financial and housing supports available to this vulnerable subpopulation of TAY and TAY-M as well as the barriers to accessing or enrolling in such benefits.

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