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Family Histories and Multiple Transitions among Homeless Young Adults: Pathways to Homelessness

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Abstract
This study explored the early family histories of homeless young adults, the types and number of transitions they experienced, and their pathways to the street. Intensive qualitative interviews were audio taped and transcribed with 40 homeless young adults 19 to 21 years of age in the Midwest. Findings show that family backgrounds were generally characterized by substance use, child maltreatment, and witnessing violence, all of which provide social context for understanding why so many of these young people opted to leave home in search of an alternative living situation. The current findings also reveal that while some young adults ran away from home as adolescents, others were "pushed out" (i.e., told to leave), or removed by state agencies. Current study findings illustrate that young adults' trajectories are marked by multiple living arrangements such as home, foster care, detention facility, and drug rehabilitation. Overall, study results show that young adults' family histories place them on trajectories for early independence marked by multiple transitions and numerous living situations, culminating in lack of a permanent residence to call home.

Keywords: homeless young adults, transitions, child maltreatment, pathways

1. Introduction

Leaving home is an expected practice for American young adults and is viewed as one of the steps in the transition to adulthood (Dubas and Petersen, 1996; Furstenberg, 2010). Young adulthood or emerging adulthood, which encompasses those 18 to 25 years of age, is a period of life characterized by change and experimentation of numerous roles (Arnett, 2000; Arnett, 2004) and decisions made during this critical time period will likely continue to shape their future life course. However, according to Zerger, Strehlow, and Gundlapalli (2008), young adults are likely to have fewer accumulated resources compared to older adults and young adults who begin life with fewer resources (e.g., low socioeconomic status) are at increased risk for negative outcomes such as teen pregnancy (Kennedy, Agbenyiga, Kasiborski, & Gladden, 2010).

Departure from one's family home between ages 18 and 24 years, such as in the pursuit of college (Gutmann, Pullum-Piñó, & Pullum, 2002), is generally considered "on time" whereas leaving home at ages 13 or 14 due to conflict or abuse (Kennedy et al., 2010; Tyler and Cauce, 2002) or being "pushed out" of their home (i.e., asked to leave) by their primary caregiver (Thompson, Bender, Windsor, Cook, & Williams, 2010) would be considered "off time" or "ill-timed" events (Elder, 1998). Each year, thousands of adolescents fall into the latter category. It is estimated that 1 in 7 adolescents will run from home prior to age 18 (National Runaway Switchboard, 2001) and 1.6 million young people experience homelessness annually (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2011).

Regardless of how they leave, those making the transition from home "off time" are likely to have fewer resources and lack many life skills that are necessary for making a successful transition to adulthood (Zerger et al., 2008).

Few people prior to age 18 or 19 are fully prepared to live on their own. Some young people continue to depend on parents and relatives into their mid-20s until they acquire the skills, experience, and resources necessary to be self-sufficient (Fingerman et al., 2012; Loman and Siegal, 2000). Additionally, through early adulthood, most young people have the opportunity to return home during times of crisis, or to ask for financial help. Unfortunately, young adults who previously ran away or have been pushed out of their home may not have this family safety net (Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010). Moreover, given that the majority of homeless young people have been neglected or abused (Ferguson, 2009; Keeshin and Campbell, 2011; Tyler and Cauce, 2002), their caregiver may be unable or unwilling to provide the necessary support. Finally, multiple transitions from home (e.g., foster care placement, running away) suggest that "half of America's youth are at risk for an unsuccessful transition into adulthood" (National Runaway Switchboard, 2001: homepage), which may be especially true for those already living on society's margins (Osgood et al., 2010).

Though disruptions in family living situations due to events such as divorce or death of a parental figure may create pathways into homelessness for young adults (Kennedy et al., 2010), few studies have focused on the *types* of transitions or changes that homeless young adults experience and rich details of their early de-

partures from home are generally absent from the literature. Experiencing multiple transitions may put these young adults at greater risk for negative health outcomes (Kennedy et al., 2010); therefore, understanding pathways to homelessness is particularly important for this population because failure to successfully establish one's self as a young adult may have life-long repercussions. As such, the current study uses qualitative methods to examine (a) family histories of homeless young adults; (b) the types and reasons for transitions; and (c) specific pathways of young adults as they transition into homelessness.

2. Literature review

2.1. Homeless young adults' backgrounds

Childhood abuse and family disorganization are common themes in the homes of many young people prior to their running away. It is reported that one third of homeless youth and/or young adults have experienced sexual abuse (Tyler et al., 2000; Unger et al., 1997) and over one half are victims of physical abuse and/or neglect (Tyler and Cauce, 2002; Whitbeck and Hoyt, 1999). Additionally, many young people report parents or caretakers who misuse alcohol or drugs (Ginzler et al., 2003; Mallett et al., 2005). Because child abuse is associated with future dating violence (Reitzel-Jaffe and Wolfe, 2001; Wolfe et al., 2004) and parental substance misuse is linked to youth's own use of substances (Stein, Leslie, & Nyamathi, 2002), it is important to gain a deeper understanding of these family histories and their relationship to multiple transitions and pathways to the street among homeless young adults.

2.2. Homeless young adults' transitions and trajectories

Transitions refer to short-term changes such as leaving high school (Elder, 1994) whereas among homeless young people, transitions may also include leaving home for the street or leaving home and going into foster care or moving temporarily to a friend's place. *Trajectories* refer to pathways of individual development over time such as education and work careers (Elder, 1998) and transitions are embedded in trajectories. Thus, the types and number of transitions that homeless young adults experience will influence their pathways of development over the life course.

Emerging adulthood (ages 18 to 25; Arnett, 2000) is a time period of enormous change when young people explore numerous roles and transitions, experience high rates of residential change and where, "college education is often pursued in a nonlinear way, frequently combined with work, and punctuated by periods of nonattendance" (Arnett, 2000: 471). Homeless young adults also experience numerous transitions and high rates of residential change, though it differs in that some of these changes or transitions include sleeping on the street or staying in shelters as compared to moving from one apartment or residence to another, which is normative of the general young adult population. To the extent that emerging adulthood is "distinguished by relative independence from social roles and from normative expectations" (Arnett, 2000: 469), homeless young adults also share some of these characteristics.

Although little has been written on the types and reasons for homeless young adults' transitions and subsequent trajectories, research on similar aged populations and homeless adults finds that experiencing multiple foster care placements results in a lack of nurturing bonds, a stable support system (Dworsky and Courtney, 2009; Roman and Wolfe, 1997), higher school dropout rates (Blome, 1997; Pecora et al., 2006), as well as unemployment (McMillen & Tucker, 1999), poverty, mental illness, and housing instability (Courtney & Heuring, 2005). In other words, numerous transitions have long-term implications for the developmental pathways of young adults. Specifically, research on foster care youth

has found that housing instability (e.g. transition) leads to frequent bouts of homelessness (e.g., trajectory; Courtney & Heuring, 2005). Additionally, a study of homeless young adult mothers found that early family backgrounds, including a neglectful, abusive maternal figure, adversely shaped the young mothers' abilities to make a healthy transition into adulthood (Kennedy et al., 2010). In other words, running away coupled with other transitions has implications for these young adults' developmental trajectories. Additionally, those who experience multiple transitions while they are young are more likely to have sporadic and problematic social support networks (Collins, 2001) and thus are at greater risk of entering adult life without family resources (Osgood et al., 2010). Lacking a primary support group, young people who experience several transitions may not develop the necessary skills (e.g., education) to be self-sufficient adults and thus, be at greater risk for housing instability and long-term homelessness.

2.3. Theoretical explanation

The life course perspective (Elder, 1998) provides a way of understanding the early family histories, transitions, and trajectories/pathways of homeless young adults. As indicated above, *transitions* refer to short-term changes whereas *trajectories* refer to pathways of development of individuals over time in which transitions are embedded (Elder, 1998). According to Elder, though some individuals are able to select their pathways to adulthood (e.g., education, work, and family) through human agency, life choices are influenced by opportunities and constraints imposed by the larger social structure. Moreover, historical context needs to be considered because the trajectories of individuals are influenced by their early life experiences. Finally, the timing of transitions affects subsequent transitions and these patterns have long-term consequences (Elder, 1998). Among those formerly in foster care and among homeless youth, early departures from home in the form of numerous transitions (e.g., foster care placement, running away) affect future opportunities including education, housing stability and so forth (Courtney and Heuring, 2005; Whitbeck and Hoyt, 1999) and thus impact their life course trajectories. Moreover, the historical context of these young people's lives, which are often marked by abuse and neglect (Kennedy et al., 2010; Tyler and Cauce, 2002; Tyler et al., 2000; Unger et al., 1997; Whitbeck and Hoyt, 1999) adversely shapes the lives of homeless young adults and their ability to make a healthy transition into adulthood (Kennedy et al., 2010; Whitbeck and Hoyt, 1999).

The timing of transitions (i.e., on time versus off time) will have implications for educational opportunities. Youth who leave or are forced to leave home prior to age 18 are considered off time and will be constrained in their opportunities for future success. Though some may experience a smooth transition (e.g., completing high school, attending college, and finding employment; Elder, 1998) others will experience transitions that are more disruptive (e.g., teen pregnancy, dropping out of high school; Kennedy et al., 2010). Thus, these transitions will ultimately affect their pathways where the accumulation of disadvantage will adversely shape their future prospects (Elder, 1998; Kennedy et al., 2010). In sum, young adults' family histories are associated with the timing and types of transitions (e.g., foster care placement, running away), which set in motion a trajectory characterized by instability which, in turn, affects their ability to make a healthy transition into adulthood (Kennedy et al., 2010; Whitbeck and Hoyt, 1999).

2.4. Research questions

Guided by previous research and our theoretical framework, the following research questions highlight the focus of the present study: (1) "Why did young people leave home and where did they go?" (2) "How did young people's family backgrounds shape their trajectories

into homelessness?" and (3) "What types of transitions did young adults experience on their pathways to homelessness and how many transitions did they undergo?"

3. Design and methods

3.1. Sample

This investigation is based on data obtained from semi-structured interviews with 40 homeless young adults, ages 19 to 21 years. Young people were interviewed in four Midwestern states (Missouri, Iowa, Nebraska, and Kansas) by street interviewers who were employed full time as survey researchers as part of a larger longitudinal project. The longitudinal research project tracked young people over a period of three years, with follow-up interviews conducted at three-month intervals for a total of 13 waves of data (see Whitbeck, 2009 for a description of the longitudinal project).

3.2. Data collection

Data were obtained from semi-structured interviews with 40 homeless young adults in the Midwest using a purposive sampling strategy (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Interviewers, who had over two years of experience working with this population, were instructed to approach shelter residents and locate eligible respondents in different areas of the cities. Interviewers offered agency services or referrals to all youth. Though study eligibility for wave 1 of the longitudinal project required young people to be between the ages of 16 and 19 years and considered homeless, the 40 respondents selected for the semi-structured interviews were chosen from subsequent waves of the longitudinal project and thus were ages 19 to 21 when they were interviewed for this portion of the study. The definition of "homeless" mandated that respondents currently resided in a shelter, on the street, or were living independently (e.g., doubling up with friends) because they had run away, had been pushed out, or had drifted out of their family of origin (Ennett, Bailey, & Federman, 1999). Study procedures were explained and informed consent was obtained from young adults.

Based on interviewer reports, 95% of the young adults who were approached for an interview and who met study criteria agreed to participate. The participants were asked a series of open-ended questions, and all interviews, which lasted 1 h, were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms are used to preserve confidentiality. The participants were paid $25 for their participation. The university IRB at the first author's institution approved this study.

3.3. Interviewer guide

The interviewer guide consisted of a series of open-ended questions and probes that related to young adult's family background, experiences on the street, mental health, and all prior living situations. The current study focuses specifically on young adult's family background and all living situations. The qualitative interviews began with the following statement: "We want to find out when and how young people became homeless, their different living situations and their experiences prior to becoming homeless." Grand tour questions drew from the following lines of inquiry: At what age did you run away or leave home for the first time? Why did you leave home? What happened each time that you ran away or left home? Where did you go? Young adults were queried about multiple life events as well as the sequencing of these events.

3.4. Data analysis

Preliminary analysis involved rereading each interview transcript to gain a deeper sense of the data as a whole. Because we were interested in family histories, the types and reasons for young adults' transitions and their specific pathways into homelessness, we focused on the transcription sections related to interview questions on these topics. Though our theoretical perspective guided the interviewing and data collection process, the themes that emerged were allowed to evolve naturally (Charmaz, 1995). After the interviews were transcribed, each interview was carefully read through and family disorganization (e.g., parental substance misuse), each type of transition (e.g., running away from foster care), reason for transition (e.g., abusive foster parent), and trajectory/pathway (e.g., ran to a friend's home) were coded. During open-ended coding, several themes began to emerge and our paper became organized around early family histories, type and reason for transition, and specific pathways into homelessness. After these three broad themes were identified, we began the process of focused coding (Charmaz, 1995) where we examined all of the interview transcriptions and extracted quotes and grouped them according to the three themes.

We assessed validity by triangulating the data through building evidence for a code or theme from several individuals (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). For intercoder agreement, we used a predetermined coding scheme and identified whether the authors assigned the same or different codes between text passages (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Both authors coded all interviews, and in cases in which the intercoder agreement between the authors was low

Table 1. Family history and transition sample quotes.

Qualitative codes and subcodes	Selected qualitative quotes and pathways
Early family histories	
Family substance use	I don't have any friends, so when I smoke marijuana, it is with my family, like my older sisters.
Child maltreatment	My mom, she would hit me and pull me around by my hair...This happened a lot.
Witnessing violence	My dad strangled her [my mom] and put her up against the cabinets and I remember like running a whole block.
Young adults' transitions from home	
Why young adults leave	I was being bad, I was in trouble with my family ... I was not following rules ... my mother was getting irritated with me.
Age at first runaway	Fifteen was the first time I tried to live out on my own.
Young adults' destinations	Started hangin' out downtown and sleepin' wherever I could ... sleeping at friends' houses.
Representative pathway trajectories	
Pathways into homelessness	
Transitioning in and out of family home	Dad's house → youth center (3 months) → group home (1½ months) → dad's house (2 months) → street (3 months)
Foster care	Multiple foster care homes (ages 5–7) → adoptive family → sister's house (1 day) → removed from sister's home by the police
Detention facility	Mother and stepfather's house → ran away several times → detention facility for 6½ days
Drug rehabilitation	Lived on the street (4 months) → went to a shelter (few weeks) → went to two different drug rehabilitation programs (2 weeks; 3 weeks) → transitional living program

or discrepancies existed (less than 5% of the time), we obtained consensus through deliberation and reevaluating our coding and themes. Percentage agreement was used to assess interrater reliability based on the small number of themes that were coded for the "presence/absence" of the theme (i.e., child abuse, foster care, running away; Boyatzis, 1998). We have exceptionally strong reliability in this study given that our 95% level of agreement in coding is much higher than the 70% or greater score that is recommended for qualitative research (Boyatzis, 1998). Table 1 presents sample quotes for each qualitative theme.

4. Findings

4.1. Sample characteristics

The qualitative sample included 24 females (60.0%) and 16 males (40.0%). Thirty-four young adults (85.0%) self-identified as heterosexual, three as homosexual (7.5%), and three as bisexual (7.5%). Ages ranged from 19 to 21 years (*M* = 20.17 years). Twenty-seven were White (67.5%), eight African American (20.0%), one Hispanic (2.5%), and four bi-racial or multi-racial (10.0%).

Three major themes emerged that are important for understanding young adults' pathways to homelessness. The first theme addresses young people's early family histories, which provide the impetus for why many young people opt to leave home in search of alternative living situations and thus helped shape the type and reason for their multiple transitions. The second theme examines the types and reasons for young adults' transitions from home. Finally, the third theme explores the various pathways to homelessness that young people experience.

4.2. Early family histories

The early family histories of these young adults provide social context of what their life was like growing up. Family substance misuse, child maltreatment, and witnessing family violence are critical in shaping many of the young adults' transitions from home. Moreover, family histories place many young adults on trajectories for early independence and thus are fundamental for understanding the unique pathways to homelessness.

4.2.1. Family substance use

Alcohol and drug use among caregivers and other family members was common (N = 37; 93%). Danny and Candy spoke about their parents abusing alcohol and using illicit drugs on a weekly basis. Because many of these young adults have been exposed to widespread substance use in their family, they are at higher risk for developing substance use problems themselves (Stein et al., 2002). Vanessa, who reported that her mother abused drugs, informed us, "I don't have any friends, so when I smoke marijuana, it is with my family, like my older sisters." Exposure to substance use by extended family members was also instrumental in these young adults' decisions to initiate usage. Stacy's aunt, whom she lived with temporarily, smoked marijuana almost daily and allowed Stacy and her friend to do so as well. These findings reveal that substance use among the wider family network is extensive for numerous young adults and through this exposure, many came to be avid users of alcohol or drugs.

Other young adults, however, turned to substance use to cope with their disorganized family. Dianne reportedly smoked marijuana because it allowed her to calm down and block out the emotional pain of being sexually abused by her adopted father. Similarly, Randy smoked marijuana to alleviate the physical pain he suffered from being beaten by his stepfather. Because many young people described heavy substance use by one or both parents, it is unlikely these caretakers are providing adequate monitoring for their children and the lack of monitoring is associated with increases in adolescent substance use (Lee, 2012). Not only were many young adults exposed to

biological, adopted, and stepparents' substance use and abuse, but those who lived in alternative care also suffered from additional exposure to alcohol and drug use from their foster parents. This finding is consistent with the literature (Ginzler et al., 2003; Mallett et al., 2005) where many homeless young people find themselves surrounded by caretakers who abuse alcohol or drugs which may be central for explaining some young adult's premature exit from home.

4.2.2. Child maltreatment

The majority of the sample (N = 38; 95%) experienced at least one form of child maltreatment. Physical abuse was the most common type reported by 31 young adults (77.5%). Michelle, for example, told us, "He [biological father] pushed me down three flights of concrete stairs…Another time he broke three pool sticks across my back and another time, he just hit me with his fists." Young men reported similar physical abuse experiences perpetrated by their parents. Michael described this incident: "My father physically hit me and knocked me around. Hit me with his hands, and other things, whatever he can get a hold of. Two by fours, sticks, about anything. Before he hit me, he would scream, cuss at me, be verbally abusive."

Sexual abuse experiences were also quite extensive and reported by 13 young adults (32.5%). Christine explained: "Tony [my mother's friend] was asking me have I ever seen a [penis] before and I told him 'no' and he showed it to me and I got scared…" Candy also recalled: "It [sexual abuse] started off when I was really little and I didn't realize what was really happening till I turned like five or six." At least two young women were further victimized by betrayal from their mothers. Sara recalled her stepfather attempting to kiss her but when she told her mother about the incident, her mother accused her of lying. Sara said, "My mom's nickname for me is lying bitch or L.B." Jolene also felt betrayed after her mother accused her of lying about a sexual abuse incident. In both cases, mothers did not provide a protective environment and the situation was compounded by accusing their daughter of lying.

4.2.3. Witnessing violence

In addition to experiencing child abuse, other young adults reported witnessing domestic violence. Rick remembered how traumatic it was for him to watch his father beat his mother. Debbie also recalled a terrifying domestic violence incident between her parents: "My dad strangled her [my mom] and put her up against the cabinets…" Some young people dealt with such violent experiences by blocking it from their memory, by retaliating with more violence, or by turning to drug use. The majority of young adults, however, responded to abuse and violence by running away from home.

Children who grow up in violent homes may learn the techniques of being violent as well as the justifications for this behavior (Gelles, 1997). Mark, for example, grew up in a violent home and the following quote, describing an encounter with his father, demonstrates the mutual violence in their household: "He [my dad] had taken out a .22 pistol and he was going to shoot me literally. I took it away from him. I kicked him in the nuts…" Childhood victims of violence not only learn how to be perpetrators, but it is possible that they also learn the social scripts for becoming victims because they internalize rationalizations for interpersonal violence. For example, Shane described an altercation with his stepdad: "I threw fists to where I wanted to hit him but you know if I hit him he'd hit me back…and then he went ahead and hit me anyway." Witnessing and experiencing familial violence may make it difficult for some young people to develop healthy relationships later in life.

Early family histories provide the necessary social context for understanding why so many young people exit home prematurely and make multiple transitions over short periods of time. Accounts of family substance abuse were extensive and parental alcohol and drug use often led to child abuse or family violence between caretakers. The following theme further describes the reasons for why these young adults left home and their numerous destinations.

4.3. Transitions from home

Young people may opt to run away from home whereas others are "pushed out" (i.e., told to leave), or removed by the state and these methods of leaving are often tied to the type and frequency of transitions that young adults experienced. Reasons for leaving home, age at first runaway, and destinations of young adults are important for understanding the multiple transitions that they undergo. Also, these transitions from home help explain how education is disrupted and how family ties may be severed, thus affecting the availability of future support for these young adults.

4.3.1. Why young adults leave

When asked why they left home for the first time, the majority (N = 38; 95%) of young adults indicated that it was abuse, a physically violent household, and/or conflict that caused them to run away. Conflict included arguments between their caregivers as well as quarrels between the young person and his/her caretaker. Robyn, for example, endured physical and emotional abuse from her stepfather before she comprehended: "I was finally old enough that I realized that it wasn't right and I didn't have to take it anymore." Another reason for leaving home was young adults' problematic behavior. Seven young people (17.5%) were at one point pushed out because the caregiver(s) could not control them. Katie remembered being pushed out of her home because 'I was being bad, I was in trouble with my family...I was not following rules...my mother was getting irritated with me." A final reason for leaving home for the first time was determined by the state: at least four (10%) young adults were removed from their home by state agencies at some point during their upbringing. For example, Denise remembered being placed in a group home after her mother was formally turned in for child abuse: "I first got pretty much on my own when I was seven, because there was like a report that she was beating us and it was true." Although 29 (72.5%) young adults only gave one reason for leaving home, over one quarter (N = 11; 27.5%) reported multiple factors that influenced their decision to leave.

4.3.2. Age at first runaway

Young people who ran away or were pushed out of their home were generally between the ages of 12 and 15 the first time this occurred. Julia, who ran away, recalled: "Fifteen was the first time I tried to live out on my own." Those removed from their home by state agencies were typically younger. John explained: "I went to a foster home when I was 10 because I wasn't real good...my mom and dad couldn't handle it." If the abuse and family disorganization occurred while the respondent was younger than 12 years of age, they were more likely to be removed by the state whereas similarly situated older youth who perhaps did not come to the attention of the authorities responded by running away. As such, their decision to leave home may be a protective impulse, which in the short term, shields them from further family abuse.

4.3.3. Young adults' destinations

When asked where they went when they left home for the first time, twenty young adults (50%) ran to a friend's place; five (12.5%) stayed with a relative; four (10%) went into detention, group home, or treatment facility; three (7.5%) were placed in foster care; three females (7.5%) stayed with a male acquaintance; and five (12.5%) reported loitering in public places. Jordan, for example, told us that he, "Started hangin' out downtown and sleepin' wherever I could... sleeping at friends' houses." Another young person, Carol, reported, "I went to my neighbors...[they] were out of town and I had a key to their house so I went there and stayed there." Though these various destinations illustrate the transitions these young adults experienced, it does not fully capture the multitude of changes that some homeless young people ultimately endured. In order to truly grasp

the nomadic nature of these young adults' lives, we now turn to their various pathways into homelessness.

4.4. Pathways into homelessness

Our third theme looks at the unique pathways or trajectories that young adults followed after they departed from their family home. Within these trajectories young people experienced multiple living arrangements as they traveled back and forth between home, foster care, detention facility, and drug rehabilitation. Frequent moves likely result in a lack of resources, which makes survival on one's own difficult (Kennedy et al., 2010).

4.4.1. Transitioning in and out of family home

Some young adults reported as many as 18 different moves between various living situations after their initial exit from home. Jordan for example began his journey at his father's home but went through a multitude of moves, which clearly demonstrate the instability of some of these young peoples' lives. Below is a flow diagram of Jordan's transitions within a two-year period:

Dad's house → youth center (3 months) → group home (1½ months) → dad's house (2 months) → street (3 months) → dad's house (1 month) → apartment (evicted) (3 weeks) → different apartment (evicted) (2 weeks) → dad's house (few weeks) → apartment (1 month) → homeless (2 weeks) → mom and stepdad's house (1 month) → apartment with girl.

Other young adults also went through several transitions due to being removed from parental custody because of child maltreatment and placed in a series of foster homes. These multiple transitions create unstable life trajectories as young adults move through a number of different living environments over relatively short periods of time. Additionally, they are unlikely to form bonds with family members or friends during this unstable time, and therefore may not have people they can rely on for future social support.

4.4.2. Foster care

Jackie was removed from her home by the state because her parents were charged with neglect and sexual abuse. She experienced an astonishing number of transitions including numerous foster care placements. Vanessa, who was initially removed from her home by the state due to her mother's drug use, reported that her adoptive parents were also alienating and as such, she ran away numerous times. Vanessa reported at least 16 transitions as illustrated by the following flow chart:

Multiple (8) foster care homes (ages 5–7) → adoptive family → sister's house (1 day) → removed from sister's home by the police → ran away multiple times for brief periods → placed in a group home by adoptive parents (4 years) → moved in with biological father (1 year) → transitional living home (9 months) → living with sister.

The more transitions that young adults experience, the more difficult it will be to form nurturing bonds and a stable support system (Osgood et al., 2010; Roman and Wolfe, 1997). Additionally, children placed in foster homes are at extreme risk for a wide range of disorders and adjustment problems over the life course, such as substance abuse and educational failure. It is estimated that 50% to over 80% of children in foster care have developmental and mental health problems (Garland et al., 2000).

4.4.3. Detention facility

Spending time in detention facilities was another pathway that some young adults experienced prior to becoming homeless. For example, Brian reported running away because his parents were fighting and he despised his stepfather. Brian experienced 18 transitions between running away several times from his parents' home and going to a detention facility as shown here:

Mother and stepfather's house → ran away several times → detention facility for 6½ days (aged 14 or 15) → back home (1 week) → back

to detention facility (2 days) → group home (1 month) → ran away → stayed with friends until caught (2 to 3 weeks) → back to detention facility in "high intensity" (6 months) → transferred to group home (3½ months) → ran away to friend's house → back to detention facility → group home → ran away again (out for summer) → turned himself in → emergency youth services → group home (50 days) → group home (4 months) → back to detention facility (2½ months).

4.4.4. Drug rehabilitation

Cindy has experienced numerous hardships both prior to being "pushed out" of home and since she has been on her own. Below is a trajectory map of her transitions and pathways from a young age to her current living situation:

Father died (Cindy age 4) → mother died (Cindy age 10) → moved in with grandparents → grandparents later died (Cindy age 11) → went to drug rehabilitation program → lived with aunt and uncle who later divorced → Cindy ran away when aunt re-married → lived with friends (3 months) → returned to aunt's house (few days) → sent to group home (1 week) → sent to a shelter → in intensive outpatient program (8 months) → lived with friends and boyfriend (2 months) → evicted for smoking crack → lived on the street (4 months) → went to a shelter (few weeks) → went to two different drug rehabilitation programs (2 weeks; 3 weeks) → transitional living program.

Many young adults we spoke with have similar histories regarding the inordinate number of transitions that they have experienced in their young lives. Though their destinations and length of stay varied considerably, the majority of these young adults' lives are marked by instability whereby they move back and forth between numerous living arrangements with average stays of less than three months. Overall, most of these young people can be characterized as coming from disorganized homes with high rates of parental substance use and family violence. Young adults' family histories are associated with the timing and types of transitions (e.g., foster care placement, running away), which set in motion a trajectory characterized by instability of numerous living situations which, in turn, affects their ability to make a healthy transition into adulthood (Kennedy et al., 2010; Whitbeck and Hoyt, 1999) and may result in the lack of a permanent residence to call home.

5. Discussion

This study explored early family histories of homeless young adults as well as the multiple transitions that they have experienced, and their pathways to the street. Since qualitative data on early family backgrounds among this population have rarely been collected, the results of intensive in depth interviews with 40 homeless young adults provide new insight into reasons for their transitions and trajectories that led them to the street. The rich findings from the present study underscore the multifaceted nature of homelessness and the notion that homeless populations are not a monolithic group (Wright, 1989). Additionally, the number and types of transitions that they have endured in a relatively short period of time illustrate the instability of these young people's lives and have long-term implications for the developmental pathways of young adults (Kennedy et al., 2010) such as sporadic and problematic social support networks (Collins, 2001) and lack of family resources (Osgood et al., 2010). Moreover, these findings are important because they shed further light on the plight of homeless young adults and the difficulty they face in escaping the shadow of homelessness with limited resources on which to rely (Auerswald & Eyre, 2002).

Parental alcohol and drug use, child maltreatment, and family violence characterized the bulk of the young adults' families, which supports previous literature on homeless young adults (Mallett et al., 2005; Stein et al., 2002). Family histories characterized by substance abuse and violence, which were often interrelated, some-

times resulted in the young person being removed from their home by state agencies and placed in alternative care, such as foster care or group homes. In other cases, young adults fled home to distance themselves from abuse and conflict whereas in a smaller number of cases, young people were pushed out of their home by caregivers. Therefore in many situations, young adults' family histories were directly linked to their early exits from home, which led to a multitude of transitions for numerous young people.

The number of transitions that these young adults described was remarkable. Some young people could not recall the exact number of moves, especially in cases in which foster care placements numbered five or more. Although being placed in multiple foster homes is stressful in and of itself for the child, the risks and outcomes associated with foster care placement in general are grave (Garland et al., 2000). For example, children placed in foster care are at an increased risk of educational incompletion in young adulthood (Pecora et al., 2006), unemployment (McMillen & Tucker, 1999), poverty, housing instability, mental illness (Courtney & Heuring, 2005) as well as physical health complications in later life (Zlotnick, Tam & Soman, 2012). Similar to the multiple transitions experienced by young adults in this study, young people in foster care rarely have stability in their foster home placements (McMillen & Tucker, 1999).

Some young adults in the present study spent three to six months in one living situation before moving onto the next, preventing them from establishing a sense of stability. Some of these transitions were voluntary while others were not. A young person's lack of a sense of autonomy in transitioning could also exacerbate their experiences by leading to feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. One to two-week stays were also common before running away, being sent to a group home/detention, moving in with a friend, going to a shelter, or finding oneself on the street.

The nomadic nature of their lives thus far suggests that they have accumulated few resources along the way, which in turn will likely impact them later in life. For example, many young people have not completed high school, very few are employed in the formal economy and those that are have part time, low-wage jobs, which are insufficient to maintain a permanent residence. Research demonstrates that the longer a young person resides on the street and whether they were currently living on the streets represented obstacles to securing stable, sufficient market employment (Ferguson, Bender, Thompson, Maccio & Pollio, 2012). Homeless young adults may turn to crime and violent offending if they are unable to meet their basic needs through legal means (Baron, 2003). As such, the majority of these young people may never realize the expected cultural transitions of graduating college, getting married or buying a house. Numerous transitions and unstable lifestyles could also increase the danger of experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder symptomology (Bender, Ferguson, Thompson, Komlo & Pollio, 2010) thereby further obstructing these young people's ability to develop on a healthy trajectory. Also, many have limited social support networks or relationships that would be characterized as stable, all of which serve as barriers to making a successful transition to adulthood.

The social context provided by probing homeless young adults' early life histories helps us understand their complex transitions and pathways to the street. Consistent with a life course perspective (Elder, 1998), young people who exit their family home at an early age are "off time" and this increases their chances of undergoing numerous problematic transitions. Additionally, families influenced the timing of events that young adults experienced (i.e., when they left home or were removed by state agencies), which subsequently hinders their successful social integration into society. That is, the instability and multiple transitions that many have endured make it difficult for them to form nurturing bonds and a stable support system (Osgood et al., 2010; Roman and Wolfe, 1997). This lack of supportive relationships and a stable residence, along with disruptions in education, is likely to make a successful transition to young adulthood particularly difficult (Kennedy et al., 2010). In the absence of mean-

ingful social support, homeless young people may remain embedded in a cycle of homelessness that is seemingly without end (Auerswald & Eyre, 2002). The unique pathways to the streets also reveal the heterogeneity of young people's trajectories and alerts policy makers that multiple solutions are required to successfully address the needs of homeless young adults from a variety of backgrounds.

5.1. Limitations

Despite the rich information obtained, there are limitations within the present study. Many aspects of the study are retrospective, which required the young adults to think back to when they were younger and some may have remembered incorrectly while others may have forgotten certain details (Hardt & Rutter, 2004). Further, since some young people experienced countless transitions, they may have given an inaccurate account of the duration and ordering of each event (Hardt & Rutter, 2004). The sensitive nature of some of the questions (e.g., child abuse and drug use) may also have led to biased reporting if respondents were compelled to provide socially desirable responses (Neuman, 2011).

Young people's reports were also not complemented by family members' perspectives, which could potentially counteract the validity of the findings if memories of past events did not coincide. Finally, this study is not intended to be representative of all homeless young adults and therefore should not be generalized to other subgroups in different locales. Increased awareness and acknowledgment of these limitations will enhance future studies on homeless young adults by broadening the scope of capturing their complex experiences.

5.2. Conclusion

Most of these young adults left home or were removed from families that would be described as troubled and in many cases abusive. The conflict and violence that occurred in their households was a main reason for why many young people left home or were removed by state agencies. The family histories of these young adults provide social context for understanding the subsequent instability and numerous transitions they endured. Lacking a stable home, young adults moved from one residence to another and the multiple transitions more broadly explain the different pathways that resulted in their homelessness. In summary, young adults' family histories are associated with the timing and types of transitions, which set in motion a trajectory characterized by instability which, in turn, affects their ability to make a healthy transition into adulthood (Kennedy et al., 2010; Whitbeck and Hoyt, 1999) and may have life-long repercussions for their well-being.

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