PERCEPTIONS OF HOUSING SERVICES AND UTILIZATION AMONG HOMELESS EMERGING ADULTS

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Purpose: Emerging adulthood is a developmental stage that is not unique to homeless young adults. Identified traits of adulthood are 1) accepting responsibility for one’s self and 2) making independent decisions. These are characteristics often required of homeless emerging adults in housing programs. Homeless emerging adults are unique because their early independence interrupts the normal developmental process, which in turn makes it difficult to resume a dependent role in restrictive housing services. Housing is essential for the safety and stability of this population; however, from perspective of adolescent development, housing stability is not typically desired. This makes structured and long term housing options unappealing. Little research has focused on the perceptions of younger adults who are homeless concerning their views of housing services. This study aims to more fully understand the factors that influence decision-making in terms of utilization of housing services.

Methods: The study employed a mixed methods design to conduct individual interviews with a purposive sample of homeless youth seeking services at a non-profit organization. Interviews were conducted with 30 homeless youth (ages 18-25). Participants completed quantitative measures, followed by an oral, qualitative interview. Questions queried participants’ background characteristics, history of housing/homelessness, use of services, and perceptions of housing services. The qualitative interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed.

Findings: Factors associated with housing utilization were not necessarily related to homeless issues, but rather normal developmental issues. Several themes were identified: positive personal and programmatic interactions with housing staff, peer support as more important than housing, and emerging adulthood oscillation between the freedom of homelessness and the safety of housing. Youth oscillated between their desire for support and acknowledgement of housing benefits versus independence and the benefits of homelessness. This indecision keeps them from making long term commitments to housing programs. Some youth noted:

Independence vs protection: “I don’t think that binding somebody up with some kind of timeframe like they’re 13 years old is really gonna help the situation any.”

Housing vs homelessness: “I love having the people I care about around me. So if I can’t invite my friends (to my home), then there's no reason I'd be there. It's like I say, ‘if it's not worth sharing it's not worth having’.”

Conclusions: Housing programs that identify services specifically for “emerging adults” and emphasize independent decision-making and flexible support by staff would likely be most effective. Although it appears that an institutional housing program would be less successful for many homeless youth, their continued use of drop-in and street outreach services are needed. These services allow them to keep their independence while accessing supportive services and relationships; working towards commitments to structured housing programs may develop over time.