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Food Insecurity and Youth Homelessness:

A Qualitative Approach to Understanding Barriers and Strategies of Food Obtainment

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences

Yale School of Public Health

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Masters of Public Health

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Abstract

Objectives: The goal of this project is to better understand the intersection between food insecurity and youth homelessness, and more extensively explore how youth develop survival skills while combating barriers to healthy eating.

Methods: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 youth (18-25 years old) experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles (LA). Interviews were conducted on site at a drop-in center in LA. An Outreach & Engagement Program Manager assisted the principle interviewer in criterion sampling. Each interview lasted approximately 20-80 minutes and participants were compensated with \$20. Data saturation was determined through preliminary analysis, and thematic coding was conducted through Dedoose.

Results: Without consistent sources of food and stable housing, youth self-reported various skillsets and street knowledge uniquely nested within their experience combating both homelessness and food insecurity. Participants in this study described instances where convenient and legal food obtainment was almost impossible due to a plethora of homeless-specific barriers, and developed numerous and creative strategies to address street-survival related to unequal food access. Youth described three primary domains of strategies to address their food insecurity, including (1) stealing food from grocery stores, (2) “spanging” (asking for spare change), and (3) forming “street families” (social support networks). Many respondents self-reported high rates of stealing, specifically from retail supermarkets, because they firmly believed that food was a basic human right and that starving was not an option. “Spanging,” “white-boxing,” and “flying a sign” were all common forms of obtaining food immediately on the street. Lastly, youth described forming close social networks as a means to establish stronger

food access channels. These street families operated with a “share what you have” mentality, such that food donations, stolen food, and food purchased using government subsidies would be shared among the street family.

Discussion: While increasing social capital has been found to improve health and wellbeing, the acts of stealing and spanging place homeless youth at a higher risk of street victimization, stigma, and incarceration. Food insecurity is prominent in the lives of youth experiencing homelessness, and there is a need to address this public health dilemma through innovate interventions, particularly programs that are culturally cognizant of the homeless experience. Service providers should also improve accessibility to subsidized foods, specifically during hours of non-operation, in order to prevent behaviors that increase risk of harm for youth experiencing homelessness.

Introduction

This study contextualizes the homeless experience in Los Angeles, from the youth's point of view, in an attempt to build shared understanding of the daily barriers youth face in accessing food while homeless. National studies that address hunger and food insecurity often overlook homeless youth, since they are transient and hard to reach.¹ The following attempts to address this dearth in literature by highlighting youth's lived experiences to better understand their navigation of the food landscape in LA. When youth could not access local food services due to cost, convenience, or personal security purposes, they adapted their own food obtainment strategies, such as stealing, spanging, or forming social networks. Although these behaviors relieved chronic hunger, they were also risky and limited youths' opportunities to exit homelessness.

While some studies have examined experiences of food insecurity among homeless youth, few have conducted rigorous qualitative research to understand the strategies that youth employ to navigate limited food access. Existing studies have cited these strategies simply as prevalence rates, but only few have a deeper understanding of the problem. Exploring youth's narratives regarding food insecurity reveals the nuances in street-culture and current needs, and provides a framework for sustainable food related policies and interventions. The uniqueness of this study should inform future policy and interventions aimed to create culturally competent and scalable solutions to decrease food insecurity among homeless youth.

¹ Whitbeck B, Les, et al. Food insecurity among homeless and runaway adolescents. *Public Health Nutrition*: 9(1), 47-52, 2005.

Background

The 2017 homeless count indicated a 64% increase of homeless youth across Los Angeles County.² Living without stable housing increases the risk of food insecurity³ and with over 6,000 young people experiencing homelessness each year, there is a growing need to understand how youth are coping with the inconsistent availability of food. All youth living on the streets meet both of USDA's definitions for food insecurity, which are (1) the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods and (2) the limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially dependable ways.⁴

Youth in this study were based in Los Angeles County, which has proven to be an adverse food environment for the homeless because of its uneven distribution of food resources. Youth experiencing homelessness have access to multiple food sources, from soup kitchens to drop in centers, but these service agencies cannot always provide food that meets their client's ongoing needs. Additionally, the inconsistent quality of food at these placements puts youth at greater risk of food insecurity and malnutrition.^{5 6}

Malnutrition and nutrient deficiencies among homeless youth are particularly concerning because they can exacerbate the risk of certain adverse health behaviors that are disproportionately prominent in this population, such as depression, substance abuse, tuberculosis, hepatitis B, HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.⁷ In addition, food insecurity as a child has been linked to adult obesity,⁸ so improving food access and food quality for homeless youth can function as a cost-effective and preventative public health measure.

² Los Angeles Homeless Service Authority Annual Homeless Count 2017

³ Olsen C, Holben D. Position of the American Dietetic Association: Domestic food and nutrition security. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 2002; 102: 1840-7.

⁴ Bickel G, Nord M, Price C, Hamilton W, Cook J. *Guide to Measuring Household Food Security*, Revised 2000. Alexandria, VA: US Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Services, 2000.

⁵ Whitbeck B, Les, et al. Food insecurity among homeless and runaway adolescents. *Public Health Nutrition*: 9(1), 47-52, 2005.

⁶ Dachner, Naomi. Homeless "squeegee kids": Food insecurity and daily survival. *Social Science & Medicine*, 2002.

⁷ Dachner, Naomi. Homeless "squeegee kids": Food insecurity and daily survival. *Social Science & Medicine*, 2002.

⁸ Powers et al., 2003; Sarlio-Lahteenkorva and Lahelma, 2001

Currently, a large majority of the literature focuses on food insecurity regarding domiciled families, and few studies have examined experiences of homeless communities, especially among homeless youth.

Methods:

Data from this project was extracted from 30 semi-structured interviews among youth (ages 18-25) experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles. Questions were asked regarding youth's experience obtaining food on the streets. Semi-structured interviews were conducted over a 10-week period. The Institutional Review Board at Yale University approved the interview guide and all subsequent research material. The interview guide included questions regarding youth's food preferences, eating habits, sense of control over food, hunger coping mechanisms, emotions associated with hunger, and strategies to obtain food efficiently. A team of qualitative researchers at Yale University, specializing in Social and Behavioral Sciences, approved the interview guide in order to ensure the omission of leading questions and wording bias. Each interview started off with a general question about favorite foods, which was an attempt to start youth thinking about their food preferences and overall food experience. The questions became increasingly more specific throughout the interview. Each interview lasted between 20-80 minutes and youth were compensated \$20.

Recruitment occurred at a local drop-in center for homeless youth. This center offers hot meals and clothing, in addition to education and employment, legal, healthcare, arts-based healing, case management, education, community gardening, and street outreach services. The drop-in hours were Tuesday-Thursday from 1:00pm-5:00pm, and youth who attended these services were eligible to participate in this study. Both the Outreach & Engagement Program Manager and Principle Investigator engaged in criterion sampling, specifically ensuring that the

sample reflected the lived experience of the majority of homeless youth who attended the drop-in center. The Program Manager contained over 20 years of work experience with at risk youth, and leveraged intimate knowledge of current issues related to youth homelessness in order to obtain a sample that reflected the general homeless population. The Principle Investigator, a second-year masters student at the Yale School of Public Health, volunteered at this organization for five years prior to conducting the interviews. Both the Program Manager and principle investigator fostered strong relationships with the youth throughout many years, which increased the likelihood of successful interviews.

To be eligible participants had to be English-speaking and over the age of 18, which was later confirmed using the drop-in center's database. Participants were chosen based on gender (male, female, and transgender). The study contained 15 males, 14 females, and 1 transgender female. Chamberlain and MacKenzie's definition of homelessness⁹ was used and all participants were either experiencing primary homelessness (youth without conventional housing, including the streets and beaches) or secondary homelessness (youth with instable temporary housing, including friend's houses and shelters). The Program Manager approached youth to gauge their level of interest in the study, and once a youth agreed to participate, the Principle Investigator explained the study in detail and obtained both oral and written consent from the interview process began. All interviews were conducted in semi-private environments, including empty offices and space outside the drop-in center under the supervision of the agency's security guard. After 30 interviews, the Principle Investigator decided that data saturation had been met.

As the Principle Investigator became more familiar with the language and street-based behaviors of the youth, she iterated the interview guide to match the youth's street culture. The

⁹ Chamberlain C, Mackenzie D. Understanding contemporary homelessness: issues of definition and meaning. *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 1992; 27: 274-97.

Principle Investigator transcribed 17 interviews, and a third party transcribed the other 13. The interviews were then thematically coded using Dedoose version 8.2.14. After the “open-coding” process, the Principle Investigator created a detailed codebook of 27 themes and categories, which was developed using Grounded Theory, and the emerging key themes were discussed with the Program Manager to ensure appropriate data understanding and analysis. The Principle Investigator continuously analyzed the interviews, through repeated readings, to make comparisons across cases and eventually reconfirmed data saturation was reached. Major themes were also discussed with the qualitative research team, which led to the final narrative of this project.

Results:

The sections that follow highlight youth’s daily experiences of food insecurity, including emotional and mental health challenges youth face in obtaining food through inconsistent food channels, and also the social isolation associated with food insecurity. The subsequent sections describe instances among youth when convenient and legal food obtainment was almost impossible, and how youth developed numerous behaviors to address these barriers, mainly by utilizing three survival strategies -- spanging, stealing, and forming social networks -- to obtain food immediately.

1. The homeless experience and food insecurity

This section explores the impact of food insecurity on youth’s mental health due to high rates of stress and stigmatization, each of which reduce youth’s self-efficacy and ability to obtain food successfully.

Youth described the homeless experience to be inextricably connected to survival. For youth in this study, their very survival physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually and economically was threatened daily.¹⁰ The chronic stress and burden of obtaining basic daily needs, such as safety and shelter, served as competing factors for healthy eating. Thus, food was not always made a priority. As Participant 22 explained,

Honestly, this whole journey of being homeless...I couldn't really eat...because I was so scared. I wasn't myself, so eating was not my first priority. Don't get me wrong, it be some days when I need something, but most of the days I just felt sick.

Youth who did prioritize food also acknowledged the mental exhaustion associated with creating daily plans to obtain food. Whether food was gathered from a local dumpster or a homeless service provider, the emotional fatigue that resulted from navigating the street-based food system created mental exhaustion and chronic stress that inhibited their desire to “hunt down food.” Meaning, the exponential energy it took to create a plan every single day to obtain food intensified preexisting stressors that limits a youth’s cognitive ability to continue creating these elaborate plans. As Participant 1 noted,

You're tired, you're hungry, and you have to find an elaborate plan... it's almost like going hunting. Like, it's an elaborate plan to not get caught by a security guard, or an elaborate plan to make money without asking for money, to go [to] work hungry as fuck to get food. So it was like more of a hunting thing than a gathering thing. Like so when I am working and I have housing and everything it's a hunting thing. Now that I'm housed it's more of a gathering thing. As to when I was homeless like I had to hunt and make a plan and trap my way into food.

Other youth described eating foods, often unhealthy ones, to quell their stress of food insecurity and overall homelessness. These behaviors put youth at higher risk for eating disorders, obesity, and perpetuating adverse relationship with food. As Participant 22 described,

¹⁰ McAlpin, Frank, "Trauma-Informed Case Management Practice for Youth Experiencing Homelessness: Connection, Healing and Transformation" (2018). *Doctorate in Social Work (DSW) Dissertations*. 114.

Sometimes like when I'm just stressed [I'm] not really hungry -- you just gotta fulfill that stressor, so I ate. Usually what I ate to get over that stressor would be like sweets [or] chips. It would never be like a meal. Never be a meal. It would always be like little snacks.

The prioritization of food did not always yield successful food obtainment. Youth acknowledged unsuccessful attempts that compounded their stress and decreased levels of self-efficacy and self-motivation. Hunger was also associated with feelings of social isolation, since youth were not engaging in mainstream behavior like eating during regular meal times.

As Participant 26 discussed,

The one really shitty thing is like, like your schedule, you don't have a schedule. It's like, like all day spending, figuring out how to get like an EBT [card]. You're just talking or doing one thing and you hope that it leads to food but you're not sure.

Since youth often faced unsuccessful attempts at securing stable food sources, many experienced chronic hunger, which evoked emotions like “anger and frustration” and caused them to be “cranky, loopy, tired, lazy, not focused, and impatient.” These emotions, due to extreme hunger, can be easily misunderstood by the public as aggressive and dangerous, thus falsely reinforcing stereotypes about homelessness and creating a cycle of othering and discrimination. As Participant 10 expressed,

Because when I'm hungry, my eyes are cold, I'm kind of like -- I don't shine, I'm not lit or nothing like that.

In order to cope with the diversity of emotions associated with hunger, some youth admitted to utilizing a “mind over matter” mentality. Others engaged in more creative means to quell their hunger; some youth went to sleep, socialized, engaged in drug activity, practiced yoga, played basketball, went to the gym, wrote music, and almost all youth admitted to drinking water to stay satiated.

2. Barriers to food access

This section highlights barriers to food access, and more specifically, how insufficient government subsidies left youth searching for food at the end of the month, how NIMBYism delayed food access, how kitchen unavailability restricted youth's channels of affordable food, how lack of food options at service agencies hindered food consumption, and how concentrated clusters of homeless food services restricted youth from leaving the city to find housing and/or employment.

The majority of youth in this study who received food subsidies claimed they could not make it last the entire month, and most youth described their money to run out by the middle of each month. Those who bought meals outside of homeless service providers claimed that on average they would spend no more than \$5 on a meal, which would often times not satisfy their hunger. Even on a tight budget, youth were not able to make it through the month with only their food subsidies.

Youth in the study self-reported instances of NIMBYism (Not In My Back Yard) and hate-crimes due to their homeless identity—these altercations forced youth to disengage and become spiteful of the outside community, thus reinforcing their isolated homeless status and delaying their access to food services. Since youth felt victimized and outcaste by mainstream society, this limited their perceived access to enter public spaces, specifically grocery stores and restaurants. As Participant 21 described,

He was recording [us] on his phone, telling us we're low lives, how we're just nothing, we shouldn't be here and we should just all die.

Lack of kitchen access was a significant barrier to convenient and daily food obtainment for youth in this study. Youth expressed creative avenues to prepare food in the context of their

street-based built environment. For example, youth acknowledged three main ways of heating up their food without access to a kitchen, which included using portable and RV-based stoves, channeling the sun's rays to heat up foods, and utilizing free microwaves at liquor and corner stores. Subsequently, youth reported systematic barriers to heating up foods, such as age restrictions on lighter purchases. As Participant 26 expressed,

I went in [to the liquor store] because I needed to buy a lighter to cook food and then they were like, no you can't, and I'm like no I'm not trying to buy cigarettes, I want a lighter. They responded, no [you can't].

Although kitchen unavailability was a main barrier to adequate eating habits, youth in this study did not have access to information regarding their food's quality and originality, which served as another large barrier to proper food consumption. The unknown ingredients of foods at homeless service agencies intensified youth's disgust for the food, which decreased their perceived-control over food consumption, and often times resulted in spillover effects to other facets of their lives. If youth did not know what was in their foods, they were less likely to consume it, thus intensifying rates of malnutrition. As Participant 27 outlined,

I definitely don't eat anything that I say I like to eat. And that's, you know, that's, and that's a whole mental F in itself because you know your body wants what it wants, and it tells you what it wants, and needs those things. And it's like you're not giving it to it-- now it's not only physical, it's not mental, but it's also spiritual, so that's a huge, uh, a huge disappointment for me right now. Not being able to eat what I want. So I would say at this point I never know what I want to eat.

Some youth described the inability to control their food options as a form of suppression and subjugation by larger systems in power. These youth felt silenced and unnoticed by government entities, and specifically used the unstructured food delivery systems to prove their sentiments. As Participant 6 recounted,

How dogs are to us is kinda like how we are to the system. Sit. Roll over. Eat this. Good boy. No bad, bad. You're grounded. Go in your cage. Bad. Like it's literally kinda how it goes. Like literally.

Some youth who obtained food at drop in centers and shelters acknowledged their inability to control, and often times inability to access information, regarding the ingredients and nutrient content of their food (i.e. maggots in shelter food or poor quality of donated food). The lack of control inherent in eating food hosted at service agencies reminded youth of their homeless identities and reinforced their food insecure status, since they rarely had the power to choose the content of their meals. Youth who had little control over their food consumption reported feeling like a “failure” because they could not adhere to a diet that was individualized and specific to their needs. Similarly, youth who practiced various forms of dietary restrictions, from veganism to fruitarianism, claimed to experience barriers in their meal consumption when the shelter or soup kitchen did not provide enough options for their diet-related needs. This lack of funding or managerial oversights created an environment where youth had to either eat foods that their bodies could not digest or continue to experience severe chronic hunger. As Participant 20 reported,

Every single meal at that shelter that they, they serve for breakfast, lunch, dinner, it's always meats for every meal. Every single meal. Some of it is mostly indescribable and unidentified. You can't, you can't figure out what it is. It's mystery meat.

The concentrated availability of food in Los Angeles served as a barrier to exiting homelessness because youth could not afford to leave that part of the city. Since the majority of free and subsidized food services exist in Los Angeles, some youth prioritized this food over services in other cities that could help escalate them out of homelessness, such as job or housing opportunities. As Participant 27 expressed,

Your accessibility to food determines where you live. It's like almost at a point it's like I can't even live because I can't...I can't afford to not be around wherever the free food is. And it's like I can't afford to not stand in those lines. So it's like my whole day is gone just so I can eat now. I have to try to be productive and now I'm like fucking tired from standing in line and BS and, and walking back and forth too.

In battling all of the aforementioned barriers to successful, healthy, and legal food obtainment, youth experiencing homelessness in this study adapted various survival skills that improved their food access – more specifically by stealing, spanging, and increasing social networks to foster avenues of immediate food obtainment.

3. Strategies to cope with food insecurity

This section describes youth’s adaptations to food insecurity and their creative solutions to combat their chronic hunger. Youth in this study took ownership of their individually crafted survival skills as they shared unique solutions to navigating the food landscape on the streets. More specially, youth engaged in three main survival strategies to obtain food, which included spanging, stealing, and forming social networks. Although these behaviors relieved chronic hunger, they were risky and limited a youth’s opportunity to exit homelessness.

Stealing

The main strategy youth described to obtain immediate food sources was stealing. Although some youth felt stealing was morally wrong, the majority of youth either stole or ate stolen food. Youth were able to avoid any sense of moral guilt from the act of stealing by describing food as a basic human right. They described large companies as having a surplus of resources and wealth, and noted that these companies would not “notice” if a couple “sandwiches or granola bars” were taken. The main piece of advice youth provided about the act of stealing was to “not get too greedy.” As Participant 7 illustrated,

Because I know I'm stealing for my life. And they actually cannot arrest you for that. If you're stealing ice cream, that's not stealing for your life. But if you're stealing like, a sandwich. It's kind of different.

To avoid moral guilt, most participants justified stealing as a means of self-preservation, and the act of theft was necessary for survival. All youth who mentioned stealing in their interviews vehemently defended the smaller family owned businesses, also called “mom and pop shops”, and declared that they only stole from large corporations because their business models could afford to restock the stolen food. As Participant 1 specified,

Better that it's a corporate organization rather than a mom and pop...I would never do a mom and pop, ever.... that was one of my things.

Most youth who “got caught” stealing from large grocery stores admitted that they took more than they needed, which resulted in attracting attention from security guards and police. The majority of youth who acknowledged stealing as an avenue to obtain food were under the age of 18. Youth who described stealing in their past claimed that once they turned 18 they prioritized their freedom over the potential free food. As Participant 5 portrayed,

After when I was 18, I was done with that type of stuff. You know, for real. Legitimate. Even when I'm hungry, I just be hungry nowadays. I'm not like running and stealing shit and all that. Because before I was 18.

The majority of youth who engaged in stealing were fully aware of the consequences, which included signing a waiver to never return to that particular store, engaging with the police, obtaining a warning, being arrested, or being attacked by the store’s security guard. As Participant 8 recounted,

Like two months ago. This dude cut my finger with a knife. He tried to cut my bag off of me, and he cut my finger in the process.

Strategies to decrease food insecurity by stealing included wearing baggy clothing to hide items or wearing “fancy” clothes to blend into mainstream society and reduce potential attention from security. Some youth left their bikes unlocked to ensure a speedy exit, while others practiced tranquility when walking out the doors. While some youth self-reported nerves as they stole, the majority of youth were callous to the consequences of theft. As Participant 1 depicted,

I mean, it came to a point where I had been homeless for so long, the nervousness was there but it wasn't felt. If you know what I mean. Like you do something risky for so long that you get used to it and it's not as intense.

The belief that food was a basic human right was clear throughout the youth’s narratives. Competing factors such as shelter, sleep, safety, and cleanliness were harder requirements to satisfy, which meant that stealing became a quick and easy option to fulfill a basic human need that the youth felt entitled to. As Participant 10 detailed,

Like I'm not ever going to go hungry, like of all things. I could be freezing cold, I could be going through everything else in the world, but I'm not about to starve 'cause like -- to me, when animals (humans) are starving, they're a whole lot more prone to violence.

The youth who took an ambiguous stance of stealing claimed that they did not steal food but traded for stolen food and ate stolen food. Additionally, youth morally justified instances of stealing by paying for one item at self-check out and then stealing the rest. This small monetary contribution to their overall purchase offset the majority of guilt associated with stealing. Other youth who refused to steal either ate non-purchased food inside the store or sought various opportunities in restaurants to accomplish other small tasks in exchange for food. As Participant 30 narrated,

Most of the general food industry, like people stealing food, I believe it's for survival, but I just don't like the risk factor in it. It just makes me too anxious and stuff. It's not for me. But normally if you ask at restaurants like “Hey, I am really hungry. Can I sweep for food?” They will do that for you.

Overall, stealing served as an immediate solution for hunger and provided youth with more control over their food consumption. Youth were able to dictate the time, quantity, and quality of food when they stole it themselves. Stealing did not always yield positive results—it emphasized their homeless identities and reminded youth of their chronic food insecurity. Additionally, stealing created long-term consequences, such as risk of engagement with the criminal justice system, which would inevitably prolong their homeless status.

Spanging

Those youth who felt morally conflicted about stealing would often times ask local residents for food or money for food, an action termed as “spanging” or asking for spare change. Other common colloquial phrases to describe this phenomenon were “panhandling” and “flying-a-sing.” Some youth were prideful in their spanging abilities, and considered it to be one of their skills. Other youth were embarrassed while they spanged, but knew it was their only option to obtain food for the day. The majority of youth was too prideful to spange, and admitted that spanging created deeper ties to their homeless identity that they hoped to one day separate from fully.

Some youth stratified the spanging process into seven different categories – “crack spanging” was all verbal and did not require the usage of a sign, “music spanging” was playing musical instruments for food or money, “sign spanging” was also known as flashing a sign, “highway spanging” was also known as interstate or freeway spanging, “sleep spanging” was falling asleep near an empty cup so individuals could approach and donate without fear of intrapersonal engagement, “drug spanging” was when a youth became intoxicated and refused to leave a local business unless the owner paid them a small amount of money, and lastly “yuppy

spanging” was asking a fellow homeless youth (yuppy) for food or money. As Participant 26 described,

You could just ask anybody like especially asking other homeless people, and other people who just like look down on their luck. Those are like the best people to ask because they would try harder to get you change. Because most of them have change -- so I would go to them first before anyone else.

The most successful instances of spanging were during rush hour and the holiday season. Youth emphasized the importance of understanding seasonality and temporality when deciding where and when to spange. Youth recognized the lucrateness of capitalizing on citizen’s generosity during specific times of the year. As Participant 13 expressed,

[We spanged on] Christmas and set up outside of a Target with a group of [friends] and had a sign that said, "May the meek inherited the earth" and wished people Merry Christmas. We made so many \$5 bills that night. We were happy to split the cash into everyone's pocket.

Youth noted common strategies for the most successful spanging, which include the following: spange in groups of two to three, spange in places separate from other spangers, and take into consideration the time of year (i.e. holidays). Similarly, youth described challenges to successful spanging, which included interpersonal street-politics among other spangers. These tacit street politics inhibited youth from spanging in specific geographical areas. Youth described the engagement with other homeless spangers to be territorial. There were unspoken areas that were more lucrative for spanging, and it was sometimes harder for youth who were newer to the city to obtain enough street credit to spange in those areas. Specifically, female spangers noted other challenges, such as sexism and discrimination that influenced their ability to spange safely, efficiently, and effectively. These females noted that male accompaniment elevated their street-credit and allowed them to spange in spaces that were previously off-limits. As Participant 28 recounted,

Lately I've been having issues with people who feel like they own the medium. They just show up while you're there and they're like, "You're going to have to leave, because I've been here ten years and this is my spot. I've got regulars." On one hand, I can make more money from flying a sign [by being a woman], but dealing with the other homeless people, there's a lot of sexism, and if you don't have a man next to you, then you have to have somebody to basically claim you because you don't get respected. The person you're with gets respected, so it's like I'm not being harassed not because they respect me but because they respect the person standing next to me, you know.

Although spanging was common in the data, some participants did not engage because they felt too prideful. These youth would rather offer a service or work a temporary job to receive funds for food, rather than blindly ask strangers for change. The idea of “earning” their money for food was a common theme across those youth who refused to spange. These youth were very aware of the social stigma associated with spanging and did not want to increase their chances of discrimination. These youth saw their homeless status as temporary and did not want to make impressions with the greater local community that could potentially brand them as “homeless” and hinder future relationships. As Participant 21 described

Yeah. I never could, like I don't know, I think my pride is too high. I'd rather go steal and if I get caught, I get caught, it's because I'm trying to feed myself. If I panhandle, they're going to think I'm not doing anything with my life and I'm just asking for money, and they probably think I'm going to spend it on drugs or something.

Other youth admitted to spanging, but emphasized their embarrassment associated with asking other people for money and that they only resorted to this strategy in particularly desperate times, such as at the end of the month when their government subsidies were running low. As YT said,

I've asked people for help, because there have been times when I didn't have nothing. I'd have to just go outside and ask someone. It's very embarrassing, but I've kind of learned how to put my pride aside for things like that.

Overall, youth who incorporated spanging as their main strategy for food obtainment described this process as an effective means for survival. The proponents of spanging were prideful in their abilities and portrayed spanging as their part-time jobs since they had to dedicate the majority of the day to spanging. Those who either refused to spange or were embarrassed by spanging recognized the intimacy associated with asking strangers for their money, and wanted to distance them from any stereotypical activity, including spanging, that associated them with their homeless identity.

Social Networks

Lastly, youth in this study created social networks in order to maximize their food obtainment opportunities. These social networks were distinct from friendships, and were purely operationalized to increase their access to food. By functioning off a “share what you have” mentality, youth in these social networks, also known as “crews” or “street families,” self-reported high rates of food consumption due to this strategy. Youth would travel, steal, spange, and sleep with their social networks. Youth who utilized these social networks believed that their food obtainment was directly proportional to the amount of peers in their network.

By intentionally associating themselves with other peers, youth in this study were able to gain access to a diversity of resources such as food, shelter, government subsidies, food storages, and kitchen availability. If a youth were to provide one of these resources, they would be seen as a contributing and functioning member of the street family. As Participant 28 reported,

If you have it, share it, you know? It's not like you can eat most of it in a day anyway, usually. You get handed a platter of food. If you see somebody else who needs it, go give it to them. That's really common. People share food a lot [in the streets]. Not one person is going to get all the food they need every day. It's going to be their friend [that] gets way too much food one day and they get way too much food the next day, and they share it.

The biggest shared resource among youth in street families was access to a kitchen. Youth who owned RVs or portable stoves were seen as a key contributor to the social network. Kitchens represent cost savings because preparing groceries was more cost effective than buying single meals using government subsidies. One of the best ways to “stretch” EBT or GR was to buy ingredients, such as rice, beans, and noodles that required kitchen preparation. As Participant 18 noted,

Well see, I'm kind of lucky because I have a van. I have a propane stove, so I can cook. So it'll be like, me and like, two or three other people, four at the most; or if someone else has food stamps at the beginning of the month, then we cook a lot, and that's cool.

Youth who did not belong to a social network, and thus lacked kitchen availability, described the burdens of spending money on individual meals everyday. As Participant 27 explained,

I haven't cooked over 10 months since I've been here. It's terrible. You have to get a lot of fast food that's cheap. You can't afford [it]. So it's just all around lose-lose. Like it's bad for the body. It's bad for my pockets. It's bad for the environment.

Youth who belonged to social networks that did not have access to a kitchen utilized the city's resources to obtain food for the group. Usually one or two designated youth would take on the responsibility of food obtainment for the day and bring it back to the group to share. Some youth formed interpersonal relationships with staff at local restaurants, whom acknowledged their homeless experience, and would provide youth with leftover food to bring back to their encampment, such as whole boxes of pizzas. Other youth would dig through garbage cans and dumpsters to obtain food for the group.

Youth also utilized these social networks to facilitate successful stealing and spanging activity. Youth noted that stealing and spanging with other members of their crew was beneficial

due to increase social support and potential diffusion of consequences. Youth would have members of their social network waiting at the door or “keeping an eye out” in front of grocery stores as they stole food inside, and other youth reported spanging in groups of 2-3 to quell instances of boredom.

Several youth in this study distinguished their social networks to be drastically different than legitimate friendships. Youth noted that even though they shared survival resources with other youth, they did not automatically categorize them as friends. The stark difference between street families and friendships highlights the individualistic survival requirements of homelessness. Relying on others for basic resources was common, but the trust and mutual support required in friendships was often lacking in the social networks formed among youth in this study. Most youth drew very distinct differences between peers in their networks and whom they would consider a friend. As YT expressed,

Friendships, I don't really have too many friends. I don't have friends like that, because most of the friends that I've had acted funny towards me. So I've never really liked friends. I'll call you my brother, I have brothers; I have people like that. I have acquaintances [street families], but I don't like to say I have friends.

Some youth even created temporary social networks among folks outside of their homeless peer groups to obtain food. One example was within the Catholic Church. Youth described the tacit street-knowledge of obtaining a free meal that was associated with attending church services. Meaning, their attendance at religious services was strongly motivated by the external factor of food obtainment. Consequently, the false association with free food and religious services can hinder youth's future relationship with spirituality. As Participant 26 described,

[I get food by] talking to religious people that I don't want to because they are having church food. Feeling like I need to be converted, because I am trying to get food

sometimes. I just deal with really toxic [people] because I really don't have that much of a choice.

Overall, youth utilized their social networks to efficiently and effectively obtain food on the streets. Since youth relied on other members of their social networks to obtain food on various days, the diffusion of responsibility allowed for reduced rates of stress among all members of the group, thus promoting positive mental health outcomes. These networks were created for survival and generally differed from actual friendships. Networks were never described as burdensome, but rather those youth who did not participate in social networks felt as if peers were not trustworthy forms of companionship.

Discussion

It is evident that homeless youth in this study did not have consistent forms of food access, and had to employ creative strategies to combat their chronic hunger. These youth faced specific barriers hindering successful food obtainment, such as chronic stress, lack of perceived control, and inadequate government subsidies. Youth adapted to street-based life by practicing their own solutions to food insecurity, which included stealing, spanging, and forming social networks. Although these behaviors relieved immediate hunger, they created added risk for engagement with the criminal justice system or the local NIMBY community. Additionally, these strategies increased their risk of adverse health, since stealing can lead to incarceration, spanging can lead to higher rates of stigmatization, and negative or nonexistent social networks could lead to social isolation. To some youth, employing these strategies served as visible reminders of their homeless status, thus perpetuating stigma and low self-efficacy. Although youth were creative in building strategies to reflect their barriers related to homelessness and food access, these behaviors were burdensome, not always effective, and associated with severe

consequences. These strategies are not the solution to food insecurity, and instead should create a framework for future service providers, policy makers, and local residents to create more targeted and efficient solutions for youth experiencing homelessness and food insecurity.

Limitations

These findings should be interpreted in light of a few limitations. First, the general theme of food insecurity is rarely assessed on demographic or intake surveys, thus youth were not familiar with talking about their experience regarding food obtainment the streets. Many youth admitted to the interviewer that they had “never thought about this before,” and consequently this could increase recall bias. Secondly, the principle investigator had previous positive engagements with the majority of youth in this study. Although youth were more willing to participate in the study and describe intimate instances of food insecurity, this level of rapport could of influenced social desirability bias. Additionally, the interviewer adhered to trauma-informed case management best practices for youth experiencing homelessness,¹¹ specifically by acknowledging and affirming youth after they self-reported traumatic experiences. Although forms of affirmation in qualitative research can cause reporting bias, the interviewer prioritized youth’s dignity in an attempt to simultaneously provide opportunities for connection, healing, and transformation. The interviewer maintained a non-judgmental and respectful tone throughout, allowing participants to remain vulnerable as the interview questions became increasingly more intimate. Despite these limitations, the narratives represented above highlight a need for more research regarding the expansion of healthy and accessible foods to youth experiencing homelessness.

Future Research

¹¹ McAlpin, Frank, "Trauma-Informed Case Management Practice for Youth Experiencing Homelessness: Connection, Healing an Transformation" (2018). *Doctorate in Social Work (DSW) Dissertations*. 114.

During the interview process, youth suggested topics to explore in future research. Specifically, youth recommended a study looking at the intersection of food insecurity and pet ownership, and how youth engage in specific strategies to ensure their pet is not hungry. Additionally, the youth's perceived control regarding food consumption should be researched in order to target which type of service providers can benefit from the introduction of trauma informed practices regarding food distribution.

Recommendations

Food insecurity is prominent in the lives of youth experiencing homelessness, and there is a need to address this public health dilemma through interventions, particularly programs that capitalize on youth's self-efficacy to increase food security in a safe and culturally cognizant way. The following recommendations aim to improve food access for homeless youth and were informed by interviews from this study.

The most prominent complaint among youth was that they could not make their food benefits last the entire month, intensifying their food insecurity especially at the end of the month. Service providers should be aware of this reality and create "snack packs" for youth to take with them, especially during the last week of the month. In normalizing these giveaways, youth can budget their food benefits more intentionally. Service providers could also administer food pantries that youth access during the end of the month, specifically during non-hours of operation. Increasing food access during this time is a scalable solution that maximizes benefits, since the consumer demand is consistently high at the end of the month.

Stealing was the main strategy of food obtainment, and the majority of youth who did not have access to a kitchen used the microwave at local liquor stores. Building off of these two realities, corner stores should move their microwaves to the front in order to reduce the

likelihood of theft, since youth won't have to walk through their store to get to the microwaves. This change could also reduce the discomfort and stigmatization youth face when entering into these spaces, since some youth in this study felt like they were being watched while they consistently used the store's microwaves. Similarly, youth in this study would leverage members in the social network to use their cooking appliances, such as portable grills or hot plates. Thus, service providers should minimize the responsibility of these social networks and provide youth with more opportunities to use microwaves, free of stigma and discrimination. Microwaves and hot plates should be added to the donation list that is sent out to all volunteers, so that youth who access these services can be gifted free kitchen appliances more often. Additionally, microwaves should be more available at community spaces, such as churches and parks. Lastly, in order to reduce the risk of stealing, service agencies should provide free pet food to their youth, since youth in this study admitted to stealing food for their pets.

Lastly, lack of control was a large theme among youth who ate the free food at shelters and drop in centers. The main concern was that youth had no autonomy in choosing their food, and felt like they should "just eat the food since it's free". In order to provide youth with more autonomy in their food consumption, service agencies should create educational material describing the day's food options. This signage can either be on a communal bulletin board or juxtaposed next to each food option, but all signage should specifically list each dish item. Ideally the option to know what food is being provided, plus any major ingredients, could not only improve rates of both perceived and actual control among youth, but also improve their relationship with food. The improved rates of perceived control could also transfer to other aspects of youth's lives.

Appendix

Interview Guide

1. If this were your last day on earth, what would your last meal be? Who would you eat it with? And where would you be?
2. How do your eating habits differ when you are not at SPY?
3. What foods make your body feel good?
4. Do you spend money on food/meals when you're out? If so, how much?
 - a. Reasoning: *Understanding that youth have EBT and other funding streams to readily spend on food.*
5. Tell me about a typical day regarding your food intake.
 - a. Probe: Where do you eat most of your meals?
 - b. Probe: Ask to explain these spaces. Who is usually there? How often do they provide food? Do you feel comfortable there?
 - c. Probe: Do you eat alone? Who do you eat with?
 - d. Probe: Do you have any dietary habits?
6. Nowadays, do you feel in control of what you eat? Why or why not?
 - a. Probe: Do you have parents, guardians, or friends help you get food?
 - b. Probe: How much are you willing to spend on a meal?
 - c. Probe: Do you trade anything (other than money) for food?
 - d. Probe: Have you ever done anything you are not proud of to attain food?
7. How many times do you come to SPY on an average week?
 - a. Probe: Have you ever received snacks from SPY outreach? What would you be thinking during those times?

- b. *Reasoning: Looking at the relationship between outreach and food; Also getting at life on the boardwalk without having to ask it directly*
- 8. How many meals do you usually eat in a day?
- 9. How many of those meals are coming from SPY?
- 10. How much water do you drink on a daily basis?
- 11. Finish my sentence: When I'm hungry, I'm...and sometimes I even _____ because I'm hungry
 - a. *Reasoning: This is getting at food acquisition strategies in another way*
- 12. Do you have EBT? GR?
 - a. Probe: How long can you make it last?
 - b. Probe: Will you ever buy food instead of coming to SPY? If so, why? If not, why not?
- 13. What was the most extreme thing you've done to get food?
- 14. Do you spange?
 - a. Follow up: If so, can you explain further. What do you buy?
 - b. Follow up: If not, why not? How do you get money for food when services are not open?
- 15. Prioritize the following based off of your individual preferences: sleep, shelter, safety, cleanliness, relationship, friendships, food
 - a. Probe: Can you walk be through your reasoning?

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