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EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES AND GOALS OF HOMELESS YOUTH
AND BARRIERS TO REACHING THESE GOALS

by

Rachel Peterson

A thesis proposal submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Psychology

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2016

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ABSTRACT

Educational Experiences and Goals of Homeless Youth
and Barriers to Reaching these Goals

by

Rachel Peterson, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2016

Major Professor: Jamison D. Fargo, Ph.D.
Department: Psychology

Over one million youth (age 14-24) experience homelessness each year in the United States, about 5-8% of all youth. For homeless youth to become independent and avoid cycling through public services, consistent income is necessary. Barriers to gaining employment and subsequent income often stem from lack of education. Defining the educational goals of homeless youth and barriers in reaching them are crucial steps in the development of relevant and effective educational interventions. Using data obtained from surveys of homeless youth in an urban Western city, this study found large discrepancies between the educational goals of homeless youth and actual academic attainment. Becoming homeless before the age of 18 and having fewer lifetime parents or guardians were predictive of lacking a diploma or GED. Implications of this research for informing educational interventions for homeless youth are discussed.

(64 pages)

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

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The cost of homelessness is high, not only in terms of the array of traumatic experiences of those who are homeless, but in monetary terms for society as a whole. It costs between \$20,000 and \$40,000 annually for one homeless individual to cycle through public service systems such as emergency rooms, jail, mental health care facilities, and shelters. This annual cost can add up quickly with long periods of homelessness. For half of homeless youth (age 14-24), homelessness will not end during adolescence. Lack of steady employment is one of the largest barriers for youth experiencing homelessness to become permanently self-sufficient. Examining the factors that contribute to the employability of these youth is critical to developing interventions. For many, education is the key to becoming self-sufficient and exiting homelessness. The unemployment rate is significantly lower for Americans who obtain a high school diploma. The unemployment rate declines further with increases in college education.

The findings of this paper are a needs assessment of sorts, pointing to considerable gaps in educational services currently available to youth experiencing homelessness, and invalidating the idea that homeless youth do not wish to attain high school, technical school, and college degrees. On the contrary, these youth have high educational aspirations, and while capable of succeeding in education, may require support beyond that of their housed peers because of the additional barriers they face. This desire to pursue education is an important consideration, and should inform the way we approach youth experiencing homelessness with educational services.

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CHAPTER I

LITERATURE REVIEW

Youth Homelessness

On a given night, over 656,000 people in the United States experience homelessness and the odds of an individual experiencing homelessness in the course of a year are about one in 200 (National Alliance to End Homelessness [NAEH], 2011). Though estimates of the extent of youth homelessness vary, researchers generally agree that existing counts are a significant underestimate of the actual numbers (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2008). One reason for this is that annual censuses, known as Point-in-Time counts, often fail to capture unaccompanied youth (age 14 to 24) who are homeless (NAEH, 2006). This is evidenced by the fact that in 2009, 35% of all communities in the U.S. reported that they enumerated no homeless youth (NAEH, 2011). According to the NAEH (2006), there are 1-1.5 million youth who experience homelessness each year. This is about 5-8% of all youth in the United States. Estimates of the percentage of the homeless population comprised of unaccompanied minors also vary, from at least two (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2008) to five percent (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2004).

Homeless youth can be defined as “unaccompanied teenagers and young adults who lack safe, stable housing and who are not in the care of a parent or guardian” (Julianelle, 2007, p. 1). This includes youth who live in shelters, on the street, “couch surfing” with friends, or in group homes (Tierney, Gupton, & Hallett, 2008, p. 7).

Though these youth are often age 18 or over, they are generally included in the term “homeless youth.” Haber and Toro (2004) suggest that this inclusion is useful because the challenges faced by homeless youth over age 18 can resemble those typically faced by younger adolescents. It is unlikely that using “teenage” as a lower age limit in this definition excludes more than a miniscule number of unaccompanied homeless individuals; research has suggested that it is rare for youth under the age of 13 to be homeless without a parent or guardian (Clark & Robertson, 1996; Robertson, 1991).

Homeless youth are a heterogeneous group, but have several common characteristics. Twenty to fifty-five percent of homeless youth have been in custody of the child welfare system (Robertson & Toro, 1998). Twenty to fifty percent of homeless youth were sexually abused in their homes, and 40-60% were physically abused (MacLean, Embry, & Cauce, 1999; Robertson & Toro, 1998). A disproportionately high number of homeless youth are of a racial minority, and within this subgroup, African American youth tend to be the most overrepresented (Cauce et al., 1994; McCaskill, Toro, & Wolfe, 1998; Owen et al., 1998). In addition, a higher percentage of homeless youth report identifying as LGBTQ than their housed peers (Kruks, 1991; Tenner, Trevithick, Wagner, & Burch, 1998). By some estimates, 20-40% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ, compared to only 3-5% of the overall population (Ray, 2006). Teenage mothers are also at higher risk of becoming homeless than teen girls who do not have children (Green & Ringwalt, 1998; Kennedy, 2007).

The teen and young adult years are a time of transition. During this time, most youth have support from family and school personnel, as well as from peer groups in the workplace or in leisure activities (Aviles & Helfrich, 2004). Because homeless youth

often lack these supports, it is difficult for them to successfully navigate this transition. For youth, homelessness is associated with a variety of risk factors and poor outcomes. One study reported that homeless youth have a mortality rate 11 times that of their housed peers (Roy et al., 2004). This may be due in part to the elevated suicide rate among homeless youth (e.g., Mallett, Rosenthal, Myers, Milburn, & Rotheram-Borus, 2004; Unger et al., 1998; Yoder, 1999). Youth experiencing homelessness are more likely to experience abuse than those who are housed (Slesnick, Dashora, Letcher, Erdem, & Serovich, 2009; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). Many youth have poor psychological health before becoming homeless, and the stress caused by life on the street can instigate or exacerbate mental health conditions (Barber, Fonagy, Fultz, Simulinas, & Yates, 2005; Cauce et al., 2000; Slesnick, Kang, Bonomi, & Prestopnik, 2008). Homeless youth are also more likely than housed youth to use illicit substances (Baer, Ginzler, & Peterson, 2003; Schwartz, Sorensen, Ammerman, & Bard, 2008; Zerger, Strehlow, & Gundlapalli, 2008) and to engage in risky sexual behaviors (Kral, Molnar, Booth, & Watters, 1997; Zimet & Sobo, 1995) or survival sex to obtain food, shelter, or other necessities (Mallett et al., 2004; Toro, Dworsky, & Fowler, 2007).

Because homeless youth are unlikely to complete school, the unemployment rate of this group is as high as 66-71% (Ferguson & Xie, 2008). This high level of unemployment creates a dependency on public service systems and contributes to the perpetuation of homelessness (Norum, 1996). Additionally, because homeless youth are at risk for poor mental and physical health, addiction and arrest, they frequent public institutions, including jail, mental health care facilities, substance abuse treatment facilities, shelters, and emergency rooms. It costs between \$20,000 and \$40,000 annually

for one homeless individual to cycle through these public service systems (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2010). Recent directions for intervention in the case of homelessness include Permanent Supportive Housing, the placement of homeless individuals in housing with supportive services. Providing supportive housing to a homeless individual costs approximately \$12,000 annually (Hardy, 2010). Though more efficient than non intervention, this remains a significant cost considering that over 656,000 individuals are homeless in the United States on a given night (NAEH, 2011).

Knowing youth homelessness is a widespread and costly social issue, this paper considers the relationship between education and youths' experience of homelessness. The next topics, Education's Effect on Quality of Life, and Identity Development, are key concepts underlying an understanding of this relationship.

Education's Effect on Quality of Life

Education level is closely related to the ability to generate permanent, consistent income. In the current U.S. economy, higher education is required for most professional jobs (Arnett, 2004). According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2009) the unemployment rate is significantly lower for high school graduates than for those who drop out. In 2009, the unemployment rate for persons without a high school diploma was 14.6%. For those with a high school diploma, this rate dropped to 9.7%, and for those with a bachelor's degree, the rate was only 5.2%. The National Center for Education Statistics reported that in 2008 the median annual earnings of high school drop-outs were

\$23,500. This amount narrowly exceeds \$22,050, the poverty line for a family of four (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). The median annual earnings of a high school graduate in 2008 were \$30,000, and for those with a bachelor's degree were \$46,000 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008).

In addition, success in education can lead to increases in self-esteem, which can act as a buffer against stress (Gilligan, 1999). For homeless youth, few opportunities exist for them to productively use their intellect and other strengths. Educational interventions may act as a catalyst for developing healthy self-esteem as well as providing a means to a more fulfilling career (Gilligan, 1999). For many youth, education also provides a valuable connection to the arts, sports, leisure activities, and cultural ties in the school (Gilligan, 1999), which can further increase youths' opportunities for positive social interactions and the development of increased self-efficacy.

Identity Development

The importance of developing a sense of identity during adolescence has been acknowledged for many decades (e.g. Erikson, 1968). One important model of identity development was introduced by Marcia in 1966. This model presents four identity statuses based on two processes, exploration of and commitment to developmental domains. These include educational, ideological, and sexual domains. Achievement status indicates exploration followed by commitment. In moratorium, the adolescent is in the process of exploration, and has not made specific commitments. In foreclosure, a commitment is made without prior exploration. Diffusion signifies that no exploration or commitment has occurred.

Luyckx and colleagues (2006) and Crocetti and colleagues (2008) have both proposed dual cycle modified versions of Marcia's identity development model. These models propose that exploration is not a single construct, but can be divided into two related constructs: breadth exploration (referred to as "reconsideration" in Meeus et al.'s model) and depth exploration. Breadth exploration refers to the comparison of multiple identities, while depth exploration is indicative of research into the chosen identity. In Luyckx and colleagues' model (2006, p. 373), commitment is also divided into two subcategories, commitment making, which represents Marcia's original concept of commitment, and identification with commitment, or "the degree to which adolescents internalize and feel certain about their commitments."

Research has consistently yielded evidence for the movement of youth from diffusion toward achievement across adolescence (e.g. Kroger, 2007; Meeus, 2011; Meeus, W., van de School, R., Keijsers, L., Schwartz, S.J., & Branje, S., 2010). However, this pattern of progress in identity development is less likely to occur in youth with psychological problems, such as anxiety (Crocetti, Klimstra, Keijsers, Hale, & Meeus, 2009). Adolescents with a mature identity status generally are well adjusted by other indicators, including a positive personality profile, and performance at school. They are also more likely to live in supportive families. Though many adolescents progress to achievement status, there is a large subgroup of young adults who have not reached achieved status (Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2010). Indeed, identity development often progresses into adulthood (Meeus, 2011).

In the U.S. and other industrialized nations, youth begin making choices about which courses to take in secondary school that relate to their later career options

(Malanchuk, Messersmith, & Eccles, 2010). Establishing an occupational identity, or a notion of who she or he will become as a worker or professional, and what kind of work would best suit her or him (Eccles, 2009), is an important aspect of adolescent identity development. Malanchuk and colleagues (2010) applied the established model of general identity development, with adolescents moving from diffusion toward achievement, to career identity development in a longitudinal study following youth from 7th grade to age 21. Consistent with other research on identity development, this study reported that having more developed occupational identities was positively related to measures of well being (self-esteem, resilience) and negatively related to measures of psychological problems (anger, depression). Over time, 40% of participants showed increasingly complex occupational identities, meaning their identities became less vague, and more associated with goal setting and active planning. Eleven percent showed a stable pattern in their career identity throughout the course of the study. About 25% showed decreased complexity in career identity over time, and another quarter showed no consistent pattern over the 5 years of the study. These data suggests that establishing an occupational identity is not a universal or linear process.

Homeless Youth and Education

The majority of existing programs available for homeless youth aim to mitigate the negative effects of living on the street rather than getting youth permanently off the streets by allowing them to develop skills that enable educational success and employability. Haber and Toro (2004, p. 149) state that, “short-term services [for homeless youth] tend to address deficits rather than building competencies such as

learning or vocational skills.” Many programs evaluated in the literature are geared toward HIV prevention (e.g., Auerswald, Sugano, Ellen, & Klausner, 2006; Gleghorn et al., 1997; Rew, Fouladi, Land, & Wong, 2007; Rotheram-Borus et al., 2003) and substance abuse intervention (e.g., Baer, Garrett, Beadnell, Wells, & Peterson, 2007; Booth, Zhang, & Kwiatkowski, 1999; Peterson, Baer, Wells, Ginzler, & Garrett, 2006; Slesnick & Prestopnik, 2005; Slesnick, Prestopnik, Meyers, & Glassman, 2007).

Although empirical research on educational services for homeless youth is sparse, academic difficulties for homeless students are well documented. In a meta-analysis of research on homeless students, Obradovic and colleagues (2009) found that homeless adolescents were less academically resilient than younger homeless children, with resilience defined as having test scores within one standard deviation of national grade cohort averages. Estimates of the number of homeless youth who drop out of school vary. Many homeless youth do not obtain a high school diploma (e.g., Barber et al., 2005; Cauce et al., 2000; Gwadz, Nish, Leonard, & Strauss, 2007; Wilder Research, 2005), but are consistently high. One study of homeless youth in New York City found that homeless adolescents were four times more likely to drop out of school than their housed peers (Nunez, 1994). Barber et al. (2005) reported that two thirds of 18 to 21-year-old homeless youth had not obtained a high school diploma or a GED certificate at the point of program intake; and Hein (2011) found that 70% of homeless adolescent males had not completed a diploma or GED. By one estimate, less than one quarter of homeless children in the U.S. complete high school (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2008). The retention rate of homeless students in school seems to be about one-third (Dworsky, 2008; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2008).

Students who experience residential instability often move between schools excessively (Institute for Children and Poverty, 2001; Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003; Thompson, Bender, Windsor, Cook, & Williams, 2010; Tierney et al., 2008). In a given year, 41% of homeless students attend two schools, and 28% attend three or more schools (Better Homes Fund, 1999). In a study of all K-12 students in three Minnesota districts, Larson and Meehan (2011) found that while 12% of non mobile students were no longer enrolled in Minnesota schools, 59% of homeless and highly mobile students were no longer enrolled. Homeless youth are disproportionately absent from school (Duffield, 2001; Dworsky, 2008; Institute for Children and Poverty, 2001; Nunez, 1994; Rafferty, 1995; Sullivan & Knutson, 2000; Tierney et al., 2008). Over half of homeless students have been suspended for infractions related to their homelessness, such as not wearing the proper uniform or being excessively tardy or absent (Cardenas, 2005). These youths are more likely to fail a grade, display poor academic performance (Haber & Toro, 2004; Heinlein & Shinn, 2000; Massachusetts Department of Education, 2007), and have low achievement test scores (Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Allen-Meares, 2002). They are also more likely to repeat a grade (Dworsky, 2008; Rafferty, Shinn, & Weitzman, 2004), which increases the likelihood of dropping out (Rafferty, 1995). Many youth who become homeless have a history of academic difficulties, including suspension and expulsion (e.g., Haber & Toro, 2004; Pollio, Thompson, Tobias, Reid, & Spitznagel, 2006; Tierney et al., 2008; U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2010), and if a youth has not dropped out of school prior to becoming homeless, the experience of homelessness often disrupts schooling (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007).

Many homeless youth struggle with reading and math, and learning disabilities are prevalent. One study found that 75% of homeless students perform below grade level in reading and 54% performed below grade level in math (Better Homes Fund, 1999). Similar findings were obtained by Tierney et al. (2008) as well as by Zeisemer, Marcoux, and Marwell (1994). In both of these studies, about two-thirds of homeless students were below grade level in reading and math. Homeless youth are more likely than their housed peers to have one or more learning disabilities (Barwick & Siegel, 1996; Haber & Toro, 2004). Cauce et al. (1994) found that 85% of youth using drop-in and emergency shelter services at a Seattle community-based agency had indications of specific learning disabilities or attention deficit problems. Other research suggests that 10-25% of homeless youth have participated in special education or remedial classes at school (Haber & Toro, 2004; Massachusetts Department of Education, 2007; Tierney et al., 2008). Homeless youth are also more likely to have behavior problems in school, including regressive behavior, inattentiveness, persistent tiredness, and inappropriate social interaction with adults (McCaskill et al., 1998; Thompson et al., 2010).

Other difficulties homeless youth face in obtaining an education include logistical complications pertaining to residency, guardianship, immunization and school records, and lack of transportation (Mawhinney-Rhoads & Stahler, 2006; Rafferty, 1995), and lack of time and space with which to complete school work (Tierney et al., 2008). Aviles and Helfrich (2004) found that youth in a shelter commonly indicated that the shelter did not provide an environment that allowed them to be productive with regard to schoolwork because of noise and the distracting environment. To enable students to complete assignments in shelters, it may be necessary to provide a separate, quiet

“school” area. Because so many youth have children, childcare is another service that is necessary in enabling homeless youth to complete school work (Aviles & Helfrich, 2004; Kennedy, 2007).

In 2001, the McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Act was reauthorized with the purpose of increasing school enrollment, attendance, and success for children and youth experiencing homelessness (Julianelle, 2007). The McKinney-Vento Act requires public schools to give homeless students the right to remain in their school of origin or to enroll in school in their current area of residence. This act also requires schools to provide transportation, to make all school-related activities fully accessible to homeless students, and to provide liaisons to advocate for the interests of homeless students and assist them in enrollment (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Even with this legislation in place, many school personnel lack understanding of the homeless population, which inhibits a school’s provision of appropriate services to these students. Few homeless students feel a connection to one or more adults in the school, and most do not participate in any extracurricular activities or other programs in the school. A study of youth in Massachusetts found that 58% of homeless students, compared with 81% of housed students, felt that there was a teacher or other school adult they could talk to if they had a problem (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2007). The same study reported that while 50% of housed students participate in an organized activity outside of school, only 30% of homeless youth participate. Tierney and colleagues (2008) reported even lower numbers, with less than 15% of homeless students reporting a relationship with a teacher that involved speaking outside of the class period, and fewer than 25% of homeless youth reporting involvement in an extracurricular activity. MacKay and Hughes

(1994) found this lack of staff awareness and sensitivity to be a main barrier for academic achievement in homeless youth. In contrast, if staff members are sensitive to the needs of homeless students, schools can act as an oasis for the youth, where they feel secure and supported in their goals (Julianelle, 2007). For school personnel to develop awareness, adequate information and resources on homeless youth and education must be made available to them.

While the drop-out rate of homeless youth is high (Barber et al., 2005; Cauce et al., 2000; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009; Nunez, 1994), these youth recognize the importance of education and often have career goals that require higher education or post secondary training. In one survey of homeless youth in Colorado, the majority indicated that they intended to complete their high school education, and over half said they were interested in pursuing education beyond high school (Norum, 1996). A study of homeless youth in California obtained similar results, with the majority surveyed expressing the desire to return to school and indicating that their life goals would require extensive education in order to achieve them (Julianelle, 2007); other studies have obtained similar results (Gwadz et al., 2009; Rafferty et al., 2004; Tierney et al., 2008).

In actuality, few homeless youth ever access vocational training or higher education (Tierney et al., 2008; Wilder Research, 2005). Most homeless youth of college age have not taken an entrance exam and are unaware of deadlines and requirements to apply to college and how to secure financial aid (Tierney et al., 2008). They generally lack information on post secondary options and relevant terminology, such as the differentiation between a vocational training center, a community college, and a

university (Tierney et al., 2008). In addition, homeless youth who are unaccompanied by adults are likely to lack financial resources to cover the costs associated with college attendance, including fees, books, and equipment. Homeless youth may be resistant to college or vocational training because it takes up time that a youth could be working for income (Broadbent, 2008).

No research to date has examined the specific career goals of homeless youth. Studies examining career goals among at-risk adolescents have implications for homeless youth, who are in many ways demographically similar to at-risk youth. Fleming and colleagues (2006) examined career goals among at-risk high school students. Responses to “what are your future plans and career goals?” differed across gender. Females were more likely to indicate goals that required a college education, while males were more likely to have goals that could be attained immediately after high school, or to be unsure of future goals. Establishing career goals is a task of normal adolescent development (Salmela-Aro, Nurmi & Ruotsalainen, 1995) and can serve as a protective factor against negative outcomes (Fleming, Woods, & Barkin, 2006; Oyserman, Terry, & Bybee, 2002). It is important to study the formulation of career goals in the context of homelessness.

Another study of at-risk 9th grade students (Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2009) reported that common career goals among this group were careers in politics (mayor or other government), sales, media services (television announcer, etc.), and careers in entertainment, such as musicians, actors, and professional athletes. It is likely that career goals of homeless youth will be similar to goals found among at-risk youth.

To narrow the gap between the educational goals of homeless youth and their actual educational attainment, empirically supported educational services and supports

are needed. Several studies have approached the issue of education-focused interventions with school-age children who are part of a homeless family (e.g., Daniels, 1992; Dupper & Halter, 1994; MacGillivray, Ardell, & Curwen, 2010; Strawser, Markos, Yamaguchi, & Higgins, 2000), but research addressing educational interventions with unaccompanied homeless youth is rare. In a review of homeless youth service evaluations, Slesnick et al. (2009) outlined 32 studies involving interventions for unaccompanied homeless youth. Intended outcomes in these studies included improved mental health, sobriety, HIV/AIDS prevention, employment, and improved family relationships. However, none of these studies listed educational progress as a desired outcome. One study evaluating crisis shelter services for homeless youth in the Midwest determined that these services helped youth in the short-term, but no long-term impact was detected with regard to employment, education, or risk behaviors at six-week, three-month, or six-month follow-up (Pollio et al., 2006).

Intervention studies that have reported educational outcome data have been largely based on transitional housing programs, which are temporary housing programs designed to assist youth in moving out of homelessness and into a more permanent housing situation. Results from these studies have indicated that females using services were more likely to be participating in school and educational interventions than male students (Hyman, Aubry, & Klodawsky, 2011), and that male homeless youth are more likely to report educational difficulties, including poor grades, learning disabilities, and history of suspension and expulsion, than female homeless youth (Thompson, Zittel-Palamara, & Maccio, 2004). In a study of homeless youth service providers in four Midwestern states, Thompson and colleagues (2002) showed that youth who received

comprehensive long-term day treatment services (as opposed to crisis shelter services) showed a reduction in suspension, expulsion, and time in detention from intake to six-week follow-up. Another study reported that youth who have been in housing programs for a longer duration are more likely to be participating in school (Hyman et al., 2011). In a comparison of three transitional housing programs, all of which offered educational assistance, Dworsky (2010) found that 56-61% of youth were either attending school or had completed school at exit. Barber et al. (2005) reported educational outcomes of youth in a crisis shelter, although educational attainment was not a specified target of the intervention. Three months after participating in a program that offered 17 different services to homeless youth, one of which was “education assistance,” only 20% of youth were enrolled in an educational program.

For half of homeless youth, homelessness does not end during adolescence (Simons & Whitbeck, 1991). Although education is not a basic need, offering educational services provides a means for homeless youth to avoid cycling through public services and becoming chronically homeless (Norum, 1996). Education is a strong predictor of the ability to gain employment (Gwadz et al., 2009) and overcome poverty (Nunez, 1995), as evidenced by a recent study that found adolescents who were attending school were nearly three times more likely to have exited homelessness at two-year follow-up (Milburn et al., 2009). In the short term, it is difficult for homeless youth to make the connection between daily choices and long-term goals (Tierney et al., 2008), in part because they see school curriculum as irrelevant and are “bored” by school (Raleigh-Duroff, 2004). Aviles and Helfrich (2004, p. 337) state that “[homeless] youth require assistance in prioritizing their responsibilities to identify small steps that facilitate goal

attainment.” This will assist youth in increasing both confidence and their ability to meet their own needs. It is clear that providing educational services to homeless youth as part of a comprehensive service system is beneficial for the youth in both the short-term and long-term.

Determining the educational background and profile of homeless youth, as well as their educational goals and attitudes are crucial first steps in developing relevant and effective educational interventions. The purpose of the current study is to provide and integrate information on the complex relationship between youth homelessness and educational achievement, goals, and barriers. This information can then be used to inform the development and implementation of educational interventions with the purpose of assisting youth in permanently exiting homelessness. Research questions in this study include:

1. What are the educational goals of homeless youth, and how discrepant are these goals from their current levels of educational attainment?
2. What are the career aspirations of homeless youth, and what level of education is required to obtain these careers? How do career goals differ between male and female homeless youth?
3. Do homeless youth have clear career goals, indicating the development of an occupational identity? Are homeless youth with more unstable backgrounds less likely to state clear career goals, as is predicted by identity development theories?

4. How do life experiences, including past experiences of abuse, history of drug use, involvement in the foster care system, and length of homelessness affect educational attainment among youth experiencing homelessness?
5. Do homeless youth who have children have lower educational attainment than homeless youth who do not have children?
6. What proportion of homeless youth have learning disabilities? How does this affect educational attainment?
7. Is employment experience related to educational attainment?
8. Do educational attainment and educational aspiration differ between male and female homeless youths?
9. How can information on education level and career goals among homeless youth inform effective educational interventions and supports?

CHAPTER II

METHODS

This study utilized data from a survey of homeless youth in an urban Western US city collected in conjunction with the national Point-in-Time count in 2011 and 2012. The purpose of the Point-in-Time count is to obtain an estimate of nationwide prevalence of homelessness on a particular night. Data collection for this study was completed as part of the homelessness service-based portion of this count. For this portion of the count, surveys were distributed to all service providers that were expected to encounter youth experiencing homelessness over the course of a week and providers were instructed to administer the survey to any homeless youth encountered during the week. Surveys were collected at the conclusion of the week.

Data Collection

Procedure

Surveys were administered to youth over a 1-week period by four service providers: a homeless youth drop-in center, an emergency shelter, an LGBTQ youth organization, a mental health service provider, and street outreach workers. The large majority of surveys were completed at the drop-in center for homeless youth. All data were collected anonymously and no identifying information was obtained. Youth completed these surveys on their own, but staff members were available to assist the youth if they had trouble reading or understanding questions. Participants were provided with a small incentive for completing the survey (generally a candy bar or soda). The

names of youth who had completed the survey were tracked separately to avoid duplication in respondents.

Sample

For this study, surveys from four biannual administrations were combined. Surveys were de-duplicated against previous cycles by discarding cases in which the respondent indicated that they had completed this survey six months prior to the current administration. The total number of surveys obtained from the four cycles combined was 244. Thirty-three were removed as duplicates. An additional 33 were removed because the participant had not responded to age or gender items. Logistic regression was used to compare participants who had responded to these items with those who had not, and no systematic differences were present. After these deletions, the sample size was 178. For analyses on whether participants had a high school diploma or GED, those under the age of 18 were removed (13 participants), leaving 165 participants included in analyses.

Because some youth in this sample reported more stable living arrangements than others, differentiations were made between those youth who met HUD's criteria for homelessness, and those at-risk of homelessness based on where they slept on the night of the survey (self-report). Youth were deemed literally homeless (meeting HUD criteria) if they slept in a homeless shelter, domestic violence shelter, motel/hotel/hostel that they pay for themselves, or place not meant for habitation. Youth who were currently staying with someone (couch-surfing) were not considered to be literally homeless (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2012). Youth who are literally homeless may also be part of a subcategory of street youth who are chronically homeless,

meaning that they experience repeated episodes of homelessness and are not able to maintain housing stability over time. HUD defines the chronically homeless as individuals who are unaccompanied, have a disabling condition, and have either been continually homeless for one year or longer or have experienced four episodes of homelessness within the past three years (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2012). Individuals currently identified as chronically homeless ($N = 6$) were included in the literal homeless group for a total of 84 literally homeless individuals. Youth were deemed at-risk of homelessness if they spent the previous night in transitional housing, their own apartment, the home of a family member, relative, or friend, or in an institution (e.g., hospital, detention facility, or jail) for a total of 93 individuals. Although HUD classifies individuals living in transitional housing as literally homeless, they are included in the at-risk homelessness group in this study due to their more stable housing situation than their literal homeless peers ($N = 10$).

Questionnaire

The survey instrument was four pages in length, and was designed to cover a wide range of youth characteristics and experiences. The instrument was developed in 2011 by Dr. Jamison Fargo (Professor), Kathleen Moore (Research Analyst), and Rachel Peterson (Graduate Student) based on the state Point-in-Time count survey instrument. It was designed to cover all areas of interest for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and incorporated items requested by local homeless youth service providers. This survey was administered to a small number of homeless youth before the study began as a pilot to alert researchers to any part of the survey that may be unclear,

and no part of the survey was reported by the youth as problematic or unclear. Items were included to assess current living situation and homelessness history, demographic variables, mental and physical health, reason for becoming homeless, service use, education history, employment history, and risk behaviors including drug use. In the three most recent surveys, participants were asked to indicate the level of schooling they plan on completing and their long-term career goal (127 respondents). Questions resulting in variables of interest in this study can be found in Table 1.

Statistical Analyses

Descriptive statistics were computed for all demographic, homelessness, and education variables, including last level of school completed, level of school youth intended to complete, career goals, the prevalence of learning disabilities, low English proficiency and illiteracy, and number of jobs held. In addition, a logistic regression analysis was conducted to assess for any differences between marginally housed and literally homeless youth in this sample. The outcome in this analysis was housing status (literal or marginal) and predictors included: gender, previous experience of abuse, current or past addiction, experience in foster care, age of first homelessness (before or after age 18), number of homelessness episodes, number of lifetime guardians, having children, and having a learning disability. All analyses were conducted using SPSS.

Table 1

Survey Questions for Variables of Interest

Question Text	Answer Choices
What is the last level of schooling you completed? (check all that apply)	<input type="checkbox"/> 9 th grade or less <input type="checkbox"/> 10 th grade <input type="checkbox"/> 11 th grade <input type="checkbox"/> 12 th grade (no diploma) <input type="checkbox"/> Currently attending school <input type="checkbox"/> GED <input type="checkbox"/> High school diploma <input type="checkbox"/> Some college <input type="checkbox"/> Technical Training (Job Corps, nursing, welding, etc.) <input type="checkbox"/> College graduate
What is the level of schooling you <i>plan on</i> completing? (check all that apply)	<input type="checkbox"/> 9 th grade or less <input type="checkbox"/> 10 th grade <input type="checkbox"/> 11 th grade <input type="checkbox"/> 12 th grade (no diploma) <input type="checkbox"/> GED <input type="checkbox"/> High school diploma <input type="checkbox"/> Technical training (Job Corps, nursing, welding, etc.) <input type="checkbox"/> College degree
What is your long-term career goal?	Open ended (free response)
What is your gender?	<input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/> Transgender - Female to Male <input type="checkbox"/> Transgender - Male to Female <input type="checkbox"/> Genderqueer <input type="checkbox"/> Other
How old are you?	<input type="checkbox"/> Under 15 <input type="checkbox"/> 15-17 <input type="checkbox"/> 18-19 <input type="checkbox"/> 20-21 <input type="checkbox"/> 22-24 <input type="checkbox"/> 25 or older

(table continued)

Table 1 (Continued)

Survey Questions for Variables of Interest

Question Text	Answer Choices
Did you experience any of the following <i>BEFORE</i> becoming homeless? (check all that apply)	<input type="checkbox"/> Emotional/verbal abuse <input type="checkbox"/> Physical abuse <input type="checkbox"/> Sexual abuse <input type="checkbox"/> None of these
Have you been addicted to drugs or alcohol?	<input type="checkbox"/> Never addicted <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, currently addicted <input type="checkbox"/> Not currently, but addicted in the past
Have you ever been in foster care?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
How long have you been homeless? (select one)	<input type="checkbox"/> Not currently homeless <input type="checkbox"/> Between 6 months and 1 year <input type="checkbox"/> Less than 6 months <input type="checkbox"/> More than 1 year
At what age did you first become homeless?	<input type="checkbox"/> Younger than 5 years <input type="checkbox"/> 5-10 years <input type="checkbox"/> 11-14 years <input type="checkbox"/> 15-17 years <input type="checkbox"/> 18-19 years <input type="checkbox"/> 20-21 years <input type="checkbox"/> 22-24 years <input type="checkbox"/> 25 years or older
How many times have you been homeless in the last 3 years? (include your current episode of homelessness)	<input type="checkbox"/> 0 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5+ <input type="checkbox"/> Never been homeless

(table continued)

Table 1 (Continued)

Survey Questions for Variables of Interest

Question Text	Answer Choices
How many parents/guardians have you had in your lifetime?	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <input type="checkbox"/> 6 <input type="checkbox"/> 7 <input type="checkbox"/> 8 <input type="checkbox"/> 9 <input type="checkbox"/> 10 or more
Are you a parent?	<input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Expecting first child <input type="checkbox"/> Expecting, have 1 or more children <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, 1 child <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, 2 children <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, 3 children <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, 4 or more children
Do any of the following apply to you? (check all that apply)	<input type="checkbox"/> Unable to read/write <input type="checkbox"/> Low English proficiency <input type="checkbox"/> Learning disability <input type="checkbox"/> None of these
How many jobs (10 hrs/wk +) have you ever held for more than two weeks?	<input type="checkbox"/> 0 <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 or more

To address the first research question, “What are the educational goals of homeless youth, and how discrepant are these goals from their current levels of educational attainment?”, a comparison was made between participants’ highest level of

education obtained and the reported level of school they plan on completing using a Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test.

In addressing the second question, “What are the career aspirations of homeless youth, and what level of education is required to obtain these careers?”, descriptive statistics were obtained for level of schooling the participant indicated that they planned to complete. Open-ended responses to the item, “What is your long-term career goal?”, were combined and coded. The Occupational Outlook Handbook, published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012), which lists the entry-level education for careers, was used to determine the level of education required to obtain participants’ stated career goals. The difference between required and actual education achievement, and whether that difference varied as a function of gender, was analyzed by conducting a 2x2 mixed design ANOVA with education level (required vs. actual) as the within-groups factor and gender (male vs. female) as the between-groups factor.

To address the third research questions, “Do homeless youth have clear career goals, indicating the development of an occupational identity?” and “Are homeless youth with more unstable backgrounds less likely to state clear career goals, as is predicted by identity development theories?”, a multiple logistic regression was conducted with whether the youth has a clear career goal as the outcome, and the following predictors serving as indicators of instability: previous experience of abuse, history in foster care, longer duration of homelessness, younger age of first homelessness, higher number of episodes of homelessness, and higher number of lifetime guardians. Career goals were coded as “clear” if the youth stated one specific career goal.

The next research question has many facets, with the purpose of looking at the impact several life experiences have on whether or not a homeless youth will obtain a high school diploma or GED. This question, “How do life experiences, including past experiences of abuse, history of drug use, involvement in the foster care system, and length of homelessness affect educational attainment?”, was addressed by performing a multiple logistic regression analysis with current level of educational attainment as the outcome (e.g., high school diploma, GED, or higher vs. those without) and the following as predictors: gender, one or more past occurrence(s) of abuse, whether or not the individual self-reported previous or current addiction to a substance, whether the participant had been involved in the foster care system, length of homelessness (one year or less, longer than one year), and whether the participant had become homeless before the age of 18, and number of homeless episodes in the last three years. The variable “lifetime number of parents/guardians” was originally included in the model as a predictor, meant as an indicator of stability. This variable was significantly correlated with involvement in foster care ($0.59, p < .01$), so it was not included in the final model. An additional predictor, children, was added to the model in order to address the fifth research question, whether homeless youth who have children have lower educational attainment than those who do not have children. To address the sixth research question, learning disability was added to the model. Similarly, for the seventh question, “Is employment experience related to educational attainment?” number of jobs held for two weeks or longer was added.

To address the research question number eight, “Do educational attainment and educational aspirations differ between male and female homeless youths?”, two chi-

square analyses were conducted: the first compared gender and possession of a high school diploma (or lack of); the second compared gender and whether or not the youth stated a goal of receiving a college degree (or less than a college degree). The main logistic regression with current level of educational attainment (diploma/GED vs. no diploma/GED) as outcome was also re-run separately for males and females to assess whether certain predictors of education level were significant for only one of the genders.

For all analyses examining how different facets of experience relate to the attainment of a high school diploma or GED, participants under age 18 were excluded as 18 is typically the age at which a high school diploma is obtained. In this data set, 14% of youth indicated that they were currently housed. It is likely that the majority of these youth had recently been housed with the guidance of case managers in various housing assistance programs. Because a significant number of youth had been housed, housing status was added to the model to assess whether housed youth reported higher educational attainment than those who were currently staying in homeless shelters, transitional living programs, domestic violence shelters, hotels, couch surfing, or in places not meant for habitation, such as in vehicles, parks, or abandoned buildings.

The last research question, “How can this information be used to inform effective educational interventions and supports for homeless youth?”, was addressed by extrapolating from results of the above analyses. Implications for effective interventions will be discussed below.

CHAPTER III

RESULTS

Descriptive Results

Participant demographics can be found in Table 2. Participant ages ranged from 14 to 23, with a median age of 20. Nearly two-thirds of the sample was male. The majority of this sample reported being white (67%). The next largest racial/ethnic groups represented were American Indian/Alaska Native (12%) and multi-racial (10%). Twenty percent of all participants reported being of Hispanic ethnicity. One-third of youth surveyed reported having children.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Variable		N (%)
Gender	Male	112 (64)
	Female	64 (36)
Race	White	115 (67)
	American Indian/Alaska Native	20 (12)
	Multi-racial	17 (10)
	African American	9 (5)
	Pacific Islander	4 (2)
	Asian	2 (1)
	Other/Unknown	5 (3)
Ethnicity	Hispanic	33 (20)
	Non Hispanic	134 (80)
Children	Has child(ren)	57 (34)
	No child(ren)	110 (66)
Homeless Status	Currently homeless	137 (86)
	Not currently homeless	22 (14)

The majority of youth in this sample were currently homeless, although 14% reported having their own home or apartment (including permanent supportive housing), but continued receiving homeless services. No significant results were obtained in the logistic regression analysis comparing marginally housed and literally homeless youth. Because these groups did not differ systematically in gender, previous experience of abuse, current or past addiction, experience in foster care, age of first homelessness (before or after age 18), number of homeless episodes, having children, or having a learning disability, marginally housed youth were included in all analysis with no distinction from literally homeless youth.

The number of homeless episodes experienced by youth in the last three years varied, with 28% reporting one episode, and approximately 20% each indicating that they had been homeless two, three, and four or more times. The duration of homelessness reported also varied. Forty-three percent of participants had been homeless between six months and one year. An additional 29% had been homeless over one year, and about one-quarter had been homeless for six months or less. About one-third of participants reported that their longest ever period of continuous homelessness was longer than one year. The majority of participants became homeless during adolescence, with 34% becoming homeless between age 15 and 17, and 36% between ages 18 and 19. About 17% experienced their first episode of homelessness during their early 20's and the remaining 14% became homeless before the age of 15. This is consistent with the finding that 14% of youth in this sample reported having been homeless with a parent or guardian at some point. A considerable portion of participants had been in the foster care system

(42%), and 56% of these youth remained in foster care until they aged out of the system at age 18.

Addressing the first research question, “What are the educational goals of homeless youth, and how discrepant are these goals from their current level of educational attainment?” findings indicate that over half (53%) of participants had a high school diploma or GED at the time of the survey. Seventeen percent indicated that they had attended some college, although none of the participants had completed college. Two percent had completed some form of technical training. Three percent indicated that their highest level of education was ninth grade, 8% tenth grade, and 23% eleventh grade. When asked about the level of school they intend to complete, half (49%) of participants endorsed “college degree.” Twelve percent intend to complete post secondary technical training. Another 20% see a high school diploma as their highest intended level of education, and 11% see GED as their highest educational attainment.

The level of education participants intended to attain differed significantly from the actual level of educational attainment of participants, $Z = -8.25, p < .001$. No significant differences were found between male and female participants in actual educational attainment as indicated by possession of a high school diploma or GED $\chi^2 (8) = 9.89, p = .27$, or in educational aspirations as indicated by a goal of receiving a college degree $\chi^2 (7) = 12.67, p = .08$. Potential barriers to educational attainment in this group include learning disabilities, reported by 17% of participants, having low English proficiency (3%), and illiteracy (3%).

The second research questions, “What are the career aspirations of homeless youth, and what level of education is required to obtain these careers? How do career goals differ

between male and female homeless youth?”, is addressed through responses to the open-ended item, “What is your long-term career goal?” These responses varied considerably. Some responses were vague, such as, “being happy” or “keep a job.” Fifty-nine respondents, or 46% of the 127 participants presented with this item stated a specific career goal. Career goals included artistic careers (actor, artist, musician, etc.), engineering, auto mechanics, construction, chef, nursing, doctor, lawyer, business careers, careers in computers, careers in criminal justice, farmer, military careers, teacher, and veterinarian. The most commonly stated career goals were in auto mechanics (6 participants), medical careers such as medical assisting, nursing, and paramedics (6 participants), computer science careers (5), veterinarian (4), chef (4), and careers in business (4). No significant differences were found between male and female participants in education level required for stated career goal. Table 3 presents the minimum level of education required to attain participants’ career goals according to the Occupational Outlook Handbook.

Career Goals

Thirteen of 178 participants reported being under age 18 and were excluded from analyses using high school diploma/GED as the outcome, leaving a sample size of 165 for analysis. The third set of research questions focused on occupational identity development: “Do homeless youth have clear career goals, indicating the development of an occupational identity? Are homeless youth with more unstable backgrounds less likely

Table 3

Education Level Required for Career Goals

	Male Participants	Female Participants	All Participants
Education Level	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
High School Diploma	14 (40)	8 (35)	22 (38)
Technical Training	1 (3)	2 (9)	3 (5)
Associate's Degree	3 (9)	5 (22)	8 (14)
Bachelor's Degree	11 (31)	5 (22)	16 (28)
Master's Degree	2 (6)	0 (0)	2 (3)
Doctoral or Professional Degree	4 (11)	3 (13)	7 (12)

to state clear career goals, as is predicted by identity development theories?”, Of the 119 youth who were asked for their long-term career goal and responded to other items in the section, 54 (46%) stated a clear career goal. Table 4 presents the results of the logistic regression model comparing the backgrounds of youth with clear career goals to those without clear career goals. No predictors were significant in this model, suggesting that in this sample, whether a youth has a clear career goal is unrelated to an unstable background when indicated by previous experience of abuse, history in foster care, longer duration of homelessness, earlier age of first homelessness, and a greater number of episodes of homelessness.

Table 4

Predictors of Clear Career Goals

Variable		Odds Ratio	95% Confidence Interval
Experience of Abuse Ref = No History of Abuse	History of Abuse	1.77	0.79, 4.00
Foster Care System Ref = Never in Foster Care	History in Foster Care	1.60	0.63, 4.07
Duration of Homelessness Ref = Homeless Less than 1 Year	Homeless Over 1 Year	0.69	0.29, 1.62
Age of First Homelessness Ref = Homeless Age 18 or Over	Homeless Before Age 18	1.34	0.58, 3.09
Number Episodes of Homelessness		1.00	0.74, 1.34

Educational Attainment

The results of the logistic regression model with high school diploma/GED versus no high school diploma/GED as the outcome, addressing the question, “How do life experiences, including past experiences of abuse, history of drug use, involvement in the foster care system, and length of homelessness affect educational attainment among youth experiencing homelessness?” are presented in Table 5. Research questions five, six and seven: “Do homeless youth who have children have lower educational attainment than homeless youth who do not have children?”; “How many homeless youth have learning disabilities? How does this affect educational attainment?”; and “Is employment experience related to educational attainment?” are also addressed in Table 5. The model

Table 5

Predictors of High School Diploma or GED

Variable		Odds Ratio	95% Confidence Interval
Gender Ref = Male	Female	1.40	0.52, 3.72
Experience of Abuse Ref = No History of Abuse	History of Abuse	0.74	0.28, 1.95
Addiction Ref = No Addiction History	Currently Addicted	2.14	0.76, 6.05
	Formerly Addicted	0.64	0.18, 2.30
Foster Care System Ref = Never in Foster Care	History in Foster Care	1.08	0.42, 2.79
Duration of Homelessness Ref = Homeless Less than 1 Year	Homeless Over 1 Year	0.55	0.21, 1.44
Age of First Homelessness Ref = Homeless Age 18 or Over	Homeless Before Age 18	0.71	0.26, 2.00
Number Episodes of Homelessness		1.20	0.83, 1.71
Children Ref = No Children	Has Child(ren)	0.37*	0.14, 0.95
Learning Disability Ref = No Learning Disability	Learning Disability	2.14	0.60, 7.65
Number of Jobs Held		1.39*	1.04, 1.90
Currently Housed Ref = Not housed	Currently Housed	0.80	0.23, 2.80

* $p < .05$

was initially run without inclusion of whether or not the youth had children, or a learning disability, or had been employed. These were added to the model, one at a time. Because

14% of youth in this sample reported being housed, housing status (yes/no) was added to the model.

The final model predicting whether youth had a high school diploma/GED successfully predicted 69.4% of cases. Gender, experiences of abuse, addiction, history in the foster care system, duration of homelessness, age of first homelessness, number of homeless episodes, having a learning disabilities, and current housing status were not significant predictors of whether a participant had obtained a high school diploma or GED. Only two predictor variables were significantly associated with academic status, having children, $OR = 0.37$, 95% CI [0.14, 0.95], $p = .04$, and number of jobs held for two weeks or longer across the lifetime, $OR = 1.39$, 95% CI [1.04, 1.90], $p = .03$. Participants who had a child (or children) were 63% less likely to have a diploma than those with no children. The more jobs a participant had held for two weeks or longer, the more likely they were to have a diploma or GED.

When logistic regressions were run separately for male and female respondents, slightly different results were obtained. In the male-participant only model ($N = 71$), 70.4% of cases were successfully predicted. Among males, having a child (or children) and having a learning disability were significantly predictors of current educational attainment. Male participants with a child (or children) were 78% less likely to have a diploma or GED than their peers without children, $OR = 0.22$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.86], $p = .03$. Those who reported a learning disability were more likely to have a diploma or GED, $OR = 10.99$, 95% CI [.05, 96.28], $p = .03$. With only female participants in the model ($N = 40$), 85% of cases are successfully predicted. With this small N , no predictors were significant in the model, although being homeless before age 18 was a marginally

significant predictor of lacking a diploma or GED, $OR = 0.09$, 95% CI [0.01, 1.02], $p = .052$.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

Education, Career Goals, and Identity Development

In this sample, 53% of participants age 18 or older reported having a high school diploma or GED. This is higher than rates obtained in previous research, which generally fall around one-third (Barber et al., 2005; Dworsky, 2008; Hein, 2011). It is unclear why youth in this study were more likely to have a diploma or GED than those in previous studies. Though this rate is higher than in previous research, the proportion of youth who reported intending to attend college is comparable, even a little lower, than the number of youth who indicate intending to move on to college in other studies of homeless youth (e.g. Julianelle, 2007; Norum, 1996). It is interesting to note that this elevated percentage of youth who have completed high school is not accompanied by an elevated rate of youth who express interest in entering college or vocational training.

One explanation for this finding may be the discrepancy between participants' stated educational goals and their stated career goals; considering that 61% of youth who had a clear career goal stated career goals that required post secondary education, while only 49% expressed an intention to attend college. As identity development theory would predict, youth who are at-risk are less likely to have goals that include clear and reasonable plans of how to reach these goals. Homeless youth may not understand the level of education that is required to obtain a career in which they are interested. In contrast to literature examining differences in education required for career goals of adolescent females and adolescent males, this study found no significant differences

between the genders in actual educational attainment, educational goals, or education required for stated career goals.

The fact that fewer than half of respondents had a clear career goal suggests that the majority of homeless youth have not had the opportunity to develop clear occupational identities. Knowing that adolescents with a mature identity status are generally well-adjusted by other measures, including performance at school, and are more likely to have supportive families, it is not surprising that the majority of homeless youth surveyed do not have a developed occupational identity. Only 45% of youth in this study had a clear career goal, even though the majority of participants were young adults (mean age of 20). This is consistent with studies on identity development have found that this process often progresses into adulthood (Meeus, 2011), and that youth with psychological problems such as anxiety (Crocetti et al., 2009), and lack of family support (Kroger et al., 2010) are less likely to progress to an achieved status during adolescence. The youth in this study had experienced numerous challenges during adolescence and young adulthood, including family instability, substance abuse and addiction, and homelessness. Because of this, homeless youth may take more time and need support in forming realistic career goals and formulating a plan to reach these goals than housed young adults who have had stability and family support throughout adolescence.

Having work experiences, however, may promote advancement of occupational identity. Models of Luyckx and colleagues (2006), and Crocetti and colleagues (2008) provide a potential explanation for the finding that increase in number of jobs held predicts having a diploma or GED. Having several jobs may provide the opportunity for breadth exploration (or reconsideration, according to Crocetti et al.), a crucial construct to

developing an occupational identity, which would affect a youth's persistence in school. It is also possible that this finding is indicative of a common construct, not accounted for in this model, underlying both employment experience and experiences in school. Future research should explore this possibility.

The Relationship between Parenthood and Education

It is worth expanding here on the relationship between having a child and current education level. Having a child was a significant predictor of lacking a diploma or GED in the main model, and it is also interesting to note that having children was significant for male participants, but not for female participants, when they were separated, as a predictor of lacking a diploma or GED. Often mothers are the custodial parents, and may have access to resources and services that the child's father does not, including federal financial aid for being a single parent. These services and resources could mitigate negative outcomes for young mothers.

Learning Disabilities and Education

In only male participants, the presence of a learning disability was predictive of having a diploma or GED. The relationship is positive; males who reported the presence of a learning disability were more likely to a diploma. It is possible that those who completed school had a diagnosed learning disorder, which could lead to more effective services in school. It could also be that those with learning disabilities were simply in school for longer, and therefore had a larger temporal window in which to be diagnosed with a learning disability. Even with this finding, undiagnosed learning disabilities may

be a barrier to education for youth who have academic struggles, but no explanation for their difficulty or supports in place to minimize the effect of the learning disability.

Youth who have been out of school for an extended period of time, or who quit attending at an earlier age may need assessment for the presence of learning disabilities, and the resulting accommodations.

Limitations, Future Directions

There are several limitations to this study. First, youth were recruited to complete surveys by homeless youth service providers. Therefore this sample is not representative of all homeless youth, only those who utilize services. Additionally, because these data are self-report, and due to characteristics of the homeless youth population, there are limitations to the accuracy. The self-report format allows for under-reporting and over-reporting certain behaviors. Though staff were present and offered to assist youth in taking the survey, learning disabilities, illiteracy, and mental illness all potentially affect the accuracy of data collected in the survey. In addition, this study did not evaluate the role of mental health issues in education. Future studies should assess the impact of mental illness on occupational identity development and educational attainment.

It would be useful for future research to facilitate direct comparisons between educational outcomes and goals between at-risk youth and youth experiencing homelessness, to determine whether theories applying to the development of at-risk youth also apply to homeless youth in a model with homelessness at one end of a poverty continuum, or whether there are discrete differences in the experiences and needs of homeless youth when compared to at-risk youth. It may also be advantageous to

supplement self-report data with administrative data, such as school records, service provider use, and documentation of learning disabilities.

Implications for Intervention

Youth experiencing homelessness often lack the ability to explore opportunities, both breadth and depth, that would facilitate the development of a clear occupational identity. It is possible that for some youth, job experience stands in for academic experience in providing the opportunity to develop an occupational identity. The significant relationship between number of jobs held and having a diploma or GED alludes to the connection between education and employment. In developing interventions with youth experiencing homelessness, it will likely be more effective to create a program addressing education and employment, and the relationship between the two. This would provide youth with knowledge and multiple skill sets supporting progression toward permanent self-sufficiency. Combining the two should also reduce discrepancies between career goals and intended level of education. Interventions combining the elements of both education and employment are recommended, rather than separate programs or services for each of these, or addressing only one of the two topics. Facilitating career exploration may encourage progress in education by helping youth to establish a realistic career goal to work toward. This could make it more likely for youth to pursue education, knowing that homeless youth are sometimes resistant to college or vocational training because it takes up time that a youth could be working for income (Broadbent, 2008). Making the connection between daily choices and long-term goals is key (Tierney et al., 2008).

There is a subgroup of youth who stated career goals, but need assistance in progressing in occupational identity development. Several youth stated goals that may be impossible or unlikely for them to attain as a permanent means of self-sufficiency, such as being a career actor, musician or artist, or careers that require extensive education, such as doctors or lawyers. It may take some coaching to gently guide youth toward more realistic careers that would allow them to support themselves in the near and distant future.

Homeless young mothers both face additional barriers to education, and have access to additional resources not available to their peers without children, or youth who are non custodial parents. Meeting the needs of young mothers is important, but several services are in place to meet these needs. The finding that homeless young fathers are less likely to have a diploma or GED alludes to the needs of these fathers, who may not have the resources available to them that are accessible to mothers. This sub-group of homeless youth may need additional supports in progressing toward permanent self-sufficiency.

In conclusion, in order to become permanently self-sufficient, youth experiencing homelessness need experiences in exploring occupations both in breadth and in depth. The development of a clear occupational identity should be a key component in educational and employment interventions with this group. Interventions with this group should incorporate both education and employment exploration, and find creative ways to link daily actions now to long-term goals. General recommendations for subgroups of homeless youth have been presented. However, it is important to keep in mind that each youth comes with a unique set of education and employment histories, personal goals,

barriers to reaching these goals, and varying levels of occupational identity development. As a result, interventions need to be flexible and catered to the needs of the individuals served.

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