YOUTH HOMELESSNESS:
EXPLORING SUPPORT NETWORKS

A Project

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MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK

by
Martha Helen Gonzales

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YOUTH HOMELESSNESS:
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A Project

by

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Division of Social Work
Abstract

of

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS:
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by

Martha Helen Gonzales

This research explored the effects of social support networks on the well-being of transition-age homeless youth. The data is drawn from a qualitative study that explored the attitudes and experience of transition-age homeless youth in the greater Sacramento areas. A criterion sample of 10 transition-age homeless youth comprised of ages 18 to 24. This content analysis study incorporated in-depth interviews with open-ended questions regarding participants’ support networks. Demographic data, such as gender, ethnicity, and age, was also collected. The main themes of support found were from: peers, family, and social service providers. Network size, group members, and relationship strength influenced support provided to the respondents. Significant others and their peers were found to provide more emotional and tangible support than participants’ family. Perceptions of social service providers varied, though three participants perceived them as a primary support network. Implications for social work practice and policy are discussed.

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_______________________
Date

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Chapter 1

Statement of the Problem

During a year of direct practice in a school setting under a McKinney-Vento Homeless Liaison, observations by the researcher were made that showed unstable networks of support among students experiencing homelessness. Some of the homeless students expressed reservations from sharing their homelessness with their classmates because they feared potential negative reactions, which could have further damaged their relationships. Although most homeless youth seen by the researcher were not unaccompanied youth but instead were experiencing homelessness with their families, they voiced feeling lonely and became estranged from friends and some family members.

The idea of exploring homeless youth’s support networks and the role it plays in their lives was intriguing to explore, especially because trust is uneasily attained among homeless youth. Given time, rapport was being built between the youth and the researcher, which allowed youth to accept the researcher. Given time, students expressed their respect for the researcher as they perceived her as nonjudgmental and trustworthy because she honored their confidentiality amongst school staff. During this time, most youth appeared not to think much about their self-worth, nor were they cognizant of the support networks available to them. Focusing on the youth’s academics and attendance was the primary focus in school social work. In addition, encouraging youth to see their full potential appeared to improve their outlook on life and develop an awareness of their support networks also became a primary interest. A holistic approach was taken, which was evident as the researcher was not only a source of support, but a resource to meet
their other needs and family’s needs.

Specifically, food, shelter, and clothing are among the simplest basic needs of human beings; unfortunately, there are numerous people whose basic needs are not being met, including youth. In the instance when basic needs are not being met, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theorizes that the higher level needs will not be met due to the persons constant struggle meeting their basic needs (Kosslyn & Rosenberg, 2002). Unfortunately, people experiencing homelessness constantly struggle with meeting their basic needs. Kilmer, Cook, Crusto, Strater, & Haber (2012) noted that youth who experience homelessness are at “additional risk for adversity exposure and difficulties in adjustments, including social and emotional problems, high risk behavior, and problems in health and education” As a result, social workers and other helping professionals have historically sought to reduce the prevalence and/or alleviate social issues i.e. homelessness.

This chapter will address the statement of the problem, the background of the problem, the statement of the research problem, the purpose of the study, the research question, the theoretical framework used to address the topic, and define the terms used in this study. Finally assumptions, justifications, and delimitations are discussed, and a summary concludes the chapter.

**Background of the Problem**

An estimate of 1.6 million youth experience homelessness in the United States for one or more days within a year, along with 200,000 to 400,000 transition-age-youth
(TAY), ages 18 to 24 (Covenant House Institute, 2010). It has been difficult to accurately verify the number of youth experiencing homelessness due to: their high mobility, the lack of a common definition of homeless youth, their perceived invisibility, and the non-youth inclusive methodologies for homeless point-in-time counts (Auerswald, Lin, Petry, & Hyatt, 2013; The Institute for Children and Poverty, 2003; Petry & Avent, 1992).

For example, society commonly associates homelessness with unconventional shelter (i.e. park benches, cardboard boxes, etc.); however homeless youth are a highly mobile population (Auerswald et al., 2013; Falci, Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Rose, 2011; Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010; Robertson, 1992). “Couch surfing” is the most common living situation for TAY, and is descriptively characterized by youth’s constant mobility because of their precarious or unstable housing and are therefore constantly seeking shelter from family, friends, and/or acquaintances (Osgood et al.).

“Homeless youth” commonly refers to ‘unaccompanied minors ages 12 through 17’ and young adults ages 18-24 that lack stable housing and “are economically and/or emotionally detached” from caregivers (Puddefoot, 2010, p. 1; Sanchez, Waller, & Green, 2006, p.780). However, the definition of homeless youth is inconsistent in federal statutes, which exemplifies the exclusion of couch surfing and making it difficult to accurately identify the scope of the problem and thereby reducing eligibility for programs that could effectively end youth’s homelessness.

In a 60 minutes segment, Pelley (2011) explains how homeless youth tip-toe in society hoping to go unnoticed, being unwilling to acknowledge or disclose their unstable
housing situation, nor seeking help to alleviate the situation. This demonstration of power and pervasiveness of the stigma of being homeless contributes to the development of insecure feelings and the reason why homeless youth has no particular “look,” but instead look just like any youth (Pelley). In addition, homeless youth prefer to be anonymous because they fear contact with social service providers will involve them being reprimanded by law enforcement and and/or being reunited with their families (Petry & Avent, 1992).

Youth become homeless for numerous reasons. Research shows that youth homelessness can be a negative repercussion of wide economic disparities, family conflict/dysfunction (i.e. domestic violence), drug use, etc. (Hammer, Finkelhor, & Sedlak, 2002; Kryder-Coe, 1991; van Wormer, 2003; Wilder Research Center, 2005). The great depression exemplifies how economic shifts displace employees placing them and their families at risk of homelessness, which was an instance when youth homelessness was first historically documented. The current United States economy may be perceived as gradually recovering from a recession or still mid-recession and has faced a fiscal cliff due to sequestration, which has resulted in tax increases and budget cuts to several resources within the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) (Berg, 2013).

As society became more aware of homeless youth, the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) started the 10 year federal program Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and end homelessness. This program points out how unaccompanied youth often leave home as a result of a severe family conflict, i.e.
physical and/or sexual abuse. An objective of Opening Doors is aimed to helping youth aging out of foster care and youth being discharged from the juvenile justice systems because “most [of youth exiting these systems] have limited options for housing, income, and family or other social support” (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness [USICH], 2010, p.46). Each year, 30,000 youth ages 16 and older “age out” of the foster care system, which contributes to “one quarter of former foster youth experiencing homelessness with in four years of exiting foster care”… and “20,000 – 25,000 [youth] age out of the juvenile justice system” (USICH, p.16, p.46). Thus exemplifying how transition-age youth are underserved.

The United States Department of Health and Human Services identifies that although homeless assistance systems and other health social services are utilized, there is frequent disconnection from the communities and therefore limited support systems (The National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2007). Therefore, there is a need for social services focused on helping homeless youth in the U.S. because without them, their overall well-being becomes more at risk. Many of these youth may resort to dangerous and/or illegal strategies such as substance abuse and/or high-risk sexual behavior in order to meet their daily survival needs, which place their physical health at risk (Hudson & Nandy, 2012). Their emotional and mental health also becomes at risk (i.e. depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation) (Hudson & Nandy, 2012). As these youth are members of our society, at some time these youth become a responsibility of society.

Statement of the Research Problem

In order to help transition-age youth experiencing homelessness to being
emotionally and mentally healthy, the youth’s support networks play an essential role in achieving this goal. Support networks are comprised of relationships that surround a person, which provide protective support for their health and well-being (Ochieng, 2011). Although efforts to ending youth homelessness throughout the world are occurring, youth homelessness still exists and therefore a need of support is needed to alleviate their overall health and well-being. Youth experiencing homelessness tend to not be involved in primary systems such as family and school; therefore, it is imperative to know information about homeless youth and their support networks. In result, social service providers would be able to identify and strengthen youth’s positive relationships and/or help youth establish positive support networks inclusive of their helping relationships with social service providers. The researcher will identify themes to provide insight of the networks among transition-age youth experiencing homelessness.

**Study Purpose**

The few local agencies focused on helping homeless youth need more information about support networks to help empower youth and help them sustain their emotional and mental health. This study aims to gain a deeper understanding of transition-age homeless youth and their support networks as they share their perspectives and experiences. The overall purpose of this study is to gather information about transition-age homeless youth and to help identify their support networks and supportive characteristics of social service providers. This research aims to provide pertinent insight for social service providers working with the transition-age homeless youth, which would increase cultural competence for transition-age homeless youth as an unfamiliar sub-population.
Research Question

This study examines the following research question: “What are the experiences and perspectives of Homeless Youth on their support networks?”

Theoretical Framework

This study uses the social system perspective as a theoretical framework. The researcher explains the social system perspective followed by an examination of how this theory is applied to this research.

Social Systems Theory Model

The social system theory is derived from the systems theory. The systems theory focuses on individuals as part of and incorporating other systems (Payne, 2005). The social systems theory explains how a social system function (Dale, Smith, Norlin, & Chess, 2009; Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 1998). A social system is a network of relationships comprised of individuals who have functionally become interdependent with one another (Dale et al.; Hutchison; 2008; Payne). The typical social systems for a person are family, a social group, a formal organization, a community, or a society. The networks of relationships that surround a person provide protective support for one’s health and well-being, hence why the social systems theory helps explain how the well-being of the system and the individuals who comprise the system is sought and maintained (Norlin & Chess, 1997; Ochieng, 2011). The surrounding environment and support systems depend on the person’s identity. For example, a person’s gender, age, race, religion, ethnicity, abilities, culture, and sexual orientation are the main contributing
factors to their social environment as well as a support system.

The social systems theory is comprised of eight structural concepts and four functional processes. The eight structural elements in all social systems are: boundaries, suprasystems, focal systems, subsystem, interface, proposed output, input, conversion operation, output, and feedback. The structural concepts help to operationalize and understand human behavior and the social environment (Norlin & Chess, 1997). As human behavior is understood we are able to identify the relationships formed in a system and how the relationships are linked between the systems and influenced by their social environment (i.e. expected behaviors from a social construction).

The boundaries identify a social system and determine the external limits as it maintains the external influences by setting limitations (Dale et al., 2009; Norlin & Chess, 1997). Therefore, the boundaries limitations serve as a method of protection from any external disruptive influences. If there is no interaction across boundaries, then it is a closed system. Every system will have the suprasystem, which “identifies the social context within which the system functions” (Dale et al., p. 14; Norlin & Chess). This means that the human behavior within a system is influenced by external social systems in their social environment. Subsystems are within a larger system, whereby the larger system is the focal system (Norlin & Chess). For example, siblings functions as a system and is a subsystem within the total family unit. The observer’s perspective designates the focal system, which is the system that is being focused on (Norlin & Chess). For example, if a family unit was the focal system, then it contained subsystems such as siblings or the married couple. Interface refers to the external relationship, either formal
or informal, between a system and the other units comprising its suprasystem (Dale et al.; Norlin & Chess). A social system has two classes of input: signal and maintenance. Signal inputs are processed by the system and transformed as task output. Maintenance inputs are the resources required and used by a system to convert the signal inputs into task outputs (Norlin & Chess). For example, money is a maintenance input for a business because it is a vital input. Conversion Operations “designates the means employed to convert signal inputs to task outputs” (Dale et al., p. 14; Norlin & Chess, p. 18), which can refer to a type of intervention. The proposed output is operationalized as the systems goal, which demonstrates how all systems have a purpose and therefore a goal to aspire to (Dale et al.; Norlin & Chess).

There are also three classes of output that all social systems produce, which are task outputs, maintenance outputs, and waste. Outputs are the results of a system’s conversion operations, whereby “the most important output of any social system is the well-being of the system itself and those individuals who comprise it” (Norlin & Chess, 1997, p. 16). Task outputs are the actual system outputs that conform to the proposed output (Dale et al., 2009). For example, in an anger management session, a person whose anger is alleviated is a task output. Maintenance outputs are the changes that take place in the maintenance inputs during the conversion process (Dale et al.). For example, while administering the anger management sessions, the new skills learned by the social worker represents the maintenance output. Waste is the residue left from inputs that are used in the conversion process (Dale et al.). Any ineffective or inappropriate techniques by the social worker which led to undesired effects constitutes as waste. Feedback ascertains
how the system’s goals were successful. Feedback is generated to help adjust the system so that the system operates more efficiently and effectively, which inadvertently helps to “maintain a state of well-being” (Dale et al., p. 15; Norlin & Chess, p.19). Therefore, feedback also constitutes as a maintenance input.

There are four functional features of social systems: goal attainment, adaptation, integration, and pattern maintenance (Dale et al., 2009). The functional concepts help identify the social system dynamics and how they derive from a social structure’s development (Norlin & Chess, 1997). As these functions are performed, systems are linked to each other and their social environment, which is perceived as a process of exchange, in order to ensure the social systems survival and growth (Norlin & Chess).

Goal attainment is an external function that prioritizes goals for the system and mobilizes the required resources that help attain the goal (Dale et al.; Robbins et al., 1998). For example, the goal of anger management sessions is to ensure individuals can successfully express their anger in a healthy and assertive way without being disruptive during or outside the sessions. Adaptation is also “external and is the means used to achieve goal attainment” as the system simultaneously seeks to adapt to environmental changes to ensure the system’s survival (Dale et al., p.34; Robbins et al.). This means that the system attempts to adapt to its external environment in order to attain its goal. Integration refers to the coordination of all things interconnected within the system (Dale et al.; Robbins et al.). For example, the workers, strategies, and conditioning techniques utilized in the anger management sessions collaboratively produce an efficient program. Pattern maintenance is the “protection of a system’s core structural patterns, those that provide its
unique identity” (Norlin & Chess, p. 24). As all systems have a hierarchy of patterns that distinguish its function, the core behavioral patterns (social functioning) become more important because they must be maintained so the system will survive (Dale et al., p. 35).

**Application of Social Systems Theory Model**

The social system perspective is applicable to this study in order to focus on social interaction and the importance of relationships in order to evaluate a homeless youth’s level of social support. The concepts of social systems theory that apply to this study revolve around structure and function. The following structural concepts that apply to this study and will be discussed are: boundaries, focal system, subsystem, suprasystem, and interface.

In applying the social systems theory to homeless youth, first it is important to understand the concept of boundaries in relation to open and closed systems. As youth list the people whom they regularly interact with, they identify their social networks and the boundaries that distinguish those networks. For example, a youth who identifies as a musician can be a member of a group of musicians, whereby music involvement exemplifies a boundary-maintaining behavior. This study perceives homeless youth as the focal system, transition-age youth as a subsystem, and homelessness as a suprasystem. Homeless youth is the focal system because identified as the system that is the subject of attention. Transition-age homeless youth are a component element of homeless youth, which means transition-age homeless youth. Transition-age youth display all the attributes of homeless youth, and can be located within a larger designated system (i.e. society). Homelessness is the social context of homeless youth as a system,
and as the youth within this system have relationships within the homeless experience is a subsystem of the focal system, then transition-age homeless youth.

The interaction between a person and their environment is purposively a social functioning, and in the case of youth experiencing homelessness their mobility and tenuous relationships demonstrates the systems fluidity and therefore open nature. On occasion, there are closed boundaries which entail neither interaction nor relationships with their external systems and influences. This closed system would be demonstrated by someone being isolated from the social environment.

The following are a set of structural concepts that apply to this study and will be discussed are: goal attainment, adaptation, and integration. This study inquires about the experiences and perspectives of homeless youth on their support networks. Everyone has wants which may lead to personal goals in life. Regardless of a person’s goal, that goal attainment requires the integration of their resources among their networks of support. Once a homeless youth acquires active members of their networks, it is the interactions among the network and members and the activities that efficiently produce integration. With such integration, homeless youth as a system attempts to adapt to its environment to facilitate any goal attainment and foremost the youth’s well-being.

**Definition of Terms**

The following list of terms is used throughout the study and are significant terms used among advocates for homeless youth.

Family: “A social group characterized by a shared kinship among its members (Dale et al., 2009, p. 45).

Social Network: A group of intimate and broader relationships that result from exchanging resources with whom an individual regularly interacts with. The social network may be composed of weak or strong relationships (whether negative or positive), “but the scope of the network does tend to indicate our potential for obtaining social support” (Hutchison, 2008, p.170).

Social Support: “the interpersonal interactions and relationships that provide us with assistance or feelings of attachment to persons we perceive as caring” (Hutchinson, 2008, p.170. Three types of social support resources are material support (“food, clothing, shelter, and other concrete items”), emotional support (interpersonal support), and instrumental support (“services provided by casual contact, such as grocers, hairstylists, and landlords”) (Hutchison, p.170).

Social System: a network of relationships comprised of individuals who have functionally become interdependent with one another (Dale et al., 2009; Hutchison 2008; Payne, 2005).

Support Networks: The social ties of an individual who provides tangible support (“money, food, or basic resources”) and emotional support (consoling that “fosters the experience of belonging and being valued”) (Greene, Ennette, & Ringwalt, 2012, p. 604). Note: Support network is used interchangeably with the following terms in the literature: networks of support, personal network, and support system.
Stigma: “A social response to specific traits of an individual or group. Stigma assigns the stigmatized person or group to a lower-social status, termed a ‘spoiled identity’ (Dale et al., 2009, p. 90).

Transition-age Youth (TAY): “Young adults between the ages of 16 and 23 years old” whom are given special attention as a subgroup of homeless youth because “in many cases transition-age youth involved in the foster care system move to the responsibilities of adulthood without the benefit of parental or family support” (Office of Children & Families in the Courts, 2009, Sec. Glossary).

Unaccompanied Youth: “are homeless children and youth who are on their own; not living with their families. This group includes, 'runaway' youth, youth whose parents encourage them to leave or locked them out of their home, and independent youth from families where irreconcilable conflicts or loss of contact have made it impossible for them to return home” (Child Trends, 2012, para. 2).

Assumptions

Several assumptions can be made as a result of this study. First, having culturally competent practitioners allows for a better understanding of homeless youth’s support networks. Second, networks of support are an essential quality of human life. Third, all homeless youth want stable housing. Fourth, homeless youth rely on someone for support. Fifth, transition-age youth are hesitant to identify themselves as a homeless youth and share their experience. Sixth, social service providers are available and accessible by transition-age youth.
Justification

Presently, there are several theories regarding homelessness overall. This study is designed to understand the importance of support networks among homeless youth in Sacramento and to explore the role of social services in acknowledging and supporting the youth’s support networks “Social work’s concern is with people’s social connections and relationships, and social objectives such as social justices or social change as well as interpersonal work. Systems perspective represent this view, seeing social work as concerned with evolving a more effective social order” (Payne, 2005, p. 142).

With the understanding of youth experiencing homelessness and the role of social service providers, the researcher will identify areas of improving the use of such services to better alleviate their concerns. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics emphasizes the importance of enhancing the wellbeing of all people, especially vulnerable populations who may be afflicted by poverty (1999).

Delimitations

The information attained for this research study is limited in various ways. First, this study is subjective because it is based only on the perceptions of participants sampled. Second, this is a qualitative study, which includes a small sample size from the greater Sacramento area, therefore it cannot be generalized. Third, findings for transition-age youth is limited. Fourth, the participants had to meet the study’s criteria (i.e. age and experiencing unstable housing). Fifth, youth may have been hesitant to participate in the study based on the stigma of homelessness, and therefore less forthcoming with their current living situation.
Summary

Chapter one discussed the statement of the problem, background of the problem, statement of the research problem, study purpose, research question, theoretical framework, definition of terms, assumptions, justifications, delimitations, and a summary concludes the chapter. The following chapter, chapter 2, will include a review of the literature, which overviews youth homelessness and support networks among homeless youth. In chapter 3, the methodology utilized will be discussed. In chapter 4, the data collected will be presented and analyzed. In chapter 5, a summary of the findings of this study will be discussed, along with implications for the social work profession, recommendations for further research, study limitations, and a conclusion.
Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

This chapter attempts to comprehensively explore the social support available to homeless youth, specifically transition-age youth. The researcher searched for materials on types of support networks among homeless youth. This chapter is organized into the following five sections that address youth homelessness. The first section provides a brief history of youth homelessness in order to understand the complexity of youth homelessness. The second section discusses the common characteristics of youth homelessness. In this section, the following sub-sections are also discussed: homeless sexual minorities, former system youth, and risks associated with youth homelessness. The third section discusses support networks among homeless youth with the following sub-sections: impact of networks, social networks, impact on transition-age youth, and developmental concerns. The fourth section describes the role of social service providers with transition-age homeless youth. The fifth and final section addresses the gaps in the literature. A summary concludes this chapter.

History of Youth Homelessness

Youth have been experiencing homelessness throughout American history. During the westward expansion, youth from impoverished homes left their families for economic opportunity throughout America (Smollar, 1999). Unfortunately, youth were denied jobs and therefore lacked income causing their displacement (Smollar). Consequently, homeless youth were usually loitering in public in the 1800s, and were perceived as an eyesore as well as being criminalized. For example, during the 1820s a
New York City police chief referred to homeless youth as “juvenile vagrants” in a newspaper, and he commented how they “infest our public fares, hotels, docks” and constantly beg when not stealing (Smollar, p. 48).

Later, during the Great Depression, homeless youth were perceived to be a result of economic problems and lack of employment opportunities (Smollar, 1999). During the 1960s, homeless youth were referred to as runaways and were perceived as a significant problem that led to Congress enacting the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, formerly referred to as the Runaway Youth Act of 1974 (Smollar). Although the act authorized funding for extensive services for family reunification, a realization emerged; a high prevalence of youth were being forced out of their homes or abandoned by their families significantly over three decades (Robertson, 1992; Smollar). Studies during the 1970s report homeless youth appeared to be more abused and emotionally disturbed than previous years and were from families that were unwilling or unable to care for them; and their home environment was detrimental to the youth’s physical and/or emotional well-being (Robertson). Studies from the 1990s revealed that homeless youth came from families experiencing unemployment, receiving public assistance, and/or experiencing homelessness themselves (Pergamit, 2010; Smollar).

Today, homeless youth have a variation of typologies. A typology based on homeless youth’s age encompasses unaccompanied youth (minors ages 12 to 17) and transition-age youth (young adults age 18 to 24), both of which lack stable housing and are economically and/or emotionally detached from caregivers (Puddefoot, 2010; Sanchez et al., 2006). Although derogatory, a typology based on youth’s trajectory into
homelessness includes runaways, throwaways, and system youth (youth who were formerly in a juvenile justice system or aged out of the foster care system) (Find Youth Info, 2012, sec. Federal Definition; Pergamit, 2010; Smith & Ferrari, 1997). Youth referred to as runaways typically ran to escape life-endangering situations (i.e. dysfunctional or punitive families), and youth referred to as throwaways were forced to leave by their caregivers; both in which appear to be un-nurturing environments (Robertson, 1992; Smith & Ferrari; Wilder Research, 2005). The research shows that former foster and incarcerated youth are identified as transition-age youth who were dependent on the state government and are immediately expected to become independent and secure stable housing with limited government assistance or lack thereof (Dworsky, Dillman, Dion, Coffee-Borden, & Rosenau, 2012; Find Youth Info; Smith & Ferrari). Although typologies enable social service providers to better address specific needs and their common obstacles, this study refers to the target population as “homeless youth” with an understanding that homeless youth are a heterogeneous population (Kryder-Coe, 1991; Pergamit).

Homeless youth as a heterogeneous population also contributes to its inconsistent definition in federal statutes. Specifically, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and their funded programs define homeless youth with more limitations than the Department of Health and Human Services and the United States Department of Education (The National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2007). HUD funds numerous statewide programs including statewide Continuum of Care (CoCs) agencies that coordinate the biennial point-in-time (PIT) counts in order to estimate
homelessness; however the PIT only recently added one survey question indirectly pertaining to homeless youth, but also excluded transition-age youth (Auerswald et al., 2013; The National Alliance to End Homelessness).

Although few, some CoC agencies began conducting youth specific homeless counts in order to better estimate the amount of youth experiencing homelessness (Auerswald et al., 2013). The youth counts also took into consideration that homeless youth are less noticeable than adults experiencing homelessness because they are rarely seen sleeping in public view as well as homeless youth being a mobile population. Instead, homeless youth are usually precariously housed with several living situations (i.e. couch-surfing or squatting in dangerous/inadequate housing), thus further demonstrating the difficulty of conducting research and having accurate findings. “Couch surfing” is the most common living situation for homeless youth including transition-age youth, and is descriptively characterized by youth’s constant mobility because of their precarious housing and are therefore constantly seeking shelter from family, friends, and/or acquaintances (Auerswald et al; Puddefoot, 2010; United States Interagency Council on Homelessness. 2010).

**Characteristics of Youth Homelessness**

Studies indicate homeless youth are an at-risk population. In comparison to their housed counterparts, homeless youth experienced a range of difficult circumstances and problems (Smith & Ferrari, 1997). Homelessness disrupts youth’s lives at home, school, and other aspects. As youth are displaced from their home, they make major readjustments to a shelter or other living situation (Petry & Avent, 1992; Smith &
Ferrari). As a result, homeless youth become weary and responsible in finding their own night-time accommodations.

As previously stated, for one or more days within a year an estimate of 1.6 million youth experience homelessness in the United States, in which 200,000 to 400,000 are transition-age youth (Covenant House Institute, 2010). Transition-age youth commonly rely on their family connections to navigate their transition into adulthood, which is not applicable to homeless youth (Wenzel et al., 2012). A “primary cause of youth homelessness is family dysfunction, specifically parental neglect, physical or sexual abuse, family substance abuse, and family violence,” which has been found to be long-standing (Karabanow, 2004; Pergamit, 2010; Smollar, 1999, p. 50). The family dynamics that set a negative environment contributes to homeless youth exhibiting several personality and self-destructive behavioral problems (i.e. poor coping skills, suicidal ideations, school failure or underachievement, mental health problems, depression, substance abuse and a history of being placed in foster care or juvenile justice facilities) (Robertson, 1992; Smollar; Wenzel et al.). Smollar (1999) found that homeless youth from dysfunctional families tend to develop “a sense of helplessness rather than control” and therefore develop an unstable identity reflecting homelessness and their alienation from society.

**Homeless Sexual Minorities**

Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, and Cauce (2002) recognized that youth who “come-out” as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) are found to be a sexual minority group among homeless youth, which continues to be on the rise.
Although LGBT youth and their heterosexual counterparts left home for similar reasons (i.e. family conflict including physical abuse), LGBT youth ran away primarily because of their parents disapproval of their sexual orientation (Cochran et al.; Rew, Whittaker, Taylor-Seehafer, & Smith, 2005; Ryan, 2010). Since some parents believed that talking about sexual orientation as taboo, they perceived their behavior to be supportive “out of concern” of their child being socially accepted (Ryan). Such behavior depicting rejection included being uninviting to the youths LGBT partners and friends to family functions and refraining from acknowledging their child’s sexual orientation as part of their identity (Cochran et al.; Ryan). Studies reported that biological parents develop preconceived notions that their children are heterosexual and associated expectations i.e. grandchildren (Ryan). Research shows the abrupt lack of support contributes to a huge proportion of youth trajectory into homelessness, and that positive family involvement could positively impact their housing (Cochran et al.; Ray, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, & National Coalition for the Homeless, 2006; Rew et al.).

Research shows that LGBT transition-age youth continually face crises that threaten their development into adulthood, ergo they are an increased risk for negative outcomes in comparison to their heterosexual counterparts (Cochran et al., 2002; Ray et al., 2006). Rejection of a youth’s LGBT identity increased risky behaviors affecting their physical and mental health, which is reflected by their variation of illegal drug use, unsafe sex, high levels of depressive symptoms, high rates of stress, psychopathology & symptomatology, and suicidal attempts (Cochran et al.; Ray et al; Rew et al., 2005; Ryan, 2010). The intersection of youth homelessness and homophobia causes LGBT homeless
youth becoming a vulnerable sub-population, which is exemplified when LGBT youth
become discriminated and victimized at the onset of their homelessness (Cochran et al.;
Ray et al.; Rew et al.). Drug use was found to be a form of coping from homophobic
harassment and homeless experience (Cochran et al; Rew et al.).

Studies found that LGBT youth report having sexual intercourse at a young age,
higher rates of sexual abuse (which contributed to LGBT youth having more sexual
partners than their heterosexual peers), and less consistent use of contraceptives (Cochran
et al., 2002; Rew et al., 2005; Wenzel et al., 2012). For example, Cochran et al. found
“more than twice as many LGBT youth as hetero youth reported that they neglected to
use protection during sex ‘all the time’” (p.775). Not knowing how to use a condom and
using drugs to ease the degradation and fear of risks associated with survival sex were
also speculated as reasons behind high-risk behaviors (Ray et al., 2006). Rew et al. found
that LGBT youth ran away more often than their heterosexual counterparts resulting to
more instances of survival sex. Transgender youth reported difficulty in accessing safe
and nurturing shelter, which is exemplified by shelters being segregated by gender and by
their being ostracized by their LGB peers at LGBT centers (Ray et al.). Some LGBT
homeless youth reported engaging in risky behavior (i.e. survival sex and drug use) to
contract HIV in order to become eligible for HIV-positive homeless housing programs
(Ray et al.).

**Former System Youth**

Former foster youth were more likely to become homeless at an earlier age than
non-foster youth and remain homeless for a longer period of time, which correlated with
self-reliant behavior (Ray et al., 2006). Though transition-age youth who emancipate from the foster care system (commonly referred to as “age out”) or discharged from residential or institutional facilities commonly experience a form of adult transitional program, they experience cessation of benefits (i.e. have little or no income, health and dental insurance) and are at higher risk to end up on the streets (Wenzel et al., 2012).

Studies show that LGBT foster youth have failed attempts of family reunification (Berger, 2005; Jacobs & Freundlich, 2006). LGBT youth were found to be passively and/or actively rejected from their foster placements based on their sexual orientation, including youth who developed emotional and/or behavioral issues from homophobic harassment, which often led them to runaway (Jacobs & Freundlich; Ray, 2006). Before guardianship was deemed the primary permanency arrangement for LGBT foster youth, they were at high risk to social isolation and loneliness (Jacobs & Freundlich). LGBT foster youth reported being hesitant to disclose their sexual orientation due to risks of homophobic harassment (Berger; Ray et al.).

“Prisoners who are gay, transgender, or perceived to be gay or gender nonconforming are at high risk of sexual abuse,” physically assaulted, and often feminized (Jacobs & Freundlich, 2006; Ray et al., 2006, p.73). LGBT youth residing in group homes (specifically transgender youth) were also found to experience hostility and verbal harassment based on their sexual orientation and/or nonconforming gender by their peers, facility staff, and other providers (Jacobs & Freundlich). As social service providers became more aware of LGBT youth in the child welfare system, agencies have collaborated in promoting LGBT cultural competency policies i.e. training programs or
access to proper resources (Jacobs & Freundlich; Ray et al.).

**Risks Associated with Youth Homelessness**

Some common educational problems that arise for homeless youth involve “educational delays, poor school performance [i.e. underachievement or repeating a grade]”, poor school attendance, or behavioral backlash resulting in disciplinary actions up to and including expulsion (Kryder-Coe, 1991; Robertson, 1992; Smith & Ferrari, 1997; Smollar, 1999; Solarz, 1992). Homelessness also hinders youth’s social development as their contact with friends is limited due to their poor school attendance or even limited contact with their relatives; both in which could be due to the stigma of their homelessness, creating a cyclical problem (Kryder-Coe; Smith & Ferrari). Such disruptions associated with homelessness (i.e. education, social instability, and or mental health) may be irreversible; however some can be alleviated with supportive networks (Rice, Kurzban, & Ray, 2012; Robertson; Solarz; Wenzel et al., 2012).

As homeless youth struggle to meet their needs, they are susceptible of being victimized by adults, who involve them in “drug dealing, prostitution, child pornography, and other criminal activities [i.e. gang involvement]” (Pergamit, 2010; Smollar, 1999, p. 48-49). A preponderance of literature find homeless youth being susceptible to emotional and psychological problems such as: poor or “delayed social and emotional development, including such problems as poor coping skills, suicidal tendencies (suicidal ideation, self-harm, and suicide attempts), aggression, withdrawal, social rejection, anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, antisocial disorders, and abnormal social fears” and trauma (i.e. post-traumatic disorder) (Hudson & Nandy, 2012; Kecojevic et al., 2012; Pergamit;
Smith and Ferrari (1997) found domestic violence as more prevalent among homeless youth than their housed counterparts, whether it is them witnessing violence or being victimized themselves, which exacerbates youth’s psychological problems as they internalize or externalize behavioral problems. Studies indicate that the “lack of routine and supervision associated with being homeless” correlates with the particularly high level of externalized behavior which further exacerbates their physical health (Smith & Ferrari, p. 12). Occasionally minors or young adults experience acute life events that become a life stressor, such as eviction due to their becoming pregnant and parents (Smith & Ferrari). Studies indicate a significant amount of homeless youth meet one or more psychiatric diagnosis, specifically conduct disorder, substance abuse disorder, and major depressive disorder (Falci et al., 2011; McCay et al., 2011). Youth who meet the criteria of conduct disorder have aggressive, intimidating, and insensitive tendencies, which contributes to them being disliked by others and having problematic social relationships (Falci et al.). Youth who meet the criteria of substance abuse disorder are likely to have low-quality, conflicted, and often mutually exploitative social relationships (Falci et al.). Homeless youth who meet the criteria of major depression disorder appear to show more empathy and support than homeless youth who have other mental health problems (Falci et al.).

Several studies draw attention to homeless youth’s physical health being at “high-risk,” some examples of health problems include: hepatitis, respiratory problems (asthma & pneumonia), and scabies (Hudson & Nandy, 2012; Kecojevic et al., 2012; Robertson,
Homeless youth use a variety of coping strategies to survive on the street, which can be life endangering and/or illegal. Strategies include: drug dealing, substance use (alcohol and/or drugs), panhandling, scavenging from garbage cans, and survival sex (Ennett, Bailey, & Federman, 1999; Kecojevic et al.; Pergamit, 2010; Robertson). A preponderance of literature consider both substance abuse and survival sex as the most prominent risky behaviors among homeless youth age 15 to 24 that highly likely lead them to contracting human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and other health infections. (Hudson & Nandy; Kecojevic et al.; Lee, Draper, & Lee, 2001; Pergamit; Robertson; Smith & Ferrari; Smollar, p. 50; Wenzel et al., 2012; Zerger, Strehlow, & Gundlapalli, 2008). As homeless youth infectious rates are 3 to 10 higher than their housed counterparts, risks compounded primarily among the female homeless youth (Zerger et al.).

Kecojevic et al. (2012) conducted a study with a sample of 596 transition-age youth (age 16 to 25) and found that youth with adverse childhood experiences (i.e. childhood physical, sexual, and emotional abuse) had a strong correlation with drug abuse, and youth without abusive experiences began drug use at later ages. High rates of drug abuse has been significantly more associated with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) homeless youth than their heterosexual homeless peers (Kecojevic et al.).

Although sexual behavior is prevalent among youth and young adults in society, homeless youth are often coerced into sex or otherwise involuntarily engage in survival sex, which is reflected by their high rates of sexually transmitted infections (Greene et al.,
Survival sex refers to sex being used as a form of service rendered in exchange to meet their needs, which is primarily for money or shelter (Greene et al.; Hudson & Nandy, 2012; Walls & Bell). In addition, the findings from Gaetz’s (2004) study are significant in that they demonstrate homeless youth are highly likely to being victimized of a broad range of violent crimes including sexual assault. Robertson (1992) found 75% of 175 homeless youth were sexually active, in which 33% of the female youth reported that limited use of contraceptives and/or incidence of rape led to their pregnancy.

**Support Networks among Homeless Youth**

A social network is comprised of relationships that interact regularly with one another, whereby behaviors are influenced by others “through social comparison, social sanctions and rewards,” and resources are exchanged (Dale, Smith, Norlin, & Chess, 2009; Wenzel et al., 2012, p. 562). Relationships within a network can be intimate and broad, weak or strong, positive or negative, “but the scope of the network does tend to indicate our potential for obtaining social support” (Dale et al; Hutchison, 2008; Payne, 2005; Wenzel et al.). Social Support is an interpersonal relationship resource that has the potential to provide us with assistance and/or feeling nurtured, which contributes to one’s health and well-being (Dale et al.; Hutchison; Ochieng, 2011; Payne; Smollar, 1999). Effective social support is a key contributor to alleviating the effects of stress and aids in problem solving, (Falci et al., 2011; de la Haye et al., 2011; Payne). Two types of social support resources are emotional support (interpersonal support by others caring, affection, and approval), and tangible support, which encompasses instrumental support
(“services provided by casual contact, such as grocers, hairstylists, and landlords”) and material support (money and provisions such as: food, clothing, a place to stay, and other concrete items), (Falci et al.; Hutchison).

**Impact of Networks**

A homeless youth’s social networks can have both positive and negative influences on the youth’s behavior. Research shows that some homeless youth’s networks may be protective and may also “provide emotional support and protection, reduce stress and depressive symptoms, and expedite getting off streets altogether” (Falci et al., 2011, p. 827; Rice et al., 2012; Wenzel et al., 2012). Likewise for youth learning deviant behaviors (i.e. criminal acts, gang involvement) for economic gain. Though homeless youth’s behavior commonly reflects their social groups, in some instances youth tend to habitually select friends whose behavior mimics their own (Rice et al.). de la Haye et al. (2012) found supportive networks to be an important factor in preventing at-risk youth from becoming homeless.

**Social Networks**

Riemer (1940) found that homeless youth develop a need to be loved and an increase in self-esteem, which is why they seek approval from others. In a review of the literature, one study found that homeless youth’s primary emotional and instrumental relationship is with their home environment, whereby their strongest connection are with friends and their weaker connections are with non-parental family members; and weakest connection to parents (Falci et al., 2011, p.833). Though consistent parental involvement (i.e. supportive, encouraging, offering guidance and structure) promotes the development
of connectedness to others, Smollar (1999) found that homeless youth felt tumultuous as they perceived their parents as excessively strict and punitive. Falci et al. (2011) found that at the onset of youth’s homelessness, instrumental and emotional support was limited because they were disconnected from their former homes, so they were more reliant on street associates to meet such needs. However, the longer youth remain homeless, their networks are weakened, and the more their network size decreases along with their instrumental aid and emotional support, which contributes to the risk of them becoming isolated and feeling hopeless (Falci et al., McCay, et al., 2011).

Youth who had a history of child abuse had small home networks, so at the onset of homelessness they lost their few emotionally supportive relationships, which led them to have large instrumental street networks (Falci et al., 2011, p. 836). The existing literature on homeless youth strongly suggest that their social networks tend to be tenuous as they exhaust their interpersonal resources (Falci et al.; de la Haye et al., 2012; Wenzel et al., 2012). McCay et al. demonstrates the correlation between “loneliness (defined as social disconnection) and low self-esteem as well as between loneliness and various forms of coping skills” (p. 214). In contrast, social connectedness, self-esteem, and resilience are positively correlated, so an improvement in one area would improve the other correlating areas (McCay et al). Ennett et al. (1999) found that youth age 14 to 21 without a social network were significantly more likely to engage in risky behavior than youth with effective supportive networks.

Impact on Transition-Age Youth

A preponderance of literature understand “emerging adulthood” to be a time of
rapid expansion and life changes “such as leaving adolescent support networks, obtaining employment, hormonal changes and deepening relationships with intimate partner” (Falci et al. 2011; Lee, Draper, & Lee, 2001; Robertson, 1992; Smollar, 1999; Wenzel et al., 2012, p. 561). Several studies assess that youth learn how to garner support from networks beyond their immediate family, which is a “fundamental development task of adolescence,” while they form their identity (Falci et al., p. 827; Lee et al; McCay et al., 2011; Robertson; Smollar). Lee et al. emphasizes that transition-age youth with low connectedness are likely to have developmental issues (i.e. depression or risky and violent behavior) thus demonstrating a need of healthy connections. Transition-age homeless youth (age 18 to 24) are unique as they experience developmental changes without guidance from parents, which contributes to them being ill-equipped to meet their own needs and having insufficient resources (Wenzel et al.).

Research on youth homelessness suggests that effective social support “serves to buffer an individual from the negative effects of stressful life experiences”, which explains why adequate social support (i.e. tangible or emotional) is a key factor for them to escape homelessness (de la Haye et al., 2012; Smith & Ferrari, 1997; Wenzel et al., 2012). Although homeless youth’s networks tend to be tenuous, some relationships may entail strong connections. Falci et al. (2011) found that homeless youth had an average of less than three relationships, whereas their housed counterparts averaged 15 to 17 relationships. Although other transition-age youth experienced housing instability due to changing of housing and schools, homeless transition-age youth demonstrate high mobility by their precarious housing situations reflecting “a revolving-door … moving
from doubling-up to the streets, to group homes and foster care to home and then back to the streets” (Falci et al., p.828), thus predicting small networks that may decrease over time (McCay et al., 2011).

While transition-age youth experience homelessness, they are likely to meet other homeless youth, whereby their relationship is the most unstable (Falci et al., 2011). Falci et al. found that homeless youth with lower rates of physical and sexual abuse were more likely to maintain their ties to family members and housed friends from their old neighborhood; which were their safer and more stable relationships. Youth who came from “the most hostile home environments” lost their home ties and therefore were “less likely to rely on family members for emotional or instrumental support” (Falci et al., p.828). Youth who experienced such abuse sought connectedness that was lacking from their home environment were also coping with past and/or current traumas (McCay et al., 2011; Smollar, 1999). As youth become homeless, they are typically “inexperienced in proper independent living, which makes them susceptible to being victimized on the street (Ray et al., 2006).

**Developmental Concerns**

Falci et al. (2011) found that “forming and maintaining social relationships depends on a skill set that involves the interest in and ability to share, empathize with others, recognize social cues, trust and disclose to others, and to be loyal across time” (Falci et al., p. 828). This skill set is compromised for youth whose families do not foster such skills, which leads to youth learning conflictive behavior characterized by power assertion (Falci et al.). Additional studies have also found that homelessness hinders such
development because “becoming homeless disrupts young people’s social networks by weakening ties to established networks at home, school, and the neighborhood” (Falci et al., p. 827; McCay et al., 2011; Wenzel et al., 2012). Robertson (1992) found that homeless youth are in a predicament where they have “no external source of emotional or financial support” (Robertson, p. 287), which can be explained by them being “rapidly introduced to new networks during a time of high vulnerability [i.e. victimization] and stress” (Falci et al., p. 827; Gaetz, 2004). This demonstrates a need of social support to address stress associated with homelessness.

Smollar (1999) identified four specific characteristics that foster positive development during youth’s transition to adulthood: 1) A sense of industry and competency; 2) a feeling of connectedness to others and to society; 3) a sense of control over one’s fate in life; and 4) a stable sense of identity. Lee et al. (2001) found that transition-age youth who “feel a lack of connectedness deep within themselves” also feel disconnected with others and with society and therefore avoid social situations and are hesitant to connect (p. 310). As some homeless youth develop a sense of competency and survival skills from living on the streets, their competence and skills led to recognition and respect from fellow homeless youth. However, the context of such competence is not valued but frowned upon in mainstream society (Smollar).

**Social Service Providers**

Although homeless youth possess internal resources, resilience and adaptability both being key resources, the research demonstrates homeless youth are in need of social services, indicating opportunities for outreach. Social service providers found outreach
most difficult with youth who have successfully adapted to street life as they remain guarded and hesitant to connect to others outside their group (Lee et al., 2001; Smollar, 1999). For example, in one study, Lee et al. explains how people with low connectedness demonstrate avoidant personality disorder (APD) tendencies and therefore focus on protecting themselves from further rejection rather than seeking more connections. Lee et al. also discusses how some people may not be ready to connect and/or be ill-equipped to trust the providers, so providers would need to adequately prepare clients for group counseling to promote social interaction.

McCay et al. (2011) conducted a study using a six session group intervention that focused on relationships and their relevance and influence on the youth participants in addition to youth learning techniques to establish and maintain positive relationships. McCay et al. ensured that all the homeless youth participants who received the intervention met mental health symptoms, which was demonstrated by their high levels of depression and hopelessness. McCay et al. found that at-risk youth who underwent the group intervention, emphasizing the importance of internal and social strength factors, fared better on metrics such as a decrease in levels of mental health symptoms, lower levels of hopelessness, social connectedness, and self-esteem than their counterparts who did not undergo the intervention thus demonstrating the importance of social support factors. McCay et al. reports their study participants identified how supportive relationships strengthened their mental health, including a positive relationship with a case manager and peer support as an essential component for homeless youth.

Research on homeless youth suggests that they mistrust and fear society’s
institutions and believe that such institutions do not care about their well-being, so this population is hesitant to seek and use resources (Riemer, 1940; Smollar, 1999). Some fears include: losing their anonymity of being homeless, possibly being reprimanded by the authorities, and/or being returned to their families (Gaetz, 2004; Petry & Avent 1992; Robertson, 1992). Hence, social service providers reported that building rapport is the most difficult task when working with homeless youth (Smollar). Smollar found that homeless youth often lack guidance, structure, and encouragement from their families. Studies also recognize that they are isolated from social institutions and often connect with their street community, which does not provide the assistance and support necessary to foster positive development (Lee et al., 2001; Reimer; Smollar).

Social workers have accumulated knowledge and experience of accessing resources, which gives them the capacity to help clients navigate systems to meet their needs (Haines, 1975). As social workers provide services for their clients, information that lies in the clients’ environment is an additional source of information. In some instances, social service providers and their clients require regular meetings to monitor the clients’ progress in attaining their goals. Homeless services directed toward youth are scarce and have limited funding opportunities. Inconsistent definitions of homeless youth in federal statutes exacerbate the restraints on available homeless youth services. For example, these programs are allotted a number of short term housing options and fewer long-term housing options, with more limitations (i.e. transitional housing with priorities for former foster youth and youth with disabilities). Karabanow (2004) found that social service providers that provide a sense of safety, being cared for, and feeling part of the
community have successfully attracted and helped homeless youth. Karabanow also found that such communities also creates a “culture of hope” where youth gain strength, courage, resiliency, and optimism with the notion of being a contributing citizen.

**Gaps in the Literature**

The researcher is interested in learning about transition-age homeless youth’s support networks and how social workers can tend to their emotional and mental health. Research up to this point has indicated that transition-age youth are at a significant development stage where the unique support is acquired. The researcher was explicitly interested in participants’ experiences and perceptions of support, which validates the idea that transition-age youth needs are partially addressed. As the researcher examined the literature, the researcher found that although there are current studies regarding transition-age youth there remains to be gaps in terms of sample size and the scopes being studied i.e. transition-age youth are uniquely and uncomfortably placed between child services and adult services. As a result, the researcher intends to help minimize the gap and provide beneficial information to increase cultural awareness and competence for social service providers regarding transition-age youth. In addition, it is uncertain when agencies began devising LGBT culturally competent programs to ensure safe and nurturing environment (i.e. preventing harassments).

There was a variety of studies on homeless youth discussed in the literature. Some of the studies discussed youth’s trajectories into homelessness, the importance of support networks for homeless youth, and the importance of emerging adulthood as a significant developmental stage. However, the literature has several limitations: 1) most study
samples were of homeless youth in general rather than focusing on transition-age youth; 2) research acknowledged a need to improve outreach to homeless youth but refrained from providing feasible recommendations; 2) the research’s scope of support networks were generalized surrounding family, significant others, and non-family; 3) Religion was only taken into consideration in relation to faith based organizations rather than youth’s spiritual connection with and support from God; 4) studies regarding LGBT homeless youth had limited information regarding the transgendered and lacked information regarding intersex youth; 5) Though drug use is a common risk among homelessness, it is unclear if drug use preceded youth’s homelessness or if homelessness caused their drug use; and 6) there were few recommendations for social service providers to work with transition-age youth regarding their networks.

The researcher of this study intends to build upon the knowledge base available and help fill the gap by sharing the perspectives of transition-age youth and their experiences with support networks in narrative form to note their intrapersonal and interpersonal resources. The researcher hoped to identify the quality of support from others based on participants’ feelings. The researcher also intends to highlight best practices for social service providers directly working with transition-age youth based on the participants’ perception as well as other notable feasible recommendations.

**Summary**

In this chapter, the literature relevant to this project was reviewed. The following topics that were discussed are: the history youth homelessness, characteristics of youth homelessness (i.e. homeless sexual minorities, former system youth, and risks), homeless
youth support networks (i.e. impact of networks, social networks, impact on transition-age youth, and developmental concerns), the role of social service providers with transition-age homeless youth, and finally gaps in the literature were reviewed. In the next chapter, the methodology applied to the research are reviewed.
Chapter 3

Methods

In this chapter, the methodology and research design utilized for this project study are addressed by discussing: the research question, study design, sample population, study population, data collection procedures, measurement instruments, data analysis, and a summary. This chapter concludes with the procedures taken to protect human subjects.

Research Question

This project examines the following research question: “What are the experiences and perspectives of Homeless Youth on their support networks?”

Study Design

In order to investigate the preceding question, the research study utilized a qualitative approach. The qualitative research design used for this study is an exploratory research design. Since a qualitative approach focuses on understanding individual’s experiences and aims to identify deeper insightful information (Dudley, 2010; Rubin & Babbie, 2010), the researcher used a qualitative approach in order to allow the sharing of experiences and perspectives of the participants to the study regarding their support networks and learn new insights. The researcher inductively explores the role of support networks among homeless youth, and to discover at what extent could social service providers be involved. As this study does not predict nor hypothesize, it seeks to explore the experience of homeless youth with particular attention to their support networks that may affect their well-being. “The process of [qualitative] research involves emerging
questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant’s setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data” (Creswell, 2009, p. 4). Hence, this is why the researcher sought detailed responses directly from the youth participants experiencing homelessness instead of relying on others perceptions. Through this qualitative research, the researcher aims to use the participants’ experiences and perspectives to better understand their support networks. However, it is important to know that not all homeless youth have supportive networks and some may not be aware of their networks.

In this study, the researcher is identified as a key instrument. “Qualitative researchers collect data themselves through examining documents, observing behavior, or interviewing participants” (Creswell, 2009, p.175). As a key instrument, the researcher initiated the plan for this study, facilitated the interviews with the support of liaisons, which were knowledgeable of youth homelessness in Sacramento, and oversaw the project from beginning to end. This exploratory study is the most appropriate design for studying the previously stated research questions because homeless youth are a highly mobile population. Typically exploratory research designs are cross-sectional, meaning that the data will be collected at only one point in time from the research participants (Dudley, 2011; Rubin & Babbie, 2010), which is ideal for a highly mobile population. Dudley even explains that “the population [used in an exploratory study] may be difficult to identify and define,” which is appropriate when trying to identify homeless youth whom are ages 18 to 24 (p.126). Since the study population is difficult to identify, the
data collection approach used direct in person interviews, which were semi-structured and in-depth interviews. The data collection was in the form of spoken words from the participants. The data was not standardized and therefore not applicable as a quantitative study.

The study questions that this study aims to address cannot be answered by experimental methods because the researcher anticipates only being able to administer to any single participant during a particular place and time. Therefore the participant’s interactions involved in the study are unique experiences and can change depending on particular circumstances (i.e. finding stable housing). The type of knowledge being sought is personal real life experiences of participants, which is the advantage of an exploratory study and therefore a feasible study. In order to answer this study’s research question the data collection approach used a semi-structured interview because of its flexibility.

The semi-structured interview is a flexible instrument with qualitative properties as it contains open-ended questions (Creswell, 2009). This method allowed participants in this study to add any additional thoughts or information due to open-ended questions. Probing questions also helped elicit deeper meaning and understanding of the participants experience and perspective in regards to their support networks and/or sense of self. In result, the researcher was able to identify common responses and patterns during the interview process. The results of this study provides useful information about support networks among the homeless youth population and the potential role social workers can play in helping maintain and/or strengthening their positive relationships and therefore
understand multiple realities.

There are several advantages of using a qualitative approach instead of a quantitative approach for this study. One of the strengths of qualitative research is that the researcher is able to collect narrative data i.e. characteristics that are not easily quantifiable (Creswell, 2009; Dudley, 2011; Rubin & Babbie, 2010). Although a qualitative study is not reflective of an entire population, this also means that fewer participants are required to conduct a qualitative study and therefore less time consuming and costly. A major strength is that this study allows the researcher to explore the participant’s insights as a sampled population by using open-ended interviews during the interview in order to elicit more information (Creswell; Dudley; Rubin & Babbie).

Qualitative design also has weaknesses to take into consideration. One of the weaknesses of qualitative studies is that being neutral or objective without bias is difficult (Creswell, 2009). The researcher’s values, beliefs, and attitudes could influence the researchers’ interpretation of the data as bias. Since qualitative studies are a subjective scientific inquiry, it is important for the researcher to hold a partial perspective and not allow such thoughts to sway their interpretation of the participant’s narratives nor make assumptions during the study. As an exploratory study, this research design provides inconclusive answers’ to research questions, but instead “hints at the answers and gives insights into the research methods that could provide definitive answers” (Rubin & Babbie, 2010, p.41). Exploratory studies are seldom definitive due to the issue of representativeness, which is not the intent of an exploratory study.

This study utilized a content analysis to examine the content communicated in the
interviews because it “is an empirically grounded method, exploratory in process, and predictive or inferential in intent” (Krippendorff, 2004, p. xvii). Content analysis “focuses specifically on the repetition of different types of recorded communication, such as words or phrases” (Dudley, 2011, p. 263). For this study, the content analysis entails a systematic reading and examination of the data in order to ascertain the contents meaning and probable effect. Content analysis was systematic by utilizing a latent and manifest coding to analyze the data collected and transcribed from the 10 interviews. The manifest content refers to the words or phrases clearly being communicated. The latent content is the underlying meaning of what is being communicated as the researcher derives inferences by reading between the lines.

An advantage of using a content analysis is that it is subjective and interpretive (Dudley, 2011, p. 263), which correlates with this study being a qualitative study. Therefore, there is neither right nor wrong answer because the experiences, feelings, and perceptions are their own. Another advantage is that it is feasible because it is financially affordable due to conducting only 10 interviews. A disadvantage of a content analysis is that the interviews need to be recorded in some form to note and count the repeated content. Another disadvantage is that coding categories need to be clearly defined for reliability, since reliability is achieved when the same results are achieved multiple times (Rubin & Babbie, 2010).

**Study Population**

The study population is youth experiencing homelessness. This population entails characteristics according to the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. As previously
stated, the homeless population entails a person lacking a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, which entails persons living in emergency or transitional shelters and persons whose primary nighttime residence that is considered unconventional because the area is not intended for ordinary sleeping accommodations for human beings (inclusive of couch surfing). In addition, these youth self-identified as transition-age youth ages 18 to 24. All 10 participants of this study were found in Sacramento, California. Although participants interviewed for this study were found in Downtown and Midtown areas of Sacramento, the participants reported they resided throughout northern California, which exemplifies this population’s high mobility. This study population included people of varying ethnicity’s, genders, and ages between 18 and 24. The focus of the interview was the participants’ networks of support.

**Sampling Population**

Due to this study being qualitative, an exploratory approach was taken. A combination of sampling approaches was sought for this study. A criterion sampling approach was used to identify this study’s participants with a set of characteristics, which was then used for the snowball sampling.

A criterion sampling, also called a purposive approach, entails research participants who need to “meet certain criteria related to the purpose of the study” (Dudley, p.145). This study’s sample criteria was based on the following characteristics: 1) age requirement ages 18 to 24 to be considered as transition-age youth, and 2) experiencing unstable housing by answering yes when asked, “Do you know where you will be sleeping tonight?” These recruitment procedures were repeated until 10 people
met the criteria and were willing to sign a consent form. Youth participants were recruited from downtown and midtown of Sacramento, California. Strength of criterion sampling is that the youth participants who are experiencing homelessness are forthcoming of their experience, which can provide this study with much needed qualitative data that could be useful for further research i.e. quantitative data. A weakness of criterion sampling is that not all youth who fall into the criteria are forthcoming about their living situation. For example, some potential participants declined to participate because the study involved them signing a consent form. Which also contributes to another weakness of this study, that criterion sampling is time consuming.

The researcher also attempted to use a snowball sampling technique. Snowball sampling involves the researcher selecting and interviewing “people who are known to fit the study’s criteria” and asking them “to identify others who fit the criteria” (Dudley, 2011, p.146). The snowball sampling technique was attempted by incorporating the question, “Do you know of another “hot spot” where I may find other homeless youth who may be interested in participating in this study? If yes, would you like to tell me about it? If no, thank you very much” in the interview. Strengths of snowball sampling is that it is useful for identifying and locating populations that are hard to find due to their being isolated from the mainstream or being stigmatized (Dudley). This sampling technique was used with the intent to help the researcher identify other areas unknown by the researcher. A weakness of snowball sampling is if the participants kept to themselves and therefore couldn’t identify others. Another weakness is that participants that did know of others may not have been willing to identify others. These weaknesses also
contribute to this sampling approach being time consuming, especially since this study required a minimum of 10 participants.

**Instrumentation**

The instruments that the researcher utilized for this study are the researcher herself, the demographic sheet, the interview questionnaire, and the audio recorder.

*The researcher/Interviewer:* The researcher herself is an instrument based on first contact when approaching/greeting potential participants, with use of small talk to build rapport (i.e. asking, “How are you?” while smiling and establishing eye contact) followed by asking the criterion questions ensuring their eligibility for this study. The researcher remains to be an instrument by being the interviewer during the interview process.

*Demographic sheet:* The demographic sheet was coded according to the audio recorder file number. The demographics were fill-in-the-blank acquiring the participant’s gender, age, and ethnicity. This was used to affirm the study criteria. (Note: Please see APPENDIX _D - DEMOGRAPHIC SHEET).

*Interview Questionnaire/Question Sheet:* This instrument was used by the researcher in order to obtain primary data from the research participants. The questionnaire was comprised of nine questions designed to elicit participant’s perceptions and experiences of their networks of support, desired supportive characteristics of social service providers, and referrals to hotspots of others in similar living situations. (Note: Please see APPENDIX E – INTERVIEW QUESTION SHEET). Questions related to basic knowledge of networks among homeless youth. Specifically, questions pertained to the respondent’s personal experiencing homelessness and being a transition-age youth.
Reliability or validity tests were not conducted for this study; however the questions utilized in this study were a compilation of a few questions asked in selected studies, which had face validity. Creswell (2009) notes that qualitative researchers may use an instrument to collect data, but that the researchers who gather the information “do not tend to use or rely on questionnaires or instruments developed my other researchers” (p. 175).

Audio Recorder: The audio recorder was utilized to ensure participant information is recorded accurately. However, if youth were uncomfortable being recorded, the researcher was reliant on the use of written information with a pen and paper. In addition, the audio recorder digitally saves the audio recordings while also assigning a random file number, which was used to code each participant’s recording. Note: in the case when the audio recorder was not used, the researcher utilized similar sequence of numbers for the written data files.

The researcher contacted and conducted the interviews at an unstructured setting. The settings are based on locations where homeless youth frequent (i.e. parks, and library entrances, in Midtown and Downtown Sacramento, California). With the use of a homeless liaison and responding to interviews suggestions, the downtown Plaza was a reliable setting for interviews. The homeless liaison/key informant remained within eyesight to ensure close proximity and safety for researcher and research participant.

Upon completion of the interviews, the researcher transcribed the audio recordings to a word document on the researchers laptop, which is password protected. Word documents are titled in accordance to the audio recorded file per participant. The
purpose of transcribing the data was to ease the process of data analysis for this study.

**Data Collection Procedures**

The researcher used a combination of sampling approaches, which began using the criterion sampling to identify homeless youth who were transition-age youth and the snowball sampling to help the researcher identify other areas that are better known by persons that are part of the targeted population in order to find the following participants. A participant was selected once they met the study’s criteria, conveyed interest and was willing to participate in the study. This followed by the researcher overviewing the consent form (i.e. explaining the research procedures, their risks and benefits, purpose of the study, and provisions for confidentiality in the research) and acquired the participant’s signature. Both the participant and the researcher retained a copy of the consent form with their signature as a reference and reminder of the information conveyed.

The researcher used a key informant during the data collection procedures (interview) based on their experiences and knowledge of the target population as well as a safety precaution. Also, the researcher provided incentives to the research participants who received a $5 gift card for food (Subway/McDonalds), a blanket, water bottle, and toiletries (toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, shampoo, and deodorant). In addition, participants were provided with a Sacramento resource packet (i.e. local resources to meet their needs).

Data was collected from the interview, which entailed the participant’s responses to the questionnaire by sharing their experiences, feelings, and perceptions of their support networks. The researcher conducted an unstructured open-ended interview to
collect data, which allowed an in-depth interview with an open narrative structure. While the researcher conducted the interview, the researcher also audio recorded the interview with the consent of the participants, and later transcribed the data.

**Data Analysis**

The strategy used for conducting qualitative data analysis is a content analysis, which is a strategy similar to theme analysis. A theme analysis focuses “on identifying common themes or patterns that are prevalent in several cases … [and] is likely to be rewarding in uncovering new insights about a topic” (Dudley, 2011, p. 256-7). Content analysis “focuses specifically on the repetition of different types of recorded communication, such as words or phrases” (Dudley, p. 263).

The audio recorded data retrieved from the interviews was transcribed onto a word document with the corresponding coding as the audio files. Once transcriptions were reviewed, summarized, and printed, the researcher began utilizing a latent and manifest coding to identify emerging themes and motifs within the 10 interviews that were conducted for this study. Latent content is the underlying meaning of what is being communicated. Manifest content refers to the apparent content being communicated, which would be the time devoted a particular topic and/or the multiple times particular words are being said (Dudley; Rubin & Babbie, 2010). In order to identify the manifest content the researcher used a system of color-coded highlighting to identify repeated words and/or ideas as representing common themes. With the use of the identified themes, the researcher was able to identify overarching motifs for the latent content analysis.
The advantage of using a content analysis is that it is subjective and interpretive (Dudley, 2011, p. 263), which correlates with this study being a qualitative study. Therefore, there is neither right nor wrong answer because the experiences, feelings, and perceptions are their own. Another advantage is that it is feasible because it is financially affordable due to conducting only 10 interviews. A disadvantage of a content analysis is that the interviews need to be recorded in some form to note and count the repeated content. Another disadvantage is that coding categories need to be clearly defined for reliability, since reliability is achieved when the same results are achieved multiple times (Rubin & Babbie, 2010).

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Prior to collecting data, a human subject’s application was submitted and approved by the California State University, Sacramento, Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects from the Division of Social Work. The researcher’s application was approved as “minimal risk.” The human subjects identify as being a part of two types of vulnerable populations, 1) experiencing homelessness, and 2) being transition-age “youth” ages 18 to 24. These anticipated risk factors were addressed by ensuring that their participation is voluntary. An additional anticipated risk to the human subjects was potential feelings of discomfort while discussing their support networks. Risks to the human subjects was minimized by allowing youth to stop the interview at any given time, as well as being providing a list of low-cost/free services for counseling if they felt distressed upon completion of the study. The researcher overviewed the consent form with each participant and encouraged participants to ask clarification questions. Once
participants consented by signing the consent form, participants were given a copy of the consent form. In order to increase anonymity the demographic information was recorded on a separate sheet than the consent form and was assigned a random code according to the tape recorder.

The completed consent forms were stored separately from the audio recordings of the interviews and transcriptions in a locked cabinet in a secure location at the researcher’s home. The researcher, the liaison, and the researcher’s thesis advisor were the only people who had access to the completed transcriptions during the completion of the project. The data will be destroyed approximately one month after the project is filed and approved with Graduate Studies at California State University, Sacramento.

**Summary**

This chapter described the research study and the methods utilized by the researchers to collect information from the research subjects. The design of the research was exploratory and the research instruments were administered to research subjects with the intention of capturing the subjects’ current knowledge about matters pertaining to experiences of support networks. The data analysis and human subject’s procedures were also discussed. In the next chapter, the results of the study are presented.
Chapter 4

Study Findings and Discussions

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of homeless youth regarding their support networks from the perspectives of members of this population. In this chapter the results of the study are presented. First, demographic information on research participants is discussed. Next the participants’ experience with their support networks are discussed which include family, social groups, and social service providers followed by their perceptions. This section concludes with a summary of what participants discussed. The researcher provided pseudonyms for all participants to protect their identity.

Demographics

This section presents the demographics of the study participants. Data are from qualitative interviews with ten participants. All ten participants that were interviewed were homeless, ages 18 to 24. There were a total of nine open-ended questions, which focused on eliciting information in five areas of concern.

Age

For legal and ethical reasons, the youngest participant was 18 years of age and the oldest participant was 24 years of age, with an average age of 21. One participant was 18 years of age, five participants were 20 years of age, one participant was 22 years of age, two participants were 23 years of age, and one participant was 24 years of age (Figure 1).
The participants in this study self-identified as either female or male. Of the ten participants, three participants identified as female and seven participants identified as male (Figure 2).

**Figure 1. Age**

**Gender**

The participants in this study self-identified as either female or male. Of the ten participants, three participants identified as female and seven participants identified as male (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Gender**
Race & Ethnicity

The participants of this study exemplified racial and ethnic diversity. Two participants identified as white or Caucasian, four participants identified as black or African American, one participant identified as Japanese, one participant identified as mixed heritage (White/Hispanic), and two participants declined to answer (Figure 3).

Experiences with Support Networks

In order to identify the support networks available to homeless youth, the researcher asked participants multiple open-ended questions to elicit information about their experiences with their support networks and specific members with whom they interact, which illustrates where they form their boundaries. All 10 youth participants interviewed shared at least one network in which they interact and therefore have at least one system that externally influences their set boundaries and behavior (Norlin & Chess, 1997). The social networks of transition-age homeless youth had a considerably diverse composition. Though Wenzel (2012) found the two most distinguishable categories of
support networks were relatives and street-based ties, this study will discuss the research participants’ most prominent support networks which include their peers, family, and social service providers.

**Peer Support**

In a review of the literature, it is consistently recognized that transition-age youth experiencing homelessness are strongly connected to their peers, especially when family relationships are strained (de la Haye et al., 2012; Falci et al., 2001; McCay et al., 2011; Wenzel et al., 2012). Seven out of the ten participants interviewed reported socializing with both street-based and housed peers, whom they may also consider acquaintances and strangers, as an available network of support. Two participants said they relied on friends, which included the help of strangers ("people in the community"), drug dealers, and others "in the same boat" (i.e. fellow struggling artists, homeless youth, and former foster youth). Joseph shared: “I’m still in touch with my foster friends and [foster] sister, but most of them are in the same situation I’m in. so it’s not like they could help me if they wanted to.” Joseph further explained: “It’s like a give and take, they give me stuff… [and] when I had my own place [we are] helping each other when we’re able.” Brian explained: “I know tons of people who won’t help, but I couch surf with my homeboys. They’re good solid people with unconditional love. They give me moral support and advices that keep[s] me sane, keep me clean, and grounded.” Brian’s relationship with his homeboys confirms what McCay et al. (2011) referred to as a strong connection with peers and how such connections are beneficial to youth’s mental health.

Eric shared, “it’s cool when people are willing to be kicking’ it and hanging out…
like if I got a light and they have a blunt there you go, no judgment.” This is consistent with other research studies that have found that homeless youth develop a strong connection to fellow street based peers based on a semblance of protection and comfort whereby friendship, acceptance, and understanding of their precarious housing situation is established (de la Haye et al.; Smollar, 1999).

Participants shared how friends, acquaintances, and strangers provided a variety of support including moral support, positive encouragement, and material support (i.e. food and shelter). Henry shared a recent event where he witnessed strangers struggling to move furniture, which led to small talk and resulted in temporary shelter. Sometimes homeless youth received assistance and support while providing nothing in return by panhandling.

In other instances, some homeless youth prefer to render services for monetary assistance or other types of support. Occasionally participants received help in exchange for various rendered services. “Carl” shares a similar experience when he and his fellow homeless band mates exchanged something for entertainment:

Even though me and a couple friends are homeless for a while, [we are] kind of couch-surfing… Davis is a pretty resourceful place to be because it’s a pretty community driven place, so they [local restaurants] would give us free dinner if we would play music for them. Sometimes they [would] pay us $150 bucks a night.

In addition, Carl and Fred both shared how community members offered money to clean up community events, mow lawns, clean cars, and so on. Carl’s primary system
was identified as his band, whereby his bandmates were his primary support system.

Henry also shared how he would play music on the streets for donations from strangers. Fred also informed me that he would do odd jobs in exchange for some tangible support.

The various support provided to the participants from their peers, specifically among street based peers and strangers, tended to involve risky behavior and not likely to acquire support. Carl confirms such risky behavior as he shared:

When I don’t have a home or means for food I feel pretty desperate and a little miserable… I was selling weed and doing what I could to make money [for] eat[ing] and for cigarettes… I remember when I started to become stressed and overwhelmed with not knowing what to do with myself, so I started smoking… I spent whatever money I had on it... It’s supposed to help you reduce stress and it doesn’t …it becomes a never ending cycle.

Norlin & Chess (1997) explain how the suprasystem determines the function of relationships in systems, whereby the systems (the youth’s well-being) output can be jeopardized by group members who are not conducive to the youth’s goal and well-being. These specific peer relationships and negative involvement is illustrated by former research studies that deter homeless youth from attaining their goals i.e. permanent housing (de la Haye et al., 2012; Gaetz, 2004; Norlin & Chess; Wenzel et al., 2012).

**Familial Support**

Although the composition and diversity of a transition-age youth networks vary according to the individual, Wenzel et al. (2012) and Falci et al., (2001) both found that transition-age youth (age 18 to 24) are likely to be supported by their relatives, unless
youth have weak connections with family (especially with their parents) and lack parental guidance. Anna is a prime example of having a weak connection with her parents and occasionally receives support from her daughters’ grandma. Despite many strained familial relationships like Anna, four of the ten participants remained in contact with a family member who provided support in some shape or form. Relatives, including parents, occasionally supported the youth by providing food, cash, and clothes. As a parent, Anna shared: “their [her daughters’] grandma came and found me the other day and helped us out a bit. When her sister wants to see her grandma I take her and let her [grandma] take care of her.” Grace also shared how she occasionally received child care from their family. Non-parental relatives also provided shelter and/or letting youth shower at their place.

The three participants, who had a significant other, identified them as family. Though the duration of the relationships was not explored, all three participants shared that their relationships have been established prior to their experiencing homelessness. The significant others often supported the participants with material resources, emotional and mental support. When the researcher probed the three participants who had significant others, they all shared that their significant others could not provide housing arrangements with them because they themselves were living at their parents’ house and therefore were not allowed. Henry shared that his girlfriend’s mother forced her to break up with him, so he referred occasionally referred to her as his girlfriend and ex-girlfriend. Carl mentioned that his significant others parents did not approve of their relationships partly because he became homeless, and therefore they do not allow him at the house. Iris
also conveyed a similar disapproval from her partner’s mother when she shared:

   My girlfriend is the only one who is really there for me…. I’m a very independent person, and I don’t like my [girlfriend] giving me stuff like food stamps, even though it’s something that I need… and then her mom gets all mad because I guess I’m taking her [girlfriend’s mom’s] food stamps and whatever from the house… Since then, she doesn’t like me.

   This is consistent with other research studies that have found that transition-age homeless youth are likely to be supported by their significant others (de la Haye et al., 2012; Falci et al. 2001; Smollar, 1999; Wenzel et al., 2012). However, both de la Haye et al. and Wenzel et al. took into consideration that survival sex and the duration and or commitment of the relationship contributed to the different levels of support from their significant others.

   Social Service Support

   In instances where peers and family were non-existent or limited, participants have received support from outside of their families. Smollar’s (1999) notion that homeless youth are “mistrustful and fearful of society’s institutions” (p. 54) explains why this studies’ participants reluctantly sought out social service providers. In addition, Lee (2001) and Wenzel, et al. (2012) identify homeless youth as an at-risk population who develop self-reliant behaviors and are known to avoid seeking resources. All ten research participants have interacted with a social service provider at least one point in time where they received support in some shape or form. Participants interacted with various social services including: churches (i.e. St. Frances house), food banks, mental health services
(i.e. Alta regional, New Star), direct services for the homeless (i.e. Loaves & Fishes, WIND youth center, Dreamcatcher), and other drop-in centers and resources (Calworks, Yolo service support).

Although all participants received support from various social service providers at least one point in time, eight participants shared their appreciation of social service providers. Three of these eight participants identified a specific social service provider or agency as a primary support network based on their supportive characteristics and services provided. Iris shared how some people like her SSI worker and case worker are really involved. “It’s nice to let them know whatever is going on with me… and have them treat me as a daughter and some treat me as a real friend.” Although a church provides a different environment for homeless youth, the literature commonly identifies faith based organizations as a type of social service provider (Auerswald et al., 2013; Berger, 2005; Ferguson et al., 2007). Another three participants identified a spiritual network based on their looking to God or a church, which was based on former connections with family members or faith based organization. Though three participants shared that they received support from God or a faith based organization, Dan was the only participant who said he relied on "nobody but God" with the help of his bible. Although Dan’s girlfriend offers and gives him stuff, he explains: “I dedicate my all to Jesus. That’s the only support I have and it’s strong, very strong. I don’t go to church a lot but when I think about God, he keeps me out of trouble.” Ferguson et al. (2007) concurs with Dan regarding how a person’s faith affects homeless youth’s outlook and mental health. Fred was the only participant named a social worker who they relied on to
meet their needs, which he attributed to his mental health.

Social service providers consistently linked youth to resources in attempts to meet their needs. For example, housing resources included shelter programs or hotel vouchers, nutritional resources included food bank programs and/or providing access to food stamps (also known as EBT card or Cal fresh). All youth participants reported having experiences where help was given under certain conditions or with limitations. Joseph shared: “they [his former foster siblings] let me stay at their place if I mow the lawn for them, do the dishes, every other night, and I got to give them my food stamps.”

**Perspectives of Support Networks**

In order to obtain an understanding of the quality of support, multiple open-ended questions allowed participants to share their perspectives and feelings regarding the support provided. Specifically, participants were asked to describe the type of support provided by their networks and how well supportive were their support networks. The participants’ shared both positive and negative perspectives based on their experiences. This section further discusses the research participants’ perspectives on support received from their peers, family, and social service providers.

Four participants said they relied on themselves, and three participants said they relied on nobody. "Iris" said, "I'm a very self-reliant person because I don't like asking people for nothing." Youth who relied on themselves or nobody said things in the effect of not wanting to owe others for provisions rendered or not needing anyone to meet their needs. Rew (2001) explained that resilience was only prominent among homeless youth experiencing loneliness, life-threatening behaviors, and lacked connectedness. This
study's participants exemplify how homeless youth are self-reliant and refrain from seeking resources.

**Perspectives of Peer Support**

The researcher asked, "Who do you rely on for support" to understand how homeless youth expect to meet their needs with or without support from others. All participants were able to identify networks that have supported them. All ten participants felt that their peers gave them something that they needed at one point in time at the very least. Eight of the ten participants expressed that moral support was the most valued support which was received, whereby they felt their peers fulfilled the role best. Iris would see former peers, from when she was housed, who would offer tangible resources though she perceived them judging her past decisions or situations that led to her homelessness. Participants shared conflicted feelings about how others did not help them solve their problems regarding acquiring housing. For example, when the researcher probed for details, Eric shared “the system [society and the government] is not going to give me something for nothing,” whereas Carl shared how a community member has been providing guidance for him and his fellow bandmates.

Brian voiced, “I know tons of people but they don’t help me… but my homeboys let me couch surf with ‘em. They’re good solid people with unconditional love.” Smollar (1999) supports the concept of street based peers establish a semblance of protection and acceptance. Although Smollar does not explore the size of the street based peer groups, Wenzel et al. (2012) found that only large street based peer groups are identified as supportive whereby tangible resources are more likely to be shared amongst the group
and emotional support is provided. Homeless youth as a mobile population contributes to their street based networks being susceptible to changes in composition and strength of relationships, resulting in a significant loss of support (Auerswald et al., 2013; de la Haye et al, 2012). Eric said “it’s just hard to have peers when you got nothing [to offer to the friendship],” which further demonstrates a loss of support among homeless youth and system fluidity.

All participants shared similar experiences where they felt most members of their networks gave provisions out of sympathy and/or obligation., and Henry shared his perception about Christians and Muslims are obligated to “be good” and help “people like me” in need. Eight of the participants felt resentful when asking for help, especially when it was from family or peers where there have been feelings of hostility. Though participants shared feelings of being supported, all ten participants felt that most of the housed people in their networks did not understand their precarious housing situation and associated problems and risks and decide to limit their interactions from what Carl explains, how people do not understand how “I was pushed in a corner and [I am] making the best of what I got with my homes.”

**Perspectives of Familial Support**

Regardless of conflicting feelings towards their families, the four participants also conveyed that they value their family regardless of their lack or minimal support. All ten participants conveyed the same thing that Grace said, "life is easier when they help.” When the researcher probed participants regarding "they” or "them,” participants clarified that they were referring to family members and peers from when they were formerly
housed. Though others helped meet the participants’ needs, eight of the ten participants conveyed that "it's nice to know that ‘they’ still care and believe in me."

Iris shared that when her cousin kicked her out that her brother reluctantly offered his place (sleeping on the couch or floor) when she cannot find other places to stay, so she considers her brothers place as a last resort. Dan perceived his family (mostly his parents and family friends) as always criticizing him as they inform him about potential jobs and that he just needs to look and ask and always being told to “stay out of trouble.” Dan further explained how he understands that although his family or family friends inform him about job opportunities, being contacted is difficult without a mailing address and working phone. This is consistent with Smollar (1999) finding that homeless youth feel tumultuous from their parents’ constructive criticisms, which was more perceived as pure criticism. When Dan was probed more about his support from family, Dan said that his family “doesn’t give me anything whatsoever… they’re just people I communicate with.” This example is consistent with the research identifying weak and or strenuous connections between homeless youth and their families, though conflicts with the notion that some family members continues to provide tangible support (Falci et al., 2001; Smollar; Wenzel et al., 2012).

**Perspectives of Social Service Support**

As an at-risk population, homeless youth are resilient, thus developing self-reliant behaviors and are known to avoid seeking resources (Lee, 2001; Wenzel, 2012). Among the seven participants who shared negative experience with social service providers, only Abby shared having only negative experiences with providers: “I don’t see them being
that way [supportive], so they should be trying to help me keep my job and help my kids with childcare, but no they’re saying I make too much money … It would be nice if they help me figure out what I can do and help me care for my girls.”

The seven participants’ negative experiences were attributed to: feeling that others forget they are people too, feeling judged, feeling that workers did not invest in their interests, and/or being spoken to disrespectfully. Henry shared his perception of social service providers as "people who are just there for a paycheck," which was his understanding of why they did not bother investing in helping him. Fred shared how: "Some of them [social service providers] treat me nice, like I'm a person and sometimes they barely see me and treat me like a number." Although social service providers’ aims to provide resources and referrals to meet homeless youths’ needs, each participant has their own perspective based on their experiences and needs.

Among the nine participants who identified social service providers as a support network, three participants (Brian, Carl, and Iris) shared only having positive experiences with providers. These nine participants described social service providers as understanding and genuine. The participants positive experiences were attributed to the social workers whom they interacted with as being genuine with their concerns and feedback, being open to listen, listening without judgment, providing feedback and constructive criticism, speaking respectfully, making me feel comfortable, making a connection, personable, offering emotional support, being involved in their lives, and keeping in touch for follow-up services. Iris shared: “whenever I need something they [her SSI worker or case worker] definitely help me out a lot. They helped me get my
medical together and dental and all that stuff… we actually keep in contact too.”

All ten participants shared what they each perceived as the most important thing a social service provider could offer to best support them, so the researcher compiled the participants’ perspectives. The overall responses geared towards ensuring that homeless youth should be made aware of resources applicable to them, provided access to resources, and directly being connected to resources pertaining to housing, jobs, childcare, healthy food, and healthcare. All ten participants expressed that services should be expedited, especially considering that they do not always sleep in the same locations or always have an operated phone. Four participants shared needing help to become independent.

**Summary**

In this chapter, overall and specific findings were analyzed and discussed in relation to the purpose of the study. The following chapter discusses this study’s conclusions and implications for social work practice and policy. The recommendations, limitations of this study and the conclusion are also discussed.
Chapter 5

Conclusion, Summary, and Recommendations

In this chapter, the researcher discusses the conclusions found in this study and their ramifications. It includes a discussion of the themes that emerged from this study: peer support, familial support, and social service support. This chapter also explores recommendations regarding future research and provider training, the limitations of this study, the implications for social work practice and policy, and a conclusion.

Conclusions

The information provided in this study offers information about transition-age homeless youth experiences with support networks. This study sought an exploration of the question: What are the experiences and perspectives of homeless youth on their support networks? Three areas of concern were explored through the interviews of transition-age homeless youth to identify: with whom they interact, who they received support from, their perspective of such support, and their involvement with social service providers. The research explains that transition-age youth have become the largest and fastest growing sub-population experiencing homelessness in the United States (Covenant House Institute, 2010; Hudson & Nandy, 2012; United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2010). It is important for social workers and professionals to explore and educate themselves on the unique needs of transition-age homeless youth in order to be more effective social service providers. The main themes that emerged from this study, as the primary support networks of transition-age homeless youth are peers, family, and social service providers.
In terms of peer support, participants identified that their peers were the primary network of support that met their needs with both emotional and tangible support. Osgood et al. (2010), Smollar (1999), and Wenzel et al. (2012) described how relationships based on comradery among street based peers and based on hope and support received from peers from when formerly housed were common. This was especially the case when the participants’ had strained relationships with family. Peers was found to describe friends from when formerly housed, those they met on the street or at homeless centers, acquaintances, and even strangers. Some participants in this study also identified their involvement in drug or alcohol use when such use was the social context of the group of people with whom they interact, which confirms Rice et al. (2012) explaining that social networks can also involve provisions (i.e. alcohol and other drugs) and supporting disruptive behavior. In regards to peers as a support system, some participants felt undeserving of friends because their lack of resources or were otherwise grateful for the relationships and support.

In terms of familial support, participants commonly thought of their immediate family (i.e. parents and siblings). Regardless of having strained relationships (primarily with their parents), participants remained in contact with at least one family member who often provided tangible support. Falci et al. (2001), Smollar (1999), and Wenzel et al. (2012) identifies homeless youth having weak and strenuous relationships with their families, which contributes to feeling tumultuous and wanting to sever the relationships. In regards to family as a support system, some participants felt judged when provided tangible resources, which often led to less contact with their family. In other instances,
participants' shared how they value their family regardless of their lack or minimal support. Participants who had a significant other identified them as family in accordance to them their long-term nature, frequent interaction, and as a primary source of emotional and tangible support. Though participants' significant others’ parents disapprove of their relationships, this study confirms that significant others are strongly supportive and their relationships remain strengthened (de la Haye et al., 2012; Wenzel et al., 2012).

In terms of social service providers as a support system, participants’ experiences with social service providers varied. Some of the participants' negative experiences confirm Pergamit (2010), Ray et al. (2006) and Rew et al. (2005) regarding the fear and mistrust of institutions and the possibility of being criminalized. In instances when participants had positive experiences with social service providers it sometimes involved them receiving tangible, emotional, and mental support. Specifically, when participants' shared experiences with a particular social service provider with whom they regularly interact, they spoke of them in high regard and appeared hopeful instead of depressed about their housing. This study confirms how having supportive relationships, including a positive relationship with a social service provider and peers, are essential in strengthening their mental health and developing positive relationships with their support networks (McCay et al., 2011; Rice et al., 2012).

**Recommendations**

From the findings in this research, recommendations can be made in the following areas: future research and provider training. These recommendations will be discussed in detail below.
Future Research

Findings in this study suggest a definite need for more research to be conducted specific to transition-age homeless youth since their needs are unique in comparison to homeless youth whom are minors. In consideration of a small sample size (N = 10) and criterion sampling method presents limitation whereby the findings cannot represent all homeless youth in the age range (ages 18 to 24). There were also limited studies pertaining to transition-age youth, there is a need for future research to be conducted with a focus on transition-age homeless youth to provide more generalizable results for transition-age homeless youth as a whole. This study retrieved firsthand experience from the participants, who are transition-age youth who themselves are experiencing homelessness. This led to the researcher wanting to explore the disparity between the perceptions of the youth and a member of their support networks. It would be useful to build upon this work by using a convenient sampling method to interview a member of their support networks.

Provider Training

There are few social service providers directed to transition-age youth, and are thus unaware of their unique needs in comparison to homeless youth whom are minors. Since homelessness exacerbates developmental concerns among transition-age youth, a need to develop cultural competent and sensitivity trainings regarding risks associated with homelessness is recommended. The findings of this research also indicate that individuals sometimes fear to share information with social service providers or withhold information. Realizing that participants’ commonly fear and mistrust social service
providers highlights the need to de-criminalize the stigmas associated with homelessness. One of the recommendations for helping professionals is to develop cultural competent and sensitivity trainings regarding the criminalization of homelessness to help build trust and establishing the practitioner-client relationship, which is a factor in helping their mental health.

**Limitations**

This study had several limitations. The discussion and recognition of these limitations will help to better understand this study and also provide a starting point for future research and inquiry.

A significant limitation of this study was the disadvantage of using a qualitative research approach. This method of data collection sought from a sample of homeless youth age 18 to 24. The small sample size (N = 10) and criterion sampling method presents limitation whereby the findings cannot represent all homeless youth in the age range (ages 18 to 24). This criterion sampling also was reliant on youth being forthcoming about their homelessness. In addition, the cross-sectional nature of this study is also a limitation pertaining to their support networks and their geographic location.

All participants identified networks of support; however, interview questions did not specifically inquire about the impact of their support networks. Also, since the researcher interviewed the participants at one point in time, the participants’ perspectives and perceptions of their support networks can change over time or has been skewed based on a recent conflict i.e. fight or theft) or a celebration (i.e. new significant other or
All participants identified being precariously housed in the greater Sacramento region, therefore findings are limited to the specific geographic region. Although these youth have mobilized across northern California, including cities in the bay area (Oakland, San Francisco), and the greater Sacramento area (Davis, Dixon, Woodland, Auburn, and Sacramento), this study’s results for this population may not generalize to other cities or regions. Specifically, some cities may have either more or less resources available to them, which may contribute to their probability of escaping homelessness.

**Implications for Social Work Practice and Policy**

The implications of this study will benefit social workers and helping professionals in social work practice and policy on the micro, mezzo and macro levels.

On a micro level, social workers and helping professionals will benefit from the insight provided in this study by increasing their cultural awareness of transition-age youth and the importance of support networks. In addition, social workers would know to involve those whom they have a strong relationship with to improve the youth’s mental health and overall well-being, eventually leading to permanent housing. Although it was prominent for youth to have strenuous relationships with their families, there remains to be a connection. This allows social workers to understand the relationship is not completely severed, and has the potential to strengthen their relationships.

On a mezzo level, the findings of this study suggests that supporting and strengthening the efforts of community members’ involvement can not only be a potential support system, but increase youths’ general outlook (USICH, 2010). This was evident
with Carl, when he expressed his gratitude for provisions from local stores and community events. In instances when homeless youth feel disconnected from their communities, community involvement and collaboration of agencies can help with this issue, which can reduce disruptive behaviors (i.e. self-harm, drug use, and vandalism) based on a sense of belonging to a community and taking responsibility of their actions.

On a macro level, the findings of this study and literature provide implications for policy makers and program administrators. These findings suggest that intervention needs to focus on deconstructing the stigma associated with homelessness. Once the stigma is reduced, then youth experiencing homelessness may be more willing to participate in research. In addition, there remains to be an inconsistent definition of homeless youth in federal statutes. More social service providers have adopted the United States Department of Education’s definition of homelessness in regards to being inclusive of “couch-surfing” and “doubled-up.” Once the definition of homeless youth is consistent on federal statutes, social service providers and Continuum of Care licensing’s can receive the proper funding to render services.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the support networks among homeless youth based on their experiences and perspectives. In particular, this study focused on transition-age homeless youth and sought to find a deeper understanding of this stage of development. The participants provided limited information regarding their support networks whereby the most prominent support was from peers, family, and social service providers. This research identified these top four themes and provided descriptive
information about each theme that was derived from the study findings and the review of literature. This study also provides recommendations at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels, which include recommendations for social service providers and future research. Some of the implications of this study are that considerable attention should be given to the stigma of homelessness and therefore cultural competence training pertaining to homelessness when working with the transition-age homeless population and the importance of building rapport and trust when working with them. Finally, an exploration of how the inconsistent definition of homelessness in federal statutes and its exclusion of the most prominent form of housing among transition-age youth determines of social service providers are appropriated proper funding to render services.
TO:    Martha Gonzales                   DATE:   December 18, 2013
FROM:  Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects

RE:  YOUR HUMAN SUBJECTS APPLICATION – CONTINUING REVIEW REQUEST

We are writing on behalf of the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects from the Division of Social Work. You have requested continuing review for one year, in order to retain and work on your data.

We have granted your continuing review. Your proposed study, “Youth Homelessness: Exploring Support Networks”, human subjects protocol number 12-13-052 expires one year from this date.

Please use your protocol number in all official correspondence and written materials relative to your study. Approval carries with it the obligation to inform the Committee promptly should an adverse reaction occur, and that you will make no modification to the protocol without prior approval from the Committee.

The committee wishes you the best in your research.

Research Review Committee members Professors Jude Antonyappan, Teiahsha Bankhead, Maria Dinis, Serge Lee, Kisun Nam, Francis Yuen

Cc:  Dinis
Appendix B

Affirmation Letter

To Whom It May Concern:

I, Robert Henderson; Lianna Luna, Sonny Iverson, Armando Flores, Addie Ellis, or Norma Zuniga (Circle One), affirm that I will be present with the student researcher, Martha Gonzales, during the interviewing process. I understand that I am undertaking the role of “key informant” and “homeless liaison” based on my experience of working with the homeless, my volunteer experience at homeless programs in various areas, and my educational background. For example, I have been volunteering at the Sacramento Loaves and Fishes Homeless Program since June of 1998. Derived from my volunteer experiences, I have the ability to talk with people from different types of communities about situations and life experiences in a respectful manner, which demonstrates my ability to fulfill the role as liaison to help ensure participants are comfortable with the interview process. Also, I understand that my very presence and accompaniment of the student researcher, Martha Gonzales, does provide a safety role for all the parties involved.

Signature: _____________________________  ____________

Date
Appendix C

Consent Form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH
I, ___________________________ (participant’s name), have been asked to participate in a master’s thesis study conducted by Martha Gonzales, Master of Social Work student, under the direction of Dr. Maria Dinis, Ph D., MSW professor of Social Work Research at Sacramento State University, reachable at (916) 278-7161 or I have been asked to participate because I am 18 to 24 years of age and am considered a homeless youth person.

PURPOSE
I understand the purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the support networks among homeless youth.

PROCEDURES
I will be asked to participate in an interview, comprised of a series of questions, by the MSW Student (Martha Gonzales). Robert Henderson, Lianna Luna, Sonny Iverson, Armando Flores, Addie Ellis, or Norma Zuniga (Circle One) will be present and undertaking the role of “key informant” and “homeless liaison” based on his experience of working with the homeless. Also, their presence will provide a safety role for everyone involved in this study. I understand that I am asked these questions based on my perceptions and thus there is no right or wrong answers. I will be asked if I am comfortable with the interview being audio recorded, which to my understanding will be used to ensure my interview is recorded accurately.

POTENTIAL RISKS/DISCOMFORTS
It has been explained to me that some of the questions in this interview may seem personal and therefore may cause feelings of discomfort. The researcher has informed me that if at any time I experience emotional distress, then I may decline to answer any particular question that I do not wish to answer for any reason or stop the interview at any time. I understand that if I experience emotional distress, then I may contact the list of low cost and/or free counseling services provided by the interviewer.

BENEFITS
I understand that the benefits from participating in this study may be beneficial for researchers, social workers, other scholars, and the general public to gain a better understanding of the variations of support networks for homeless youth, and therefore enable workers to assist homeless youth sustain positive networks of support. Personally, I may also benefit from participating in this study as I learn more about my own perspectives and from the referrals provided to me today.

CONFIDENTIALITY
I understand that my responses in the interview are confidential. Participants will only be identified by a randomly assigned ID number in any data collected for this research. I also understand that my information will be kept confidential, and therefore will only be seen by the researcher listed above and will be stored in a secure, locked location, except when being used for the purpose of this study. Access to this data is restricted to the researcher.
and her faculty sponsor, Dr. Maria Dinis, who may be reached at dinis@csus.edu. I understand that reports or publications may result from this study but my name or any personal identifiers will not be included in any publication. All data will be reported in the aggregate form. And all research materials will be destroyed once the Office of Graduate Studies has accepted this project or by June of 2013.

**PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**
I understand that my participation in this research study is voluntary, and that I may decide not to participate in this study at any time without consequences. My signature below indicates that I have read and understood this consent form and agree to participate in the research study.

**SIGNATURES**
I have read the entire consent form and completely understand my rights as a potential research participant. I voluntarily consent to participate in this research study. I have been informed that I will be given a copy of this form, and should questions arise, I may contact Dr. Dinis or Sacramento State University’s Human Subject Review Committee (916-278-7565) to discuss my rights as a research participant, I am able to do so at any time during or after the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature of Research Subject</th>
<th>Date</th>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature of Researcher</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
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</table>

I, ____________________________, (print name) agree to have my interview recorded for this research study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature of Participant</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Contact Information:**
If you have any questions or comments regarding the research, please contact Martha Gonzales at: mhg25@saclink.csus.edu.

Additionally, you may also contact my faculty sponsor,

Maria Dinis, Ph.D., MSW
c/o Sacramento State University
dinis@saclink.csus.edu
(916) 278-7161
Appendix D

Demographic Sheet

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Participant’s Gender Identity:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male ________     Female________     Intersex________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transgender_______     Other_______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Participant’s Age (18-24): ______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Participant’s Ethnicity: _____________________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E

Interview Question Sheet

Please provide me your thoughts and perceptions of your support networks by answering the following questions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>What type(s) of networks do you have (i.e. familial, professional, marital, spiritual, social, educational, etc.)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>How would you describe the assistance and/or support provided to you from networks?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Who do you rely on for support?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>How would you describe the assistance and/or support provided to you from individuals?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>How well supported (good, okay, etc.) do you feel by the assistance provided to you from networks and/or individuals?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>What supportive characteristics come to mind when you think about the service providers you have encountered?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>What is the most important thing a social service provider could offer you to best support you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Anything else you would like to add or comment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Do you know of another “hot spot” where I may find other homeless youth who may be interested in participating in this study? If yes, would you like to tell me about it? If no, thank you very much.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR PARTICIPATING IN MY STUDY!
References


McCay, E., Quesnel, S., Langley, J., Beanlands, H., Cooper, L., Blidner, R., & ... Bach, K. (2011). A relationship-based intervention to improve social


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