



Emerging adult homelessness in geographic perspective: A view from the Rust Belt



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ABSTRACT

This study provides a place-centered analysis of homelessness among emerging adults (age 18–24) by examining this issue in the context of the U.S. Rust Belt. In-depth interviews were conducted with a diverse sample of 30 homeless young adults in the small post-industrial city of Buffalo, New York. Our qualitative analysis focused on how place intersects with other factors to shape participants' experiences of homelessness and their views of the city and local social services. Participants described a sense of limited opportunity in Buffalo as well as the frustration that the service spectrum was too small, yet confusing to navigate. These findings point to directions for expanding employment prospects and housing and service options for homeless young adults in small cities.

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1. Introduction

“Homeless youth” is a broad term referencing young people up to age 24 who do not have a safe, stable place to stay (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2013). Within this population is a subgroup of homeless emerging adults, defined as those 18 to 24 years old (Zerger, Strehlow, & Gundlapalli, 2008). According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) annual point-in-time count, the majority of unaccompanied homeless youth are young adults between 18 and 24, with nearly 53,000 young adults experiencing homelessness in the United States on a given evening (HUD, 2015).

Homeless emerging adults face particular vulnerabilities. Due to having reached the age of majority, they may find themselves ineligible for resources that benefitted them when they were younger, such as school-based health services (Zerger et al., 2008). At the same time, homeless emerging adults are often not well served by programs targeted at the general homeless adult population. Some homeless emerging adults perceive shelters to be unsafe, while others resist the strict rules associated with many housing programs, or do not know how to access them (Gharabaghi & Stuart, 2010; Ryan & Thompson, 2013). Consequently, homeless emerging adults remain an underserved population that faces a number of health risks, including elevated rates of substance use, sexually transmitted infections, mental health

conditions, and food insecurity (Eidin, Ganim, Hunter, & Karnik, 2012; Tarasuk, Dachner, Poland, & Gaetz, 2009).

Much of the research on emerging adult homelessness adopts a developmental perspective. Studies have noted the need for programs that balance homeless young adults' developmentally appropriate desire for both support and independence (Ryan & Thompson, 2013; Stewart, Reutter, LeTourneau, Makwarimba, & Hungler, 2010). However, it can be argued that the problem of emerging adult homelessness and the solutions to ending it are rooted in place as well as in developmental time. This study sought to integrate a geographic perspective by looking at the issue of young adult homelessness in a particular place context—that of a small city in the U.S. Rust Belt—and understanding emerging adults' views of their city and of local services in this setting.

1.1. Homelessness in geographic perspective

Although the problem of homelessness is global in scope, it can also be argued that homelessness is a fundamentally local problem, such that trends in populations affected, living conditions, and community responses vary significantly between geographic locations (Hudson & Vissing, 2010). Florida, Mellander, and Witt (2012) note that climate, area housing costs, and population density are among the strongest predictors of per capita homelessness rates, even when controlling for community-level poverty. Metropolitan areas in the United States with warmer climates and steep housing costs tend to have disproportionately higher rates of homelessness, as well as greater resources for addressing this issue (Esparza, 2009; Florida et al., 2012). Conversely,

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rural communities report lower rates of homelessness, but face unique challenges conducting outreach and delivering services to the homeless population in general and to homeless young people specifically (Edwards, Torgerson, & Sattlem, 2009; Shamblin, Williams, & Bellaw, 2012).

Another important geographical dimension of homelessness pertaining to youth and young adults is the role of migration. “Travelers” are a subgroup of homeless young people who migrate to different areas of the United States via hopping trains, hitchhiking, and other means, often congregating in cities that have mild climates and are perceived as hip, such as Denver, Seattle, San Francisco and New Orleans (Chang, 2010; Covarrubias, 2014). Thus, youth homelessness may be more visible in cities that attract large populations of travelers, and cities’ responses may vary accordingly.

Despite the geographical variations in youth and young adult homelessness and related services, geography does not appear to figure strongly in research on this topic. Due to the challenges of recruiting samples of homeless young people, studies often rely on a single location (Edidin et al., 2012). Though a few multi-site studies have noted geographic variations in homeless young adults’ demographics and behavior profiles (Ferguson, Bender, Thompson, Maccio, & Pollio, 2012; Ferguson, Jun, Bender, Thompson, & Pollio, 2010), little research has examined how regional economic contexts or local service availability contribute to these differences. Further, since many prominent studies have been conducted in large cities with well-developed service networks such as Los Angeles (Rice, Milburn, Barman-Adhikari, & Monro, 2012; Wenzel et al., 2012), Houston (Ha, Narendorf, Santa Maria, & Bezette-Flores, 2015), and New York City (Ream & Forge, 2014), comparatively less is known about homeless youth and young adults in rural areas or mid-sized cities. In addition, though some studies have noted that travelers may differ from other homeless youth in terms of their behaviors and service needs (Martino et al., 2011; Sanders, Lankenau, Jackson-Bloom, & Hathazi, 2008), most studies fail to differentiate between traveling and local homeless youth and young adults.

1.2. Current study: emerging adult homelessness in a Rust Belt context

The current study addresses some of the gaps in the young adult homelessness literature by exploring this issue in a specific geographic context: the U.S. Rust Belt. The term “Rust Belt” refers to a band of post-industrial cities stretching from the Midwestern to the Northeastern United States. The Rust Belt moniker derives from the decline of industry in this region, often represented by the presence of abandoned factories literally turning to rust (McClelland, 2013). The setting for this study was the Rust Belt city of Buffalo, situated along Lake Erie in western New York.

Like most Rust Belt cities, Buffalo’s 20th century history is one marked by a steep decline in manufacturing employment, precipitating a decline in population; the city’s 2015 population estimate of 258,703 is less than half of the peak population of 580,132 at midcentury (McNeil, 2015; Partnership for the Public Good [PPG], 2011). Though Buffalo is regularly ranked as among the poorest cities in the United States based on its overall poverty rate of 30.1% (PPG, 2014), this figure does not convey the racial disparities present nor the geographic concentration of poverty. The Buffalo-Niagara metropolitan region is the sixth most segregated in the U.S., with approximately 80% of African Americans living in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, compared with 10% of whites (PPG, 2016). Many of these neighborhoods are on Buffalo’s East Side, a predominantly African American section of the city marked by elevated crime and police presence, economic distress, and an abundance of vacant lots (Arnade, 2016; Vogel, 2015).

Though some gains have been made following the 2008 recession, Buffalo’s job market remains lagging. Unemployment in Buffalo is consistently higher than national and New York state averages, with greater disparities for people of color (PPG, 2016). These gaps are particularly

pronounced for young workers. In 2013, unemployment among white young adults age 20–24 was 8.2%, compared with 20.5% for African American and 14.8% for Latino workers of the same age (PPG, 2016). Average weekly wages in Erie County of \$893 fall well below the national average of \$1043, reflecting the predominance of low-wage service sector jobs in the region (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Following national trends, these low-wages jobs disproportionately employ people of color (PPG, 2016).

The Rust Belt story is not entirely one of loss. Buffalo and other Rust Belt cities such as Pittsburgh and Cleveland have recently featured in well-publicized comeback narratives. Buffalo’s comeback story has included economic growth, particularly in the city’s medical corridor; a heralded increase in the number of educated millennials moving to the region; and a celebrated arts and cultural scene (Robinson & Epstein, 2015; Teicher, 2015). The city’s redevelopment has been uneven, however, with some neighborhood rapidly gentrifying while others remain entrenched in poverty. One reflection of this is the growing gap in home values; in 2014 homes in the trendy Elmwood Village neighborhood sold for an average of \$282,098, in comparison to an average of \$35,188 on Buffalo’s lower East Side, just a few miles away (Epstein, 2015).

Per official count, 531 young adults age 18–24 were homeless in federal fiscal year 2015 in the five-county region where the Homeless Alliance of Western New York (HAWNY) coordinates services for homeless-serving agencies that receive HUD funding (HAWNY, 2016a). As greater Erie County and the surrounding counties are primarily rural, both the homeless population and homelessness-related services are concentrated in Buffalo. HAWNY’s annual inventory lists 44 organizations in the region that receive HUD funding to support a variety of housing and affiliated social services programs, including emergency shelters, transitional housing, and long-term supportive housing (HAWNY, 2016b). The region has very few services targeted to homeless youth or young adults. Buffalo has one shelter for homeless or runaway youth up to age 17, but no emergency shelters specifically for young adults. The city has one resource center that provides a space where young people up to age 24 who are homeless or at risk of homelessness can use a kitchen and laundry facilities, watch television, or speak with a case manager. The greater Buffalo region does not have any drop-in programs for homeless youth or young adults that provide shower facilities or are open outside of regular daytime business hours.

Within this setting of a small and unevenly redeveloping Rust Belt city, this study examined two central research questions: (1) How do homeless emerging adults in Buffalo view their city, including their local employment and housing prospects? and (2) What are homeless emerging adults’ perspectives on local housing and social services? In answering these questions, our analysis applied a place-focused lens, assuming that participants’ responses would be shaped by the study’s geographic setting and participants’ construction of place meaning, along with other identity factors including race and class (Collins et al., 2016; Keene & Padilla, 2010). We did not suppose that participants’ responses would necessarily generalize to homeless young adults in other locales, but rather that these responses could offer insights into how place characteristics influence homelessness in a particular geographic context.

2. Methods

2.1. Design, setting, and sample

This study employed a qualitative research design, guided by principles of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Eligibility criteria for the study were: (1) being age 18–24 and (2) not having a stable place to live. This broad definition of homelessness allowed the study to include young adults in a variety of housing situations, including shelters, places not meant for human habitation, and couch surfing. Individuals in

transitional or supportive housing programs were excluded. Recruitment for the study continued until the research team agreed that theoretical saturation was reached, with a final sample of 30.

The study used community-based recruitment strategies to ensure that the sample was not restricted to individuals already accessing services. The research team partnered with Buffalo's resource center for homeless and at-risk youth, recruiting the first study participants there. Participants were given flyers to give to friends or acquaintances, generating word-of-mouth referrals. We also posted flyers in a variety of locations, including bus and train stations, libraries, coffee shops, community centers, and grocery and convenience stores. Finally, we recruited participants at two outdoor and one indoor program that distributed free meals, and recruited young people who were panhandling or busking on the street.

Recruitment and interviewing took place between June 2015–January 2016, with the majority of interviews conducted in the summer months. This facilitated our ability to recruit participants in outdoor locations, since Buffalo has a mild summer climate (average summer temperature 71 °F) but harsh winters (average winter temperature 28 °F with frequent heavy snow; *World Guides, 2016*). Most interviews took place at the resource center, even for participants who were not recruited there. Located on Main Street—typically recognized as the border between Buffalo's East and West sides—and near multiple public transportation options, this location was relatively central for participants coming from different parts of the city.

2.2. Study procedures

Interviews were completed by the principal investigator (PI) or a trained research assistant (RA). At the time of recruitment, participants scheduled a time to meet individually with the PI or RA to complete study procedures. Participants verbally provided informed consent and then completed a demographic questionnaire and semi-structured interview. The interview guide was developed collaboratively by the PI and a team of local service providers, including staff from the drop-in center. All interviews were audio recorded and lasted between 15 and 69 min, with an average of 40 min. Participants received \$20 cash compensation. Study procedures were approved by the IRB at the PI's university.

2.3. Data analysis

Data from the demographic questionnaire were entered into an electronic spreadsheet. All interviews were professionally transcribed and subsequently uploaded into Atlas.ti software. The PI and a second RA independently coded the interviews using a constant comparative method (*Charmaz, 2014*). Through this process, the two researchers each conducted primary coding on the transcripts, comparing emergent themes both within and across transcripts. During the primary coding phase, the PI and RA independently coded two transcripts per week and met weekly to discuss and compare codes, arriving at a consensus list of codes through this iterative process. The researchers used memo-writing to document the coding process and chart emerging ideas. Second-level coding, in which primary codes were consolidated into major analytic themes, was conducted primarily by the PI, in consultation with the RA. Interview data was supplemented by the researchers' observations and field notes, which were not formally coded but informed the identification of themes. The researchers also conducted member checks with six homeless young adults (including two who were interviewed for the study and four who were not), who provided feedback on the codes. This feedback validated the authenticity of the codes and was used to refine the development of final themes.

3. Results

3.1. Description of the sample

Demographics of the sample ($n = 30$) are reported in *Table 1*. The sample was racially diverse and primarily heterosexual. Educational attainment and employment were low among participants. The majority had experienced prior involvement in the child welfare and criminal justice systems. Most participants (63%) reported couch surfing as their principal form of housing. This included participants who were able to stay with relatives or friends for relatively lengthy periods of time (e.g. a month or more) as well as others who had to contact friends and acquaintances daily to find a place for the night. About one-third of participants used a combination of sleeping in places not meant for human habitation, such as bridges or tunnels, and accessing overnight shelters. Three men, two women, and one gender-fluid participant identified as travelers passing through Buffalo; the demographics of this sub-sample included five participants who identified as White and one as Asian American.

Our analysis focused on the ways in which participants' lives and experiences were rooted in their reality as homeless young adults in Buffalo. This place-conscious analysis of participant interviews yielded two major themes and several sub-themes. The first theme conveyed participants' views of their city, encompassed by the statement, "There's nothing here" and including a sense of lack of opportunity, loss, and hopelessness. The second theme reflected participants' experiences accessing services in Buffalo, summarized in the question, "Who are we supposed to rely on?" and embodying participants' sense of limited options coupled with difficulties navigating the system.

3.2. Perspectives on Buffalo: "There's nothing here"

For the majority of non-traveling participants, views of Buffalo were characterized by discouragement and restricted opportunity. As one participant elaborated: "I'm tired of Buffalo...there's nothing here. When you run these streets – like I said, I been running these streets since I was 11. There's nothing here for me no more." (Participant 30,

Table 1
Description of the sample.

	n (%)
Gender	
Male	15 (50)
Female	13 (43)
Other gender identity: transgender (female to male), gender fluid	2 (6)
Race	
African American	15 (50)
White	10 (33)
Other race/more than one race	5 (17)
Latino/a	4 (13)
Sexual orientation	
Straight	23 (77)
Bisexual	4 (13)
Other sexual orientation: queer, asexual	3 (10)
Traveler	6 (20)
Primary housing	
Couch surfing	19 (63)
Overnight shelters or places not meant for human habitation	9 (30)
Other (rooming house, mixed locations)	2 (7)
In a long-term relationship	12 (40)
Has children	11 (37)
High school diploma or GED	17 (57)
Currently employed	6 (20)
Ever involved in child welfare system	19 (63)
Ever incarcerated	22 (73)
Recruitment method	
Drop-in center	12 (40)
Recruited by research team at free meal program or outdoor location	10 (33)
Word-of-mouth	6 (20)
Called in response to seeing flyer	2 (7)

African American female). This view appeared to be shaped by participants' experiences of living in high-poverty and high-crime neighborhoods, particularly on the city's East Side. As another participant remarked:

I grew up on East Side...the East Side is a lot of killing, it's a lot of drama... I just feel like Buffalo – it's making a comeback, it is. Buffalo is making a major comeback, shout out to [mayor] Byron Brown or whoever, whatever politics that's doing that – but it's not enough.

[(Participant 14, African American and Native American male)]

Several African American participants remarked on Buffalo's segregation and the inequality that they observed between different parts of the city, as well as the city and its suburbs. "It's so segregated, and that shit is weird as hell," stated Participant 5 (African American male):

You know the black people are going to be in the East. You know the Ricans and shit are going to be on the West. You know all the white people are going to be [in] Kaisertown [a southeast Buffalo neighborhood]. Everybody just needs to get over it.

Another young man described how guarded he had to be when walking in his high-crime East Side neighborhood and how he would listen to music on his headphones that would "get you evil" to feel strong and safe. He contrasted this with the feeling of walking in a nearby suburb north of the city: "If I'm in Amherst, I'll walk down the street. Nice people, good morning. Nice grass, nice houses. It'll get you in the mindset of, you're joyful, you're happy. You don't have to be so guarded. You can relax" (Participant 4, African American male).

3.2.1. Lack of opportunity

Such comments suggested that though some participants were aware of Buffalo's "comeback," they did not see the benefits of the city and region's revitalization extending to their own lives. Participants' negative views of their city were shaped in part by a sense of limited economic opportunity. Only 20% of the sample were currently employed, and participants' incomes averaged \$413 per month, including income from illicit and under-the-table sources. Participants mentioned a lack of jobs (particularly for those with criminal records or with less than a high school education) and low wages for the jobs that they were able to get, leaving some with the perception that illegal activities such as selling drugs were the only way to survive. This sentiment appeared to be particularly strong for African American young men, such as Participant 2, who was couch-surfing at different friends' homes and had recently been hired to do stock at Walmart. He elaborated:

I know I need to be in a different city. There's not shit here. The most jobs, the most money I make at a job is \$12 an hour...[if you stay in Buffalo] you're just going to be a depressed fuck walking around, not wanting to do shit but gang bang and sell drugs because that's all there is to do here.

Related to their limited economic prospects, participants expressed that market-rate housing in Buffalo was not affordable for them. For example, one participant described that when she aged out of the foster care system at age 21, she could not afford the rent for the apartment located by her independent living program: "They dropped me off at [an apartment development in a nearby Buffalo suburb], an apartment that was almost \$700 a month...that's not affordable at all. So from there, it's just been eviction after eviction" (Participant 7, African American female). This participant was currently working at a temp agency, but reported only \$235 in income for the previous month, making paying for an apartment on her own a near impossibility. Another young woman reported that she had been working as a personal care assistant and was able to rent her own apartment, but was fired for calling in sick too many times to attend to her own or her two children's health. She

was subsequently evicted: "I couldn't afford the rent anymore. So I had to move all my furniture, I had no one to help me move my stuff, so all that stuff that I worked so hard for was gone" (P28, African American female).

3.2.2. Loss and hopelessness

Participants' perspectives on Buffalo were shaped not only by economic factors, but also by personal loss and trauma. Experiences such as those reported by Participant 15 (African American male) were common. Removed from his mother's care at a young age by Child Protective Services, Participant 15's childhood was characterized by foster placements with various relatives, gang involvement, and several stays in group homes through the juvenile justice system. The participant described his fantasy of leaving behind the violence he had participated in and witnessed during his time in the justice system and in the "trap houses" of Buffalo's East Side, and starting a new life in the rural state of North Dakota:

I know people die every day in different places, but if I go to North Dakota it's not like my people. You understand what I'm saying? If somebody going like, my people going to die before the year is over. I just don't want to be like, that was my people... It's just somewhere random in the middle of the world. There's North Dakota.

When asked where they would like to be living next year, the overwhelming majority of participants indicated locations other than Buffalo. For some, their preferred location was a place they had previously visited or heard about and that they perceived as offering better opportunities, such as California, Florida, or New York City. Others named specific Buffalo suburbs, such as Amherst or Cheektowaga, that they perceived as safe and comfortable places to live. Some participants did not have clear idea of where they would like to relocate, but simply articulated a wish to live "just in my own apartment and not in Buffalo" (Participant 7, African American female). This participant, who was couch-surfing with a friend of her boyfriend in substandard housing that did not have regular running water, explained that her perception of Buffalo was based primarily on her experience with housing conditions on the East Side: "I know now that the East Side and often Fillmore area are all slumlords. It's just you live and you learn."

In contrast to local participants, the travelers in the sample tended to spend time in more gentrified parts of the city, and generally had positive views of Buffalo. As one traveler (Participant 10, White male) commented, "there are some pretty cool people around here. I mean [we] usually really only hang out like around Allen and Elmwood," referring to a part of the city with a concentration of bars, restaurants, and parks where some of the travelers busked or panhandled. Another traveler described Buffalo positively in the context of other places he had visited: "It doesn't matter where [I stay] really, so long as it's a city that has stuff going on. Buffalo has that. Toronto has that" (Participant 19, Asian American male). For all of the traveling participants, Buffalo was not a destination but a stopover en route to other places such as New York City or Maine, where some planned to work the blueberry harvest.

3.3. Perspectives on services: "who are we supposed to rely on?"

Participants' experiences interacting with Buffalo's service system reflected a dual frustration: that the system offered too few options, particularly in terms of shelter and housing assistance, and yet was difficult to navigate.

3.3.1. Limited options

Many participants expressed that Buffalo did not have adequate shelters, in terms of quality and quantity. Because the city's shelters serve the general adult population (excluding one youth-only shelter for those up to age 17), emerging adults often observed themselves to

be part of a small minority of young people in these environments. Some expressed concern that the older shelter residents might harm them, or act as negative influences. “People pushed me around because they knew I was a soft kid and didn’t want to fight,” described one young man (Participant 3, White male) who had stayed at Buffalo’s largest men’s shelter, located downtown. This participant also described an attempted sexual assault from another resident while staying at the shelter. Another participant (Participant 29, African American female) staying in a women’s shelter found being around older homeless women to be discouraging: “They’re old but they don’t – their mindset is young. They don’t do things that they supposed to do... it’s like they want to stay there forever,” she stated.

Given these concerns, participants strongly expressed a desire for youth or young adult-only shelters (i.e. for those up to age 25) and other youth-focused services. Several participants expressed that though Buffalo’s singular resource center for homeless youth was highly valued, it was inadequate to serve the entire city. One young woman (Participant 28, African American female) stated, “There’s nothing like the resource center... I would say they need to make more resource centers like this.” This participant and others articulated that they appreciated how they could get supplies such as hygiene products, diapers, or food at the resource center, as well as assistance from staff applying for benefits and services. “I think there should be more locations. It shouldn’t just be one place,” stated Participant 29, noting that though the center’s location was convenient for many, it would be difficult for some young people to access, particularly those in South Buffalo or near the city’s eastern border.

Some of the traveling participants positively described drop-in centers they had visited in larger cities. “It was a place to just go and meet people,” said one traveler of a homeless youth drop-in program in San Francisco, which provided access to a variety of resources including condoms, toiletries, food, a needle exchange, food, and a place to watch television. “And I got to take a shower, you know, which was great cause I was sleeping in Golden Gate Park,” they stated (Participant 11, White and gender fluid). Another traveler similarly described a drop-in program in New Orleans:

You go and you can get food, and you can like watch the tube. Or like get on the computer, or take a shower, you know, do your laundry. In exchange for going and like using the facilities you just like do a chore. Like wipe down the counters before you leave, or take out the trash when you go.

[(Participant 9, White female)]

While the travelers in the sample described couch-surfing at times, most primarily slept in a vehicle or in tents, making access to showers and laundry particularly valuable. Traveling participants avoided using shelters except in instances of extreme weather. All interviews with travelers for this study took place in the summer, and none had used shelters or other housing services in Buffalo.

3.3.2. Difficulties navigating the system

Despite the limited range of service options, participants also discussed difficulties navigating the web of housing and social services available to them. Many participants were aware that the county administered programs such as shelter referrals, subsidized housing, rental assistance, and other benefits, and viewed these programs as important to their gaining stability and independence. However, participants frequently referenced challenges applying for assistance. “When they [young people] go down to the Rath Building or the building downtown [the central offices of the Erie County Department of Social Services], they don’t have to be so rude about it,” one participant commented (Participant 23, African American female). “They think because I’m young, I’m young-minded, I don’t know what I want...they don’t treat me like an adult.” Another participant remarked: “I need help filling out paperwork because I can’t really understand what I’m

filling out. My dad used to fill everything out, or my counselor at my old school” (Participant 24, African American female). One specific barrier participants frequently reported was obtaining assistance with security deposits. The Department of Social Services has a policy of negotiating security agreements with landlords under certain conditions, but since the agreements do not provide an actual deposit (only security against future damages), participants reported that many landlords would not accept them.

In addition, participants who had few couch-surfing options mentioned specific difficulties navigating the shelter system. “There’s so many people there you had to have a referral, and they have to have room. If they don’t have room, you’re basically sleeping in a hallway,” one participant remarked of the city’s main men’s shelter (Participant 13, White male). He added that he would rather sleep outdoors than deal with admission procedures that he likened as similar to “airport security,” excepting nights of extreme cold. Unable to stay with family but encountering difficulties in accessing the services they needed to survive, some participants expressed feeling caught in a troubling bind:

But if our parents are kicking us out and not helping us, what are we supposed to do? Who are we supposed to rely on? We can’t just be out here in the streets. Like I went downtown multiple times, even with [a staff member of the drop-in center] to try get assistance and help and they kept denying me and I’m just like where am I supposed to stay the night? And where am I supposed to go? If you are telling me you can’t help me because my grandmother has custody of me, she kicked me out, I cannot go back to her house.

[(Participant 24, African American female)]

4. Discussion

The results of this study offer unique insights into the lived experiences of homeless emerging adults in a Rust Belt city, and point to directions for service and policy interventions. To begin, our findings augment previous research conducted in larger cities with high housing costs by indicating that even in relatively low-cost housing markets, independent housing remains out of reach to young adults with extremely limited financial resources. Homeless emerging adults may therefore need access to subsidized housing while also receiving support to find and maintain employment at a level that provides a sustainable income.

The exploration of individual and geographic factors affecting employment among homeless emerging adults is an important area for further inquiry. The young adults in our sample were primarily able and wanting to work, though faced barriers including low educational attainment, criminal justice histories, and limited opportunities in a regional economy in which young people and people of color are disproportionately unemployed or concentrated in low-wage jobs, to an even greater extent than national trends (PPG, 2016). Ferguson et al. (2012) found that homeless young adults from Los Angeles were more likely to have full-time employment compared to young adults from mid-sized cities such as St. Louis. While a study of homeless youth in the Canadian cities of Toronto and Halifax noted educational disparities and low employment rates similar to our findings, two-thirds of youth in that study received government income subsidies (in contrast to only 10% of our sample), likely reflecting on differences in U.S. and Canadian welfare policy (Kidd et al., 2016). Future research should examine how geographic contexts may shape employment trajectories for homeless emerging adults, as well as study the impact of economic policies (e.g. living wage ordinances, welfare and disability income policies, and systems interventions to address barriers to employment for marginalized groups such as African American young men) on this population.

Our findings indicated that participants were largely frustrated by the limited service options in Buffalo, particularly the fact that the city had no shelters designated for young adults, and no homeless youth

or young adult drop-in centers. While larger cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago boast multiple drop-in centers and shelters exclusively for youth and young adults up to age 26, smaller cities with lower revenues such as Buffalo rarely have the resources and political will to support the same service spectrum (Esparza, 2009). With many homeless young adults relying on couch-surfing and the winter climate restricting the viability of sleeping outdoors, emerging adult homelessness is rendered largely invisible in cities like Buffalo, suggesting a need to educate local policymakers and funders on this population's existence and service needs. One potential strategy for this is photovoice, which has been used in other cities such as Denver to raise awareness about youth homelessness and promote policy change (Bender et al., 2016).

Buffalo's service system would be enhanced by having at least one full-service, 24-hour drop-in center for homeless youth and young adults. The results of a recent feasibility study conducted in Columbus, Ohio (Slesnick et al., 2016) suggest that in small cities, drop-in centers may be an effective approach for linking homeless youth and young adults with other health and social services. Notably, though Columbus has only one 24-hour youth drop-in center, the study found that youth were far more likely to access the drop-in program than the city's shelters. A 24-hour drop-in program with showers, washing machines, and cooking facilities would help to meet the survival needs of both local and traveling homeless youth (Pedersen, Tucker, & Kovalchik, 2016). Use of social media and communication between agencies (e.g. advertising shelter and drop-in spaces at free meal programs) could help to ensure that local young adults and travelers know where and how to access such a program. Establishing a network of smaller satellite drop-in centers throughout Buffalo's neighborhoods, or adding mobile van-based services, would help to address geographic barriers to access, particularly the dearth of services on the East Side. Further, though most participants in our study described using shelters as a last resort, designating spaces exclusively for young adults within existing adult shelters could bolster comfort with this option. While little research has examined young adults' shelter use, one Houston-based study (Ha et al., 2015) noted that a lack of young adult-focused shelter spaces there presented as a barrier to young adults' shelter access, suggesting that this concern may be present even in some larger cities.

Our results also indicate that even in a small urban setting with limited service options, participants felt overwhelmed in attempting to apply for housing assistance and navigating the available options. Young adults may benefit from mentorship or advocacy programs to provide guidance on their transition to adulthood, including support in accessing education and employment training programs, saving money, communicating with landlords, and applying for assistance with security deposits. Previous research has suggested that mentorship can play a role in youth making positive transitions and obtaining stability in housing and employment (Dang & Miller, 2013; Jennings, Shore, Strohming, & Allison, 2015); mentoring programs could provide this support for homeless young adults who do not have a "natural mentor" in their lives. In addition, our findings indicated that young adults' perceptions of rude or insensitive behavior from front-line social service workers was sometimes a barrier to receiving services. Given the frequent reporting of trauma histories by homeless young people, training social service workers across a variety of settings in the basic provisions of trauma-informed care could help to improve young adults' service-seeking experiences (Wolf, Green, Nochajski, Mendel, & Kusmaul, 2014; Wong, Clark, & Marlotte, 2016).

The sense of limited opportunity in Buffalo voiced by local study participants provides a stark juxtaposition against the dominant narrative regarding the region's resurgence, as well as against the traveling participants' generally positive views (even if Buffalo was a stopover rather than an intentional destination). In contrast to the titular millennials described in Teicher's (2015) article as "moving to Buffalo and living like kings," the young adults in our sample were struggling to meet subsistence needs and largely unable to access the cultural and economic

benefits drawing other young people to the region. In the excitement over Rust Belt cities' redevelopment, too little attention has been paid to economic and racial segregation and the inequalities that remain or are sometimes even exacerbated in the process (PPG, 2016). Our findings serve as a reminder that those invested in the recovery and health of Rust Belt cities must constantly ask "development for whom?" When young people's lives remain so marked by struggle that they see their futures improving only by a move to California or the suburbs, the depth of the Rust Belt's urban resurgence must be questioned.

These findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. While the study aimed to examine emerging adult homelessness in a Rust Belt context, data was collected in one city, and is not representative of the entire region. Though in-depth information on participants' experiences was obtained through qualitative interviewing, data collection was limited to singular participant interviews. Longitudinal interviewing and the addition of ethnographic methods such as structured observations would likely have yielded further insights. A strength of the study is its inclusion of participants who were not engaged in services; however, the viewpoints of youth accessing resource centers or free meal programs may be over-represented. Furthermore, this study addressed emerging adult homelessness only from the perspective of the young adults themselves. Future research should build from these findings to examine the perspectives of other stakeholders, such as service providers and young adults' parents/guardians and family members.

Despite these limitations, this study offers insights into the importance of place in understanding homelessness among young adults and points to ways that service systems in smaller urban settings can be strengthened. Our findings articulate an emerging adult "face" of homelessness in a region where homelessness among this age group is less visible, given that post-industrial cities like Buffalo are not frequent destinations for traveling homeless youth, housing costs are assumed to be low, and the dominant narrative is one of young people thriving. Future research should examine the implementation and impact of interventions to improve health and socioeconomic outcomes for homeless young adults in different geographic settings, in order to further elucidate the importance of place context in preventing and addressing young adult homelessness.

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