

“Nothing is for free...”: Youth Logics of Engaging Resources While Unstably Housed

Gina M. Samuels

University of Chicago, School of Social Service Administration

Christine Cerven

Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago

Susanna R. Curry

California State University-Sacramento, Division of Social Work

Shantá R. Robinson

University of Chicago, School of Social Service Administration

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Abstract

This article presents findings from a national study of 215 youth, ages 13 to 25, experiencing housing instability in five U.S. counties. Drawing on life-course interviews, a housing timeline tool, and background survey data, we explored the factors associated with their use and rejection of both formal and informal resources. Using inductive conceptual methods of analysis, we created a model of “youth logics of engagement,” illustrating three factors that shaped how youth interpreted the costs versus benefits of using available resources. The three interrelated factors were (1) identity protection, (2) accumulated experience, and (3) personal agency. We feature four vignettes as examples that highlight how these three factors drive logics—processes of evaluating the pros and cons—of engaging resources in ways that are both shared and individually unique across all 215 participants. Our findings support the need to expand our attention beyond youth’s physical risks, to include risks and costs that are emotional, psychological, and relational. Youth’s management of these often-hidden elements of risk sometimes increased their exposure to physical risk as a consequence of rejecting or avoiding resources that might compromise their emotional, psychological, or relational well-being.

Key Terms: Help-seeking, Identity, Positive youth development, Risk management, Qualitative research, Resilience, Self-reliance, Youth decision making, Youth homelessness, Service use

Introduction

The most recent national estimates suggest nearly 4.2 million young people, 1 in every 10 18- to 25-year olds and 1 in every 30 13- to 17-year olds, has experienced some form of housing instability within a period of 1 year (Morton, Dworsky, and Samuels, 2017). This statistic alone is concerning. It becomes more alarming, however, when one considers the host of adversities that typically characterize the developmental contexts of these young people prior to their homelessness (Bender et al., 2015; Davies and Allen, 2017). Youth who experience housing instability often describe early adverse childhood contexts mired in intergenerational poverty; parental struggles with addiction and/or mental health conditions; family instability; and chronic family conflict including abuse, neglect, and violence (Haber and Toro, 2004; Laird, 2007).

Youth experiencing unaccompanied homelessness (that is, on their own without a parent or guardian) represent a unique population in which to explore help-seeking and engagement. By definition, these young people are assumed to be disengaged from the informal support of parents and extended family; resources that are normative and critical to healthy child development and achievement even into early adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Because these youth have accumulated experience with a host of adversities both while homeless and prior to homelessness (Davies and Allen, 2017; Keuroghlian, Shtasel, and Bassuk, 2014; Mallett, Rosenthal, and Keys, 2005) many have also been exposed to formal service systems (for example, the child welfare system). Some evidence supports the idea that some youth can be reticent to engage formal services as trustworthy or reliable sources of help (Malow et al., 2007; Stewart et al., 2010). Although the experience of unaccompanied youth homelessness creates an acute need for supports, it may also strengthen one's existing belief that engaging even needed resources is risky, and as such, may be more harmful than helpful.

This study investigates youth perspectives on risks of engaging resources, specifically elevating how young people framed why they use or reject resources. We take a resilience approach to understanding youth's behavior as protective attempts to anticipate and mitigate a host of risks or negative costs relationally, emotionally, physically, and psychologically. Our article contributes to the literature on youth resilience specifically, and positive youth development generally, by focusing on youth's processes of meaning making. Our findings illuminate their personal agency and power in activating resilience as they manage the risks they perceived were inherent in using both informal and formal resources and supports. We use the word "logics" to label the process of how youth made meaning of, and evaluated risks and benefits attached to, existing supports and resources. The title "Nothing is for free" acknowledges their overwhelming endorsement of a belief (grounded in lived experience) that asking for and receiving help often comes with personal, relational, emotional, and psychological costs that might outweigh the gains.

Background and Significance

Not all youth are at equal risk of becoming homeless. Young adults who transition to adulthood from foster care are at a higher risk of becoming homeless during early adulthood (Dworsky, Napolitano, and Courtney, 2013). Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) youth have a 120 percent higher risk for becoming homeless compared with heterosexual and cisgender

youth (Morton, Dworsky, and Samuels, 2017), comprising an estimated 20-40 percent of the youth homeless population in the U.S. (Kipke and Unger, 1997; Quintana, Rosenthal, and Krehely, 2010; Morton, Dworsky, and Samuels, 2017). Most research associates their increased risk for homelessness with the severe rejection, homophobia, and transphobia they often endure within their own families (Durso and Gates, 2012). Recent estimates also suggest that Latin@ youth and African-American youth are at higher risk than White youth for homelessness at 33 percent and 83 percent respectively (Morton, Dworsky, and Samuels, 2017). Perhaps most stunning, this same report indicated that youth who had less than a high school diploma were at a 346 percent higher risk than their high school-graduated peers to have experienced homelessness in the past year. These findings suggest the condition of unaccompanied youth homelessness is a symptom of many structural problems and failings in the ability of society’s basic systems and institutions to be equally safe, supportive, and growth fostering for all young people (Lippy et al., 2017).

Once homeless, youth are further exposed to a host of increased threats to their literal survival and to their emotional and physical health (Bender et al., 2015). Young people face increased risks for sexual exploitation, victimization, abuse, substance use, pregnancy, and incarceration (Bender et al., 2010; Ferguson et al., 2012; Thompson et al., 2008). Research has identified sub-groups of youth who face higher levels of vulnerability while homeless, including women (Ensign and Panke, 2002), LGBTQ youth (Abramovich, 2013; Herman, 2013; Keuroghlian, Shtasel, and Bassuk, 2014), youth of color (Gattis and Larson, 2016; 2017), and youth who hold multiple stigmatized identities by race, gender, or sexuality, such as transgender young women of color (Ensign and Panke, 2002; Page, 2017). Taken together, homelessness is not only a critical public health concern, it is a serious developmental threat to the young people who must survive and attempt escaping threats to their basic physical safety and survival. Their need for supports and help are undeniably high. Understanding how and under what conditions youth decide to seek and engage a resource for that support is an understudied but critical element of their achieving and retaining stability and wellbeing into adulthood.

Exploring Factors and Processes of Resilience

Since the early 1970s, scholars have sought to explore the developmental and behavioral effects of experiencing trauma, adversity, and developmental disruptions that place the wellbeing and health of individuals, families and entire communities at risk (Masten, 2018). Risk as pathology and dysfunction were major themes in early scholarly research as both an overarching theoretical construct and an analytical lens (Greene, 2014; Jenson and Fraser, 2016; Masten, 2018; Zimmerman, 2013). Starting in the late 1980s, the focus expanded to resilience, defined as a person’s capacity to withstand, rebound, mitigate, or “adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten system function, viability, or development” (Masten, 2014: 6). Today, most scholars consider one’s resilience as a dynamic interplay between personal and environmental processes and characteristics (Lerner et al., 2013; Masten, 2018). Resilience is normative to all human beings and is multifaceted, context driven, developmental, and mutually reinforcing (Greene, 2014).

In this article, we take a similar approach to understanding and defining resilience as mutually reinforcing interactions, behaviors, and systems of meaning that indicate “adaptive significance” (Lerner et al., 2013: 1). Although most studies of youth homelessness focus solely on the risks

youth face, a literature on resilience and strength among youth navigating homelessness is emerging (Cleverley and Kidd, 2011; Lindsey, Kurtz, Jarvis, Williams, and Nackerud, 2000;

Kidd and Davidson, 2007; Perron, Cleverley, and Kidd, 2014). Within and beyond the field of homelessness, related research is sought to focus on identity as a critical but often hidden dimension of risk and resilience particularly for minoritized and stigmatized young people (Abramovich, 2017; Forrest-Bank, Nicotera, Anthony & Jenson, 2015) and among youth experiencing family disruption (Bender et al., 2007; Kools, 1997; Perron et al., 2014). Here, we examine “youth logics of engagement”—behaviors and systems of meaning making that facilitate *both* risk and resilience.

Intersectionality

In this study, we explicitly engage theories of intersectionality as a theoretical tool for exploring and articulating risk and resilience as tied to social identities that are oppressed or privileged. First introduced by third-wave feminist writing (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016), the idea of intersectionality is typically used to underscore how a person’s multiple oppressed and/or privileged statuses intersect in mutually reinforcing ways (Hutchinson, 2001; Samuels and Ross-Sheriff, 2007). For example, not all women experience womanhood or sexism in the same way, and women with class, cisgender, race, and/or sexual identity privilege can enact oppression on other women without those privileged statuses. Intersectionality is certainly relevant for young people navigating homelessness, a stigmatized status. Young transgender women of color often report experiencing simultaneous and compounded stigmas tied to racism, homophobia, and transphobia in society and while seeking services (Abramovich, 2017; Quintana, Rosenthal, and Krehely 2010; Price, Wheeler, Shelton, and Maury, 2016). Throughout, this article expands beyond single categories and typologies of experience, to examine intersecting identities and social statuses that shape differences in individual behavior, experience, and assessments of risk.

Young People and “Help-seeking”

Help-seeking is typically defined as the act and process of identifying and using formal or informal relationships and resources to address a problem or personal struggle (Rickwood, Deane, and Wilson, 2007). However, help-seeking as leading to actual use of (that is, engaging) a resource is a complex and relational process involving an interpretive awareness of the problem and recognizing the need for help, the ability to identify a potential solution, the actual accessibility and availability of a resource, and a willingness to disclose information and one’s need for help to another (Kauer, Mangan, and Sancu, 2014). Given the vulnerability of many youth and emerging adults (Arnett, 2000), particularly those navigating homelessness, it is essential for stakeholders to understand the barriers to engaging potentially critical resources.

Research outside of homelessness has sought to explain the general reluctance of young people to seek a formal resource when it appears necessary to others (Pryce, Napolitano, and Samuels, 2017; Rutman and Hubberstey, 2016). Reported reasons range from lack of awareness and perceiving too many barriers to access to concern about provider characteristics (Gulliver, Griffiths, and Christensen, 2010) and negative attitudes toward help-seeking in general (Rickwood, Deane,

and Wilson, 2007). Research also finds that anticipating providers’ stigma, prejudice, and discrimination can cause clients to avoid formal services (Abramovich, 2013 2017; Page, 2017; Scott, McMillen, and Snowden, 2015; Stotzer, Silverschanz, and Wilson, 2013). On the other hand, positive attitudes or trust toward professionals and social encouragement are found to facilitate help-seeking (Rickwood, Deane, and Wilson, 2007).

Patterns of Help-Seeking among Youth Experiencing Homelessness

Research to date suggests that many youth experiencing homelessness, like youth in general, underutilize available formal services (DeRosa et al., 1999; Kipke and Unger, 1997). In particular, estimates of the proportion of homeless youth using shelters range from as low as 7 percent to a high of only 40 percent (Ha et al., 2015; Carlson et al., 2006; DeRosa et al., 1999). In general, reasons youth report rejecting formal resources include strict rules, their distrust of adults, or lack of physical safety in shelter facilities (DeRosa et al., 1999; Pedersen, Tucker, and Kovalchik, 2016).

Some research indicates that youth reject resources because they value being self-reliant (Barker, 2014; Garrett et al., 2008; Ha et al., 2015). These studies suggest that negative experiences with institutions, adults, and parents can cause youth to mistrust their support (Barker, 2014; Kidd, 2003; Kurtz et al., 2000; Samuels, 2008; Thompson et al., 2006). Other youth report experiences with professionals that left them feeling dehumanized and disrespected, causing them to avoid engaging formal resources in general (Christiani et al., 2008; Ha et al., 2015).

The Role of Identity

A small but critical body of scholarship suggests that sexual identity, gender identity, and racial/ethnic identity separately and together may also influence one’s perception and use of resources. For example, LGBTQ youth sometimes report a preference to sleep on the streets because shelters are often sources of homophobic or transphobic violence and discrimination (Abramovich, 2013; 2017). Many report rejection and stigma in their families of origin to such a degree that it has threatened or destroyed their sense of unconditional family belonging (Robinson, 2018). Although many LGBTQ youth often prefer LGBTQ-attuned services, few resources are attuned to the varied needs and substantial diversity within this population (Page, 2017; Shelton, 2015, 2016; Stotzer et al., 2013). This finding echoes research in other fields that highlight identity safety (Gamarel et al., 2014), the centrality of a new or tenuous identity (Gunn and Samuels, in press; Shade et al., 2012), or identity stigma (Abramovich, 2013, 2017; Gunn and Samuels, in press; Forrest-Bank et al., 2015) as critical to the meaning youth make of the risks as they experience social service systems and professionals (Feinstein, 2015).

One’s identities tied to race, ethnicity, and culture, and experience of discrimination and stereotype threat may also influence help-seeking while homeless. Studies suggest that African-American youth, may be less likely than other youth to identify as homeless, and as a result, may avoid resources labeled as such (Winetrobe et al., 2017). Relatedly, Hickler and Auerswald (2009) found that although White youth rejected shelters due to strict rules and safety issues, African-American youth rejected shelters because they refused to identify as “homeless,” a label implying that they had failed. Identity management of stigmatized or discredited statuses and identities in general is a seriously understudied, but likely an important, element of help-seeking.

Our study sought to build on and expand the existing research on help-seeking and resilience to explore youth perspectives on what factors shape their use or avoidance of *both* formal and informal resources in their environments. Few studies have examined risk management as multidimensional or created a comprehensive conceptual model that explains why youth may reject resources they believe they need. Even fewer analyses have contributed a conceptualization of the help-seeking processes that highlight hidden dimensions of risk that youth are managing separately or together (Liang et al., 2005). A deep understanding of how youth make meaning of the emotional, psychological, and relational dimensions of risk, and the factors that inform these processes of discernment overtime, is an important contribution of this paper.

Method

This study was part of a larger national research and policy initiative to end unaccompanied youth homelessness in the U.S., Voices of Youth Count (VoYC). VoYC involved a multi-component research design including (1) a national household survey, (2) point-in time counts and brief surveys of homeless and unstably housed youth, (3) a survey of service providers, (4) an evidence review, (5) a policy and fiscal review, and (6) in-depth interviews. The target population for VoYC was youth ages 13 to 25 who ran away, were homeless, or were unstably housed without a parent or caregiver. The VoYC initiative used a broad definition of homelessness, consistent with the most inclusive federal definitions, by including different kinds of sleeping arrangements involving the lack of a safe and stable alternative, including the streets, shelters, motels, couch surfing, as well as a host of other contexts not intended for permanent residence (for example, waiting rooms, stairwells, cars, abandoned buildings). In this article, we present findings from the In-Depth Interview component (hereafter referred to as the IDI).

The IDI is a mixed-method study designed to highlight youth-driven insight into the causes, conditions, and consequences of the diverse experiences of running away, homelessness, and being unstably housed. In the following, we briefly outline the study's methods for site selection, recruitment, data collection, and analysis. The Institutional Review Board at the University of Chicago approved all procedures associated with this study, including a waiver of the requirement for parental consent for minor youth.

Site Selection and Recruitment

Drawing on VoYC's 22 randomly selected partner sites, the IDI used purposive methods (that is, intentional rather than random) to select and partner with 5 of these 22 counties. Selection criteria included diversity in geography, urbanicity, and homeless youth service infrastructure as well as unique local factors such as proximity to a national border, climate, and regional demographics. Ultimately, we partnered with one small and four more urban counties: Cook County, Illinois; Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania; San Diego County, California; Travis County, Texas; and Walla Walla County, Washington. The goal was to interview 40 youth at each site (See exhibit 1 for sample demographics).

Each county included a local team of interviewers, transcribers, and lead agencies that served as a home base for field staff. Recruitment strategies included using information from focus groups held at each locale with youth and providers about "hot spots" where homeless youth hang out, posting flyers,

online announcements, as well as directly contacting youth on the streets. We also used peer-driven methods (that is, snowball sampling), asking youth who completed interviews to share our contact information with others who we may not easily encounter. Most youth were recruited via agency referrals (n=50), direct recruitment of youth at an agency (n=48), street-based recruitment (n=28), peer referrals from study participants (n=36), and schools (n=9). We ultimately interviewed 215 youth (See exhibit 1 within the results section for sample demographics).

Data Collection

Data were collected from July 2016 through March 2017. All youth were informed about the study, their rights, and the voluntary nature of their participation. We received Internal Review Board (IRB) approval to collect verbal assent from youth under 18 and verbal consent for the youth 18 and over. Interviews were audio recorded and lasted, on average, 1.5 hours. Participants received a \$25.00 Visa gift card and a local service/resource guide that we created for this study. Youth shared their current age (not birthdate) and selected their own pseudonyms for use during interviews and within all reports. The IDI's research design was comprised of four interwoven data collection methods and included narrative interviews, a housing timeline tool, a background survey, and interviewer reflection logs. All IDI components could be completed in either Spanish or English.

Interviews began by asking the youth: “If you were to think of your experience with housing instability as a story, where does your story begin?” The interviewer then used the “Housing Timeline Tool” to document the young person's story of housing instability over time and throughout the interview, probed around any changes in six key domains of interest: jobs/employment, family, friends/peers/intimate partners, school/education, use of formal and informal supports, and health/well-being. Participants also completed a survey on an iPad asking them to self-report identities tied to race, gender and sexuality, formal service use, government benefit use, education, and adversities experienced both while stably and unstably housed. All data were uploaded to NVivo Pro11, a qualitative software program.

Analysis

Analyses largely followed interpretive and Constructivist Grounded Theory Method (CGTM) approaches (Charmaz, 2006) and involved a three-phase year-long process. Briefly, phase I involved reviewing and comparing the survey data with the timelines and narrative interview data to create a single integrated database of the demographic and variable-based data (for example, history of foster care, preferred gender identity). Phase II involved cycles of reading and coding the narrative data together as a group. Over the course of Phases I and II, the group met weekly and used both descriptive and constant comparison techniques (Charmaz, 2006) to develop, revise, and finalize a codebook comprised of stable thematic codes including action-oriented codes (for example, facilitating informal resource use) and conceptual codes (for example, styles of engagement, statements of “youth logics”). All 215 transcripts were coded, and 25 percent of transcripts were double coded to ensure rigor and thorough coding.

In Phase III, we refined conceptual categories and tested the relationship between thematic concepts using constant comparison, axial coding, and dimensional analysis techniques, all

typical of CGTMs of analyses (Charmaz, 2006; Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2011). These analytic methods are, in part, intended to test “hypotheses,” account for both confirming and disconfirming evidence across the entire sample and to ultimately build a model or conceptual framework that is explanatory across the data. For example, we asked the question, “Under what conditions do youth reject/engage a service? Why?” “What are the exceptions to this rule?” By actively seeking out exceptions and negative cases, these techniques move analyses beyond descriptive themes toward explanations that are responsive to the diversity within a sample.

In our analyses, this process produced three conditions—identity protection, prior experience, and personal agency—as explanatory of the differences and dynamic similarities that we observed across the sample in their engagement and rejection of services. It also resulted in identifying three broad styles of engagement: full engagement, selective engagement, disengagement. Use of these interpretive and conceptual methods of analysis also resulted in our choice to label the styles of engagement and articulate a process, rather than label the youth or numerically categorize typologies of youth. This decision means that the model and processes it depicts do not indicate *types of youth* (that is, engagers or disengagers). Rather, findings support the idea of *styles of engaging* that are driven by common factors used in combination as youth consider a resource. Individual youth used all three engagement styles across their trajectories.

Finally, typical of Grounded Theory Methods, and specifically traditions that engage dimensional analyses (Bowers and Schatzman, 2009; Kools et al., 1996), we portray our findings visually (see exhibit 2). As such, this model is a comprehensive depiction of our analyses of all 215 interviews. However, to illustrate variance and diversity, even within a single youth, we present four vignettes as examples that highlight how the three factors of identity, accumulated experience, and personal agency shaped different interpretations of risk and, in turn, distinct patterns of engaging and rejecting both formal and informal resources.

Ensuring Rigor and Trustworthiness

We made use of several established methods within qualitative and interpretive research traditions to ensure a systematic and rigorous research process throughout (Hays et al., 2016; Sandelowski, 1993). We regularly involved key stakeholders and critical external reviews at each stage of this study including its conception, design, data collection, analysis, and findings. The research team also met a minimum of once a week throughout the year-long analysis process to discuss and critique emerging themes and concepts. Research team members, including interviewers, completed reflexive memoing and used consensus methods, which ensured consistency and systematic interpretations in coding all 215 transcripts. Finally, audit trails recorded key decision points, and we returned to the field to meet with key stakeholders to debrief emerging analyses and more final-stage reporting of our findings.

Results

The goal was to interview approximately 40 youth in each of the 5 sites for a total sample of 200. We were able to interview 215 young people (see exhibit 1). Most participants (86 percent) were age 18 or older. Slightly more than one-half identified as either Black/African-American (31 percent) or

White (23 percent), and 21 percent identified as multiracial. Most young people reported gender identities as either male (52 percent) or female (41 percent).

Youth were able to report their sexual identities on a spectrum. Although 58 percent identified as exclusively heterosexual/straight, 38 percent did not. Among those, 11 percent identified as bisexual and 10 percent as exclusively gay or lesbian. Nearly one-fourth reported being a parent and an additional 8 percent of youth (n=18) indicated that they or their partner were currently pregnant.

Exhibit 1

Characteristics of Participants (N=215)

| | Number | Percent |
|---|---------------|----------------|
| Age (in years) | | |
| 13 to 17 | 31 | 14.4 |
| 18 to 21 | 112 | 52.1 |
| 22 to 25 | 72 | 33.5 |
| Race/ethnicity | | |
| White | 50 | 23.2 |
| Black/African American | 67 | 31.2 |
| Latin@ | 30 | 14.0 |
| American Indian or Alaskan Native | 6 | 2.8 |
| Asian | 1 | 0.5 |
| Multiracial | 44 | 20.5 |
| Other | 4 | 1.8 |
| Don't know | 1 | 0.5 |
| Refused | 7 | 3.2 |
| Missing | 5 | 2.3 |
| Gender identity | | |
| Female | 87 | 40.5 |
| Male | 112 | 52.1 |
| Transgender M-F | 8 | 3.7 |
| Transgender F-M | 4 | 1.8 |
| Genderqueer/nonconforming | 2 | 0.9 |
| Other | 1 | 0.5 |
| Refused | 0 | 0.0 |
| Missing | 1 | 0.5 |
| Sexual orientation | | |
| 100 percent heterosexual | 125 | 58.1 |
| Mostly heterosexual | 16 | 7.4 |
| Bisexual | 24 | 11.2 |
| Mostly gay/lesbian | 8 | 3.7 |
| 100 percent gay/lesbian | 21 | 9.8 |
| Not sexually attracted to either males or females/asexual | 1 | 0.5 |
| Other | 6 | 2.8 |
| Don't know | 5 | 2.3 |
| Refused | 5 | 2.3 |
| Missing | 4 | 1.9 |

We also asked young people about their educational experiences, completion of high school, and involvement in the formal workforce. A slight majority of youth (60 percent) had already completed high school or a GED. However, only one-third of youth were formally employed. Relatedly, the term *disconnected youth* refers to 16- to 24-year-olds who are neither working nor in school. Based on this definition, 46 percent of IDI participants would be considered disconnected.

We asked youth about their lifetime use of a select list of resources as well as government benefits. Among government benefits available, food stamps (63 percent) were the most commonly used, followed by Medicaid (33.5 percent) and WIC (16 percent). Over half (58 percent) indicated receiving subsidized lunch at school and less than half (44.5 percent) said they received transportation assistance. Only 8 percent reported receiving food vouchers. Nearly 44 percent of participants said that they did not use any of the services listed in exhibit 2.

Exhibit 2

Government Benefit Use (N =203)*

| | Currently Receiving | | Ever Received | |
|---|---------------------|---------|---------------|---------|
| | Number | Percent | Number | Percent |
| Food stamps/SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) | 90 | 44.3 | 128 | 63.1 |
| TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) | 8 | 3.9 | 17 | 8.4 |
| Medicaid | 48 | 23.6 | 68 | 33.5 |
| State Children’s Health Insurance Program (S-CHIP) | 3 | 1.5 | 7 | 3.4 |
| WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children) | 21 | 10.3 | 32 | 15.8 |
| Housing Assistance (Section 8, public housing) | 6 | 3.0 | 16 | 7.9 |
| Supplemental Security Income (SSI) | 11 | 5.4 | 16 | 7.9 |
| Social Security Survivor’s Benefits | 2 | 1.0 | 7 | 3.4 |
| Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) | 2 | 1.0 | 4 | 1.9 |
| Unemployment insurance or worker’s compensation | 0 | 0.0 | 2 | 1.0 |
| Veteran’s benefits | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 |

*Participants could select multiple responses.

Youth reported receiving mental health services more than any other category of formal resource use. However, 40 percent indicated that they never used formal services for any of the listed reasons in exhibit 3.

Exhibit 3

Reasons for Service Receipt (N = 211)*

| | Number | Percent |
|---|--------|---------|
| Physical disability or developmental disability | 19 | 9.0 |
| Alcohol or drug use | 33 | 15.6 |
| HIV/AIDS and related health issues | 5 | 2.4 |
| Mental health | 81 | 38.4 |
| None of the above | 92 | 43.6 |

*Participants could select multiple responses.

These statistics, however, provide an incomplete story of their experiences with formal services or their need for them. They also hide how formal service use is shaped by existing or unavailable informal resources. The following section shares findings from the 215 narrative interviews and timelines to illustrate why youth used or rejected a much broader array of resources, and what shaped how they engaged that resource. We explore those factors and present their interrelationships within a model of engagement (See exhibit 2).

Exploring Youth Logics of Engagement

“I didn’t enroll in a shelter. I had too much pride. I just slept on the streets ...”

Angel, Travis County

“I’ve never tried to find anyone as a support because people have their own agendas and I understand that and, I can do things alone.” **Kyle, San Diego County**

“Never depend on nobody ... I’m on my OWN!” **Paris, Cook County**

Like Kyle, Angel, and Paris, youth often rejected both formal and informal resources, even when they were available. An important part of our analysis was to understand why. First, however, we define the three different ways youth engaged resources and these include disengagement, selective engagement, and full engagement. As we define each, we emphasize that these are not *types of youth* but rather patterns in the way they engaged a particular source of assistance. Any individual youth may, as youth often did, display all three. Some youth also changed styles over the course of their housing instability. The four case examples illustrate that fluidity and diversity.

We intentionally use the word resource to include both formal and informal sources and kinds of assistance. It is a term that does not assume its receipt is experienced by youth as supportive or as helpful. We ultimately present our findings based on analysis of all 215 interviews in the form of a conceptual model (exhibit 2) and provide four youths’ stories to illustrate the complexity in how this process unfolded for youth differently over time.

Defining the Engagement Styles

As youth contemplated the available resources in their local and social environments, they faced choices about using them. This section defines the three ways in which youth engaged resources: Disengagement, Selective Engagement, and Full Engagement.

Disengagement

“I just wanted to stay out on the street ‘cuz I don’t trust people and everybody.” **Selena, Walla Walla County**

“... My mom raised me to take nothing and that nothing is for free.” **D, San Diego County**

On one end of the spectrum, sometimes certain services or resources were rejected and avoided. When youth reported this style toward a particular resource, they often referenced past experiences of service systems (or their family systems) that left them less open to, or trusting of, help-seeking

or help-receiving in general. This was the only pattern of engagement where some youth attempted to use this style exclusively and fully desired to disengage from all resources (formal and informal). The desire to disengage was explained by needing to affirm a high degree of self-reliance, blaming their own “pride,” or an insistence on doing things independently or, “on my own.” Even in these cases, however, young people still engaged some resources when externally forced to, due to harsh weather, an arrest, a pregnancy, or because their literal survival depended on it.

Although certainly youth with chronic stories of homelessness used disengagement styles, sometimes young people new to homelessness were exposed to a resource they had been avoiding, and the positive experience caused them to engage. For example, Alicia had been dead set against ever using shelters. As she continued to be homeless, however, an outreach worker encouraged her to go, “To be honest, *it’s a lot better than I thought* . . . no one wants to be in a shelter, but it’s some place (pause) like-the irony of it, it’s some place you can call *home*. Because like, you know, you don’t really have anywhere to go, but it’s like somewhere you stay for a while until you get all your stuff together.” Although few youth reported a complete change of heart (that is, change of logic), new experiences that were positive, particularly tied to formal resources, did indeed sometimes shift their levels of openness, even if selective, to engage a specific resource.

Selective Engagement

“I mean anything is better than being out on the street. But if it’s not geared for LGBT people, I can’t do it. Cause I’m just-uh-I just can’t not be myself.” **London, Philadelphia County**

Selective engagement was by far the most common style of engaging. Selective engagement refers to a pattern of using specific criteria or conditions to engage or disengage on a case-by-case basis. This method resulted in either conditionally engaging an array of formal or informal services or being selective within a category in choosing one resource over another. For example, sometimes youth like London might only go to a particular shelter if it specifically targeted LGBTQ youth. Other times, youth would only engage a resource if important relationships could be retained or preserved (for example, shelter allows baby to stay with them, or will also accept a partner or friend). When these conditions were not met, youth rejected the resource often choosing to stay on the streets instead.

Sometimes selective engagement affected the length of time a young person would engage. For example, when couch surfing, it was very common for youth to only stay for a short period of time, not wanting to wear out their welcome or be a “burden.” This was especially true when youth couch surfed at the home of a relative, friend, or intimate partner’s family. For example, Ashanti (one of the youth we will explore in a following vignette) explained why she stopped staying at the family home of her boyfriend. Referring to the friend’s mother she said, “It wasn’t *her fault*, I got kicked out and stuff. I didn’t wanna feel a burden to her, like take advantage . . . it’s not her responsibility to sit here and give me a home.”

Full Engagement

“I’m thinking that every week they just gonna give us stuff so I’m like, ‘alright!’ So I was there! But when I started going there I soon learned that they help you get into college, they help you

do resumes, they help you get **jobs**. They do **all this stuff** and I was like, “What?!?” I’m going here! I’m gonna come here!” **Alanna, Philadelphia County**

“I’m gonna take advantage of every damn thing they’re giving me! I’m gonna use it.”

Dillinger, Cook County

Full engagement refers to a style where a young person deeply connects either to a trusted single resource or to a constellation of resources. It is important to remind readers that even young people who fully engaged one resource may choose to fully disengage or selectively engage another. Exhibiting this style took several forms. Sometimes youth used an array of informal and formal resources and rotated between them. This often meant youth would have a complex schedule of using shelter resources some days, couch surfing other days, the streets, possibly going to a relative’s home to do laundry and having a meal, and accessing other formal services in between. Other times, like Alanna and Dillinger, this style involved youth attaching (when available) to a single agency that provided many services.

For youth in the smaller county, where formal resources were limited, styles of full engagement more heavily involved informal networks including peers, strangers, occasionally parents, and even “trap houses” (that is, buildings and apartments that were eventually overrun by drug use and unstably housed youth and adults cycling in and out). This lack of formal housing resources often shaped their involuntary engagement with formal resources and systems (for example, juvenile justice). As Natalie described, however, this was still a welcomed substitute for disengaging shelters, “I’m grateful to be here (in juvenile detention) ... I have a bed to sleep, I’m safe here ... I have nowhere safe to go when I leave ... this is like a second home to me.”

The following section will now explore the “why” behind these engagement patterns. Our analyses suggest each are deeply informed by perceiving and managing risks through the lens of three underlying factors: identity protection, accumulated lived experience, and personal agency (that is, one’s sense of control and autonomy). These factors shaped how youth weighed the risks and benefits of engaging the actual resources in their environments.

Managing Risks and Benefits: Identity Protection, Accumulated Experience and Personal Agency

As youth considered their available options and access to resources, their decision-making processes were overshadowed by a need to manage risk against the benefits. All young people in our study had, to varying degrees, prior experiences of receiving or being offered assistance from peers, adults, and/or professionals. Participants also shared a history of navigating complex and chronically stressed, toxic, and even traumatic relationships with parents or adult family members. Based on our survey data, youth reported experiencing discrimination and stigma within their own families (n=100) and being physically harmed by someone while stably housed (n=62) more than while on the streets (n=41). Content analyses of their narrative interviews included histories of foster care (n=82), parental struggles with addictions and mental illnesses (n=74), and chronic family conflict that often led to youth’s rejection by their own parents (n=65). Understandably, most remained leery of the hidden or explicit costs of receiving “help” from others. If someone

offers a place to stay, what will they want in exchange? Was returning home to a mother addicted to drugs, or whose boyfriend is homophobic, riskier than sleeping on the streets? Was disclosing one's homelessness to a teacher worth risking a call to child protective services? These were among the commonly articulated risks that young people in our study mentioned as they considered making use of a resource.

As youth differed in weighing the possible risks against the gains, so too did they vary in their individual degrees of openness to a resource and help in general. Not all youth had to navigate the same kinds of risks. Our analysis identified three factors that were commonly featured across all interviews and shaped their assessments of risks and gains of engaging resources: identity protection, past experience, and personal agency. We briefly define these concepts, present their interrelationship within a model (exhibit 2) and then offer four case examples to illustrate how these factors show up uniquely and complexly in the stories of young people's engagement styles with both formal and informal resources.

Identity Protection

Although all 215 youth had identities that mattered to them, some youth held identities that they felt needed extra protection or were at risk for discrimination, stigma, or invalidation. This situation was overwhelmingly true for the youth in our study who identified as gender minorities (transgender youth), and as sexual minorities—in particular youth who identified as gay or lesbian. As London's previous quote illustrated, an agency's reputation for being a safe space for "LGBT people" was often a filter through which they assessed risk versus benefits. Youth also felt protective of or had to manage risk around other identities and statuses, however (for example, being a new parent, family belonging, and citizen status). Some of our following vignettes will highlight the ways in which youth weighed the benefits of engaging a resource at the expense of an identity that was stigmatized, marginalized, or discredited.

Accumulated Experience

Despite their young ages, participants also had acquired lived experiences that factored significantly into how they perceived the risk or gains attached to the people and resources in their environments. The emotional and relational residue, both positive and negative, that these lived experiences deposited were important reference points for all 215 young people. Specifically, accumulated experience contributed to a youth's level of openness or trust that help would indeed be helpful. For some, like Selena who previously self-described as distrustful of "people and everybody" this could easily reinforce one's reticence to engage a formal or informal support. However, other youth interpreted their experiences like Dillinger, who despite an equally negative lived experience of adults and services, remained open to the potential gains from using some resources. In the following vignettes, readers will hear youth reference their accumulated experiences as they weigh the risk and benefits and explain why they rejected or used one resource versus another.

Personal Agency

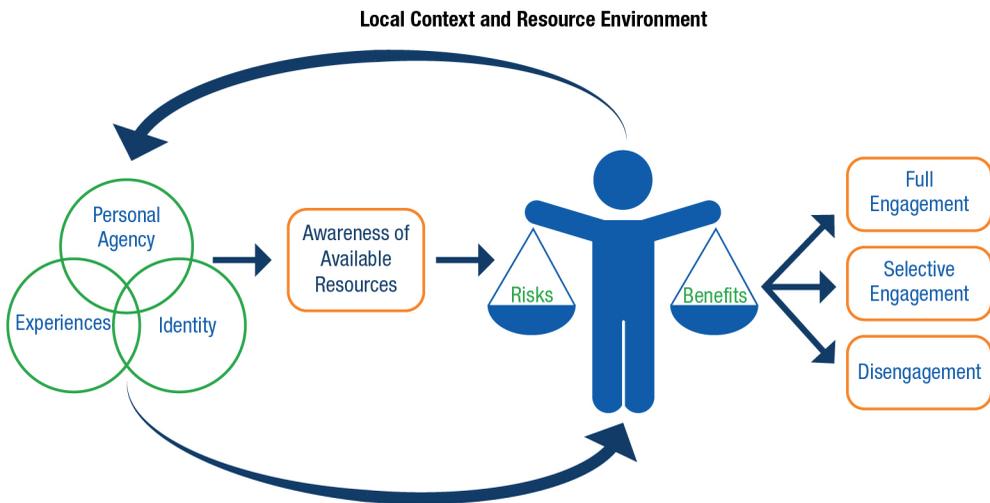
Finally, youth varied in their sense of personal agency—how they made use of and understood their own power to act, resist, and create change in their worlds. Again, for Dillinger who remained

open, his personal agency contributed to, and was affirmed by, actively engaging resources. This generated a corresponding positive experience for doing so and sense of personal power and control. For others like Selena who were less open, it caused her to steadfastly avoid shelters and acquire a resulting experience of avoiding the risk she feared. Youth also varied in the degree to which they believed their personal agency was further threatened by receiving help; that their pride, autonomy, and control (that is, personal agency) would be at risk and weakened by engaging a particular resource.

Exhibit 4, in the following, illustrates how these three factors fueled a process of youths’ logics of engagement in weighing risks and benefits of a given resource. In combination, these three factors were essential parts of youth’s toolkits, their logics for navigating not only housing instability but daily life. We recognize youth may likely carry many other concerns for harm with them as they move through their environments and assess risk. These three, however, were the most frequently mentioned among all 215 participants as they made meaning of their options. The four youth vignettes that follow are used to illustrate the diversity in how these factors show up uniquely within the logics of individual young people’s stories over time.

Exhibit 4

Youth Logics of Engagement—Identity, Experience and Personal Agency



Although youth in our sample were distinct in their understanding of risks versus benefits in engaging, what drove their engagement were the shared factors of identity protection, accumulated experience, and personal agency (exhibit 2). As mentioned previously, even for young people who expressed preferences to disengage from all resources, over time they were forced, or strongly encouraged, to make use of a resource. Jax, the first young person we feature, is an example of this. Other youth had complex and individually unique combinations of selective/engagement and disengagement across informal and formal resources, as well as intersecting identities and statuses. Ashanti, Brad, and Jamal (as well as Jax) represent that diversity. We present the vignettes to challenge the idea of “types of youth” and rather, that youth make meaning of the risks and

benefits and use or reject resources to varying degrees based on factors articulated within this model that are often hidden to others but that mattered deeply to youth.

Putting It All Together: Youth Logics of Engagement in Individual Context

In the following, we provide four examples: Jax, Ashanti, Brad, and Jamal. These young people were selected to illustrate the diversity across these three factors, and each demonstrate how these factors matter in their processes of engaging and rejecting resources in general, and across informal and formal resources specifically. Each young person's story also illustrates different expressions of the three factors (identity, experience, personal agency) that in turn, shaped their styles of engagement with the resources available to them. We provide these vignettes to illustrate that all youth, like these four, were both unique in their individual stories and ultimate patterns of engagement over time, and yet, all 215 stories have the common thread of managing risks through the lens of three shared factors: identity protection, accumulated experiences, and personal agency. Each of the four stories portray a degree of diversity in how these three factors manifest, but also demographic diversity in place of residence, gender identity, sexual identity, foster care experience, and mental/physical health. We italicize *identity protection*, *accumulated experience*, and *personal agency*, as we narrate their stories to help emphasize their presence within the young persons' logic of engagement over time.

“Jax”

Disengaged informal resources, selectively engaged one formal resource

Jax was an 18-year-old heterosexual male living in Travis County. Born in México, he and his family arrived to the U.S. undocumented. In addition to the strong confidence Jax exuded throughout his interview, his expression of *personal agency* was projected by the tattoo he pridefully displayed, “TRUST NOBODY.” This extreme sense of *personal agency* paired with his general distrust of others has caused him to reject adoption, and to turn down educational opportunities, “I just didn't wanna depend on anybody no more and kind of just be independent.”

Jax has actually been independent most of his life, however; his is an *accumulated lived experience* of loss and sense of rejection that shows up throughout his story. His mother abandoned the family when Jax was six. His father often left Jax and his older siblings alone for weeks at a time while he was away working. Eventually, Jax's father was deported when Jax was 12. Parentless and undocumented in the U.S., Jax and his remaining brother spent most of their time fully disengaged from school to avoid being discovered and reported as undocumented. To avoid arrest, his brother ran away to México leaving Jax at 14, alone in the family trailer. Avoiding formal services, he rotated between staying at the trailer, couch surfing at friends, and living on the streets. A friend's dad offered to help Jax find a job and go back to school but Jax refused. A cousin also reached out and invited Jax to come live with them and re-enroll in high school. He again rejected this resource and opportunity. Months later, exhausted, he moved to a small nearby town to work. Shortly thereafter, however, he bought drugs to commit suicide, “I tried killing myself ... I was done ... I just didn't see no point in life no more ... I didn't see why God took everything from me like that.”

Police eventually discovered Jax and took him to the hospital. Once stable, he entered foster care. Although the case plan was to obtain his paperwork for citizenship, Jax believes the paperwork fell through the cracks after his caseworker left. In an effort to provide support, his foster parents offered to adopt him. Jax also rejected this, “they were good ... there was nothing wrong with them. They wanted to adopt me hard. I’d be like, ‘No, no!’ ... They tried a lot.”

Despite this history of disengagement, strongly rooted in his own *accumulated experiences* of rejection, Jax is currently selectively engaged in a transitional living placement (TLP). He does this only because it preserves his relationship with his fiancé. It also protects a newly emerging *identity as a father*, “I don’t have family, you know, and I have my own family you know with my girl and our baby ... no drug use, no alcohol use. Everything is good. She’s my happiness, you know?” This selective engagement is made possible only because the TLP allows him to be in close contact with his fiancé who lives in the same town in her own foster placement. He also indicates that most of the staff affirm his *emerging parent identity*, “They think I’m gonna be a really good father.” Jax has read, “eight books for babies and stuff, and I’m trying to prepare myself ... and I had sympathy symptoms ... I’m the one that has the nausea!” Just as the tape recorder is turned off, he discloses happily that the name he has chosen to use as his own during this interview, “Jax,” is the name they plan to give the baby.

“Ashanti”

Disengaged informal and formal resources, selectively engaged shelter, fully engaged school

Ashanti, from Cook County, identified as a heterosexual, 16-year-old African-American female with a lifetime of unstable housing tied to her mother’s mental illness and both parents’ drug addictions—*accumulated experiences* that led her to grow up fast and depend on herself. As she notes of her mother’s reliability, “depending on my mama is like depending on a brick wall.” Her story of family is also one of experiencing rejection and abandonment. She was “tormented” by her sister, and told she was “adopted.” By the time Ashanti was 6, her mother had been institutionalized and, by age 10, her father moved Ashanti and her siblings in with his own parents. But even at her grandmother’s, she slept on a couch and was largely on her own. At 14, her grandmother kicked Ashanti out when she became pregnant. She says she felt “betrayed, lost (and) hurt.” For the following week, she snuck in and out of her grandmother’s house through an open basement window until one night, that window was locked. From then on, she cycled between sleeping on the streets and on the city train. Ashanti believes the stress of it all caused her miscarriage. Throughout, Ashanti remained engaged with school but never told them of her homelessness, “... it’s not a story that everybody should know ... cause once you tell **one grown person**, it just spread around ...” Thus, she *protected her identity* as “not a bum” in as many settings as she could. As she explained, “... I’m not a BUM, ... Being a bum, I wouldn’t care about nothing. But I care about everything that’s happening to me.”

Ashanti’s *accumulated lived experiences* also included therapy when she was diagnosed with “bipolar depression.” This left her feeling therapists lacked genuine care and were only “in it for money,” so she limited her use of school for education only. School was a place riddled with other risks. Despite her serious need for shelter and supports, she rejected formal services, and chose to hide her pregnancy, miscarriage, and homelessness to avoid teachers’ reports to the police or to the local

child welfare agency. In fact, she remained fully disengaged from formal services until a friend strongly encouraged using a drop-in center. Her positive experience there led to her trusting a recommendation for a youth shelter where she was staying at the time of the interview.

Ashanti's *personal agency*, has always been strong, mostly out of necessity, "I'm doing it on my own, cause in this WORLD, ... don't nobody got me like how I got me." At one point, she engaged a friend from school as a resource for informal housing. Eventually, this friend's mom kicked both girls out because of their partying. Still rejecting formal services, they slept in an abandoned house for the entire summer. She reported being assaulted several times while sleeping on public transit. Ashanti's strong sense of *personal agency* and her own need to not be a burden, however, caused her to stay on the streets instead of joining her friend when that friend was allowed to return home.

Ashanti dreams of finishing high school, earning a scholarship, and attending a historically Black college or university in the South. In ending her interview, she also was clear about only engaging people and resources that affirmed and protected her identity as a caring person with self-dignity, "... I'm not a bum, I'm less fortunate ... I care about my body, I care about how I present myself, I care about how I talk to people, I care about my education, I care about all that. Like, I take all that to the heart."

"Brad"

Disengaged most formal services, selectively engaged with informal networks

Brad identified as a White heterosexual male who currently lives in Walla Walla County, Washington. He began his story at age 17 by naming his mom's addiction to methamphetamines and family homelessness as the beginning of his own instability. "I lost my place when I was 17 with my mom ... my mom got really bad into drugs and so we were just bouncing from, you know, tweaker houses to park benches ..." Brad and his younger brother were removed from their mother's care because of her drug use. Brad's *accumulated experience* included cycling through five foster care placements until he was returned home. Brad noted foster care as mostly a positive experience that gave him a respite from his mom's struggles with addiction and enabled him to re-engage with school. When he returned home, however, his mom relapsed into drug use, they again became homeless, and he dropped out of school.

When asked if he ever sought help, Brad explained, "I was always afraid to tell anybody because ... I didn't want my mom to ... get in trouble or have somebody come in and take her to some facility or something." Brad also explains that his negative *accumulated experiences* with counseling services in foster care made him doubt the benefits of seeking help now, "... My counselors never really lasted ... they'd be like, 'Oh well, this is our last appointment cause we're no longer being paid for it.' ... I'd just realize, 'Oh yeah, it's all about money so I don't really want to sit and talk to you anyways.'"

Brad described mainly coping on his own. The *personal agency*, independence, and autonomy his life has required of him, however, does not always produce pride, but instead, a sense of loneliness from which he seeks distraction, "I think about all the [expletive] that I've been through ... I'd sit and pity myself sometimes ... It's when I'm alone that it starts getting bad ... so I always try to keep myself occupied." At the time of his interview, Brad was connected to his dad, and his dad's girlfriend had hired him to work in her seasonal landscaping business. She helped him to get

his ID and re-engage in school to complete his GED. At the time of his interview, Brad was still unstably housed and was still spending most nights on the streets. He made minimal selective use of a local church’s meals and their health services and sometimes went to the hospital for “panic attacks.” Brad was ambivalent about ending his homelessness and talked at length about its benefits including enabling an *identity, personal agency* and supported lifestyle of not feeling “confined”—a sense of unbridled freedom that he identified with and “liked too much.” Although he appreciates the stability of times when he has been housed, he explains being stable included risks to his own *identity as independent and unconstrained*, “It took me a little while to transition into not being homeless again ... I felt confined when I lived in a place ... But then I got used to it again and like now I can kinda see it from both –both angles.” Brad’s *personal agency* has certainly caused him to reject formal and at times, informal, housing resources. He asserted the key to ending his homelessness was based on individual motivation and *personal agency*, “I think to achieve the stability you would ... need to want it.”

“Jamal”

Fully engaged formal services, selectively engaged informal networks

Jamal was a 21-year-old African-American male living in Philadelphia County. Jamal began his story of instability when he first came out as gay at the age of 14. His family’s early awareness and discrimination toward his identity brewed for 3 years until it resulted in Jamal’s first episode of unaccompanied homelessness at age 17. Jamal was never kicked out for being gay, but he left a home that was certainly a source of stigma and discrimination because of this identity. As Jamal recalled, “My mom, when she found out that I was gay, she didn’t really have a big problem with it. She did accept me, took me in, like with open arms. My dad, he was a little on edge about it, but he finally came around. But um my older brothers and like my grandmother were ... against it ... My grandma she would claim it was a phase or ... it was like a disgrace or disgust to her ... One of my older brothers ... stopped speaking to me.”

The emotional and literal cutoffs from his grandmother and brothers made Jamal feel like he no longer had a home. He said these years were like “hell.” From the ages of 15 to 17, in attempts to *protect his identity*, he cycled between couch surfing at a cousin’s house. When his cousin died, Jamal, then 17, was forced to live full-time with his grandmother again. Despite being unaware of local resources, his strong *personal agency* inspired initiating a departure from his grandmother’s home to couch surf with a friend and thus, escape the “hell” he endured in his grandmother’s home.

Eventually, he told the friend that he was gay. That friend told him about a local agency that served LGBTQ youth. Jamal was elated to discover this resource and safe space that *affirmed an identity* that was unprotected in his own home, “I gained family and friends there ... I’d rather see them more than my friends, my brother’s friends, and him any day!” After this awareness, he fully engaged with and trusted this provider. Jamal made use of all their resources, “They gave me resources and staff to talk to ... [who] still help me out ... to this day.” With Jamal’s lack of previous negative experience of formal resources, and continued *accumulated positive experience* with the provider, he trusted their recommendations to fully engage with other services that were not specifically targeting LGBTQ youth.

As Jamal spent less and less time at his grandmother's and more time couch surfing and at shelters, he continued to think of his mother as a support system. Although she could only provide limited emotional support from a distance as she remained at his grandmother's house. However, she insisted, and he accepted, that he was welcomed there, "She was very inviting. My mom used to always tell me if I ever had a boyfriend or a friend ... she'd rather us be there in the house safe than to be out any other place that is unsafe." Jamal did not return home, however.

Instead, he graduated from high school and engaged a job training program. At the time of his interview, Jamal had learned he was accepted to a transitional living program and was already working three part-time jobs. Jamal was also engaged in therapy sessions and was completing a life skills course. He considered an invitation to live with a friend who was also transitioning out of homelessness, but after contemplating his *past experience* living in tight quarters with his brothers and his grandmother, he opted to live on his own and thwart the risk of potential tension or turmoil. As Jamal ended his interview, he expressed his strong *personal agency*, his now protected and *affirmed identity*, paired with openness to make change in his life. He offered the following wisdom to other youth who might be going through similar struggles, "And regardless of anything that may come your way, you still have the ability to fight it. Like whether it's with help, by yourself, with friends, family, coworkers, like anything ... know that there's someone out here ... that can relate to you. So, you're never in this world alone by yourself going through just one thing ... never give up trying to make a better you."

Discussion

This article examined the ways in which unstably housed young people make decisions about engaging the resources available to them. The four examples illustrate several lessons in understanding the conceptual model and the larger analysis of our sample. First, a person's identity and sense of self matters. When young people had an identity that needed affirming, nurturing, or protecting, that reality helped to illuminate a unique set of risks and gains with regard to resource use. The vignettes illustrate this theme that ran across all our participants' stories. For example, Jamal's identity as a young gay man and Jax's experience as a young expectant father both required identity protection. Each found a resource where those identities could grow and develop. These resources also gave access to important relationships with adults and peers who validated those identities. Conversely, other youth were searching for an affirming resource. Ashanti wanted affirmation of her sense of self as caring and having dignity, and "not a bum." These identity related factors were critical to youth's choices to engage, and then stay engaged, or to avoid, service providers. In fact, positive experiences drove engagement for Jamal with other formal resources that were not solely targeting LGBTQ youth. Our analysis suggests that understanding how young people identify, and perceive risks to those core identities, is critical to understanding patterns of engagement with informal and formal resources.

Second, youth's accumulated experiences shaped their openness or hesitance in believing that certain sources of help are actually helpful rather than harmful. Although all the young people highlighted in this article had accumulated some experiences with formal resources, Brad was the most disengaged from, and least open to, formal services. His negative experiences of service

providers are shared by many other youth in this study, and experientially grounded their doubts that any gains would result by seeking out formal services. Still, Brad was not disconnected from all resources and did make use of some limited informal support from his dad and step-mom. Ashanti's story reminds us that change is possible. Through a trusted friend (informal resource), she is connected to a formal resource in the form of a shelter. That shelter becomes a novel and positive experience of support from a formal resource she previously avoided. For Jax, his history of rejection in his family of origin (an informal resource) shadowed his own interpretation of the risks and gains presented by the potential adoptive family as a trusted new informal resource. Thus, he rejected it. Conversely, Jamal was the rare youth example who lacked a childhood experience of formal services. His first contact, through his friend, was exclusively positive and quite transformative. As he accumulated this new experience, it only fueled deeper levels of engagement with service providers. His story is instructive about the importance of positive experiences when receiving first-time formal service provision. This did not generalize to his interpretation of risk for *informal* resources, however. His experiences in his family of origin caused him to be reticent to engage the resource of a roommate for financial help with a place to stay.

Finally, our findings remind us that personal agency can often derive from extreme self-reliance in childhood, caused by outright rejection, or simply by having parents whose protective presence is compromised by poor mental health or addiction among many other factors. This circumstance sometimes fueled the courage to engage a new resource through a trusted friend's recommendation; other times, it facilitated a rejection of a resource. To illustrate this theme of rejection in our analyses, the cases of Jax and Brad are particularly instructive. Time and again, Jax disengages the informal resources in his social network. They are too risky. This sentiment highlights the critical importance of his only informal resource, his fiancé and future child, an identity and relationship he works hard to protect and that likely offers a critical counterpoint to his prior experience of family. Brad's version of self-reliance causes him to reject formal services, and he still wrestles with the attraction of the freedom and unconfined lifestyle gained by homelessness; it is affirming to his sense of independence and self-reliance.

In Ashanti's story, her personal agency affirms a positive sense of competence that results in similar rejections of help but enables her to remain engaged in school for its educational benefits and later, to agree to her friend's suggestion of using a drop-in center. This in turn facilitates her trust to more deeply engage formal services as the drop-in staff recommend a shelter. Finally, Jamal's story extends our understanding of the interaction of a strong sense of personal agency and resource engagement. His story suggests that youth can fully engage in resources even when they uphold a value of personal agency. Like other youth, Jamal's personal agency compelled him to leave his family home at 17, convinced in his ability to find a better more nurturing and affirming place. Although he remained reticent of some informal resources (for example, the roommate), he was fully open and trusting of help from professionals at the agency for LGBTQ homeless youth.

Limitations

Several limitations are important to note. First, this study uses point-in-time data with young people experiencing homelessness. Although our trajectory method helped to illuminate their use

and rejection of resources both current and in the past, we do not know how it unfolds into the future. Relatedly, we are also not able to speak to how these logics inform the actual relationships youth have with providers and informal resources overtime. We especially lack data from family, friends, and peers—important members of youth’s informal resource network. Future research should use more ethnographic and case study methods with a smaller sample of youth to also understand how factors like identity, their accumulated experience, and personal agency shape and are shaped by new or unique experiences with both formal and informal resource use.

Second, this study was not designed to be a nationally representative sample of youth experiencing homelessness. In particular, because we used recruitment methods that included agency-based recruitment, many of the youth in our sample were already connected in some way to formal resources. It is possible that our sample represents a disproportionately high number of these youth than exist in the general population of youth experiencing homelessness. As such, we may have a less robust and diverse set of findings about processes related to experiences of young people who are fully disengaged than were youth in our sample. That said, youth’s frequent rejection of resources, avoidance and use of both formal and informal resources across our sample, suggest that our findings still speak to youth patterns and processes of disengagement.

Finally, youth in this study are experiencing a specific developmental moment of adolescence and emerging adulthood. For many young people in the U.S., this developmental stage is characterized by increasing levels of independence and autonomy from parents and heightened exploration, risk taking and a reliance on one’s social and family networks of choice. These youth represent a distinct sub-population of emerging adults who have experienced independence and autonomy earlier than youth in the general population. However, our sample of younger adolescents (that is, 13 to 16) was too small to conduct age comparisons in order to understand potential developmental differences within the group. This field would be advantaged by pursuing developmental approaches (Nott and Vuchinich, 2016) and research that is responsive and relevant to this population’s experiences of independence, family, and autonomy during adolescence and early adulthood.

Implications for Literature and Research

The breadth and depth of the interviews provided a unique opportunity to develop a more complex understanding of the concept of engagement and processes that shape styles in the use and rejection of a broad spectrum of resources. This analysis produced our *Model of Youth Logics of Engagement* and suggests future research should broaden its consideration to the full array of resources and relationships present within the social ecologies of youth. No youth across their trajectory of instability remained disconnected and disengaged from every type of resource. Consequently, future studies of engagement and help-seeking should measure and explore both formal and informal resources overtime and together. Our findings suggest these are interconnected rather than separate features of support that shift and change across a young person’s trajectory of homelessness. As in prior studies of identity, self-reliance and independence among homeless youth (Barker, 2014; Garrett et al., 2008; Ha et al., 2015), and in populations of systems, involved youth (Cunningham and Diversi, 2013; Havlicek and Samuels, 2018; Kools, 1997; Mulkerens and Owen, 2008; Samuels and Pryce, 2008); our findings reinforce how identities shape the type, frequency, and depth of connection to resources. Future research however is needed to explore

how these different identities that youth protected (that is, minoritized and stigmatized identities, parent identities) uniquely intersect identities and self-concepts tied to resilience and personal agency in ways that inhibit or facilitate use of a resource. Specifically, youth's sense of personal agency varied, and when extremely anchored in individualistic and self-reliant conceptions, often caused serious delays or outright rejection of important resources. Youth also mobilized personal agency in ways that opened up new opportunities to affirm an identity that was marginalized in their immediate environments. Future research should take seriously the varied ways in which identities and self-concepts intersect and interact to foster risk and resilience in young people.

Our findings reinforce other studies that have illustrated aspects of disengagement that are simultaneously self-protective while engendering risks and vulnerabilities (Gunn & Samuels, in press; Kools, 1997; Samuels, 2008). Disengagement was indeed sometimes resilient and protective of youth's immediate emotional and psychological safety (for example, leaving an abusive or stigmatizing family). It also posed other short- and long-term risks, however (for example, homelessness). The meaning youth made of their use or rejection of a resource often resulted in outcomes that were mutually reinforcing of their resilience and abilities to be self-protective against future harm. Yet these same outcomes increased their vulnerability and validated continued disconnection or rejection of needed supports to end homelessness. Future research on resilience and risk must explore the ways in which a single behavior or system of meaning can indicate simultaneous resilience and risk across different contexts. Pursuing holistic and multidimensional measures of risk and resilience can illuminate these dualities and paradoxes in ways that may inform more effectively supporting young people as they learn to enact their resilience in ways that are not ultimately self-defeating.

This study's findings complicate the tendency within service research to theorize engagement as a static condition of a person as engaged or disengaged (Becker et al., 2018; Chacko et al., 2016). Rather youth's engagement involved ongoing and dynamic decision-making processes in which they engaged, selectively engaged, and disengaged a host of known resources simultaneously. More fluid and multidimensional concepts of engagement that use youth perspectives outside of narrowly measuring youth's use of a single source of support are needed.

Finally, the purpose of a Grounded Theory Method study is theory-building research: to produce conceptual and theoretical explanations that derive from ground-up, inductive analyses. Although continued refinement of the core concepts in our youth logics of engagement model is certainly needed, the salience of many of our model's factors are individually well-substantiated in scholarship across a range of fields and populations. Protection or negotiation of a discredited identity leading to selective engagement styles has been discussed in prior research generally (Gunn and Samuels, in press), and among foster youth (Kools, 1997; Samuels and Pryce, 2008). Identity safety and relational health has been examined among LGBTQ youth (Gamarel et al., 2014), and youth experiencing the juvenile justice system (Feinstein, 2015; Squatriglia, 2008). Therefore, our findings are not new. They do operationalize, into a model, complementary findings from a range of fields, including foster care and juvenile justice, and extend the relevance of individual findings to a broader group of young people. The young people in our study had extremely similar (and often literally overlapping) childhood histories, family backgrounds, and adversities that caused contact with social services and formal resources.

One potential next step for theory development in this area could be to test various aspects of the model separately or together. This could further refine conceptual constructs, as well as strengthen its potential for generalizability. Although most theory-testing activities are thought to belong to experimental and positivist methods of science, constructivist and interpretive methods often tied to Grounded Theory traditions also provide avenues for future research to test and challenge the relationships set forth in our model. Any of these scientific methods could include exploring the role of identities that are privileged rather than stigmatized, or changes in the three factors that cause a change in engagement around a specific resource. Other possibilities could include testing the role of trusted peers and adults as potential mediators to both one's awareness and openness to using a resource, or as moderators of risk to sustain engagement with resources. Future research should also examine the long-term outcomes for youth's well-being and housing stability as it relates to any of the model's engagement styles.

Implications for Practice

Perhaps one of the most important implications of this study is the need for practices that are more explicitly attuned to the dual presence of strength and vulnerability in youth experiences and coping behaviors while homeless. Our work supports prior research that has illuminated similar risks among youth who are homeless (Auerswald and Eyre, 2002) including the role of stigmatized and marginalized identities (Abramovich, 2017), youth's autonomy and self-reliance deriving from prior experiences (Barker, 2014, 2016; Garrett et al., 2008; Ha et al., 2015), and their ongoing exposure to, and experience with, formal and informal resources (Kurtz et al., 2000; Christiani et al, 2008). This study joins that body of work in calling for practice models and outreach approaches that take seriously the many ways in which youth anticipated ongoing risk and harm from nearly all sources of "help." These youth, need practitioners that are attuned to their accumulated experiences of adults within families and service systems that have caused harm relationally. Youth were responsive to sources of help that explicitly facilitated their trust and healing from relational and complex trauma (including family-based stigma and discrimination) and that honored positive but often invalidated identities and aspects of who they are or were wanting to become.

Our findings complicate the constrained narrative common in practice research claiming that a person's resistance, ambivalence or avoidance of a resource is an exclusively problematic or an ill-conceived stance to be overcome or managed within practice relationships (Miller and Rollnick, 2012; Westra and Norouzian, 2018). Ultimately, we find young adults in this study relied on complex logics that considered intersecting needs and concerns in deciding when, how, how much, and with whom to engage. As our title suggests, many young people engaged the philosophy that "nothing is for free." This meant all forms of help from any source, including family, always incurred some sort of emotional, relational, or psychological cost or debt. Our findings suggest that their logics structured decision-making processes that privileged a need to avoid or minimize such costs, and consequently, manage a set of risks that were often hidden to service providers, adults, and even informal sources of support. Our practices must find ways of illuminating and respecting these costs and risks and supporting youth's abilities to navigate them successfully.

Our findings call for practice and organizational structures that attend to youth’s developmental needs to maximize their control, personal agency, and their sense of positive identity. These needs are normative to their developmental stage (Arnett, 2000), but are needs that may be more acutely present among this group of young people (Nott and Vuchinich, 2016). Many youth in our study, however, perceived resources (including family) as disempowering, a risk to their sense of personal agency, or a threat to invalidate an important identity. When these risks lessened and their positive development was nurtured, youth were more apt to engage. Our work reinforces scholarship that highlights practice approaches that explicitly identify personal agency as a critical element of socially just practice in general (Alford, 2009; Benjamin and Campbell, 2015), and for engaging youth experiencing housing instability in particular (Abramovich and Shelton, 2017; Christiani et al., 2008; Nott and Vuchinich, 2016). Such power-enabling practices must include youth at the center of decision making about their own lives and draw on their resilience and unique strengths as starting places for engagement. Youth often hid or downplayed their needs to avoid parents getting in trouble, avoid reports to child welfare systems, or retain their own independence. Outreach and other services must also rethink access requirements in engaging young people and reconsider ways to provide basic resources to them without having to fully assess and investigate youth in ways that may feel intrusive, risk harming or losing an important relationship, or invalidate or discredit an identity.

Understanding youth’s needs for trauma-informed supports is part of effective engagement and intervention (Bronstein, 1996; Davies and Allen, 2017; Davies et al., 2014; DeRosa et al., 1999). Although the idea of mistrust among youth in the literature emerges from chronic homelessness (Barker, 2014; Garrett et al., 2008), for many of these youth, mistrust in adults was first born out of their traumatic childhood experiences with parents and other adults. Our research reinforces findings elsewhere that youth’s accumulated experiences in foster care, juvenile justice, or simply in homes struggling with chronic adversity shape how young people assess and determine risk (Bender et al., 2018; Kools, 1997). Participants noted parents who struggled with addictions, poverty, mental health conditions, families who experienced homelessness, or their own removal from home (for example, through foster care). It is not surprising that emerging in the field is a strong call for trauma-informed practices with this population of young people (Davies and Allen, 2017). Our work supports this movement in practice as of critical importance to these youth’s stability and well-being long term. Often missing from most trauma-informed models, however, are practices that explicitly interrupt and directly address intrafamilial stigma and discrimination as both a societal and relational injustice (Samuels, 2018).

Youth of color and LGBTQ youth are overrepresented among those experiencing unaccompanied youth homelessness, and this was true within our study sample. Consequently, the typical youth experiencing homelessness is often negotiating multiple intersecting stigmatized identities. They are also navigating both overt forms of stigma and discrimination as well as microaggressions (Sue, 2010) in their families, schools, and communities. Our findings strongly support the need for trauma-specific approaches that include supporting young people in healthy identity development tied to statuses that are marginalized and stigmatized, including homelessness. Youth in our study were learning to anticipate, avoid, and cope with overt and covert discrimination and stigma. When agency staff affirmed and nurtured youth’s positive identity work, it often facilitated deeper engagement by the youth. Our findings fully support the small but growing trend in work with

minoritized youth experiencing homelessness that calls for use of intersectional models for practice (Abramovich and Shelton, 2017, Baines, 2011; Hyde, 2005; Zufferey, 2017) and methods of research (Lavizzari, 2015) that are anti-oppressive, holistic, and identity affirming. These models offer a shift in understanding the role of power, and cycles of oppression tied to structural and interpersonal factors, that are deeply relevant to the lived experience of all youth in this study. They offer a person-centered-in-context frame from which to assess unique needs of youth collaboratively and guide work that is relationally just and restorative (Gal, 2015).

Finally, agencies could also address these developmental needs by designing intake assessments (including ones similar to our own narrative timeline tool) that explore, collaboratively with youth, the meaning they have made of their accumulated experiences (rather than collecting lists of experiences), the meaning of their identity (rather than assuming the meanings of labels), and how youth understand help-seeking as affirming or threatening to their personal agency or self-reliance. Indeed, relational practices that foster mutual engagement could facilitate more tailored and effective interventions for youth (Dang and Miller, 2014). In turn, these improved practices could promote youth's greater trust and involvement in the services they need to achieve stability and reach developmental milestones successfully. This development of trust, an instrumental factor in any engagement process, may increase youth's willingness to consider a greater spectrum of supports across the life course (Toro, Dworsky, and Fowler, 2007).

Conclusion

This analysis provided important youth-centered insight and highlights factors that shaped youth's patterns of engaging or avoiding resources. These findings suggest the need to rethink how providers message their resources to youth in general, but in particular, attune to youth's need to manage often hidden risks. Our findings suggest that work with even young adults must continue to be developmentally informed and consider not only youth's physical safety and basic needs, but their unique needs for resources that nurture resilience, psychological and emotional security, and trust. Youth deepened their engagement when resource providers offered relationships that affirmed their identities and personal agency. Such relationships could provide important counterweights to their common experience of adults and services as untrustworthy and harmful. We highlight the need for an increased focus in practice on identity and personal agency as critical, but often hidden, elements of youth resilience and risk. This article is a call to the field to engage young people in ways that affirm their healthy identity development, model relationally just and restorative experiences, and inspire their own capacities to enact resilience within their communities and social worlds, and ultimately, to thrive.

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Authors

Gina M. Samuels is an Associate Professor at the University of Chicago, School of Social Service Administration and can be contacted by email at gmsamuels@uchicago.edu.

Christine Cerven is a Researcher at Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

Susanna R. Curry is an Assistant Professor at California State University-Sacramento, Division of Social Work.

Shantá R. Robinson is an Assistant Professor at the University of Chicago, School of Social Service Administration.

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