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HOMELESS STUDENTS IN RURAL OREGON:

A NARRATIVE ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

By

Sherri Sinicki

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the experiences of a little understood marginalized segment of the American population. Using a narrative ethnographic approach, I examined the perceptions and experiences of a small sample of youth ages 18-24 in rural Oregon who experienced high school while homeless. I conducted personal interviews to explore the perceived needs of homeless youth as identified by the participants and document what they consider as the predominant misconceptions surrounding their circumstances. The data analysis documented four prevailing themes common to the participants' experience with homelessness while high school students: 1) the challenge presented by being a homeless high school student requires enormous resiliency; 2) the necessity to confront their own and others' ambivalence about homelessness; 3) the need for practical assistance; and 4) the imperative desire for normalcy. The findings of this study shed light on how to assist rural homeless high school students as well as provides a voice to those who frequently go unheard.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“Yes, unfortunately I believe that a large portion of the homeless are that way because they have addiction problems to the extreme and that has cost them all their $.”

“It’s may be hard to believe but some people choose it as a lifestyle . . . they consider themselves gypsies or free from the a daily routine lifestyle that traps so many people . . . other drugs have taken them . . . some “homeless” in [name of town] have gotten aggressive with people . . . sad to say it’s hard to help them all or find those that truly need help and want it.”

“It's a choice you make! There's lots of help out there!”

“No matter what you want in life you can always better your situation with a willingness to work for it.”

“The only way you are guaranteed to get out of a hole is to claw your way out on your own taking any help you can on the way up. You can't sit at the bottom forever waiting for the right opportunity or expecting someone to pull you out.”

“Maybe if they really needed to get their feet then they would get a job. And if they have a job but can't afford to live then GET A ROOMMATE or a few. That way they can all save up to get on their feet. If you want it to work then you make it work.”

“Let's be honest here the majority of the people put themselves there. You can blame the cost-of-living, bad luck or drugs. But sometimes it's not always somebody else's responsibility but the person who put themselves there.”

These were actual quotes taken from a local social media page responding to the post:

> Looking for resources for homeless people in [name of town]. I recently heard from a [name of town] officer that there are no places for homeless people to sleep in [name of town]. So, specifically where would someone be able to stay, sleep, camp so they don't have to live in their car. Ideas? Suggestions? If someone had an RV but couldn't find an RV Park, or a place to pitch a tent, or a place to park a car . . . where can a homeless person go for help in [name of town]?

These sentiments from the local social media site were as discouraging as they were unhelpful. Yet, it would not be an overstatement to say that approximately 80% of the responses were in this spirit. The posted comments assumed a personal lack of "grit" is the primary reason people are homeless (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews & Kelly, 2007). Yet, the assumption that you "can always better your situation with a willingness to work for it" was naive at best. Moreover, even if such an assumption had any merit at all, one would still have to question its validity as applied to the situation of homeless minors. How can anyone reasonably assume that underage minors must display sheer determination to correct their plight?

The responses obviously highlight a lack of empathy while reflecting the misunderstanding and stereotyping associated with the homeless. Likely such attitudes serve to inhibit the homeless from coming forward to seek assistance. Nonetheless, the original social media question was posted with sympathy toward the homeless and there certainly were some people who responded by offering help. Those responses should offer hope and encouragement. It is this spirit of hopefulness that framed this research effort. The hope that we can authentically tell the stories of youth who have experienced homelessness and, yet, have successfully traversed the educational system as a means to give them personal agency while dispelling prevailing

myths about the homeless. Their stories, at the minimum, provide clarity to their situation and, at the maximum, serve to prompt necessary changes.

Background of the Study

If people do indeed desire to offer assistance to the homeless, providing readily available services, most notably shelters, should be a major priority (Barber, Fonagy, Fultz, Simulinas, & Yates, 2005; Fitzpatrick-Lewis, Ganann, Krishnaratne, Ciliska, Kouyoumdjian, & Hwang, 2011; Heinze, 2013). Yet, such services are woefully lacking especially in rural areas. According to the Homeless Shelter Directory (2018), there are 11 homeless shelters within a five-mile radius of Portland's city center with an additional eight centers reaching from Vancouver, Washington to Hillsboro, Oregon (a suburb about 15 miles west of Portland's city center). Many of these shelters serve several populations including women in crisis, families, and military veterans. Moreover, those who are struggling with addiction sometimes have access to drug clinics or needle exchange programs (Homeless Shelter Directory, 2018).

Rural homeless families, on the other hand, have very limited places to stay, services, and transportation leaving them at a distinct disadvantage in seeking assistance (Murphy, 2014). In contrast to the 11 shelters within five miles of Portland's center, the three rural counties (Yamhill, Polk, and Benton) just south of Portland cover over 2,100 square miles and have only two shelters for the homeless (Oregon Demographics, 2018).

For rural youth, homelessness poses even greater problems. Services are not only limited but the rural homeless may have even less means to access those services (Paik & Phillips, 2002). Moreover, homeless youth often attend schools as transients and frequently their school records do not follow them from school-to-school (NCHE, 2014; Julianelle, 2008). As a result, it is almost impossible for teachers to understand their academic standing and needs. The constant

movement affects student achievement making the homeless student more likely to drop out of school (Hallett, 2012; Loomis, 2017; McMillan & Reed, 1994; Paik & Phillips, 2002). Further, making connections with peers and with teachers is also a monumental task for homeless youth and frequently results in extracting a tremendous emotional cost (Cozolino, 2014; Croninger & Lee, 2001).

Statement of the Problem

The number of homeless students has been increasing nationally over the past decade (Canfield, 2015; Purcell, 2014). Oregon is no exception to this trend. The Oregon Department of Education estimates there were 3,232 homeless students during the 2014-2015 school year (Oregon Department of Human Services, 2016). While this is an astonishing figure, it comes with two qualifications. First, it only includes youth that have been enrolled in school; and second, it does not count youth who hide their housing situation from school staff. This means the number of homeless students in Oregon is likely higher than the 3,232 reported.

Some scholars suggest that teachers in rural areas may have more personal contact with students simply due to the size of their community and school (Edwards, Torgerson & Sattem, 2009; Loomis, 2017). If that is indeed the case, then school size could well be an important factor in the way homeless youth experience school. Yet without accurate insight about student needs, teachers may be prone to hold misconceptions about both student needs and the nature of their students' lives (Loomis, 2017). Thus, the need for research designed to explore the journey of homeless youth who attended rural schools.

This qualitative study explored the experiences of a little understood marginalized segment of American population. Using a narrative ethnographic approach, I examined the perceptions and experiences of a small sample of homeless youth aged between 19-24 in rural

Oregon. I conducted personal interviews in order to examine the perceived needs of a sample of rural homeless youth and documented what they consider as the prevailing misconceptions surrounding their circumstances. The findings of this study shed light on how to assist this population as well as provides a voice to a segment of high school students who frequently go unheard.

Research Questions

All scholarly studies require specific research questions to guide and structure the investigation (Lindemann, 2017). As this study examined the narrative accounts of how a sample of formerly homeless young adults experienced attending a rural school, the structured research questions were designed to provide an opportunity to systematically explore their perceptions on a variety of important issues.

Research Question #1

What assumptions do the participants believe school personnel make about homeless students?

Research Question #2

What do the participants believe the school district or the county could have done better to support them when they were students?

Research Question #3

What were the major challenges the participants faced when they were homeless students?

Key Terms

Adverse Childhood Experiences Scale (ACES) – A common instrument used to assess the degree of trauma experienced during childhood. The scale includes ten items that inquire on the experience of various traumatic events. ACES scores can range from 0 to 10 with higher scores

generally associated with greater at-risk consequences trauma (ACES Too High, 2018a, 2018b; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018).

Homeless Student – The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 defines homelessness as "an individual or family who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence" (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2006, p. 2). This definition is generally used by schools to define a homeless student. However, the definition of homeless student was expanded in the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act which considered a student homeless if he/she is not living with a guardian (McGuinn, 2016). For this study, students who experienced homelessness with or without parents were included as potential participants.

Homeless Youth in Families – A category of homeless youth recognized by Oregon Housing Community Service in which young people, typically between the ages of 12 and 17, are homeless but accompanied by a parent or adult guardian.

National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH) – A nonpartisan organization committed to preventing and ending homelessness in the United States. The NAEH routinely gathers and disseminates information and statistics on the extent and nature of homelessness in the county.

National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) – the agency within the U.S. Department of Education that provides technical assistance and information and administers the federal government's Education for Homeless Children and Youth program.

Oregon Housing and Community Services (OHCS) – Oregon governmental state agency responsible for oversight of housing policies. The OHCS also issues statewide data on poverty and homelessness. Thus, the OHCS is a major source of demographic information on homelessness, rural homelessness, and youth homelessness in the state of Oregon.

Point-in-time count – An unduplicated count on a single night of the people in a community who experience homelessness, including both sheltered and unsheltered populations. These types of accounting procedures are frequently used as a means to measure the extent of homelessness.

Resiliency – For the purpose of this study, resiliency refers to the ability to continue on with a normal life despite the many and varied challenges derived from being classified as a homeless youth.

Rural Community – Curiously, the U.S. Census Bureau does not define rural areas. Rather it defines urban and urban clusters. Specifically, "The U.S. Census Bureau defines rural as what is not urban—that is, after defining individual urban areas, rural is what is left" (Ratcliffe, Burd, Holder, & Fields, 2016, p. 1). Based on this non-definition, it is generally regarded that a rural community is one of 2,500 people or less (Ratcliff et al., 2016).

Rural School District – The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) recognizes three categories of rural schools. Fringe: A rural territory less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster; Distant: A rural territory more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster; Remote: Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018).

Unaccompanied Homeless Youth – A category of homeless youth recognized by Oregon Housing Community Service whereby a young person between the ages of 12 and 24 is homeless without an adult family member of guardian present.

Success – For this study, a successful student has graduated from high school. However, this does not necessarily mean the students graduated by completing four years in a traditional high school setting. Success is any accepted completion of high school including through nontraditional means such as the General Education Development (GED) tests.

Limitations and Delimitations

There are inherent limitations within any research study. For qualitative research, one limitation is the fact that studies are not generalizable because of the reliance on nonprobability samples. While this is an important issue if generalizations to larger populations are the objective of the study, this shortcoming is balanced with the transferability of the insights gained from the investigation (Daniel, 2011).

This study uses a narrative ethnographic approach. Narrative ethnography in its simplest form is the telling of peoples' stories. Since collecting data rely heavily on the recounting of personal stories, researchers must be aware and guard again possible social desirability effects (Maxwell, 2005). There is no ready guardrail that can be erected to protect the researcher and participant from social desirability biases. Rather, the researcher must be careful to conduct the interview in a professional manner that strives to create conducive rapport while maintaining neutral, social distance (Bernard & Ryan, 2010).

There are four important delimitations of this study. First, this research relied on participants who traversed high school while homeless in one rural Oregon county. This choice was based largely because of the accessibility to conduct the research. That is, individuals who meet the research criteria and were accessible to the researcher reside in a one rural county. However, this delimitation posed a special burden on me as the researcher. Some of the participants had been my former students. In these cases, certainly a certain rapport had already

been established (which is critical to this type of research); but this dynamic also invited greater potential for a social desirability bias. I did not wish to exclude former students from participating in the research as their narratives are just as valid as anyone else's. However, I had to be extra vigilant to gauge and reduce situations when too much rapport gets in the way of genuine narrative accounts. With all that said, I am satisfied that on balance having good, established rapport with participants was more important than having little rapport at all (Maxwell, 2005).

A second delimitation is the research used individuals who are now young adults, aged 19 to 24, but who were homeless high school students. This delimitation resulted from ethical considerations. Namely, homeless minors represent a highly vulnerable population and extra precautions would obviously to be needed for their participation in a research effort. However, by delimiting the research to young adults who were formerly homeless students but are capable of granting their personal consent to participate in the research as adults avoided any potential ethical dilemmas.

A third delimitation is related to the choice to use young adults who were once homeless students and must rely on their recollections of the experience. There was the potential that reflecting on past experiences (as opposed describing current lived experiences) would result in some faulty memories and accounts. This is a problem for most qualitative research efforts (Maxwell, 2005). However, delimiting the study to young adults whose experiences were fresher should have the effect of mitigating some of the faded memories typical of those who reflect on more distant lived experiences.

An additional important delimitation for this study was that participants needed to have successfully graduated from high school. Their high school completion could be through a

variety of means beyond the traditional, four-year high school setting. Participants could have graduated by completing their GED (General Education Development tests), by staying at the high school an additional year, or any other nontraditional means of achieving a terminal high school degree.

Significance of the Study

The narratives provided by the participants in this study are of the utmost importance as there is very little scholarly literature on rural homeless youth (Jackson & Shannon, 2014; Samal, 2017; Skott-Myhre, Raby, & Nikolaou, 2008). What is known is that there is a deficit of viable places to live (even temporarily) for the homeless population as well as a lack of social services (Homeless Shelter Directory, 2018; Oregon Department of Human Services, 2016). There is also a plethora of information on trauma and how it affects the inner workings of the brain (Herringa et al., 2018); moreover, scholars understand that homelessness itself can cause great trauma among young people (Bender, Thompson, McMansu, Lantry, & Flynn, 2007; Jackson Nakazawa, 2018; Lockwood, 1989; McManus & Thompson, 2008; Murphy, 2014).

This research is significant in at least two respects. First it helps in filling a gap in the existing literature on rural homeless youth. Scholars have noted the lack of research on the personal perceptions and experiences of homeless youth (Fisher, Florsheim, & Sheetz, 2005; Garrett, Higa, Phares, Peterson, Wells, & Baer, 2008; Gharabaghi & Stuart, 2010; Thompson, McManus, Lantry, Windsor, & Flynn, 2006). The lack of attention to the personal accounts of rural youth is particularly glaring (Mallett, Rosenthal, Keys, & Averill, 2010; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 2017). Second, the narratives of the participants provide actionable recommendations which can form the basis for future educational and social service practice (Carlson, Sugano, Millstein, & Auerswald, 2006; Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006).

Bracketing

This researcher lives in the area where the research occurred and some of the participants were former students. I would be negligent if I didn't report my passion for helping these students. It would also be remiss if I didn't reveal the frustration I often feel with the "system" we purport to have in place to help students who are struggling. While living and teaching in a rural community it is impossible not to see the struggles of homeless students. I find it appalling that the stories of rural youth experiencing homelessness have not been told. These young people simply do not have the agency to have their voices heard.

I have heard faculty members say, "If they would just be here," "If they could just get homework done, I know it's hard, but come on, it's just a few problems." They have no idea what it takes for students to just "show up." Many (if not most) of these students are hungry and tired and their fight or flight response is on high alert and their brains can barely function. Frequently, they have come to school because it is their only safe space (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006; Kidd & Davidson, 2007; National Center for Homeless Education, 2018a, 2018b).

I also acknowledge the personal, firsthand understanding on what it is like to struggle daily for food, to live paycheck to paycheck, and to collect boxes of food from our church. While I was privileged to never be without a roof over my head, I know the feeling that "next month may be the month." During my sophomore year in high school, the paper mill where dad had worked his entire life closed. My dad lost his job. My family was in a position of need and people let us live with them for a time. We were fed and we were loved. When I think back of this experience, I realize how infinitely lucky my family was to have help. This experience left its mark on my heart and on my family's heart. I know what it is like to have a loss of control

over your situation and have to rely on others for basic needs. I know what it is like to have and I know what it is like to have not.

As educators, we often do not know how to effectively help homeless students. Typically, we know we are the "helpers;" and educators want very much to help. It is our vocation, our calling (Neville, 2018). However, there is little social scientific documentation on the perceived experiences and needs of this underrepresented population. As such, how can we possibly effectively help until we hear their honest stories and listen to their true needs?

Conclusion

There is much to be learned from the experiences of rural young people who find they must experience high school while struggling with homeless. The circumstances that led to their situation, the emotional and physical stress they necessarily bear, and the strategies they employ to navigate to successful completion of high school are certainly little understood. Yet, the insights that can be gleaned from their personal narratives can be enormous. The stories themselves have inherent merit. But so are the practical benefits for educational practice and policy that might result from documenting these experiences and perceptions. This study strives to tell those stories faithfully, accurately, and with fidelity to the storytellers.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Homeless youth come to school wondering where they are going to sleep, what they will have for dinner, and if they will be safe; by comparison, learning appears inconsequential to these larger issues of survival (McMillan & Reed, 1994; Murphy, 2014; Ogren, 2003; Slesnick, Zhang, & Brakenhoff, 2016; Whitbeck, Hoyt, Yoder, Cauce, & Paradise, 2001). While homelessness has emerged as a national concern and there is growing awareness on the needs of homeless students, little is understood about rural homelessness and youth. Simply put, the scholarly literature contains little on the plight of rural homeless students.

This review examines the nature of this important issue. Specifically, I present the contextual demographic information on homelessness in the United States and Oregon. Those descriptions are followed by a discussion on rural homelessness, a topic that receives less attention than urban homelessness. The literature on youth homelessness is also reviewed. Next, the literature surrounding homelessness and education is considered. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion on the intersection of rural education and rural homelessness.

The Nature of Homelessness

Homelessness has been on the rise since the 1980s, but exact numbers are nigh impossible to determine (Bassuk, DeCandia, Beach, & Berman, 2014). Adding to the confusion are the differing definitions for homelessness which produces difficulty in assessing this population. Nevertheless, the most recent data from the National Alliance to End Homelessness (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2018) approximates that, using point-in-counts, some 553,742 people experience homelessness on any given night. The homeless include a true cross-

section of Americans that spans all races and genders; young and old; single persons and entire families; veterans and non-veterans; recently dispossessed and chronically homeless; structurally unemployed and permanently unemployed; and those who enjoy vigorous mental and physical health and who do not (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2018).

Homelessness in the United States. The homeless encompass a large range of people. Experts estimate that about one-third of the homeless include families (33.3%) while about two-thirds include single adults (66.7%) (Hartman McNamara, 2009; Homeless Shelter Directory, 2018). The NCHE (2017) projects that about 7.4% of the homeless are children. This estimation is consistent with the figures reported by the NAEH (2018). According to the NAEH, out of the 553,742 homeless individuals in the United States, about 40,799 are youth. This figure makes up a little over 7% of all homeless persons.

NAEH offers a demographic snapshot of homeless in the United States. While the estimates are imperfect, they are based on point-in-time counts which attempt to assemble homeless census efforts from across the nation on a specific night. Based on this research, NAEH (2018) projects that during 2017, of the 553,742 homeless Americans, 369,081 (67%) included single individuals while 184,661 (33%) were households. The majority of the homeless are temporarily dispossessed of homes, nevertheless almost one in five, (about 96,000 or 17%), is considered as chronically homeless. There are also approximately 40,056 (7%) homeless veterans, about the same number of homeless youth.

The NAEH also reports that about one-third of America's homeless live in a place not meant for human habitation such as on the street or in abandoned buildings. Thus, while two-thirds of the homeless utilize some form of shelter, nearly 200,000 people have to spend the night in an unsafe, unhealthy, and unprotected location (NAEH, 2018). As alarming as these

statistics are, there is some reason for encouragement. The most dramatic decreases in homelessness since 2007 are among the chronically homeless and those who are unsheltered (NAEH, 2018).

Homelessness in Oregon. The homelessness condition in Oregon is among the most bleak in the nation. Oregon Housing and Community Services (OHCS) (2017) reports,

> According to this year's PIT (Point-in-time) survey, the number of homeless people in Oregon increased by 6% from 13,176 in 2015 to 13,953 in 2017. . . . This increase in homelessness is likely the result of a number of economic and demographic factors that have led to more Oregonians struggling to find housing they can afford. According to the latest Census Bureau data, Oregon was the 6th fastest growing state in the nation in 2016 and more than three-quarters of this growth came from people moving into the state. . . . A low housing inventory coupled with a growing population has led to some of the lowest rental vacancy rates in the country. Furthermore, from 2008 to 2015, family median incomes decreased 1.8 percent while median rents increased 9.8 percent. Tens of thousands of people are simply unable to afford these rising housing costs and have had to sleep in shelters, in their cars, or on the streets. (p. 1)

OHCS (2017) also estimates that in any given night nearly 14,000 people in the state are homeless, the majority of which are unsheltered (approximately 57%). This agency projects that 24% of Oregon's homeless population is chronically homeless and most of these go unsheltered.

Rural Homelessness

Urban homelessness receives a great deal more attention than rural homelessness. As Mullins, Wilkins, Mahan, and Bouldin (2016) point out,

> Homelessness is generally considered an urban social problem, thus attention is given to homelessness in urban areas. Many urban areas have programs and organizations in place to address homelessness in their area, whereas many rural locations do not perceive homelessness to be a problem (p. 361).

Yet, rural homelessness is a very real problem (Whitbeck & Hoyt, 2017; Wilson & Squires, 2014). The lack of appreciation regarding the nature of rural homelessness poses difficulty for those in need of assistance (Canfield, 2015; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 2017). Namely, the lack of medical and other social services presents unique challenges for the rural homeless (Fraenkel, Hameline, & Shannon, 2009). This is ironic as some urban homeless move to rural areas anticipating an improvement in their situation (Hilton & Trella, 2014). Indeed, formerly urban homeless move to rural areas for a variety of reasons. These motivations include a search for areas with less crime, less drug use, and generally a better life (Whitbeck & Hoyt, 2017). Yet, they often find they have simply exchanged one set of problems for another including less available housing and shelters, fewer social services, and less access to medical care (Hilton & Trella, 2014; Miller, 2011; Tyler & Melander, 2015; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 2017).

Youth Homelessness

If any group can be considered at-risk, it is certainly homeless youth (Mallett, Rosenthal, & Keys, 2005). Indeed, homeless youth are more likely to suffer from a wide range of physical and mental health problems (Perlman, Willard, & Herbers, 2014), violence (Heerde, Hemphill, & Scholes-Balog, 2014), early pregnancy (Greene & Ringwalt, 1998), substance use (Whitbeck & Hoyt, 2017), and even early death (Auerswald, Lin, & Parriott, 2016).

Yet, despite the seriousness of the problem, efforts to respond to the needs of homeless youth are hindered by the lack of credible data on the nature and prevalence of youth

homelessness and the inability to reliably track homeless children over time (Morton, Dworsky, Matjasko, Curry, Schlueter, Chávez, & Farrell, 2018). This is especially frustrating as the Runaway and Homeless Act of 1974 specifically called for replicable national estimates of youth homelessness (Sznajder-Murray, Jang, Slesnick, & Snyder, 2015). This federal legislation has been reaffirmed and updated by Congress in the 40 years since its first passage and still a lack of accurate information on the nature and prevalence of youth homelessness persists.

Estimates of youth homelessness are also frustrated by the sheer range of conditions that might constitute homelessness. For instance, homelessness among youth may include situations ranging from living alone on the street to serial "couch surfing" with friends and acquaintances (Kid & Evans, 2010; Morton et al., 2018; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 2017). At issue also is the question on what timeframe is sufficient to consider a young person homeless? As a result, some scholars have distinguished between short-term homelessness (as few as a couple of nights without a home) (Sznajder-Murray et al., 2015) and long-term homelessness (generally at least 12 months without a permanent home) (Morton, et al., 2018). As a result of these various distinctions, national estimates on the size of the population experiencing youth homelessness vary a great deal and render differing demographic pictures of youth homelessness (Whitbeck & Hoyt, 2017; Wilson & Squires, 2014).

The difficulties in estimating the extent and nature of youth homelessness have important implications. Not fully understanding the nature of the issue prevents effective means to answer the challenge. As Morton et al. (2018) observes,

> Many youth do not fit squarely into any single type of homelessness experience. Still, a sizable share of the overall prevalence rates also involve couch surfing only without a safe and stable living arrangement. These experiences likely include a wide range of

> degrees of vulnerability (from lower-risk experiences of leveraging social networks during periods of housing instability to high-risk or exploitative arrangements). Additionally, some couch surfing could function as a precursor to more entrenched homelessness. Given these complexities, assessments of youths' circumstances beyond their sleeping arrangement at a given time are important to determining their levels of risk and service needs. (p. 20)

While national estimates of youth homelessness are important, albeit variable, the NAEH (2018) reports there were 40,799 homeless youth in the United States in 2017. Unfortunately, this organization does not provide the parameters on the ages of the individuals, the duration, or the circumstance of those they consider homeless youth. Nevertheless, of particular relevance to this research are the OHCS estimates on the number of homeless youth in the state of Oregon. The OHCS distinguishes between two types of homeless youth: Homeless youth in families and unaccompanied youth. According to OHCS, in 2017 there were 1,731 unaccompanied youth and youth with parents experiencing homelessness. The majority of Oregon's homeless youth are unaccompanied by an adult. In fact, OHCS reports that some 84% (about 1,462) of homeless youth are unaccompanied.

There is evidence the situation for homeless youth in Oregon may has become more acute. OHCS (2017) reports that between 2015 and 2017, the number of unaccompanied homeless youth increased by 14% while the number of homeless youth with an adult decreased by 8%. Perhaps not surprising, unaccompanied youth are more likely to be unsheltered than those who are accompanied by an adult. Curiously but not incidentally, the Oregon county with the largest percentage of homeless youth is Curry County, a largely rural area along the coast with a population of less than 23,000.

Reasons for youth homelessness and its consequences. The plight of homeless youth is one of complex needs paired with complex misconceptions. While the basic definition of homelessness provided by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987, defines a homeless person as someone "who lacks fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence." it is important not to use a rudimentary classification for a situation that is highly complicated. For instance, unaccompanied youth become voluntarily homeless because of a variety of reasons, including physical and/or sexual abuse, violence, neglect, addiction of a family member, family conflict, and/or poverty (Hallett, 2012; Murphy, 2014; Oregon Department of Human Services, 2016; Thrane, Hoyt, Whitbeck, & Yoder, 2006). Obviously, these are serious and complex factors associated with youth homelessness.

Homelessness also occurs because youth are abandoned. In these situations, they do not leave home voluntarily. Sometimes abandoned youths are forced out by families who reject their sexual orientation, gender identity, substance use, mental illness, behavior, pregnancy; or they are abandoned by parents who have been deported, incarcerated, or struggle with their own addictions or mental illness (Hallett, 2012; Murphy, 2014; Thrane et al., 2006; Whitbeck et al., 2001).

Whatever the reasons for their homelessness, whether because of voluntary choice or involuntary expulsion, these young people clearly do not deserve their circumstances. They do, however, deserve understanding and help. That assistance includes an appreciation of the serious consequences that accompany homelessness for young people (Corliss, Goodenow, Nichols, & Austin, 2011). The reasons for homeless youth in Oregon mirror the reasons for youth homelessness across the nation. According to the Oregon Department of Human Services, the major factors resulting in homeless youth are complex and serious (Tables 1 & 2).

Table 1.

*Causes of Youth Homeless**

- Runaway youth typically leave home in response to physical and/or sexual abuse, violence, neglect, addiction of a family member, family conflict, and/or poverty.
- Abandoned youth may be thrown out by families who reject their sexual orientation, gender identity, substance use, mental illness, behavior, and/or pregnancy, or abandoned by parents who are deported, incarcerated, or struggling with their own addictions or mental illness.
- Youth with a history of systems involvement may become homeless upon release from residential treatment, the juvenile justice system, or the mental health system.
- Youth with a history of foster care are disproportionately likely to become homeless, either after running away from a foster care placement or aging out of the child welfare system.
- Youth in homeless families can become separated from their parents due to shelter restrictions, parents' efforts to protect youth from the streets, or older youth's efforts to reduce the family's economic burdens.
- Older youth who are living independently can become homeless due to inadequate income or a lack of affordable housing options.
- Pregnant youth may be kicked out by their parents, and for parenting youth already living independently, the economic and logistical challenges of taking care of a child can lead to homelessness.

Table 2.

Characteristics of Youth Homeless†

- Youth are still developing and need to have developmentally appropriate services and supports. Youth often enter into homelessness before completing their education, and with little or no work experience.
- Youth typically lack independent living skills such as money management and housekeeping, and they lack experience interfacing with landlords, government agencies, and other institutions. Youth on the streets are at risk of victimization from adults, sexual predators, and human traffickers.
- Youth under age 18 are often afraid to seek out assistance because they fear being reported to the authorities, sent to foster care, or forced to return home.
- Youth under age 18 may have the opportunity to resolve their homelessness through family reunification, but this process can be complex and may require ongoing support.
- Youth under age 18 can have difficulty accessing critical services such as health care, as well as essential documents such as identification and driver's licenses, without parental consent.
- A disproportionately high percentage of homeless youth identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

*†Adapted from Oregon Department of Human Services, *Oregon's Runaway and Homeless Youth: An Overview and Strategic Framework* (2016)

Impact of homelessness on youth. Homelessness is a form of trauma for children (Wong, Clark, & Marlotte, 2016). In fact, some mental health experts liken the impact and consequences of homelessness on youth as Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (Bender,

Thompson, Ferguson, Yoder, & Kern, 2014; Wong et al., 2016). Compounding the difficulties of homelessness, frequently homeless children are the victims of multiple trauma whereby they have experienced a series of serious events prior to and subsequent of their homeless situation (Canfield, 2015; Cyr, Clement, & Chamberland, 2013; Hallet, 2012; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 2017). The seriousness of the multiple traumas common to many homeless youth is startling and includes sexual abuse (Tyler, Hoyt, Whitbeck, & Cauce, 2001), physical abuse and neglect (Kipke, Simon, Montgomery, Unger, & Iversen, 1997), substance abuse by either an adult caregiver or themselves (Rabinovitz, Desai, Schneir, & Clark, 2010), and extreme poverty (Shinn, Gibbons-Benton, & Brown, 2015).

The Adverse Childhood Experiences Scale (ACES) is commonly used to assess the degree of trauma (ACES Too High, 2018a, 2018b; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). The scale includes ten items that inquire on the experience of various traumatic events during childhood (Table 3). ACES scores can range from 0 to 10 with higher scores generally associated with greater at-risk consequences. Homeless youth frequently suffer from childhood trauma experiences to the extent that it is not unusual for their ACES score to be at least four and, in fact, are often registered at ten (ACES Too High, 2018a, 2018b; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). Childhood experiences, both positive and negative, have a tremendous impact on future violence victimization and perpetration, and lifelong health and opportunity. As such, early experiences are an important public health issue.

Table 3.

Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) Questionnaire *

Prior to your 18th birthday:

1. Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often… Swear at you, insult you, put you down, or humiliate you? or Act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt?
   No___If Yes, enter 1 __
2. Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often… Push, grab, slap, or throw something at you? or Ever hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?
   No___If Yes, enter 1 __
3. Did an adult or person at least 5 years older than you ever… Touch or fondle you or have you touch their body in a sexual way? or Attempt or actually have oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with you?
   No___If Yes, enter 1 __
4. Did you often or very often feel that … No one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special? or Your family didn't look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each other?
   No___If Yes, enter 1 __
5. Did you often or very often feel that … You didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you? or Your parents were too drunk or high to take care of you or take you to the doctor if you needed it?
   No___If Yes, enter 1 __
6. Were your parents ever separated or divorced?
   No___If Yes, enter 1 __
7. Was your mother or stepmother:
   Often or very often pushed, grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at her? or Sometimes, often, or very often kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard? or Ever repeatedly hit over at least a few minutes or threatened with a gun or knife?
   No___If Yes, enter 1 __
8. Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic, or who used street drugs?
   No___If Yes, enter 1 __
9. Was a household member depressed or mentally ill, or did a household member attempt suicide? No___If Yes, enter 1 __
10. Did a household member go to prison?
    No___If Yes, enter 1 __

Now add up your "Yes" answers: ___ This is your ACE Score.

* Adapted from *Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)*, (2018)

Homeless youth are at risk for a specific type of trauma experienced before the age of eighteen known as a trauma brain (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006). A study commissioned by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the Kaiser Foundation documented the serious long-term effects of early childhood trauma on the brain (Larkin & Park, 2012). Youth whose brains are affected by trauma continually operate in a state of flight or fight which in turn leads to poor

to tragic decisions (Jackson, Nakazawa, 2018; Murphy, 2014). While on the street these youths are more susceptible to mental health issues such as anxiety, mood disorders, depression, leading to substance abuse and self-harm (Herringa et al., 2018; Ottaway, King. & Erickson, 2009). Obviously, if such brain trauma is pervasive among homeless youth (Wong et al., 2016), it would have significant implications for educators tasked with teaching such students.

Homelessness and Education

One of the obvious human service needs of homeless youth is their education. It goes without saying that most teachers see their vocation as a calling to serve the young (Neville, 2018). However, frequently current policy and practice works to inhibit educators from fully serving homeless students. Many of those barriers stem from how homeless students are identified and associated laws and policies regarding homeless youth (Canfield, 2015; Edwards et al., 2009; Miller, 2012).

Identification of homeless students. Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, reauthorized in 2015 by Title IX, Part A of the Every Student Succeeds Act (42 U.S.C. § 11431) guarantees education to all students experiencing homelessness. The act also defines homelessness as a person who "lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence" (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). The McKinney-Vento Act also requires school districts to have a person designated specifically as a homeless liaison. The liaison is responsible for working with others to identify homeless students, conduct community assessments that include data on homelessness in the area, work with appropriate district and school authorities, ensure that local policies and procedures comply with the McKinney-Vento Act, and provide targeted outreach through information sharing and gathering activities (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). The liaison is responsible for posting public notices about the rights of homeless children

and youth and disseminate information on where families are likely to receive services (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). The district liaison also administers and makes available a housing questionnaire which asks students and/or families directly where they are living (Hartman McNamara, 2009).

While the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is a formal policy means to identify homeless students, educators often informally assess whether a student is homeless by observing their behavior. For example, oftentimes students experiencing homelessness are not prepared for class or for school. They repeatedly do not have supplies, do not have completed homework, lose school supplies, and poor hygiene or erratic hygiene is also frequently a sign of not having a consistent place to live (National Center for Homeless Education, 2017; 2018a; 2018b).

Homelessness and academic success. Homeless students frequently have gaps in their education, making consistent academic progress difficult (National Center for Homeless Education, 2017; 2018a; 2018b; Paik & Phillips, 2002). Homeless students typically miss more school because of illness than their peers as access to health care is limited. Socially students who experience transitional living are often shy and very possessive of their possessions and have difficulty trusting new people. As problematic as it is for student to participate in school, it is not unusual for them to experience anxiety at the end of the school day, on weekends, and even during holidays (National Center for Homeless Education, 2017; 2018a; 2018b).

Moreover, because homeless youth frequently do not have a place to study, time to study, or access to important resources, such as computers and internet, school work is especially challenging (Aratani & Cooper, 2012; Cozolino, 2014). Educators need to be aware of operative strategies for homeless students. First, homeless students benefit from the same teaching

strategies as students with a stable home life. Beyond that, specific strategies have been shown to be particularly effective are frequent check-ins, having a school buddy/friend, and positive feedback (Evers, 2011; Reed-Victor & Stronge, 2002). Homeless students may also need more concentrated care strategies compared to other students. Educators may need to allow greater time for students to complete work at school as they may have limited or no access to internet or necessary supplies needed to complete assignments. As getting to school on time can be difficult, penalizing a student for tardiness may serve to undermine educational efforts (Cutuli, Desjardins, Herbers, Long, Heistad, & Chan, 2012; Evers, 2011).

Success in school is more likely for all students when they can make a connection with others, especially an adult (Cutuli et al., 2012). The adult becomes an advocate as well as someone who likely understands the operation of the school system. Thus, the issue of trust and adult guidance complement each other in the lives of homeless students. This type of connection has been found to be instrumental in realizing school success for homeless students (Ottaway, King, & Erickson, 2009; Purcell, 2014).

Intersection of Rural Education and Rural Homelessness

Some scholars suggest that teachers in rural areas may have more personal contact with students simply due to the size of their community and school (Edwards et al., 2009). If that is indeed the case, then school size is very important when considering homeless student needs. However, without conclusive information about student needs, teachers may be prone to hold misconceptions not only about student needs but the lives of the students themselves (Canfield, 2015). The potential for stigmas attached to homeless students in small rural communities, where everyone is familiar with virtually everyone else, is an especially important issue for rural

educators (Paik & Phillips, 2002). Little is known on how rural homeless student deal with prevailing stereotypes.

While there is reliable information on the nature and extent of homeless in general and among young people specifically, noticeably lacking is scholarship on the experiences of young people themselves. All the more so is insight on the experiences of rural homeless students. Namely, there is virtually no scholarly treatment on how rural homeless students describe their schooling experience. This lack of attention is especially curious given that much policy and practice are based on what is assumed to be best for homeless students. Yet, we know virtually nothing about their personal thoughts on important needs, desires, and experiences. This research attempted to provide some insight and fill part of the gap in the scholarly literature.

Conclusion

While the existing literature provides a general picture of the demographic nature of youth homelessness, what is missing is real insight on their daily experiences and struggles. Simply put, we know next to nothing on how young people manage high school while going through this life stage as homeless (Whitbeck & Hoyt, 2017). This remains a curious oversight among scholars as surely these personal accounts are likely be compelling as well as revealing.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

This study explores the experiences of a little understood marginalized segment of American population. Using a narrative ethnographic approach, I examined the perceptions and experiences of a sample of homeless youth ages 19 to 24 in rural Oregon. I relied heavily on personal interviews in order to explore their perceived needs of homeless youth and document what they consider as the prevailing misconceptions surrounding the homeless circumstances when they were students. The findings of this study shed light on how to assist this population as well as to lend a voice to a people who are frequently ignored or dismissed. In addition, the findings will assist educators in responding effectively to the needs of homeless students by examining the lives of a sample of rural youth who experienced high school as homeless individuals.

Setting for the Research

I conducted this study in one Oregon county. The county is a mix of suburban, small town, and rural with a population of just over 100,000. There are 12 public high schools and three private high schools in the county. These schools are located throughout the county and, like their communities, include suburban, small town, and rural schools.

The U.S. Census Bureau defines rural as “not urban” which is vague at best (U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts, 2018). Moreover, various federal agencies define rural based on differing populations and differing proximity to large cities. In his 2010 book *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism*, Scott Herring delved into the various and sometimes conflicting definitions of rural that are often derived from specific agendas rather than practical concerns,

> Since definitions of "rural" and "urban" must participate in a rigged language game, any "urban/rural" distinction is as much context-specific, phantasmatic, performative, subjective, and—I'll stress—standardizing as it is geographically verifiable. Here we see that the pat definition of "rural" is analogous to "country" as much as "urban" is analogous to the "city" or "town." But what, exactly, constitutes a "city" or a "country" when it is "opposed to the town"? Who, exactly, puts them in opposition? We could take a cue from Webster's and turn to the U.S. Census Bureau's most recent guidelines, where the bureau's definition of "population density" may help clarify our understanding of "rural/country" and "urban/city." While we should rightly be suspicious of such bio-political number games, the census nevertheless serves as a material and epistemological technology for enumerating and spatializing the geography of the U.S. nation-state. (Herring, 2010, p. 8-9)

For the purposes of this study, I conceptualize rural as an outlying area not connected to an urban area. Specifically, rural contains small towns interspersed with agricultural areas along with communities that tend to be characterized by intentional, personal relationships and fewer industrial businesses.

According to the Oregon Department of Human Services (ODHS) (2016), during 2016 there were an estimated 64 homeless youth in the county that was the setting of this research. However, this figure is restricted to youth between the ages 12 to 24 and does not include children under the age of 12. (Smock, 2017). ODHS further reports that 12 of Oregon's 36 counties have 50 or more homeless youth. However, the department qualifies these figures by noting,

> The lack of comprehensive data makes it impossible to know the exact geography of youth homelessness in Oregon, but the limited information we do have makes it clear that there are homeless youth across the state. . . These figures only capture youth who are attending school, so they are a significant undercount of the homeless youth populations in each community, but they provide an indication of the geographic distribution of the homeless youth population. (Oregon Department of Human Services, 2016, pp. 5-6)

Thus, it is clear that youth homelessness in Oregon is not merely an urban problem but afflicts all sections of the state. Moreover, the ODHS recognizes that youth homelessness is likely underestimated. Thus, it is also likely the problem is more pervasive and serious than generally recognized.

In 2006 the county that is the setting for this research created a ten-year plan for ending homelessness. This plan held as a goal to not just manage homelessness, but to eliminate it entirely from the county. While the ultimate goal of ending homelessness has not been achieved, county officials have added important services for people in transition. Specific services include 50 new units for senior housing, 118 new units of affordable workforce housing, as well as 1 to 5 bedroom homes for adults in recovery with young children, and 14 beds have been made available for runaway and homeless youth (11-17 years of age), eight beds for transitional housing for those aged 18-21, and a private organization opened a 14 bed emergency shelter for men. The effort to end homelessness has also resulted in partnerships between county government and various religious organization to supply emergency winter shelters. This ambitious plan to eliminate homelessness combined with the concerted efforts to serve those in transition demonstrate that the county in which this research occurred takes the issue of homelessness very seriously.

Research Design, Sampling Strategy, and Data Collection

This study involved face-to-face, personal interviews, fieldnotes, direct observation and used a sample of five formerly homeless youth aged 19 to 24. The sample included three women and two men. The youngest participant was 19 at the time of the interview, one was 21 years old, two were 22 years old, and the oldest participant was 24. The average age of the sample is 22.6 years old.

The five participants, now graduated, had experienced attending a high school in the same rural Oregon county while homeless. There were a number of important reasons for the use of former rather than current students. First, homeless, underage students represented a highly vulnerable population and required significant ethical research measures. The use of adults who were no longer homeless reduces the ethical dilemmas of conducting research with a multiple vulnerable population (Wiles, 2013). Second, using young adults allowed them to reflect with enough distance to assess their experiences in a different way than underage youth might evaluate while currently experiencing stressful events (Fellows, & Liu, 2015).

I coordinated with a private organization and rural schools (using personal contacts I had already established) in identifying and recruiting individuals who met the research criteria for the research (e.g., between the ages of 18 and 24 and who experienced high school as a homeless individual). Specifically, I used a combination of email and personal contacts to work cooperatively with the appropriate personnel. In essence, I used a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling assisted by important gatekeepers (Cleary, Horsfall, & Hayter, 2014). To be eligible for participation in this study, the parameters of the sampling selection were: 1) those who graduated from high school; 2) spent at least part of their high school experience as homeless; 3) the participants were either homeless with a family or

unaccompanied homeless; 4) between the ages of 18-24; and 5) not restricted by gender or ethnicity.

A variety of data collection techniques were utilized to document the experiences and perceptions of the participants. Personal, fact-to-face interviews were the primary data documentation strategy. The interviews included guide questions designed to capture the data required to answer the study's primary research questions along with extemporaneous questions meant to inquire into issues and insights that arose during the interview (see Appendix A). In addition to the personal interviews, I used fieldnotes designed to document important insights and patterns in the data as the research proceeded. I also used direct observation, important to ethnographic methods, as a means to contextualize the setting and places of important events (e.g., the locations where the participants went to school and/or spend significant time during their period of homelessness). These various data sources were triangulated to analyze the experiences and perceptions of the participants (Renz, Carrington, & Badger, 2018).

Narrative Ethnography

This research is framed within a narrative ethnographic approach. Technically, narrative ethnography combines traditional micro-ethnographic methods with narrative analysis common to qualitative research (Fetterman, 2010; Gubrium & Holstein, 2002; Ogbu, 2003; Polkinghorne, 1998). Using the research methodology of narrative ethnography, the researcher is able to document the personal stories held by individuals while contextualizing those stories in their cultural setting. Narrative ethnography allows the researcher to look at the many layers of a story, how it is told as much as who tells it (Polkinghorne, 1988). Narrative ethnography is especially important for this study as the subject matter is sensitive and warrants that the

participants' stories be told within their personal and social framework (Hampshire, Iqbal, Blell & Simpson, 2012).

Narrative ethnography as a type of ethnography is distinguished by several important features. First, narrative ethnography intends to tell the stories shared by people who also share a common community or cultural experience (Harper, Lardon, Rappaport, Bangi, Contreras, & Pedraza, 2004). In this respect, narrative ethnography is related to narrative inquiry research. However, rather than focusing on the narrative offered by individuals (as is the case for narrative inquiry), narrative ethnography examines the shared stories of individuals within a common cultural context (Gubruim & Holstein, 2008).

Second, narrative ethnography employs the research methods traditionally associated with ethnography. This means narrative ethnography makes use of triangulation by assembling a variety of data sources. Triangulation is especially crucial as understanding the cultural context of the narratives provided by individual participants is paramount. Namely, personal stories require a more nuanced appreciation of social setting and cultural experience than is possible with only one data collection method (Harper et al., 2004; Tedlock, 1991). The description of narrative ethnography provided by Gubrium and Holstein (2008) reveals the significance of the cultural context behind the personal narratives:

> [Narrative ethnography] is a method of procedure and analysis aimed at close scrutiny of social situations, their actors, and actions in relation to narratives. This involves direct, intensive observation of the field of study—in this case, the multifaceted field of narrative practice. Being on the scenes of story construction and storytelling and considering how stories are shaped by the contingencies of communication is not simply window dressing for narrative analysis. Settings are integral parts of narrativity. (p. 250)

Analytical Procedures

Since the personal interviews supplied the primary data for this study, those interviews were analyzed in a conventional three stages process typical of qualitative research (Maxwell, 2005). This process included initial coding, focused coding, and thematic coding. In initial coding, I identified the separate responses and perceptions of the participants looking particularly at the participants own words in an "in vivo" fashion (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The second state involved focused coding during which I refined the initial coding themes into smaller and similar coding categories. The last stage of coding, thematic coding, attempted to take the themes that have become apparent within focused coding and looked for themes that may group together.

This analytical strategy served several purposes. First, the procedures allowed me to identify important themes shared by the participants. Second, it permitted me to examine the data for relevant connections between themes. Finally, the strategy was designed to organize the findings in a way they can speak to and provide answers to the research question that guide and structure the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Ultimately, following this three-stage analytical process allowed me to identify four themes common to the participants' homeless experience.

Complementing the personal interview transcripts were my fieldnotes. Namely, I kept fieldnotes on important details of each interview along with general information on the nature of the interview, participant, and the setting. For instance, I noted general impressions on the appearance and demeanor of the participants, the ambiance of the setting of the interview, along with what seemed to be important perceptions and experiences voiced by each individual. The fieldnotes were especially helpful when I analyzed the data (i.e., assisted in identify emerging themes) and in reporting the findings (i.e., assisted in describing each participant and the interview episode).

Research Ethics

The data for this study were primarily gathered by conducting semi-structured interviews. Participants were informed that their answers to the research questions and their identity would be kept confidential (see Appendix B). I use pseudonyms to refer to specific individuals when reporting the findings. Interviews were recorded digitally and then transcribed verbatim. In order to preserve the confidentiality and anonymity of individuals, all research materials (including signed letters of consent and audio recordings, etc.) are kept secure in a locked file or are password protected. I will destroy all research materials four years after the defense of the dissertation. No data were collected until the research study had been granted approval by the George Fox University Institutional Review Board.

I allowed the participants to choose where to be interviewed. While it was important to have a place optimal for the participant, it was also important to conduct interviews in a place where recording and taking accurate fieldnotes was possible. I strove to report the findings of the study in such a manner that personal identities cannot be decoded. As such, some contextual background information is not included in either the profile of the participants or the narration of the findings. For example, it was clear from the beginning of the research that it was possible private information such as drug use would be uncovered. This background information is tangential to the research questions and study and are not be reported unless specific permission was given by the participant. However, participants were made aware that though the researcher would be taking all possible practical ways to keep their identity anonymous, the nature of the study involves a small sample size and occurring in a rural setting with a small population. For this reason, the county that was the location for the research, is not disclosed. Further, I do not

report any sensitive information about the participants or their experiences that would be reasonably deemed detrimental.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

This study examines the stories of young adults who were attended in a rural high school while homeless. The participants were all between the ages of 19-24, but all of their paths to homelessness began much earlier in their life as a result of circumstances beyond their control. I sought to give voice to a section of society that is largely voiceless. I wanted to know what their experiences truly were; did they have help, if so, by whom? What were their challenges in school? What would they like others to know about them? Mostly I really wanted to honor their stories and to assist them to frame their own narrative.

I had several gatekeepers to help me make contact with my participants as the nature of their lives is ever changing; the principal at a rural high school, a school homeless liaison, a social studies/college and career teacher. I also was able to interview a young man my family and I have been privileged to help. His kindness in reaching out to others he knew led to two more interviews. One of my participants was referred to me by almost all of my gatekeepers and one interview was the result of someone who heard I was looking for people to interview "for my school thing." Most of the interviews occurred over a two-week period in my classroom.

The fact that the majority of the interviews were conducted in my classroom is no small detail. My classroom has always been a place for students to come and hang out even when they are not in my class. I deliberately display images in the room to convey to the message to students that no matter who they are or who they are becoming, they are welcome. LGBTQIA magnets, Comi-Con pictures, sports heroes, and musical theater stars decorate the room. The

classroom walls are adorned with student work from past and present students as well as images of inspiring people with their quotes, and calls to action. The tables are set up so five people can sit as a group, and there is the smell of oranges and eucalyptus wafting through the room. Only one set of overhead lights are on, two windows overlook our class "bush," and the windowsill holds bamboo, fern, and coffee plants. The interviews that occurred in this space are as physically comfortable as a classroom can be made. Two interviews took place in the room where one of the participant's now lives.

Each of the participants, two young men (one white, one Hispanic) and three young women (all white), were eager to share their story. Some of them did not go into great detail on aspects of their experiences and used phrases such "it was a hard time" or they jumped into the timeline because they did not feel comfortable relating specifics of the earliest part of their story. I assured them all they were being helpful and their participation in this study was very valuable. Nevertheless, in keeping with accepted research ethics, I respected the personal boundaries they set in telling their narratives

Participants

Five stories make up this research study. The similarities are striking as is the pain these participants experienced. Their resilience is also astounding. As such, a profile of each of the participants is necessary to provide context to their experiences and perceptions.

Participant one: Macie. Macie is a beautiful 19-year-old young woman with startling green eyes and an open face. She was nervous about the meeting but assured me she is an "open book" and "really wants to help." Macie is also a former student who agreed to meet in my classroom as she feels comfortable chatting at school, and it is "a quiet place." She arrived early

and chatted about coming back to the school and how many things are the same and how many things have changed in just a year's time.

Macie became homeless the summer after her high school freshman year. She and her mother had a tumultuous and abusive relationship. Macie explained, "We calculated all that I had moved 17 times, 14 different schools. My mom was abusive, me only. With my younger siblings she was more mentally (abusive). Me, I don't know why, I still can't pinpoint, she was physically abusive."

Macie is the middle sibling with two older brothers (aged 25 and 23), a twin sister to Macie who has since passed away (19 years old), a sister (16 years), a brother (13 years), and the youngest sister (12 years). Macie grew up babysitting her youngest siblings and continued to babysit them even when not living in the same house as her mother. When her mother decided to move to out of state, Macie remained behind living with an aunt and uncle. Her mother cut off all contact and forbad contact by any of her siblings; something that Macie is still dealing with through therapy today. Additionally, Macie's mother would not sign guardianship papers, so it was extremely difficult for Macie to do basic things many high school students take for granted such as go on fieldtrips or get a driver's license. In fact, Macie just last year obtained a driver's license when she turned 18. The need for her mother to control but to not interact with Macie was then and even now remains baffling and hurtful to her.

Life with her mother was also complicated by her mother's relationship choices. Macie related, "One thing about my mom is she always had to have a man in her life, she can never be alone. She would always put that man before her children." Consequently, she came to live with her aunt and uncle, a transition that, while difficult initially, was welcomed as it gave Macie a place to call home.

> I went into their home with a lot of issues such as trust issues, lying issues. I got involved with a couple of drugs stuff. I stopped doing my homework completely. A lot of the time it was just because I was so overwhelmed and stressed. I lost so much sleep. I pretty much was—had insomnia. But after I moved in with them, they showed me how it should be, showed me how a relationship should be with your spouse, showed me how a real home is, showed me the love and support that I never got.

Macie began attending a local four-year college after high school. However, it was difficult not having a driver's license. While she did fine academically in high school, Macie had moved so many times and switched schools so often, there were gaps in her education. She recalled, "I was able to go to (local four-year school), and that was rough. Knocked me on my butt quite a bit. I ended up not passing a couple of my classes and I just really wasn't prepared for college in any shape or form."

Macie's boyfriend's parents helped her buy a car, and she makes monthly payments to them. They also let Macie move in with them for a time when her aunt and uncle decided to move to another state. She is currently enrolled in a local community college, working fulltime at a diner, and has moved in with her boyfriend. Macie is exceptionally proud of holding her job which she has had it since she was 15. Being employed gives her a sense of family and stability similar to what she saw in her aunt and uncle's lives. Macie plans on going back to the four-year college and pursue her goal of becoming a nurse.

Macie came back to see me two days after our interview sporting a beautiful diamond ring on her left hand, she and her boyfriend were engaged.

Participant two: Isaiah. I have known Isaiah for almost six years. He participated heavily in high school drama and choir. Isaiah sings with a beautiful tenor and frequently

performed solos in the choir, was often the lead in school musicals as well as plays. He is a 22-year-old who has looked 25 since he was 18, has an earnest and giving heart, and wants very much to have, as he puts it, a "normal" life.

Isaiah became homeless in 2012, the winter of his high school sophomore year. He had to work as his parents demanded he buy things, "for the house, or you can leave." After a period of this kind on continued pressure, Isaiah packed a bag, told his parents, "You should be taking care of me. I can't take care of you guys right now" and walked out. He eventually called his best friend and explained what had happened. As a result, his best friend's family agreed that Isaiah could stay with them for however long he needed.

Isaiah was uncertain about how long he stayed at his friend's home as it was a traumatic time in his life. But the change was necessary. As Isaiah related, "I didn't want to get sucked down back into that little cycle of not having money, and then not being able to go after opportunities because you're not equipped, because that's what happened to my older sister." Isaiah witnessed his sister's guilt for leaving her sibling, and she was ill-prepared for the world. Unfortunately, she followed a self-destructive path as a result.

Isaiah lived with his friend's family until he graduated from high school, residing in the attic space over the garage. While his friend's home offered a steady place to live, it became "slowly obvious it was not a safe place to be emotionally" and "I could tell that they felt trapped in the situation because they couldn't morally allow themselves to say, ask me to leave." Isaiah had made the decision to live out of his truck rather than "sit in a smelly dirty house while Mrs. [name of friend's mother] plays solitaire and says racial slurs. I'd rather spend the night in a Walmart parking lot than do that." Unfortunately, the time spent at his friend's home also had an adverse effect on their friendship. Isaiah recalled,

> They also compared me to [name of friend] a lot; because that was one of the weird abusive cycles that was happening was, I would succeed in school, and they would look at [name of friend] who was provided for financially, and he's not succeeding in school. They would say, "Why aren't you like [Isaiah]?" It ruined our friendship completely. It destroyed it. He was my best friend through most of high school. That was rough.

Eventually, Isaiah got a mattress and gave away anything that would not fit inside a small pickup truck. He then spoke to another good friend and asked if he could stay with him and his family until the end of summer when his college campus opened up. He sent a group text to his friend and his parents explaining he could give them 22% of his monthly paycheck from his job if he could stay in their home. He also asked that if they did not have a place for him inside their home, would they permit him to park his truck outside and have use of their bathroom. The family took in Isaiah but did not take 22% of his paycheck. Instead, they had him be responsible for the same chores required of their children.

Living with this family turned out to be longer than anticipated as Isaiah could not afford the four-year college even with the grants and scholarships he earned in high school. He again asked the family if he could continue staying with them while he completed college. The family once again agreed. Yet, residing with other families was not always easy. Isaiah spoke candidly about what it was like to live with other people while not a member of the family,

> When you're a bonus person in the household, it's hard to know what the rules are because usually, the guardians of the household feel some sort of parental role because you're a kid and they're an adult, and you're in their house. So, it kind of has that vibe. At the same time, the guardians don't usually feel that they can tell you what to do because you're not biologically theirs and you haven't been there, so they don't. The

guardians don't know necessarily where the line is, as far as setting boundaries. Then I didn't know where the boundaries were because I wasn't exactly a houseguest, but I wasn't exactly kin either. It was very hard to navigate.

However, with the second family, Isaiah was able to settle into some normalcy. He did not have to worry about food or shelter and had emotional support. This family also pushed Isaiah to seek counseling. Ultimately, with the family's support along with professional counseling, Isaiah was able to deal with the trauma he experienced living with emotionally abusive parents, the trauma of scarcity, the guilt of leaving younger siblings, and was able to take care of his own wounds and begin to heal.

At the time of the research, Isaiah was still living with the second family and is in his final year of college. He has limited contact with his family but does stay in contact with his siblings and has tried to provide emotional support for them when he can and when they need him. Isaiah's goal of not repeating the cycle of poverty and abuse characteristic of his family of orientation is well on its way of being realized.

Participant three: Sandi. I interacted with Sandi briefly when she was my student during her junior year of high school. Sandi was in my class briefly and then she was gone. I did not meet up with her until later at a mutual friend's house. I knew she looked familiar, but I could not put my finger on how. Sandi had changed her last name and had grown into a young woman of 22 with only traces of the little high school junior girl I had known.

Sandi came to my home to be interviewed as she lives in a large city in a very tiny apartment in a less than safe part of town. Sandi is also a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) and works 17 hours overnight shifts for a company that provides care to hospice patients. Sandi had

woken from her afterwork nap and was dressed in yoga pants, a t-shirt, and her gorgeous deep purple hair was pulled up into a loose bun. She took a deep breath and was ready to begin.

Sandi was a sophomore in high school when she and her mother became homeless. After not living with her mother for several years Sandi found herself back in her mother's care. Her mother was then living with Sandi's stepfather when a domestic violence dispute ended with the stepfather leaving the home. Sandi recalled that without the second income from the stepfather, "very gradually things in the house started to disappear. My mom's car got repossessed while she was at work and then we lost the house shortly after that and then we were homeless." Sandi, her little brother (who at the time was a baby), and her mother then moved in with Sandi's aunt. As her mother wanted Sandi to have some stability, she continued to attend the school where she was enrolled before they lost the house. If they had switched schools at that point in time, Sandi would have been on her fourth school in almost as many years. During this period, the three of them also bounced between family friends in other towns in the area.

One of the places Sandi and her family lived was a property with a sizable number of families. Sandi did not like to stay there as she felt unsafe. Some of the residents were mentally ill and some people would make sexual advances. Sandi and her mom eventually moved to a small town where I teach. This is when I met Sandi when she enrolled in my English class.

Sandi did not stay at my school very long. She could not see a way to make up the credits she had missed due to attending a large number of different schools. Adding to her difficulties, she and her mother didn't have the money to pay for online classes. Sandi kept to herself just how bad her situation was, and her frustration mounted to the breaking point,

> I was so frustrated and angry with my situation. I was heading to such a breaking point of feeling out of control because I can work hard and I can want to learn, but that's not

> enough. That feeling of not feeling enough and not feeling in control at all, I felt like I was such at a breaking point. I needed to do something that put me at the wheel again and put me in control of what was going on.

For Sandi dropping out of school and getting a GED was a way of retaking control of her life. Unfortunately, it proved to be difficult to earn her GED as the money to take each test was scarce. Nevertheless, Sandi managed to earn a GED and complete high school.

It was during this time that Sandi and her mother moved to another small town four hours away from where Sandi was hoping to begin college. Adding to her difficulties, Sandi's mother failed to help her get a driver's license or fill out the FAFSA required for college financial aid. As a result, Sandi decided to get a job. Since Sandi was only 17, it was difficult to find a job that would meet her financial needs. By happenstance, Sandi saw a poster for a CNA program. The program, however, was back in the small town they had just left. Sandi's mother was inconsistent in driving her to class. In order to resolve this issue, Sandi reached out to family friends who let her stay with them for a week or so at a time. During one of these visits Sandi's mother never returned to pick her up and bring her back home. Sandi was stranded with family friends who were growing frustrated with the inconvenience and her mother's lack of dependability.

> Then they ended up kicking me out. It wasn't so much of like, "Get out of here," but it was like, "Hey, we love you, but we didn't sign up for this." Because she (Sandi's mother) didn't talk to them either, I was just in their lap. They didn't have the space for me, didn't have the money to pay for a whole another kid. Be responsible for a whole another kid.

At this point, Sandi was truly on her own and coped with her living situation by couch surfing until she was able to finish the CNA courses. By the time Sandi finished the CNA program, she had secured a job at a local assisted living facility and began saving money. However, Sandi felt the only course of action was to seek out her biological father and move back in with him.

> When you're 17, and you're couch surfing, you have to have your friend's parents' permission. A lot of times they're going to just say "no" because they think you're just spending the night. Parents don't want to kind of take, a lot of people don't want to take, on that responsibility. Then it's also like, this isn't your kid. How much of a parental figure are you allowed to be to?

Sandi lived with her dad for a few months until she and some of her friends moved in together. Sandi had a somewhat stable place to live for a year. Then Sandi moved in with a boyfriend who turned abusive. Sandi ended up living in a camping trailer at another friend's house, "During the summer I stayed in a trailer at a friend's house. Their like camping trailer. The windows were broken, and it was moldy." Eventually, Sandi moved back in with her father until she could find an apartment she could afford.

At the time of the interview, Sandi was living in a tiny apartment in a less desirable part of a major city. While this was obviously not where Sandi desired to reside, it offered stability she has lacked for a large part of her life. Sandi had a steady job, a new boyfriend who appreciated and encouraged her. Eventually, Sandi would like to go back to school and earn another degree, possibly in the medical field. For now, she is content.

Participant four: Alle. I have known Alle peripherally for several years. I know her gorgeous singing voice, her excellent acting skills, and her ready boisterous laugh; what I didn't

know was Alle's journey through homelessness. Alle met me at my high school as it offered a private and quiet place for us to conduct the interview. She is 24, works two jobs, and had just recently re-enrolled in a local community college. This was not an easy interview. It was difficult for Alle and, quite honestly, for myself. The road Alle has traveled has been full of obstacles from birth, and it is only within the past six months she feels she is in a place that is stable, safe, and home.

Growing up Alle's family has always been at or below the poverty line and continues to live in scarcity today. She described her family's circumstances by stating, "We were extremely poor my entire life. Borderline, I mean. We were below the poverty level. I think my dad would like to say otherwise, but they were definitely working poor or worse. Sometimes dinner would be like a snack, would be like bread and ketchup."

The immediate family has five children, of which Alle is one of the oldest. Her mother is battling multiple sclerosis which went undiagnosed for years and added to the emotional and financial stress of the family. Alle's father provides the only income for the family by working as a non-skilled laborer. The family includes a daughter who needs special services, a mother who is essentially disabled, and must survive on a single, low income. Obviously, there are many stressors operating on the family and taking a toll on their finances and stability. In Alle's estimation, the lack of resources paired with adult immaturity led to friction in the family.

One of the points of continual contention between Alle and her parents was that Alle would not share her paycheck with her family. Alle worked several jobs in high school while participating fully in drama (oft times being the lead actress), competing in choir, and the special smaller competition choral group; all while keeping up with academics. These activities require

money. As her parents could not afford such extracurricular activities, Alle chose to work and pay for them herself.

Her parents had repeatedly threatened to kick Alle out of the house for a variety of reasons, the most prominent complaint was that she would not share her meager paycheck. In desperation to have Alle conform to their wishes, she was sent to live with extremely religious family members in another state in hopes that she would "straighten up." This strategy did not work and drove a further wedge between Alle and her parents. The divide only became worse when she returned. As the threats of being kicked out of her home escalated, Alle began to search for another place to live. The next time her parents threatened to make her leave, Alle was ready with a plan of her own. Alle began living with a friend from school. Alle became homeless at 16.

In Alle's eyes she was not really "homeless" as she was not living on the street. However, Alle was far from secure and had not found the stability nor the normalcy she was so desperately seeking. For the remainder of her high school education, Alle would only infrequently have a real home and largely depended on others for shelter. In her new situation, while she had a roof over her head, Alle still felt out of place and experienced a tension that she couldn't quite define. The tension in the house fueled Alle's hectic school schedule and she continued to feel out of place. The pressure Alle initially felt was not unwarranted as the father of her friend began to make sexual advances toward her. Alle lived with her friend for two years until the sexual advances of her friend's father became too much. At that point, Alle moved back in with her parents in an uninsulated, unheated garage as an escape from the sexual predator. Predictably this situation did not last long as old tensions about money and newer tensions about privacy chiseled away at the already tenuous relationship. Alle left the garage and moved in with another friend

which was in Alle's words, "an epic failure because I didn't have enough money to pay for school, and gas, and groceries, and rent. I did not have enough. I met my boyfriend and moved in with him because I couldn't afford to live on my own."

Alle moved with her boyfriend as another means of finding stability and normalcy. Unfortunately, this relationship was verbally and physically abusive and led to excessive drinking and drug use. The relationship was,

> Extremely toxic two and a half years of my life. I dropped out of school. I gained a lot of weight. I lost hair. I lost a lot of my friends. I lost touch with my brother, which was really hard for me. I was living paycheck to paycheck. I just was going nowhere. I had no idea what to do, I was like, "This is not what I imagined." I always imagined that I would set a legacy for my family and I would be making enough money, because I knew I was going to be taking care of my mom and my dad imminently. I wanted to be a singer. I wanted to be a performer, and I was so depressed and so lost.

After two and a half tumultuous years, Alle left this relationship and once again moved back in her parents' garage. However, something had changed in Alle. The empowerment of escaping a sexual predator and leaving an abusive relationship made Alle look both inward and outward for realistic help. She began to listen to self-help podcasts, reading self-help books, going to self-help seminars, and trying to connect with people whom she considered as functional. She moved into a townhouse with two roommates, worked three jobs but was still barely able to make ends meet. When the roommates moved on, Alle was stuck trying to afford the townhouse alone.

During this time of upheaval, Alle managed to complete high school, meet a "nice guy." She didn't want to share with her new boyfriend that she "was about to lose my townhouse and I

was $11,000 in debt. I had a car that was not running. I felt like, 'How could I be trying so hard and still be such an epic failure?' I didn't tell him because he's so amazing." Eventually, Alle shared her situation with her boyfriend, and they are currently sharing their lives together. With his support, Alle paid off all of her debt, enrolled in community college, and is working at two stable jobs. It bothers Alle that she is still unsure about the career she wants to pursue. She is entrepreneurially minded and desires to be a mentor for other young women who may be in or have been in her situation. Following our interview, Alle sent me an email saying, "I wanted to let you know that I found an organization that is close to what I was discussing with you as a solution (on mentoring). Very cool program, I just signed up to (hopefully) be a mentor to at-risk youth helping with college things!!" For the first time in Alle's life, she in the process of achieving the stability and normalcy for which she has always yearned.

Participant five: Brian. Brian agreed to meet me in my classroom as it is close to the four-year college he is attending. He spent his last two years of high school at my school and while I never had him as a student, I saw his smiling face often at school. I remember that Brian was always laughing with his friends. I never had an inkling that Brian may have been struggling with homelessness.

At the interview, Brian bounded into my classroom, his slight 21 year-old frame dressed in his college colors. His positive energy was almost tangible. We took a few minutes to chat and to look around the room as it had changed drastically since he attended school. We then sat down for the interview and Brian told me he had been thinking a lot about the questions and was ready to answer anything I wanted to ask. He wanted very much to be of help.

Brian became homeless going into his junior year of high school when he was 16 years old. His story is similar to so many of the other participants. His struggle with homeless resulted

from family dysfunctions. His mother, who showed little interest in Brian, left with his brothers and sisters moved to another state in order to escape Brian's alcoholic father. Not only afterward, Brian's father decided to move to a large city which left Brian with some decisions to make; should he move in with his father who was unable to care for him or follow a disinterested and emotionally detached mother to another state? Brian decided on a third option and moved in with his best friend who lived in a smaller town with a smaller school in hopes of finding some stability and graduate from high school. Brian's host family was kind and treated him as if he was one of the family. In this regard, Brian's period of homelessness was unique from many of the other participants' experiences. Brian recalled,

> They made it really clear that it was my home, I was a part of the family. They made it very welcoming. But the type of person I am wasn't allowing me to feel comfortable. It was tough. I had my own room, I had my own space and everything, but I always felt bad, almost like a burden.

Brian lived with his friend's family throughout high school, not moving out until he moved in his college dorm. In this respect, Brian's homelessness included stability and security lacking in the experiences of the other participants. Indeed, Brian is very aware of the advantage he experienced. During the interview Brian expressed gratefulness for the help he received from the family that took him into their home. He knew he could have been in a much worse situation. Brian is currently a junior in college and pursuing his dream of becoming a dual language elementary teacher. His mother is not in his life even though she has moved back to the area, "it's just usually a kind of a letdown. Not that I don't want to think about her, but I just try not to because that's something that brings me down." Brian's father's life is on the upswing. He has a

steady job and is dealing with his addiction. Brian was even able to spend the holidays with his grandparents and his dad,

> My grandparents, who are from Mexico, they got their citizenship; I think seven, eight years ago. They're currently living with my dad right now. This past winter through the holidays, I got to spend New Year's, Christmas, Thanksgiving with them. It was something that I hadn't done in a long time. It was really nice, and it's really a nice change in my life that I'm really taking advantage of and really enjoying.

Brian is very excited to begin his career as a teacher as he wants to help students like himself who may not see a way out of their situation. His future is going to be amazing.

Emergent Themes

Although the five participants involved in this study are unique individuals, they shared many similar experiences while homeless. Their struggles to obtain a high school education while dealing with the physical and emotional demands of homelessness were at times overwhelming and perplexing. The family dynamics leading to homelessness contained an eerily common thread; as the family experienced a breakdown, the student was left to fend for him or herself.

Beyond the common family dysfunctions, the participants also shared other experiences. Similar types of emotional and physical stressors were typical in their personal accounts. Not surprisingly, perhaps due to their shared experiences, they also held similar desires and needs. The analysis of the personal interviews led me to identify five common themes in their collective experience as homeless rural high school students. These themes include: 1) the challenge presented by being a homeless high school student requires enormous resiliency; 2) confronting

their own and others' ambivalence about homelessness; 3) the need for practical assistance; and 4) the imperative desire for normalcy.

Theme one: The challenge of homeless requires enormous resiliency. The challenges the participants faced include simple everyday routines most students take for granted, such as merely how to get to school. Other challenges were much more serious and involved physical safety, such as "where will I sleep tonight" or "how do I protect myself from a sexual predator." In all of these situations the participants most frequently needed to resort to their own ingenuity to resolve the challenges. Simply put, being homeless required the participants to display an incredible degree of resiliency.

One of the most common challenges confronting the participants was simply one of everyday logistics. Merely getting from one location to another proved to be a source great frustration and stress for the participants. Macie spoke of the fact her mother would not sign the permission form so she could get her driver's license. This left her at the mercy of friends and it negatively affected her ability to get a job. While Macie was lucky to find a job in the small rural town she was living in, this was only because one of her friends knew the family who operated the business. Isaiah related that he relied greatly on his host family for rides to school, practice, and his jobs. Brian specifically changed schools from one rural location to another as he knew how difficult it would be for him to try to stay at his current school but live in another town and risk interrupting the continuity of his education.

Transitioning to different schools was a common experience. With the exception of Isaiah and Alle, all the participants changed schools. While schools follow similar state and federal guidelines and standards, that does not mean these standards are taught in the same way. Often schools have specific classes all students must take in order to graduate. However, when a

student comes into the school at another grade level, he or she may need to fit another class into a tight schedule. Moreover, sometimes the transient nature leads to students missing weeks or more of school which can result in serious gaps in academic information and skills. For instance, Sandi related,

> Each school I was at taught things at a different order. All you did was change schools, but they're going to tell you you're behind in credits because there is some mandatory class they make freshmen take in order to graduate. But you didn't go there as a freshman. That was going to be another thing that I was going to have to deal with. I was like, well, I can work my butt off and makeup all these credits here, but then what if I go to that school? And they're going to tell me I'm still behind or I'm going to be taking classes on things that I already knew.

Macie who experienced a great deal of transitions recalled, "We calculated all that I had moved 17 times, 14 different schools." The nature of this transition created unpredictability and inconsistency in the participants' lives. In Sandi's case, the constant changes lead to her drop out of school and earn a GED as, for her, it was a more practical option.

One exception is that of Brian. While he too changed schools, Brian felt the transition worked to his advantage. He explained, "The transition from [name of school] High School from being such a big school, I think the expectations were a little bit higher. The skills that I brought over, I think they were enough to get by for me, at least." Alle and Isaiah stayed primarily at the same high school, so they did not necessarily struggle with gaps in learning resulting from moving in the manner experienced by Macie and Sandi. However, all of the participants reported struggling with the mandates typical of traditional education such as meeting concrete due dates, accomplishing daily homework, dealing with feelings of being overworked, and interacting with

disinterested or unsympathetic teachers. It was also challenging to adhere to all the rules and expectations of high school when working. For some of the participants, this included holding multiple jobs.

Most participants were unaware of available resources to assist them while they were homeless. Only a few participants knew of the school resources available to assist them. For instance, Brian knew his school had a homeless liaison. However, it is important to point out that the only reason that Brian learned about this resource was because the mother of his host family happened to be friends with the school liaison. Brian recalled,

> Ms. [name of homeless liaison] was really good friends with my best friend's mom and my best friend's mom would watch her kids. They discussed a lot, and they had a lot of trust in each other. I was called to her office one day and she introduced herself and told me her position with the homelessness, and I think from there, she started helping me.

I specifically asked Macie if she knew that there was a person at school assigned to help students who were struggling with homelessness. She responded, "I didn't go to her because I didn't know it existed." It was only after another teacher she trusted took her to see the liaison did Macie discover there was anyone with that job. She said,

> She called me in for weekly meetings to just see how things were going. [Interviewer: Did you want to go and see her?] Sometimes. Sometimes I didn't. Reasons being it was just I had already accepted what had gone on and moved on with it. I was just trying to move forward. When I felt like I wanted to go back to visit, yes, she was being helpful, but at the same time, it just pulled me back a little bit.

Macie believed that she didn't find any real help from the liaison. Further, as she was at that time staying with her aunt and uncle, she felt strange going to the homeless liaison for

assistance and didn't regard herself as truly homeless. Three of the participants, Sandi, Alle, and Isaiah knew nothing about help for homeless students at school. They were unaware of a specific liaison to help them. As Alle succinctly put it, "I never heard of anything like that. Yes, I never heard of anything like that."

While most of the participants did not receive official help from their school, they did receive informal, personal help from school staff. For example, the drama teacher allowed Isaiah to keep the shoes and the costumes from the plays he was in,

> She actually gave me clothes from the shows. I got to keep most of my shoes, from the musicals and stuff. That's why I wore dress shoes through most of high school. I had one pair of ruddy gym shoes, and then the rest of my repertoire were all Penny loafers, [chuckles] which was very odd, because the rest of my outfit was bedraggled, put it in a good way.

For Alle, assistance came from teachers who granted her a grace day on assignments, Alle self-advocated greatly and tried very hard to keep her needs to herself. She admitted she was not easy to get along with and that teachers sometimes gave her a wide berth,

> There were some teachers, like few, maybe two or three in my whole high school, that were just so rude to me. Honestly, I know I was rude back. So, I just maybe wish that there would have been maybe some empathy there. I was very fortunate to have a lot of teachers who were able to look beyond my hostility and see that I was just a young girl who was floundering. I was very, very fortunate in that, and I don't think that's the case at every school. I was really lucky that way.

While Sandi had teachers who helped her emotionally, there was very little help from other school staff. The exception occurred at the penultimate school she attended where the

janitor was kind to her as she arrived very early to school so she could shower and do her homework. In the last school she attended, Sandi formed important relationships with the English teacher and the Art teacher. While neither of these teachers knew of her situation, they both made connections with Sandi, for which she was grateful. She recalled,

> The janitor was actually really nice to me. I think she started coming in early because she knew I was waiting outside to go under the doors. Then at [the final school she attended], the two teachers, there's was like two classes that kept me going to school for as long as I did, Art and English. I was so angry and frustrated. It just felt nice to see someone that was strong and was telling people to knock it off. The English teacher's class was also engaging and kept me interested.

Unfortunately, some teachers and staff only made the challenges facing the participants more difficult. Alle recalled that her advisory teacher became a source of vexation that she came to avoid. She related, "I would skip advisory because he was so awful." This was unfortunate as advisory is a time to make connections with students and identify important issues. The advisory teacher likely missed the opportunity to make a difference in Alle's life. Both Macie and Sandi related similar experiences with the counselor at their schools. Macie felt that the counselor did not take what was happening in her life very seriously,

> I would go into a counseling center with the counselor at the time, and it was very much so quick, ask more routine questions that she felt that she was required to ask and then that was it. Don't just, don't have one conversation and leave it is my big thing. We had one conversation, and you think that's enough? I understand a lot of the time you need to seek it for yourself; but kids my age don't want to seek it for themselves.

The lack of assistance at school drove Macie to seek help elsewhere. Her aunt and uncle took Macie to a therapist who helped her deal with insomnia and panic attacks. The experience seemed to leave Macie with resentment over the absence of empathy. At one point, Macie received a lecture from a teacher about falling asleep during class. Macie had just moved in with her aunt and uncle, was babysitting her younger siblings, working, along with going to school. She was physically and mentally exhausted. Yet, the teacher had not been informed about Macie's complicated life of homelessness. Neither the counselor nor the homeless liaison alerted the teacher that Macie was experiencing significant and complex home circumstances and may need extra attention. Sandi felt the counselor cared more about her academics than about her emotional wellbeing. She spoke of visiting the school counselor but who did not seem to share Sandi's sense of urgency about her problems,

> That counselor made me feel like I was lazy or that was why I was behind in credits. The big thing I struggled with at [name of school] was there are kids walking around with just self-harm on their arms and on their legs. No effort to cover it up. That was something I had struggled with in my freshman and my sophomore year. Including my junior year of high school. It started again.

Two of the participants, Alle and Sandi, did not receive a great deal of help, inside or outside the school. While these two young women did not know each other, their stories are disconcertingly similar. Both Alle and Sandi were left to forge their path through some incredibly difficult situations without an advocate. It is only now at the ages of 25 (Alle) and 22 (Sandi)are they finding stability. This is largely because of their fighting spirit and their own personal tenacity.

Generally, the primary assistance the participants received was not from school staff, nor from any county officials. The help that most impacted their fortunes came from people who agreed to having someone live with them. It came from those who said yes to taking on someone who was not their own, and say yes to someone who needed them. However, this assistance only came when the participants took the initiative and relied on their own resilience to get the help they needed.

Theme two: Confronting their own and others' ambivalence about homelessness. None of the participants wanted to admit they were struggling or even admit they were truly homeless. They were hesitant to ask for help or accept aid from others. It is a curious disposition they shared given the obvious desperation of their situations. However, this attitude resulted in part from feeling ashamed that they were homeless. It also derived from their reluctance to define themselves as homeless because they weren't living on the street. Moreover, this ambivalence created an emotional burden shared by the participants. Isaiah described his ambivalence in seeking help while he was homeless,

> It's because I wasn't desolate, I felt that I didn't deserve or qualify for it [assistance from others], is the better way to put it. I didn't qualify for the help that was offered, because I was like, "Well, I'm not on the street, so I guess I don't count as far as that goes." Yes, so that was honestly the main thing was I just didn't feel qualified because I wasn't completely desolate yet.

Brian believed that by accepting help, he might actually reduce the assistance for others who had greater needs. Brian considered he was secure with his host family and the only support he actively sought out was help completing the paperwork to apply to college and financial aid.

However, there was more to Brian's disposition as the shame the participants felt tended to be exacerbated by the high school staff. It is unfortunate the participants regarded that, when their living situations were revealed, school staff regarded them differently even going so far as to hold different academic standards for them. For example, Alle stated,

> I think that there is an assumption that they [the homeless] are dirty, illiterate, dysfunctional members of society, and if they're a student that there's something like they're selling drugs. There's like all of these negative connotations with homelessness, and I think it's so heavily stereotyped because people don't understand.

Isaiah related similar views,

> They try to set your goals lower. That's honestly the main one. Their goal for me was more stability as opposed to achieving more than my parents did. It was more like, "How can we get you a fulltime job or how can we get you set up here as opposed to. Okay, let's look at secondary education, let's look at Yada Yada Yada." At first, I was like, "I don't want to start a job right out of high school. I want to go to school." I felt that I hadn't reached my intellectual potential yet. I wanted to keep working on that. That's what they're so focused on like the core needs that they don't really help you or counsel you to reach those higher-tier needs, fulfillment and stuff in your career. It's more like, "How can we make it so that you have money?" As opposed to, "How can we help you figure out what your dreams are and then help you pursue those?"

None of these students desired what they considered a "free pass." All of them tried to keep academics as a high priority in their lives as they possibly could. It is noteworthy that all of the participants accepted the notion that education was the way out of their situation. As a result, they pushed for rigor, they advocated to be in higher demand classes. As Sandi, who referring to

her attitudes toward classmates, colorfully put it, "'Could you please shut up. You have to be in here for 45 minutes, it's 45 minutes of your life. Talk later.' I understood the value of that [education occurring in the class]." Yet, many of their educators, possibly trying to help or perhaps due to bias, frequently guided them to classes that were less demanding and seemed to be motivated by simply getting the participants out of school and into fulltime employment as soon as possible. Such short-sighted objectives frustrated the participants. In Sandi's case, it became the impetus for her dropping out of school and earning a GED.

Macie and Sandi perceived that the people who were supposed to help them did not take them seriously. Both of these young women came to the conclusion that their school counselors did not appreciate the gravity of their situation. Sandi felt that the only thing the counselor was focused on was whether or not she was able to earn all her credits for graduation. The result of these dismissals was that both of these young women decided not to seek out the counselor any longer. However, what is more, they also came to believe there was a perception that being homeless was somehow the participant's fault, which to them, explained the single-minded attention to getting the students successfully through school with little regard for other needs. Sandi related,

> There's nothing shameful about having to go, accept free food, or coming in and talking because society really shames homeless people in a big way, like adults. Like, "You brought this on yourself." I think across the board, a lot of people who are homeless are people who are just struggling in some way so, if there's more resources available and less stigma of like, "You didn't do this to yourself, you're not a bad person," or taking that fear away, because some kids don't want to be taken away from their families. The fear of, "I didn't want to own up to the fact that I'm hungry, without them going, "We're

> going to report you, and you're going to be put in the foster care system, and your little brother's going to be taken away."

Sandi's sentiment was common among the participants. While none of the participants in the study caused their homelessness, they all felt some degree of embarrassment which seemed to impact how they regarded the reactions of others. For them, it is easy for people of means to judge and to make people feel as if it has been their fault for being homeless. No doubt in many cases their perceptions accurately reflected the attitudes held by some school staff. However, the stigma surrounding homelessness likely colored some of the participants' perceptions too as, at least a few of them, did receive much needed assistance from others both inside and outside the school.

Theme three: The need for practical assistance. The participants had a great deal to say when I asked how they could have been better supported. They did not say a lot about specific services from the county as it is likely they did not know what was available to them. Yet, they discussed the need for life skills classes and, especially, for therapy. In other words, they identified the need for practical assistance.

All five of the participants said they would have benefitted from life skills classes at school that would have assisted them cope with daily routines. For example, Alle described how such courses would have been beneficial,

> I had no basic life skills, and I had no emotional, interpersonal life skills whatsoever. I was completely unprepared. I never learned anything about local government. I didn't understand any of it until I got older and taught myself. I think a mentorship program and having that communal space and having that life skill program. I know that's a lot, but I really think that we just have to acknowledge the fact that, generally speaking,

> statistically speaking, family systems are extremely broken in this country and kids are not getting those essential life skills that they need to be successful in real life. I think that if I had something like that, I wouldn't have just fallen off a cliff after high school. I wouldn't have just plummeted and completely given up on my dreams and myself.

All the participants identified the need for therapy for homeless students. They all related that they had no one to talk to about the difficulty of their situation. Both Macie and Sandi lost faith in their school counselor and gave up on trying to seek help from that source. Nevertheless, both young women related they desired to have some type of professional therapy.

Isaiah was very candid about the need for therapeutic assistance. "Therapy. That's how I see the main ingredient that was missing. I did feel like they cared once they knew. Nobody asked me. There's no, 'Yes. I'm homeless,' box to check anywhere." He sought help through a religious institution but did not receive the help he needed to deal with the trauma he was carrying. He was also open about his struggle with an addiction to pornography. He felt extremely guilty about this addiction and the therapist only seemed to emphasize this aspect of Isaiah's struggles. Unfortunately, Isaiah came to believe that other important issues were simply of secondary concern,

> The therapist was not as helpful because that particular therapist was not as grounded in rationalism as I needed. It was obviously a religious institution, and it was very influenced by that. He was more focused on my sexual addiction, I needed to be focused on more than that. I was still with my ex [former girlfriend] who placed a lot of undue emphasis on that also. I was just stuck in an emotionally abusive relationship. That was one of the things that I think came in part for me being homeless because it made me hold on to dysfunctional relationships because it was at least stable. My ex was a terrible

> partner, but at least they weren't going anywhere. I just can't emphasize the need for behavioral therapy for homeless students. I can't emphasize that enough because if I had received good support in that department, I would have ended the relationship. I would have improved my current relationships. I would have been a lot more pleasant to be around. I would have been a better mentor figure in high school.

While Alle advocated for therapy for homeless students, she also realized it can potentially come with greater unwanted stigma in the minds of some homeless students. For her, since the status of homeless already carries a negative stereotype for some people, there may be an advantage in giving therapy a different label. She suggests,

> I think maybe not calling it therapy because I know for me, it was my parents forced me. I don't even know how many therapy sessions because they thought there was something wrong with me. I had a severe aversion to going to any school counseling whatsoever, maybe mentoring.

Brian, the quietest and most reserved of the participants, also spoke about the need for therapy. Displaying a great deal of insightfulness, he reflected,

> Definitely counseling is something that I think can be important for people. In my life what I figured out is, if you bottle things up and you don't talk about things, they really stick with you, and they can all come out at once. That's how a lot of people get into depression and have anxiety. I think a lot of times, people don't understand it or why it's happening because it's so bottled up.

When trauma takes place, even for those like Brian Isaiah and Macie who feel lucky to have found safe places, the trauma of homelessness seriously impacts everyday life. Their shared experiences led them to recognize the importance of professional therapy in dealing with the

trauma of homelessness. This felt need should not be unattainable for high school students coping with circumstance similar to those of the five participants in this study. The various rural high schools the participants attended all have a school counselor and have county appointed family and youth school-based therapists. It is revealing that none of these five young people were provided access to these valuable resources.

Theme four: The imperative desire for normalcy. It is striking that all the participants described the desire for normalcy in their lives. It is an understandable yearning. Not one of these participants described a positive, functional relationship with their parent(s). Even as homeless individuals, these students found it difficult to establish healthy living situations that served to bring normalcy. In Alle and Sandi's cases, the people that took them in were even more abusive than the situation they had left behind. Isaiah lived in a home where he felt he was a burden, a place where the parents continually compared him to their son which served to poison their relationship. Brian and Macie found places to live that were generally safe and stable but still experienced traumatic run-ins with their biological families that worked to harm their emotional health.

Isaiah's overwhelming desire for normalcy actually led to dysfunctional consequences. He stayed in an unhealthy, emotionally abusive, relationship for five years because he wanted someone to hang on to and to love him. When he first came to live with his second host family, he tried to mimic the behavior he saw which only resulting in strained complicated relations. Isaiah recalled,

> It's hard to know what the rules are because, usually, the guardians of the household feel some sort of parental role because you're a kid and they're an adult, and you're in their house. So it kind of has that vibe. At the same time, the guardians don't usually feel that

> they can tell you what to do because you're not biologically theirs and you haven't been there, so they don't. The guardians don't know necessarily where the line is, as far as setting boundaries. Then I didn't know where the boundaries were because I wasn't exactly a houseguest, but I wasn't exactly kin either. It was very hard to navigate.

Isaiah's host family displayed generally typical routines of most families although, like any family, they had their unique idiosyncrasies. When the host family recommended professional help after a particularly frightening incident involving Isaiah having thoughts of self-harm, the therapist helped him find a sense of self and a realistic sense of normalcy. Isaiah related that he wants to travel, pay bills on time, and to eventually have a family. He also came to realize that normal for him is simply being true to himself.

Normalcy for Alle is very similar to Isaiah's notion. For her, normalcy includes having a stable place to live, a steady career, and a reliable person to love her. She still struggles at times with the idea of being adequate enough, of being deserving of the life she is now living. Yet, achieving a sense of normalcy in her life has helped her focus on her goals for the future. Alle explained,

> I don't have any answers, unfortunately, but I know generally, what I want to do. I would love to be a life coach. Honestly, that's my ultimate dream. It's to be a life and business coach and just take whatever person under my wing and tell them, "I've been there. This is how you do this." I would just love to do that.

Sandi felt she has yet to achieve normalcy. She acknowledged her life is tenuous as she is her own sole support system. For her, obtaining normalcy requires diligently working toward future goals and aspirations. She is setting a course for another step in her CNA journey that will

allow her greater opportunities and command a higher wage. She is taking small steps in the direction toward stability and realizing her desire for normalcy.

Brian is living the life he has hoped for right now. As a college junior, he is on the path to becoming an elementary school teacher. Among the participants, Brian articulated some of the clearest goals for his life and enjoyed greater assistance while a homeless high school student. Perhaps because of these factors, Brian aligned his notions of normalcy with specific, concrete life/career aspirations in a way that was distinct from the rest of the sample,

> My plan is to go into education. I want to be an elementary school bilingual teacher. It was something that I wanted to do as soon as I got into education at [name of college] but I have been aiding and volunteering in a kindergarten class that's bilingual and one of the local elementary schools in [name of town]. It's something that's opened my eyes to the beauty in education and what you can do for students and how you can really impact their lives. It's just something that I want to do throughout my journey in the future, is really change stereotypes, mentalities, teach; not just my students but just people in my life; how to be good people and what are important things to look out for.

Macie, the youngest of the participants at just 19 had seen "normal" while living with her aunt and uncle and again in the example of her boyfriend's family. These individuals represented important role models for her. As a result of these positive examples, Macie formed notions on what she needs to aspire to in order to gain normalcy. She stated, "I'm going for my nursing degree, ultimately my BSN. I'm wanting to work in ER, OR, operating. I need something that's very fast paced to keep me on my toes." As was the case for several of the other participants, the goal of attaining normalcy seemed to be more aspirational than actual for Macie.

The participants are young and have lived in a state of trauma for most of their lives; it was difficult for them to know what normal is or should be in one's life. However, while these young adults may struggle to comprehend what normal is, they certainly know what it is not. That realization alone is a driving force toward seeking out their own sense of normal.

Conclusion

This research study was meant to bring to light the journeys of five homeless students who navigated high school successfully. Analysis of the data revealed four themes: 1) the challenge of homeless requires enormous resiliency; 2) confronting their own and others' ambivalence toward homelessness; 3) the participants described the need for practical assistance; and 4) the imperative desire for normalcy was universally expressed by the participants.

The research documented several important shared experiences among these participants. It revealed the burden and the shame of being homeless common to them. Shame is a powerful emotion and it is not difficult to imagine its crippling effects on high school students. The research also revealed the clarity and the emphatic nature of the participants' need for practical help in high schools and their desire to have normal lives.

While each participant strives to have a normal life, they also aspire toward a life of service. Each one of the participants is either going to school or has already gone to school to be in a service field. They are all becoming helpers; a CNA, a nurse, a health care lab scientist, a teacher, and a mentor. The lives they were forced to lead, the struggles they fought through, have left them all bruised and scarred, but definitely not defeated.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

This narrative ethnographic study was conducted in an effort to explore the experiences of a little understood marginalized segment of the American population. I set out to examine the perceptions and experiences of a small sample of young adults who had been homeless high school students in rural Oregon. After an analysis of the data, four major themes emerged. These themes reveal the challenges faced by the participants while they were homeless high school students; but they also suggest possible responses to these challenges.

In this chapter, I summarize the findings and provide answers to the three research questions that guided the study. I also identify some additional findings beyond the three research questions. I discuss important implications of the findings for the scholarly literature, educational practice, and educational policy. The chapter concludes with suggestions for further research.

Summary of Research Questions

Three general research questions guided this investigation. The research questions were deliberately crafted to be general in order to allow a wide exploration into the experiences and perceptions of the participants. This was necessary as little is known about the actual experiences of rural homeless high school students; thus, global research questions were deemed more appropriate for an exploratory study. The specific findings of the research provide answers to the three research questions.

Research question #1: What assumptions do the participants believe school personnel make about homeless students? Participants believed that there is a tendency for school personnel to hold negative assumptions about them. Specifically, they were concerned that others would somehow regard them as responsible for their homelessness. This sentiment is even reflected in Alle's experience. Alle, likely the most ready to self-advocate among the sample, admitted that she could be difficult and was concerned that school staff might stereotype her behavior as due to homelessness. Although she found some understanding school personnel, generally Alle regarded the staff as unsympathetic. As she was quoted in chapter 4, "So, I just maybe wish that there would have been maybe some empathy there. I was very fortunate to have a lot of teachers who were able to look beyond my hostility and see that I was just a young girl who was floundering."

Generally, the participants labored under the concern that they would be judged because they were homeless. It is revealing that this concern led all five participants to be reluctant to seek assistance from school officials. Sandi and Macie in particular were left with feelings of resentment over the lack of empathy and felt a great deal of anxiety about being criticized for being homeless.

The participants also felt that school personnel, even when they knew about the students' circumstances, appeared to make assumptions about how the students should be best served. However, these assumptions tended to be narrowly focused and did not include helping the participants with of many everyday logistical difficulties they faced or assisting them to achieve long-range life aspirations. Specifically, the participants related that school officials were more concerned that the students maintain grades and make progress toward graduation as opposed to assisting them to meet immediate, practical needs or achieve goals beyond high school. Isaiah

specifically spoke to this issue. He came to view school personnel as too concentrated on fixing his situation as they viewed it (namely graduating him so he could immediately get a fulltime job and cease being homeless) rather than helping him with practical matters and preparing him for a fulfilling and successful future. To Isaiah, they did not see him as an intelligent, motivated individual who desired to succeed at a university.

The views these participants perceived in their school officials are directly connected to what they desired from their schools. This was the subject of the second research question.

Research question #2: What do the participants believe the school district or the county could have done better to support them when they were students? It is remarkable that with the exception of Brian, none of the participants knew their school provided a homeless liaison. While the McKinney-Vento Act outlines the requirements schools must follow in order to serve homeless students, clearly these mandates were not enough in the experiences of the participants in this study. The participants desired a variety of assistance from schools. Foremost among these desires were to have adequate and appropriate counseling available and to have life skills classes to help with the practical matter of functioning as a homeless student.

All of the participants spoke of the need for appropriate therapy for homeless students. They recognized that homelessness is itself a traumatic event, but additionally most students come to find themselves without a home after a series of life traumas. They all had a visceral understanding of the stress and anxiety common to homeless students and the need to have professional assistance. Moreover, they all explicitly spoke to the necessity that schools have professionals equipped and willing to engage in counseling that involves more than academic matters and who only operate from the sole agenda to get students to graduate on schedule. The

emotional, mental and physical health needs of many homeless students are complex and requires a more holistic approach than the participants received from their schools.

Associated with the need for professional counseling to address emotional, mental health needs, the participants also understood that homeless students have a myriad of logistical, everyday needs that are difficult to fulfill. All of them described the problems they encountered in finding safe, secure places to reside, in simply getting from place to place, having access to resources to complete school work assignments, and in some cases, finding the means to juggle the demands between school and work. In other words, the participants found that merely working through day-to-day activities could be extremely daunting if not overwhelming. Little wonder they voiced the desire to have schools assist homeless students cope by providing practical life skill courses.

The expectations voiced by the participants point back to the importance of the homeless liaison. It is the homeless liaison who is responsible to guide students to the services that can help them through their challenges. Through the state, it is possible for homeless students to receive help with housing, to sign-up for food assistance, get help to find food banks, and to receive counseling to deal with personal trauma. Sadly, if students do not know there is even a homeless liaison, they will flounder without help. Based on the experiences described by the five participants in this study, it appears that schools need to do a better job in 1) educating school staff on the needs of homeless students and what resources are available to them, and 2) training school staff on how to connect students to important resources such as a homeless liaison.

Research Question #3: What were the major challenges the participants faced when they were homeless students? The challenges faced by all the participants included those of a typical teenager in a rural high school with the addition of the enormous stress of being

homeless. An analysis of the data reveals that the challenges the participants faced fall into three categories: 1) finding safe and secure residence, 2) meeting routine needs of clothing, food, and transportation, and 3) striving for a normal life free of undue stress.

Likely the most serious challenge for the participants was merely obtaining safe housing where they could have security. This was no easy task for homeless high school students. Many of them found shelter with several options before they finished high school. Sandi and Alle even experienced the potential danger of sexual abuse while residing with other people. All of them described the stress and anxiety they endured while searching for a stable residence that would allow them to complete high school. Their concern over safety and security is likely an important reason why all the participants described their desire to find normalcy.

The participants also found that simply meeting routine needs in clothing, food, and transportation posed problems many high school students need not worry about. Although the participants held jobs while going to school, they worked at low-paying, part-time positions that were insufficient to meet all their needs. As a result, the participants, in one form or another, necessarily turned to other people to help provide the food, clothing, and even the transportation they needed. Isaiah even relied on clothes used in school plays provided by a drama teacher.

The challenge in meeting basic routines had important consequences for the participants' school experiences. For instance, holding a job and attending high school fulltime meant that they often went to school tired and sleep deprived and had little time or opportunity for homework. Many of the participants' teachers were unaware of their life situations and, even among those who did, many were who less than forgiving with late work or other distractions. Other researchers have documented similar experiences for homeless high school students (Canal, Bonini, Micciolo & Tentori, 2011; Cozolino, 2014; Croninger & Lee, 2001).

The stigma of being a homeless student created a reluctance for the participants to confide in school personnel. Previous researchers have documented similar experiences among homeless students (Evers, 2011; Reed-Victor & Stronge, 2002). Likely, the hesitancy to seek out help inside the school resulted from a number of factors. Distrust, fear, and anxiety derived from strained and damaged family relations, concerns over the stigma attached to homelessness partly account for their reservations. Whatever the source, their reticence made receiving help incredibly difficult. If other people did not know the student was struggling, they obviously cannot offer assistance.

All of the participants also described their desire to attain a normal life free of undue stress and the desire to achieve a routine typical of most people. Central to this aspiration was resolving the problems created by difficult family relations. Each of the five participants struggled with dysfunctional family relationships. In fact, it was these complicated and untenable family dynamics that had led each of them to become a homeless student. Some of the participants had made strides to repair damaged family relations, others had not. Whatever the state of their family dynamics, the obvious desire for normalcy was initially rooted in the nature of their complex and troubled family life.

While all of the participants spoke of normalcy, yet, beyond the desire to resolve family relations, it is an amorphous concept. What exactly did normalcy mean to the participants? Most of the participants spoke of normality involving not having to worry about meeting basic needs of food, shelter, clothing, and freedom from fear. For them, normalcy fundamentally meant fulfilling the basic hierarchy of human needs (Maslow, 1943), a concern than most middle-class American high school students need not be mindful. While normalcy might have been difficult to

define for the participants, their narratives contain the determined efforts to put their lives on a trajectory where they will not have to face scarcity, shame, or abuse.

Additional Findings

One of the most curious findings resulting from this study is that while all the participants met the unfortunate requirement of being classified as homeless, they expressed difficulty in regarding themselves as truly homeless. Because most of them had a place to sleep, they were disinclined to consider themselves as a homeless individual. They generally assumed that a homeless person lives on the street with no shelter. Thus, because their situation did not fit this conception, the participants were reluctant to define themselves as homeless.

This image of their situation had a major consequence. They did not see their situation as dire and serious as a homeless, street person. Thus, they were hesitant to ask for or accept help as they were inclined to believe that there were others who needed the resources more (Aratani & Cooper, 2012; Cozolino, 2014) This mindset, regrettably, led to the participants to receive far less help than they could have accessed.

Previous (albeit limited) research has also documented that homeless students frequently do not access readily available services (Edwards et al., 2009). While having access to services is limited in most rural communities (Heinze, 2013), an unexpected finding emerging from this research was that the participants were unaware of the help that was available within their schools. Thus, this research study reveals that rural homeless students not only do not access services, they are largely unaware of those services and the people who can provide assistance. With the exception of Brian, none of the students realized there was a homeless liaison at their school. Isaiah eventually discovered, by accident, that there was someone to help. But this was only because he was in the counselor's office at the right time. Yet, this research documents that

as students, the participants attended school in a building with people who are supposed to care for them. Yet, the participants had little to no idea of their presence or an understanding on the specific role of these professionals.

Another important finding is that the participants were surprised to learn their teachers and other school staff do not know some students are homeless. Several of the participants had told a trusted teacher or a counselor of their situation, yet most of these educational professionals were unaware the student was struggling. This finding of a general lack of awareness on the homelessness of students among school staff has been reported by other researchers and is supported in this investigation (Canfield, 2015; Edwards et al., 2009; Miller, 2012). Participants assumed that teachers were informed about students who are struggling. However, with how confidentiality practices/laws are interpreted, teachers, more often than not, have no idea a student is experiencing scarcity (Canfield, 2015; Edwards et al., 2009; Miller, 2012). This lack of knowledge does both the students and the educators a disservice. Teachers are privy to Individualized Educational Plan (IEP's), behavior plans, and 504 plans. Yet, according to the participants' narratives, their teachers were not informed that they were dealing with serious life circumstances.

Also troubling is that some of the participants realized that there were school staff who knew of their circumstances but showed little empathy or consideration. When students believe teachers know they are struggling yet are not reaching out to help, they assume teachers are being dismissive and uncaring. As previous research demonstrates, these perceptions (accurate or inaccurate) serve to damage the relationship a student and teacher may cultivate and serve to remove one more person who potentially could help the homeless student (Ottaway, King, & Erickson, 2009; Purcell, 2014).

Implications of the Research

The findings of this research have importance on a number of levels. Certainly, the findings speak to previous research on homeless students. Moreover, because there is limited research on rural homeless students, the findings add important insight to the scholarly literature. The findings are also relevant to educational practice in that they offer practical suggestions important to school staff. Finally, the findings provide significant information important to policymakers. Thus, the findings speak directly to current and future educational policy.

Implications for scholarship. Previous research has established that some of the major reasons for homelessness among youth include physical and/or sexual abuse, violence, neglect, addiction of a family member, family conflict, and/or poverty (Hallett, 2012; Murphy, 2014; Oregon Department of Human Services, 2016; Thrane et al., 2006). All of these factors were part of the experiences of the five participants in this study. Taken together these findings suggest that rather than acts of rebellion or ill-fated attempts to gain independence, homelessness for rural high school students is more likely the result of being pushed out of the home (Whitbeck & Hoyt, 2017). Indeed, all the participants identified troublesome family dysfunctions as fundamental to their experience as homeless students.

The findings of this investigation also lend support for previous research on the impact of homelessness for students. Previous scholars have likened homelessness among youth as a form of trauma (Cry et al., 2013; Wong et al., 2016). Ottaway et al. (2009) argue that homelessness exacerbates the susceptibility to such mental health issues as anxiety, mood disorders, depression, and even self-harm. The narratives included in this study clearly indicate serious personal and likely long-term trauma and mental health issues for many of the participants similar to reports in the scholarly literature.

Past research has documented the difficulties in completing high school for homeless students. For instance, homeless students frequently face such academic challenges as gaps in schooling (Paik & Phillips, 2002), scarcity of important educational resources like access to computers and the internet (Aratani & Cooper, 2012; Cozolino, 2014); and ability to get to school consistently and on time (Cutuli et al., 2012; Evers, 2011). The participants faced all of these challenges. However, one of the gaps in the literature this research fills is insight on how the participants overcame these obstacles to complete their education. Personal resilience appeared to be an extremely significant factor for the five individuals who engage in this research (Duckworth et al., 2007).

The literature clearly demonstrates the critical importance of personal relationship between school staff and homeless students. These relationships assist to foster a sense of emotional support and provides a means for student to obtain necessary assistance (Cutuli et al., 2012; Ottaway et al., 2009; Purcell, 2014). Although some of participants had developed trusting relationships with school staff, it cannot be ignored that several of them also found it difficult to create meaningful connections with staff. Indeed, a few even grew distrustful with school staff. Nevertheless, similar to findings previously reported in the literature, the participants recognized the importance of establishing personal relationships with school staff for homeless students.

Implications for educational practice. While it may seem simplistic, clearly homeless students require sympathetic, caring, and informed educators. The participants revealed their hesitancy to come forward out of concerns with stigma and the shame of being homeless. Some students feel that they are not destitute enough to be deserving of help. Further, the narratives of the participants demonstrate that many teachers are unaware of a student's struggles.

It is well and good to have a homeless liaison, but if students do not know that resource exists, they will remain of little assistance. If the homeless liaison or the school counselor do not inform teachers of students' struggles how can they be helpers? If students do not know where to find information or if they feel dismissed by authority figures at school, how can they reasonable be expected to seek help?

Obviously, these issues and questions underscore the complexity of responding effectively to the needs of homeless students. Based on the insights derived from the findings of this research, the following recommendations are suggested in order to enhance educational practice:

- Educate the student body on where to find help. Specifically, make public who the homeless liaison is and what their job is so that the entire school is made aware.
- Educate students and staff on the definitions of homelessness. The participants in this study showed that there are misconceptions regarding their own homelessness. These misconceptions led to the participants not receiving much of the assistance they might have benefited. Likely staff are just as vulnerable to misconceptions on what constitutes homelessness as are students.
- Incorporate practical learning, such as life skills courses, into the curriculum. While all students can profit from this type of education, students dealing with highly stressful life situations, such as homeless students, will especially benefit. Such courses should include education on how to open a bank account, how to balance a bank account, how to file tax returns, how to complete renter's agreements, and how to read and fill out a voter's ballot, etc.

- Practical help for homeless youth is also imperative. For example, looking closely at attendance policies and how students may be penalized for tardiness or low attendance. Likewise revisiting the rigidity of fixed due dates would benefit students living in scarcity. While obviously attendance and completed work affects education, yet it is very possible to look through the lens of equity and come up with an everyday solution for all struggling students.
- Homeless liaisons need additional training and assistance from staff. While they may be well versed in the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, they may not be trained in the complexities of reaching high school students. Reaching out for help from the rest of the school staff would be beneficial. Typically, teachers and instructional assistants see students daily and could greatly help with the practicalities of helping students.
- Teachers need to have practical training on trauma; how to recognize trauma, how to connect with students who are or have experienced trauma/scarcity. Importantly, school staff need greater professional development training on how to look at their own biases towards unconventional youth (Loomis, 2017).

In a perfect world teachers, counselors, and administrators would be trained in trauma and on how to identify students in need and act upon their new found knowledge/ability. However, knowledge is not empathy (Haidt & Morris, 2009; Haidt, 2003). In his essay *Moral Emotions*, Jonathan Haidt (2003) argues that empathy is not an emotion at all, "but is a tendency or an ability to feel whatever another person including happiness, anger, or boredom" what we are looking for is not empathy but compassion. Unlike empathy, compassion denotes action, a willingness to help another human. Brené Brown 's (2013) definition of empathy, "empathy is feeling with people" about some emotion they are going through also rings true and really aligns

with Haidt's as empathy is not a specific emotion. As stated, my aspiration is that with proper training high school staff would reach out to students in need. Just as knowledge does not equal compassion it also does not equal action; just because someone knows a person is struggling does not mean a person will reach out to help, no matter how trained they are. However, my hope is that by providing proper training, school staff will at the very least have the capacity to reach out to someone who can help a student, even if they are uncomfortable helping that person themselves.

Implications for educational policy. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act identifies the services homeless students should receive from their school. Included in the act is Subtitle VII-B, Education for Homeless Children and Youths (EHCY) which details the services for students at not only the federal level but at the state and local levels as well (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act provides a solid policy foundation for responding to the needs of homeless students. Yet, as good of a foundation as the McKinney-Vento Act might be, as the narratives of the participants demonstrate, there is always room for policy improvement.

One of the most important provisions included in the McKinney-Vento Act is the local homeless liaison for schools. This resource person plays a critical role in assisting homeless students. However, the participants in this study most frequently did not know of this resource. Based on the narratives, it may be likely that the homeless liaison is the most underutilized resources specifically created by national policy to help homeless students.

The implication is that schools face the challenge of enhancing the effectiveness of the homeless liaison. Obviously, it would be best if school leaders would take the initiative to inform

students, staff, and the community on the role of the liaison. Short of this, policy adjustments could provide greater strength to existing laws by requiring school officials to take these steps.

Another important implication of the findings of this research is the lack of awareness and understanding among school staff on the complex needs of homeless students. To address this gap in educational/social service, federal or state policy might require all schools to provide professional development training for school staff. Such training will need to include privacy and confidentiality issues, but at its core must emphasize awareness building among staff to be able to identify homeless students and appreciate their myriad needs. Efforts to breakdown misconceptions on what constitutes homelessness (i.e., it does not only include street homelessness) and strategies to assist students toward the services they require must be part of the professional training.

Suggestions for Future Research

Homelessness is an American social problem that is not likely to be solved any time soon. As virtually all social problems eventually find their way into to schools, it must be realized that homeless students will remain a challenge for educators. Greater research is needed, especially in the area of rural student homelessness.

While this study utilized in-depth interviews with a small sample of five former homeless rural high school students, future researchers should expand the sample size in order to document a wider expanse of personal experiences. Along these lines, investigators should also design studies with longer duration that might identify the processes and changes of homeless experiences among rural students.

Future research involving school personnel, especially homeless liaisons and counselors, is greatly needed and would prove highly useful. The findings reported in this dissertation do not

present a complimentary picture of the contributions of these educational professionals. Namely, the participants generally did not know about the homeless liaison and were disappointed with their interactions with school counselors. There is obviously another side of this story. Qualitative research, in particular, with these professionals would provide important insight on the objectives, strategies, and outcome of their efforts with homeless students.

Research with teachers undergoing professional development training on assisting homeless students (such as comprehensive trauma training) is also important. Such investigations might examine the views, values, and general knowledge before participants engage in the training and once again after implementing the training at their school. This type of research would assist school officials understanding on how to improve the effectiveness of their school's response to the needs of homeless students.

Personal Reflection

I would be remiss if I did not inform the reader that my family and I took Isaiah into our home. I would be lying if I said it was an easy road as it was most definitely not. Taking someone, anyone, into your house changes the dynamics of your home. Taking someone into your home who has experienced trauma is an entirely different beast.

While Isaiah did not live with us while he was in high school, he began living with us right after his high school graduation when the friend he was living left for college. We thought Isaiah would live with us for approximately a month possibly two, we are now going on year five. While we navigated all new territory, we made loads of mistakes because we were ill-informed on how the trauma brain works and how someone, anyone, being in your home for a long period of time affects the family dynamic.

I wish we had thought about family therapy. I wish we would have learned more about how to deal with all of the extra things going on in our lives. I also wish we had gotten Isaiah into therapy much sooner than we did. It would have equipped him with significant social-emotional tools to help him heal. Counseling would also have helped us as a family to understand our feelings and our two son's feelings about having someone else become a big part of their lives when they had very little preparation.

While we definitely could have done better in the beginning for Isaiah and our family, we did do a lot of things correctly. We supported everyone through the change and validated all the feelings, from anger to sadness, to frustration. We kept everyone safe and fed and secure even when emotions were running high. We stayed stable and supportive while making sure the house rules were followed. Most importantly we made sure everyone felt loved.

Conclusion

We need to do better. We have been grossly negligent as a society and as an educational community in helping our most at-risk students. We are failing and, I believe, we are failing horribly. That is what I truly want to say as I reflect on the nature of this investigative effort. Indeed, that may be what needs saying.

America is the wealthiest country in the world. The fact we have such a widespread problem with homelessness is a national disgrace. The fact that our educational system is so broken it cannot fully support basic student needs is inexcusable. How is it that we worry endlessly about our state testing scores while making our students' mental health a secondary or even a tertiary worry? I do not know why we as a society are not screaming from every rooftop that childhood trauma is affecting everything we do as a society. Perhaps we need to realize that if we want better test scores, we need to take better care of our children.

We have educators who care but haven't been properly trained to deal with complex human issues and trauma typical of homeless students. This we can fix. Sadly, some lack the empathy to do so. This will be more of a challenge. Yet, we can correct much of how we fail students; in-house professional development is a good start. We can address many of the needs of homeless student with properly trained counselors, homeless liaisons, and teachers working together to surround and uplift those in need. These fixes cost little to no money. The only real cost is time.

We need to do better. We have to do better.

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APPENDIX A

LETTER OF CONSENT

Letter of Consent

HOMELESS STUDENTS IN RURAL OREGON: A NARRATIVE ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

Dear Participant,

My name is Sherri Sinicki and I am a student in the Doctor of Education program at George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon. I am conducting research on the experiences on young adults who experienced high school while coping with the stresses of homelessness. I would like to invite you to engage in a personal interview (about a half hour to an hour) regarding your perceptions and experiences during that important period of your life.

This study promises many social benefits. I believe there is much to be learned from your experiences that will inform researchers, educators, and policymakers about how to better serve students who are homeless. By engaging in honest, forthright conversation, this research will document the views, concerns, and advice that you and others can provide.

The risks associated with this research are minimal. The personal interview questions are innocuous and should not create distress. Nevertheless, please be aware that your participation is completely voluntary and you may decline to continue at anytime or decline to answer any question at your discretion.

The results of this study will only be used for research purposes, most notably as part of my doctoral dissertation. The findings may also be used for presentations at a professional conference and/or academic publications. Personal interviews will be audio recorded and later transcribed. Information will be analyzed and presented in an anonymous fashion and no individual will be personally identified. I affirm to keep any personal information and identities confidential.

All research materials (i.e., audio recordings, transcriptions, and signed consent forms) will be locked in separate, secure locations for four years. I will be the only individual who will have access to these materials. After four years, I will personally destroy all relevant materials and delete the audio recordings.

I thank you for your time in considering this project. If you choose to participate, please be aware that you are making a contribution to furthering educational research. If you have any questions regarding this research, please contact me at (503) 476-4897. If you have any additional questions you may contact my dissertation, Dr. Terry Huffman at (503) 554-2856.

If you understand the use of this research and agree to participate, please sign below.

Participant signature_____

Researcher signature_____

APPENDIX B

PERSONAL INTERVIEW GUIDE QUESTIONS

Personal Interview - Guide Questions

1. How and when did you become homeless?
2. Were you with your family when you became homeless?
3. Where did you live? Friends, family (aunts, grandparents)
4. Did you try to cover up your homelessness, how?
5. Who did you tell? Who was in the loop?
6. Did you have adults you confided in? (Probe - Who? Why?)
7. What were the major challenges you faced as a homeless student? (Directly relates to *Research Question #1*)
8. What teachers/school personnel were helpful to you? (Probe - Why?)
9. What do you wish your teachers and school personnel understood about you and your circumstance when you were homeless? (Directly relates to *Research Question #2*)
10. What assumptions do the participants believe school personnel make about homeless students? (Directly relates to *Research Question #3*)
11. What would have been helpful to you while you were in school?
12. Are there any services that would have been helpful? (Probe - What? Or, Please explain)
13. How did you find out about these services?
14. Academically, what would have been helpful?
15. What was your journey like after high school?
16. Did homelessness persist after high school?
17. What would you like educators and others to know about homeless students?
18. How do you believe the school and school district could have better served you while you were a homeless student? (Directly relates to *Research Question #4*)