



THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SUBSTANCE MISUSE INFLUENCING ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF HOMELESS YOUTH IN SEATTLE - A QUALITATIVE NARRATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT: Of the over 10,000 homeless individuals in the city of Seattle, more than half are classified as youth (15-24 years old). The University of Washington in Seattle is the sixth highest-ranked university in the nation; however, there is a gap of study in why the homeless youth of this city do not get access to proper academic services. Due to the common causes of youth homelessness, such as family problems and abusive relationships, this vulnerable population is at risk of substance abuse and academic instability. This research analyzes homeless youth through a qualitative narrative study to determine the risk factors of substance abuse and the outcome of academic stability and endeavors. This study is focused on the homeless youth population in the city of Seattle, recruiting participants from the Seattle Union Gospel Mission. Further research is needed to imply the correlation of decreasing academic stability in homeless youth, and to incorporate proper permanent interventions to prosper development academically and professionally.

Keywords: Homeless youth, substance abuse, academic stability, risk factors

Introduction

As we begin to discuss the population of unhoused youth, there are multiple levels to uncover and will dictate the flow of the research study. Prior to describing the purpose of this study, there are important considerations to identify. Who qualifies as unhoused youth? Does this population interact with social groups that could be damaging to their physical and mental well-being? How common is substance abuse among unhoused youth, and how does that correlate to their academic gaps? Because of the common causes of youth homelessness being hardships within interpersonal relationships and financial instability, this vulnerable population is at greater risk of substance abuse and as a result, academic instability.

According to the National Institute of Health, the Erikson Stages of Psychosocial Development illustrate the stages in which individuals grow

and perceive the world around them (Orenstein GA and Lewis L 2022). The population of youth is in between stages five and six, adolescence to adulthood. These two stages focus on identity vs. identity confusion, and intimacy vs. isolation. Both stages imply themes of identity and support, which are crucial in supplying youth's self-esteem and well-being.

The outcome of this study is to track an individual's academic performance. This concept refers to the idea of students participating in active listening and understanding of academic and social ideas. Examples of proficient academic performance are completing assignments, attendance or participation, and behavior. The introduction of psychosocial development due to homelessness and substance abuse determines the factors that will eventually predict the academic outcome of each individual.



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Homeless Youth

Of the over 10,000 homeless individuals in the city of Seattle, more than half are classified as youth (15-24 years old). In this specific study, we will be focusing on youth above 18, to minimize conflict between IRB approval on homeless minors who are not able to attain parental consent (18 years-24 years). Because homeless youth have fewer life experiences than homeless adults, the prominent issue we observe with this population is helping them transform a temporary living situation into a success story. With effective interventions, these accomplished outcomes will not be sustained if not run continuously through these youth's transition into adulthood, concluding that developing individuals are in need of long-term interventions (Slesnick, N. et. al 2008). As we follow these youth over time, we can presume that the occurrence of homeless relapse decreases even when there are ebbs and flows of relapse in the beginning stages of said intervention (Tompsett, C., et. al 2013). A call to action to implement interventions that generate long term benefits for unhoused youth are crucial for both their personal and academic development.

With hopeful spirit, there are hundreds of non-profit organizations other than the Seattle Union Gospel Mission that primarily focuses on youth and their holistic health. YouthCare is one of these organizations in the city of Seattle and is commonly seen writing their own research on these populations and their contributions to the success of youth. In one of their articles, "Why Are Youth Homeless?"—they discuss the overwhelming response of youth ending up on the streets due to family conflict, or worse, abuse or neglect (YouthCare, 2023). Moreover, there are cofactors to homeless youth such as identifying as LGBTQ+, family poverty, and having limited access to mental and physical health services.

Social Interactions

When we analyze the behavior of unhoused youth, researchers have observed aspects such as social influences: who are they interacting with, and what persuades them to do so? Many homeless youth heavily interact with their peers, participating in both drug and alcohol use in a social scene. (Green, H. et. al 2013). Acknowledging this phenomenon, researchers tend to describe the support system of youth to be minimally guided by parental and government assistance. (Gomez, R. et. al 2010). Through studying these questions, we find that homeless youth are most at risk of participating in injection drug use (IDU), have a record of criminal activity, and are sexually active (Lankenau, S. et. al 2010).

Substance Abuse in Youth

The health outcomes of partaking in the ingestion of drugs and alcohol at such a developmental stage in life can be detrimental. Many public health specialists have taken action in order to improve the academic and psychosocial welfare of unhoused youth through techniques such as Community Reinforced Approach (CRA), Motivational Enhancement (MET), and Case Management (CM) (Slesnick, N., et. al 2015). We unfortunately fail to recognize that throughout these interventions, youth are still experiencing cases of academic instability (Saperstein, A. et. al 2014). To introduce the disparities of interventions regarding unhoused youth, it is crucial to identify the underlying risk factors and outcomes for the population.

The introduction of the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an immediate increase of substance misuse within unhoused youth due to minimal resources to tele-health and shelters closing to decrease infection (Lundahl, L. H., and Cannoy, C. 2021). The overwhelming importance of health education and promotion within vulnerable communities such as unhoused youth in phases of pre-pandemic,



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pandemic, and post-pandemic, has influenced the following proposal.

Research Question

In the city of Seattle, there have been conversations regarding the increased unhoused population of youth. Through participating in substance misuse and lack of health education, many of these individuals are struggling to seek long term interventions as well as the compliance of their community. When we continue to dive deep into the use of drugs and alcohol among the unhoused youth, we fail to acknowledge the psychosocial outcomes they experience on a day-to-day basis. We also fail to acknowledge their interactions with their social environment, which plays as much as an important role as their actions towards partaking in substance misuse. Because these individuals are engaging in substances that could eventually play a destructive role in their development, there is a longing need for prevention and health promotion. There are various explanations to why youth are more at risk to develop characteristics of substance abuse, a main reason being growing up in a toxic environment, eventually wanting to seek freedom (Smart, 1991). The struggle for independence due to these conditions along with the limited employment and education opportunities may not be accomplished the way they have envisioned. The question this proposal aims to answer is, “How does the act of substance abuse influence the psychosocial development of homeless youth and their academic performance?” Future extensive research predicts that participating in substance abuse will negatively impact the psychosocial development of unhoused youth, leading to decreased academic performance.

Research Approach

This is a qualitative narrative research study in order to properly examine the experiences of unhoused youth participating in substance abuse and their perspective on their own academic

ability. The purpose of implementing a qualitative approach is for us to identify themes and patterns through one-on-one interviews. We will be gathering data in the city of Seattle at the Seattle Union Gospel Mission in Washington State. All participants have provided their consent to publish the findings of this research project.

Participants

To minimize the vagueness of conducting a research study in such a growing city, the Seattle Union Gospel Mission in Washington State will be our main focus. This mission focuses on speakers, volunteers, and mental/physical health workers gathering in unison to be able to run an organization to provide food, emergency necessities, and life lessons. Participants in this mission were selected based on convenience—those who are eligible within the inclusion criteria. Then, researchers will recruit these participants to search for other youth frequently attending the mission’s events and programs, through snowball sampling. Utilizing this recruitment strategy ensures that the participants properly fit the following inclusion and exclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria entails that the youth be 18-24 years old, as consent for homeless minors will increase complexity in the study. Moreover, participants should be recorded as being homeless for at least two years and having completed some or all of high school. Individuals would also need to have participated in substance misuse through the means of drugs or alcohol for at least five times in the year 2023. There are no language requirements as interpreters will be present during the one-on-one interviews to be able to attain as much diversity as possible. Exclusion criteria consists of youth that are minors, have some or all of a college education completed, have received a GED instead of a high school diploma, and have no evidence of past substance misuse. This exclusion criteria was chosen due to the purpose of creating a boundary of youth who chose not to finish high



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school, as we are interviewing participants who did not want to obtain a certificate of completion for their own reasons. Individuals who have not participated in substance misuse over the past year are not going to be chosen because this study primarily focuses on the impacts of substance abuse on homeless youth. Minors are not going to be considered in this study as there will be increased conflict with IRB approval of homeless minors, so we are targeting ages 18-24 instead of 15-24.

Data Collection

Using the convenience and snowball method strategy, we will obtain 15 participants. One-on-one interviews will be conducted in hopes of identifying themes and patterns of unhoused youth who have participated in substance abuse and their academic ability. Because this is a qualitative narrative study, the purpose is to listen to each individual's experiences in response to the interview questions, so we can identify themes of homelessness and perceived notions towards academia. Prior to the interview, participants were asked about their age, education level, and the number of times they have used drugs or alcohol throughout the year, as a result of the inclusion criteria. Researchers facilitating the interview were given a clipboard that listed the questions as well as space for them to write specific one-word themes that the participant emphasizes as well as unique experiences they feel would help understand this study more intently. Participants were asked, "Tell us your story: how did you end up homeless?" and "Who do you interact with on a day-to-day basis?" These two questions hit the two main ideas of this research study. The first question clarifies that the individual has been homeless for the past two years and has experiences to share; this could be in relation to how they ended up homeless and how they are coping with it. The second question describes their social interactions, as drug and alcohol use are popular social activities, especially among homeless individuals, which is why youth

are interacting with on a day-to-day basis is important to know. Finally, at the end of the interview, the interviewer will open up a space for the participants to discuss their perceptions on academics: "Why did you not continue or complete your high school degree? What do you think you and your peers need in order to view obtaining employment or opportunities to further your education? What are your remaining thoughts on the American education system?"

Ethical Considerations

To proceed with this research study, we must send the proposal to the IRB for approval. The proposal consists of transparent information, which participants will be able to view, and have an identical copy to read for future reference. Information included in the proposal is the purpose of the study, why this study benefits them, the promise to express confidentiality and anonymity, and compensation. Documents will be written very simply to accommodate a wide range of academic backgrounds; therefore, there will be distinct sections of the purpose, instructions of the study, and the resulting benefits/compensation. In the pursuit of IRB approval, each individual will be asked to give verbal and written consent prior to the study. This consent form will consist of a written and verbal instruction that explains that the study will be audio recorded and notes will be taken accordingly. Note that youth participants in this study cannot be minors, as it will complicate the IRB approval process because unhoused minors may not be able to obtain parental consent for reasons such as broken family dynamics or loss of a parent or guardian. According to the United Nations, youth are aged 15-24 years old; therefore, we will exclude ages 15-17 and include ages 18-24 years old (United Nations 2024).

The individual may choose to not answer certain questions and will have space to write additional comments or concerns. Right before the study, the interviewer will assure participants



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of their confidentiality and anonymity rights. The interviewer will be similar in age (18-24 years) to minimize perceived intimidation and to ensure that the participant is more comfortable with expressing their responses. The interviewer will then begin the questioning by asking the participant to share their personal experiences on how substance abuse has influenced their past, present, and future behaviors towards themselves and their academic performance, if any. Because we are discussing studying unhoused youth, this population is more likely to accept all given incentives, and our goal is to decrease the possibility of participation being foreseen as coercive to the community and to the IRB. Therefore, incentives will be dispersed in these three categories: food/clothes, shelter, and education. For food and clothes, participants will be given a card that is solely for buying food and clothes. Each participant will be given 3 months of shelter in a local housing collaboration with the researchers and with access to a free quarter of school to complete either technical training or University studies.

Discussion

Significance

The importance of increasing the visibility of homeless youth is to further study the implications of substance abuse on developing individuals and their ability to flourish in an academic setting. Moreover, the more we fund research studies on homeless youth, the more we can prove that the stigmas of misbehavior are one of the lesser risk factors of this population, rather than the environmental influences in their lives that determine their behavioral outcome. This study, as well as many previous and future studies, will aid our ability to implicate health education and promotion throughout the community, and as a result there will be more people who understand the complexity of youth development and the importance of investing more time and effort into this vulnerable population. Additionally, in order to prevent

the increasing adult homeless population, it is crucial to observe the influx of youth who continue to experience homelessness until adulthood.

Limitations

Because of the vulnerability of homeless youth, they are not the most convenient population to study. This is because unhoused youth tend to be mobile, and therefore, it is more difficult to get a hold of them overtime if a long-term study were to proceed. As a result, it is crucial to honor and respect their requests for confidentiality and anonymity when providing them with the proper consent procedures. Additionally, bias is important when considering unhoused youth. Instances in this study could be observed around the location of the study itself, the Seattle Union Gospel Mission. This Mission implies religious considerations, and many would perceive this study as a religious intervention rather than a community-oriented service. A situation where there are less than fifteen participants but more than ten decreases the effectiveness of a qualitative study. Due to gathering a low number of participants, the purpose is to exhibit uniqueness in experiences through these one-on-one interviews; therefore, obtaining enough participants is possible through the approach of snowball sampling. Although this strategy increases participant bias, this process ensures that we obtain individuals for this study even with a less convenient, vulnerable population.

Future Directions

In conclusion, the development of homeless youth is greatly influenced by who they interact with on a social level as well as the accessible organizations that aid in their academic and professional development. Predicted outcomes of this intervention will most likely lead to increased awareness in the community, the harmful developmental effects of substance abuse, and the importance of advocating for education and professional endeavors for



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unhoused youth. Unfortunately, there will be an increasing need for funding from the community or from the government in order to implement more permanent and long-term interventions to be provided for this population due to its vulnerability in maturation and their ability to achieve their potential. All in all, the eventual outcome is decreased homelessness relapse and the ability for these individuals to transition out to obtain further education.

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