



Employment Barriers in Homeless Young Adults and Youth

Katie Bakken¹

Introduction

According to the National Youth Homelessness Survey, approximately 35,000 to 40,000 youths aged 13-24 experience homelessness in Canada in any given year (Gaetz et al., 2016). Up to 75% of young adults experiencing homelessness are unemployed (Slesnik et al., 2018). There is a variety of reasons that play into an individual being homeless. These reasons include job loss, home loss, bankruptcy, illness-preventing work, addiction, abusive relationships, and employment barriers. This paper will explore how homeless youth navigate employment and income barriers. I predict that homeless youth will face employment barriers, leading to unhealthy income generation and the continuous cycle of homelessness. Researchers found that some barriers youth experiencing homelessness face includes a lack of mental and physical health care, stable housing, resources and transportation, and an unhealthy street environment (Sample et al., 2020). Homelessness comes with many adverse and dangerous circumstances that often encompass an individual's life. It can be challenging for those experiencing homelessness to change their lifestyle and overcome employment barriers. A study examining the employment status of homeless youth across five U.S cities found that the main barriers to finding work include consistent movement, previous felonies, mental illness, addiction, and prior homelessness (Ferguson et al., 2012). Homeless youth often experience employment discrimination which is defined as being treated unjustly based on specific traits or characteristics.

There are various reasons youth experiencing homelessness struggle to find employment off the streets. Researchers found that homeless youth disconnected from services and resources are more likely to struggle to find healthy employment and stable housing (Slesnick et al., 2018). However, there are various ways that youth overcome barriers to finding a job. Researchers for a study exploring how homeless youth navigate employment barriers found that common themes for finding employment include communicating with potential employers, using non-profit resources, finding a higher purpose, and maintaining motivation (Huffman et al., 2021). Overcoming some of these barriers is essential for overcoming homelessness and creating stability in life and employment. A study exploring income sources in youth found that the essential part of exiting homelessness and generating steady, healthy income is support from sources through mental health, substance use control and stable housing (Slesnick et al., 2018). Support is significant in

¹ MacEwan University, Edmonton, Alberta.

exiting homelessness, sustaining a stable shelter, and maintaining income. Some strategies are more effective and long-lasting than others. Certain programs and resources are available to help homeless people find employment. A study examining Canadian homeless youth and the employment project 'Eva's Phoenix' found that running a program for homeless youth requires a lot of flexibility and patience within the organization (Bridgman, 2001). While the project came with several challenges due to the population being worked with, there were several positive testimonials and opportunities for employment after it ended (Bridgman, 2001). There is significant importance to available resources for homeless youth.

Young people experiencing homelessness struggle to find healthy ways of generating income. Tactics to generate income are often based on survival and can be dangerous to the young individuals engaging in them. Researchers exploring income tendencies found that homeless youth engage in sex work, selling drugs, selling blood, theft and panhandling (Slesnick et al., 2018). The environments young adults engage in these survival tactics are often unhealthy and contribute to a cycle of continued homelessness and drug use. Researchers exploring homeless Canadian youth defined six income-generating categories: paid employment (formal and informal), social assistance, panhandling, squeegeeing, sex work and crime (Gaetz & O'Brady, 2002). According to several sources, some leading causes of homeless youths' inability to find employment are substance use, mental health issues, and a disconnect from social services and resources (Ferguson et al., 2014; Gaetz & O'Brady, 2002; Slesnick et al., 2018). Lack of available resources often contributes to harm and recurrent homelessness in young adults and youth. Another study exploring social estrangement factors found that youth with a stable place to stay for at least six months were more likely to engage in 'formal' working conditions than 'informal,' such as prostitution and selling drugs or theft (Ferguson et al., 2014). Homeless youth are more likely to engage in 'informal' employment, perhaps because they grew up in that world, come from low-income families or feel unable to leave the street life.

Barriers to Employment and Homelessness

Homelessness comes with a wide range of challenges. Getting off the streets and finding employment and stable housing is even more difficult after experiencing homelessness. A decent proportion of homeless individuals struggle with mental health issues which further contributes to their homelessness due to a lack of resources and distress. A study exploring mental health distress trends in young adults found that those aged 18-34 experienced the highest levels of mental distress in 2019 (Gagne et al., 2021). Researchers found that mental distress increased among men and women during periods of recession, partially due to the stress of debt and financial hardship, as well as the inability to find employment (Gagne et al., 2021). Inevitable recessions in the economy significantly increase the population of homeless individuals. The longer the individual is out of work, the more distressed they seem to become (Gagne et al., 2021). Increased distress after an extended period of no employment explains why some homeless individuals may feel more distressed the longer they experience unemployment and homelessness. While an economic recession is one barrier to homelessness, many others exist. Along with barriers, there are also a variety of explanations as to why one might be experiencing homelessness as a youth or young

adult. Researchers suggest some reasons why youth might be homeless include lifestyle choices, rejection of norms that constitute stable housing, choosing homelessness over unstable home environments or sleeping on the streets when shelter options are unsafe or discriminatory (Sample et al., 2020). Homeless individuals often report preferring to sleep on the streets than in shelters due to the conditions (bed bugs). Youth who go through adverse childhood experiences such as abuse, neglect and household dysfunction may prefer to sleep on the streets rather than deal with a chaotic and dangerous home situation. When the home environment is unsafe for youth, they may seek out others who choose the street life and surround themselves with those who provide them with social support regardless of whether it is healthy. A youth who has become homeless and is unemployed may choose to find other ways to generate income that may not be safe and healthy. The social estrangement model suggests that the longer an individual experiences homelessness, the more wrapped up they become in homeless and street life, which further contributes to a cycle of continued homelessness (Ferguson et al., 2014). Removing oneself from the currently experienced lifestyle and peer groups is difficult. It is even more challenging to leave behind current habits when surrounded by groups who engage in the very habits being left behind. The individuals that homeless youth surround themselves with and the lifestyle that they are experiencing may encourage informal income generation. For those who experience homelessness, it is often a lifelong battle of being on and off the streets with no stable address or income.

The difficulties of obtaining work are just as numerous as being homeless. Researchers use the term ‘scaffolded city phenomenon’ to explain the barriers that homeless young adults face when navigating employment (Huffman et al., 2020). The ‘scaffolded city phenomenon’ is best explained as the reinforcing structures of work and home life that young adults experiencing homelessness must climb to fight employment barriers (Huffman et al., 2020). There are a variety of tactics used to overcome barriers, whether that be healthy or unhealthy. Overcoming these barriers may be finding formal or informal ways of generating income. However, generating income has many difficulties, such as the surrounding supports and influences that dictate what the homeless youth may decide. A study using the social estrangement model to examine youth experiencing homelessness found that this population experiences barriers to formal employment, including “lack of housing, difficulty maintaining personal hygiene, stigma, food insecurity, and low educational levels” (Ferguson et al., 2014, p. 463). Most current employers require some form of education from their employees. With lower education levels, it is easy to see how some young adults may face barriers to employment along with the many other adverse circumstances of being young and homeless. Another barrier to employment is feeling disconnected from resources and services. Services, groups, and non-profit organizations are essential for homeless individuals. They provide food, shelter, programs, and safe addiction services. Some programs are directed toward employment. Researchers exploring income generation among homeless youth aged 14-24 found that many youths do not actually access programs directed toward employment and therefore do not have the full benefits of finding formal employment (Slesnik et al., 2018). Not accessing or having the inability to access employment programs can hinder the ability of homeless youth to find work and have a stable social network. Most of these programs require significant effort and flexibility with the workers, volunteers, and coordinators to work with homeless youth and young adults.

Employment Services

Although overcoming the obstacles related to homelessness and work may be challenging, many options can still be used. The existing programs show some effectiveness for the homeless youth who want to join. One study found that homeless youth were likelier to use drop-in services that ‘fulfill their basic needs’ over those that provide ‘counselling or skill-building services’. Researchers even suggested that employment services may be better utilized if they were created in a drop-in fashion (Barman-Adhikari & Rice, 2014). While it may be true that drop-in services could be utilized more effectively, there is evidence that longer projects may have a lasting effect on teaching homeless youth employment skills. Researcher Bridgman (2001) discusses a pilot project developed in Toronto for homeless youth:

Key components of Eva’s Phoenix include transitional housing to accommodate 50 young people (ages 16-24 years), emphasis on skills development to help find and keep employment, assistance with educational and employment opportunities, assistance with educational and employment opportunities, follow-up as youth settle into the accommodation/employment of their choice, and involvement of homeless youth in the development, construction, and management of the project (p. 785).

The non-profit project required the target youth group to be “substance-free, physically able, willing to learn, have grade 10 or equivalent and be able to work at 7:00 am” (Bridgman, 2001, p. 785). Projects like this are essential for helping homeless individuals regardless of age, as they provide opportunities for those who might not have access to stable housing and the knowledge to find and maintain employment. Crew members and organizers had to be flexible and have extensive knowledge of the construction industry to teach the youth. Projects like this require much patience, funding and proper training for youth and organizers. One staff member explained that they had to learn to navigate being both firm and soft when speaking to young workers due to abusive backgrounds. Unfortunately, there is no formal training to prepare one for managing homeless youth and how to encourage participation and motivation in those who may never have experienced that. Eva’s Phoenix had several strengths and weaknesses and ethical concerns with encouraging homeless youth to work and learn the difficulties of navigating employment. A brief number of testimonies from youth who have gone through the project show that there can be some significant benefit, especially in helping the youth find work after the project end (Bridgman, 2001). Projects can be highly beneficial in providing resources and outlets for youth experiencing homelessness. Projects, programs and drop-in services are also safe spaces for the youth to come that are not on the streets and in a survival setting. The partial success of Eva’s Phoenix proves that there is a benefit to employment programs for youth who participate and want to work. However, some individuals do not necessarily participate in programs and have their own tactics for finding employment.

Motivation and personal effort are critical factors in finding employment. They are also crucial factors in finding housing and refraining from informal sources of income. Researchers exploring how to overcome employment barriers found that some key solutions include professional aspirations, motivation, the use of non-profit sources and creative money-making tactics (Huffman et al., 2020). Healthy entrepreneurship is a great creative outlet for young homeless people who need to generate money. It is also motivating and essential to have friends working in formal environments and doing well for themselves. One individual interviewed in the study by Huffman and others (2020) explained that seeing her friend working also encouraged her to get a job. As mentioned before, motivation plays a prominent role in work and finding employment. Whether that motivation comes from peers or aspirations, it is essential in preventing the continued cycle of homelessness and an unhealthy street lifestyle. Without motivation, individuals may fall into the cracks of informal and unhealthy income generation and street life and be surrounded by those deep into the lifestyle themselves. Motivation also plays a significant role in achieving one's goals. Youth need to be motivated, set goals to change, and find formal employment and housing. While there may be solutions to overcome employment barriers without resources, it is still a good idea for homeless youth to utilize the opportunities and support that are out there as this increases success, prevention of homelessness and finding informal income.

Informal Income Generation Among Homeless Youth

Despite resources and solutions to overcoming barriers, some homeless youth engage in informal income generation, putting themselves and others at risk. Researchers exploring the economy of homeless Canadian youth aged 25 years and under found six income-generating categories: paid employment, social assistance, panhandling, squeegeeing, sex trade and crime (Gaetz & O'Brady, 2002). All six categories seem to be relatively common across research. A study examining Canadian street-involved youth aged 14-26 found that some income generation methods involved "salvaging/recycling, drug dealing, theft, panhandling, sex work, squeegeeing car windows and other criminal activities". Researchers found that approximately 53% of their sample would give up risky income generation if they were not using drugs. Unfortunately, once youth become street-involved, they are less likely to find formal employment and exit that lifestyle. Researchers suggest that interventions for substance use and economic insecurity of street-involved youth should be examined to reduce risky income generation (Cheng et al., 2016). Due to economic insecurity, it is easy to see how street-involved youth may continuously choose to be involved in risky income generation. Referring to the social estrangement model, researchers explain that the more estranged from society, homeless individuals become, the more likely they are to remain homeless. Many individuals have grown up on the streets, and it is the only life they have ever known. The longer they are on the streets without education and social connection, the longer they will remain and engage in risky income generation. A study exploring income generation among American youth across five cities found that "substance use greatly hinders employment as those addicted to drugs and embedded in street culture often engage in illegal activities' to generate income" (Ferguson et al., 2012). Being embedded in street culture and en-

gaging in illegal activities creates a huge barrier to finding formal employment, as most employers do not necessarily want to hire previous offenders. Due to a lack of education and criminal records, it is easy to see how street-involved youth may get stuck in a cycle of risky income generation and homelessness. Those who engage in risky income generation also seem to have a much lower likelihood of exiting homelessness as they are deeply enmeshed in the street lifestyle.

Conclusion

Overall, there are a wide variety of barriers that homeless youth experience to employment and street life. These barriers included lifestyle choices and choosing the streets over unstable home environments (Sample et al., 2020). Often, homeless youth have difficulties with their parent or caregiver and choose to be homeless rather than experience abuse at home. Many youth and young adults also experience great mental distress, and it increases the longer they are unemployed (Gagne et al., 2021). Lack of mental health resources is a significant contributor to homelessness, especially when the individual has a disorder that is on the more severe side. Some individuals may prefer street life over their home life as it is less dangerous and abusive, and that is where their peers may be. The social estrangement model explains that the further an individual is from conventional norms, the more entrenched they will be in street life and homelessness (Ferguson et al., 2014). This model aids in explaining why youth experiencing homelessness have various barriers to employment that are difficult to overcome and may lead to risky income generation. The 'scaffolded city phenomenon,' defined as the reinforcing structures of work and home life that youth need to climb to overcome employment barriers, can be used to explain some of the difficulties that homeless youth experience when finding formal employment (Huffman et al., 2020). Climbing some of these societal structures is difficult, especially without healthy support and resources. Homeless youth are more likely to remain on the streets without formal employment if they cannot fight these barriers. Projects such as 'Eva's Phoenix,' which help homeless youth learn employment and construction skills, can be highly beneficial but can also come with their own set of challenges (Bridgman, 2001). It requires great flexibility, patience and funding from organizations to run projects and programs that support homeless individuals. These programs also require effort from those who want to learn and get involved. Some key components of success for homeless youth finding employment include aspirations, use of non-profit resources, entrepreneurship, and motivation (Huffman et al., 2020). While youth may have some of these skills to find formal employment, it can be difficult without support, resources and education. Often, youth who are involved in street life and have problems with substance use will engage in risky income generation. Some forms of risky income generation include panhandling, sex work, drug dealing and theft (Cheng et al., 2016). The more embedded youth become in street life and risky income generation, the less likely they are to find employment and stable housing (Ferguson et al., 2012). While it may be unfortunate, homeless youth who experience employment barriers are more likely to engage in risky income generation and, therefore, further the cycle of homelessness. It was found that youth who have substance use issues were more likely to engage in risky income generation (Ferguson et al., 2012). Some programs and interventions may be used to prevent substance use and teach homeless youth how to find and maintain healthy employment.

In conclusion, it is difficult to find regular employment when there are so many barriers to being a homeless youth. According to the social estrangement model, the more enmeshed in street life the homeless youth is, the less likely they are to get out of that lifestyle (Ferguson et al., 2014). Motivation, goals, healthy support and use of resources are all critical components to overcoming employment barriers.

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