

JUST SIX
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH
SUMMARY



Service and policy considerations when working with highly mobile homeless youth: Perspectives from the frontlines

Key Details

KEY WORDS

Homeless Youth, Service Providers,
Mobility, Rural Homelessness

POPULATION GROUPS

Youth Living in Poverty; Youth Living
in Rural & Remote Communities;
Youth Workers

STEPPING UP THEMES

Health & Wellness;
Diversity, Social Inclusion & Safety

RESEARCH ORIGIN

USA

SOURCE

Academic

“The perspectives of frontlines providers are often overlooked in homelessness research... Providers can offer insight into service design and delivery, what strategies are useful for outreach and engagement, and the kinds of skills necessitated by the work. ...they have a deep understanding of the system and policy context in which services are provided, as well as the limits of the service system” (p. 9).

1. What is the research about?

This research explores providers’ experiences of working with geographically mobile homeless youth in order to better understand perceptions of this mobility, the role of the service system, and how best to support this population.

The researcher used three conceptual lenses from the research literature about homelessness in order to frame their understanding of **mobility**:

- part of the homeless lifestyle (a choice);
- part of a coping strategy (a stress response); and
- connected to external forces (a response to coercion).

The two research questions explored were:

- How do providers understand the mobility of homeless youth?
- How do providers understand the relationship between the mobility of homeless youth and the service system?

2. Where did the research take place?

This research took place in New York’s Capital Region, which includes three small cities, less populated suburban towns, and large rural areas. The researcher noted that “unaccompanied youth made up roughly 15% of the homeless population in the Capital Region, a 41% increase from the year prior” (p. 11).

3. Who is this research about?

This research is about highly mobile homeless youth, from the perspective of homeless service providers who work at agencies offering direct services to homeless youth.

4. How was the research done?

Eight female participants were recruited from five of the six agencies providing homeless youth services in New York’s Capital Region; although these agencies are primarily located in the cities, they serve youth across the region through onsite services, mobile outreach teams, and satellite sites. In their role, each participant served only young people, ranging in ages from 13 to 21.

Each provider participated in a semi-structured interview; the researcher had prepared a set of guiding questions, but allowed for new ideas and directions as a result of how each interviewee responded to those questions. Interviews were recorded and transcribed (written out word-for-word). The transcripts were analyzed using a coding process to identify patterns and themes across all interviews.

5. What are the key findings?

Participants shared *common understandings of mobility* for homeless youth:

a) As a coping strategy.

Participants described mobility as a coping strategy or survival skill, reflecting the resourcefulness of homeless youth, who may need to move quickly to access living options within and outside of shelters and other services or supports, often discovered through word of mouth and social media. However, providers shared how this resourcefulness can “present as a false sense of security” (p. 11); if young people are too easily trusting, mobility can become dangerous, with an increased vulnerability to sex and labour trafficking, for example.

b) As a response to service system policies, gaps, and limitations.

Providers noted that mobility may be forced due to the service system, which often refers youth in and out of different areas of the region for different levels of care. Every program or shelter has different policies, and there may be discrepancies in how providers enforce those policies; in a system with limited services, youth may find themselves running out of options. For example, if a young person’s behaviour results in a discharge, they may not be able to return to that shelter. Local policies also impact mobility; for example, there are limits to the number of days a young person can access a shelter bed, and young people coming from another county might be rejected or risk a parent or guardian being notified (if they are under the age of 18), all of which can keep a homeless young person on the move.

Participants also outlined *important and effective practice approaches* for providers working with mobile homeless youth:

a) Build trust.

Building rapport and trust with young people can take time. Be straightforward and honest. Providers recognize that this is important for retention, but also encourage staying in contact with youth on the move.

b) Meet youth where they are.

Ensure that outcomes for service provision are client-driven and determined in partnership. Providers should only work to geographically stabilize a young person if that aligns with their needs and goals.

c) Ensure accessibility.

Limit barriers to outreach and service access, and be forgiving of youth by avoiding punitive rules or policies.

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

For service providers working with highly mobile homeless youth, this research points out critical considerations for youth work at the policy, organizational, and individual levels.

Addressing policies and service gaps can serve to further engage youth in existing services and reduce mobility; **introducing additional services in areas with limited access** (for example, at drop-in spaces in libraries or community centres in suburban or rural areas) can also meet the needs of mobile homeless youth.

The participants in this study outlined important **practice approaches**, and the researcher further recommends a **trauma-informed approach** for youth work, not only in one-on-one relationships with young people, but at the organizational and policy levels, in order to avoid retraumatizing this vulnerable population.



Aykanian, A. (2018). Service and policy considerations when working with highly mobile homeless youth: Perspectives from the frontlines. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 84, 9-16.