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The Extended Shelter Stay of Homeless Millennials in New York City Shelters

**POSTER
PRESENTATION**

OCTOBER 1, 2020

**WALDEN
UNIVERSITY**

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Acknowledgement

Barbara Benoliel – Chair

Sandra Harris – Committee Member

Sarah Matthey – URR Member

Abstract

There are extended shelter stay increase among homeless millennials nightly in New York City (NYC). The purpose of this qualitative, multiple case study was to explore the experiences of 4 long-term-stay millennials, 25 to 34 years of age, residing in single adult NYC shelters to understand how they explain and interpret their extended stays. Arnett's interpretation of emerging adulthood as part of generational theory provided the study's conceptual framework. The study findings contribute to social change by helping human service professionals identify the challenges among millennials currently in shelter for an extended stay and barriers to exiting successfully.

Doctoral Capstone

Problem

The **extended stays of homeless millennials** in NYC shelters puts a strain on city resources and has a negative impact on the available services for other populations.

The concern is gaining understanding on their experience as it relates to their shelter stay. In addition, how they see themselves as full-fledge adults determines whether they are delaying adulthood furthering contributing to their shelter stay.

The problem is a lack of knowledge on the factors that contribute to extended shelter stay and their perception on adulthood.

Purpose

The purpose of qualitative, multiple case study was to **better understand the experiences of single, millennial adults, 25 to 34 years of age**, that may contribute to their staying in shelters longer than the allowed stay.

Significance

This study provided insight on the factors that contribute to the extended shelter stay among homeless millennial adults as well as their perception of full-fledge adulthood.

While residing in NYC shelters, the participants indicated barriers that they believed were keeping them in shelter. They outlined their experience before entering shelter and while in shelter to provide a better understanding.

By gaining insights from the participants, this study provided information that social workers, shelter workers, and social service policymakers may use to gain a deeper understanding of the barriers to exiting shelters.

Theory or Framework

Generational theory (Arnett (2000) provided a framework for exploring sheltered millennials' thinking about their situations.

Arnett's concept of **emerging adulthood** describes a phase between adolescence and full-fledged adulthood that encompasses late adolescence and early adulthood.

The emerging adulthood construct covers the life span of the target population and includes features such as exploration of identity, instability, self-focus and feeling in between (Arnett, 2014).

Relevant Scholarship

NYC is a sanctuary city, meaning that all individuals who seek shelter are eligible to receive it (Su, 2011). However, the reasons for extended shelter stay were explored among the millennial generation in response to the perception that they are more independent than previous generations.

Many factors that can lead to homelessness include unemployment, a challenging job market, decreases in government funding for public assistance and housing vouchers, housing market discrimination, mental illness, and deinstitutionalization (Byrne, Treglia, Culhane, Kuhn, & Kane, 2016). The need for resources is greater among millennials in the city.

Emerging adulthood is the time when people should be able to assume greater responsibility for themselves while maintaining family ties that can assist them with their life transitions (Arnett, 2014).

The emerging adulthood construct was used to help describes delays that occur in some who are emerging into adulthood and may provide a framework for a better understanding of why some millennials who are entering homeless shelters are staying for an extended time. Millennials tend to be ambivalent about the responsibilities of adulthood (Sherber, 2018).

Murray (2019) suggests that when engaged by shelter workers with attention to planning from the first day in shelter would assist with reclaiming independence. This would promote a successful shelter experience leading to an exit into permanent housing.

The issues reflect the research problem for the study as little is known about why millennials are using shelters for extended stays and the experiences that may cause them to stay longer than the time allotted.

Research Question

RQ1: What are the experiences of single, millennial adults staying long term in NYC homeless shelters?

RQ2: How do millennial-aged, long-term shelter stay adults describe their adulthood and perceive their future after their shelter stay?

Participants

A purposeful random sampling method was used.

4 participants (2 men, 2 women) were selected for in-depth interviews.

Participants needed to be adults currently residing in a NYC shelter for at least 180+ days on a voluntary basis.

Procedures

Recruitment flyers were posted around the shelters. Those who responded the flyer were scheduled for an interview at a public library close to their shelter residence.

Following the researcher-designed interview protocol of 20 items, the 4 interviews were scheduled for 45 – 60 minutes over a one-month period. They were recorded on two devices and transcribed.

Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed to identify themes in the responses. Codes into operational themes that later resulted in the emerging themes.

Themes and Findings

Limited Exposure to Housing Resources and Information

- Participants indicated not having knowledge of housing resources and information.

Difficulty Finding Employment or Jobs With Livable Wages

- Due to criminal records and/or education, participants reported having a difficult finding employment or jobs with a wage higher than \$15 an hour (minimum wage)

Limited Engagement With Shelter Staff

- Participants reported not being actively or consistently engaged by shelter staff. Further reporting they appeared overwhelmed.

Poor Socialization Skills

- Participants reported not having outside support systems.

Trauma

- Participants reported previous trauma before entering shelter that included drug use/abuse, criminal involvement and/or abandonment of family/friends.

Differences Based on Gender

Male participants' perspectives on their adulthood were based on their age and the fact that they did not depend on someone.

Female participants' perspectives on their adulthood were based on the fact that they needed to learn more to be more independent. They felt they had more "growing up" to do, despite their age.

Interpretation

The results suggest that the five themes were the common factors that were contributing to their extended stay in shelter. In addition, how they perceive themselves as an adult differed by gender rather than by age.

Sharing their stories provided insight on their shelter stay and provide recommendations for how to assist them with moving out of shelter.

Limitations

The findings and conclusions reflect only the experiences of four homeless millennials living in NYC shelters.

This study was limited to the demographics of the responding participants who may not represent other cultures and groups who are represented in the shelter population.

This study was limited to individuals who volunteered to share their stories and may not have represented the full stories of other shelter residents.

Interviews were limited in time, if given more time, the research might have been expanded the data available and stories shared.

Recommendations

For Practice

- Examine the approaches of agencies governing shelters on how information and resources are disseminated. Use the results to develop more effective shelter staff training and service delivery for client engagement.
- Developing a revised version of the housing first model inclusive of comprehensive and medical services could promote stability for overall self-care as well as housing.
- Encouraged to tackle each session on an individual basis rather than a collective group. Shelter plans should include all barriers that are preventing them from exiting shelter. All sessions should be tackled on an individual basis and not as a collective group.

- While tackling homelessness by exiting shelter is the goal, it is also important to ensure that former shelter residents can sustain themselves in the community independently, as many of the participants reported lack of social support and social isolation.

For Future Research

- Increase the sample size and expand the study timeframe.
- The theme of traumatic influences contributing to shelter stay.
- Systematic issues delaying shelter exit such as lack of housing resources and information that would lead to exiting shelter.

Social Change Implications

This study led to positive social change by identifying some of the specific characteristics and needs of millennial aged adults in shelter in a large urban center; and encouraging shelter operators, administrators and policy makers to undertake innovative human services solutions to provide for this growing population.

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