**The Contribution of Childhood Risk Factors and Marginalization**

**to Youth Homelessness in Los Angeles**

**Dennis Marciuska**

**Loyola Marymount University**

**Abstract:** Youth homelessness is an issue which is absent from mainstream public discourse and scholarship on homelessness in general. Despite being on track to becoming a crisis, there is not enough documentation on how risk factors and marginalization give rise to this process. While studies have been done nationwide on this phenomenon in terms of LGBTQ+ youth, youth homelessness due to childhood risk factors, and how other risk groups are affected, most studies are not regionally specific, or they fail to bridge these factors. By articulating the causality of previous seminal works and conducting ethnographic research, I seek to lay a groundwork which enriches the current scholarship on youth homelessness and influences similar scholarship in other regions. This work is also crucial in providing more humanizing statistical analysis through firsthand perspectives and observation.

**Introduction**

In recent years, homelessness has become an exigent crisis in the city of Los Angeles, as affordable housing has become increasingly scarce and gentrification has rampantly swept through the city. It is an issue which elicits a continual response from the media given its increasing scope and status (as a crisis) within the city. However, seldom is the homeless youth population at the forefront of this conversation despite the alarming number of unaccompanied youth on the streets. These youth, often coming from marginalized environments (e.g., low-income communities, abusive households, or foster care) or having marginalized identities (e.g., LGBTQ+ or racial minority), are put at further risk. They are at high risk for experiencing mental health issues, being trafficked, or developing substance abuse. Thus, I seek to analyze how marginalized identities/groups are more at risk for youth homelessness in Los Angeles and what preventative and mitigating measures can be taken.

**Background/Related Work and Motivation**

While researching social issues which were especially pertinent to the Los Angeles region, I found that homelessness is an issue which seems too pressing and current to ignore. The city is the epicenter of the county-wide homeless crisis which has been well documented. However, I want to explore a dimension of the issue which was not as frequently discussed or the subject of media reporting, and I began to look for microcosms of the issue. This in turn resulted in my research leading me to youth homelessness, a phenomenon that is often absent from public discourse, although it is subject to a considerable degree of academic scholarship. It became evident to me that further contributing to this research would be valuable both in bringing awareness to the issue and furthering knowledge on this phenomenon, particularly by focusing on the risk factors. Previous research on risk factors which affect youth homelessness has been particularly concerned with: childhood risk factors (Koegel et al., 1995), LGBTQ+ youth who are disproportionately affected by this phenomenon (Quintana et al., 2010), mental health and its effects on youth homelessness (University of Southern California, 2019), amongst a plethora other factors. Journalistic coverage has also illustrated that the foster care system serves as a pipeline to youth homelessness (LA Times Editorial, 2019). These risk factors are affirmed through a current statistical report done by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Agency (LASHA) indicating how LGBTQ+ youth, racial minorities (Latinx and Black), and children in marginalized environments (welfare, abuse, etc.) are disproportionately affected by youth homelessness. Furthermore, past research solidifies that systemic institutions such as the criminal/juvenile justice and foster care systems are primary contributors to youth homelessness as well. Though there is not one definitive cause of youth homelessness, and these factors often vary, I formulated the conclusion that by identifying primary risk factors and developing preventative methods, my research could be of particular use to the issue. This led me to propose the question, how are at risk and marginalized youth in Los Angeles disproportionately affected by youth homelessness?

**Methods**

To identify risk factors which detrimentally impact youth and cause them to end up on the streets, I seek to conduct ethnographic research by working firsthand with homeless youth and identifying their needs. To engage in this process, I must first get approval from an institutional review board in an effort to demonstrate that my work is both ethical and impactful while working with human subjects. I plan to conduct my research in two primary ways, namely visual ethnography and through more informal methods of interview and participant observation. This means that I will first work with these youth informally, getting to know them, and in doing so I will conduct informal interviews, in addition to observing their lives and the challenges they face. I will document these challenges alongside my experiences with these youth, during the journey I will embark on while working with them. I want to do so, to better understand their backgrounds, if they are from at risk environments, and to document their perspectives. This is essential, as much of the academic information on youth homelessness is mere statistics, and it could greatly benefit from personalization and giving traditionally unheard voices a platform. In doing so, I will develop my connections to these youth by partnering with organizations such as the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority and shelters including Jóvenes Inc. and Covenant House, amongst others, to do outreach work. I also want to make significant efforts in reaching out to unsheltered youth using the professional connections I will make while conducting this research. What is paramount is that I serve the communities I am working with, as this is at the heart of ethnographic research. As the project progresses, I also want to conduct my research within a visual ethnographic framework, a methodology well documented in the book *Ethnographic Film*. This work encompasses visually documenting subjects to provide a more accessible and engaging medium for their perspectives, in an ethically responsible and dignified manner and grounded in ethnographic understanding (Heider, 2006). The work done prior to this visual documentation will be essential in getting to know those who I will depict and representing them with dignity. To facilitate this process, I will conduct visual interviews with those who are comfortable telling their stories on camera, in addition to recording additional footage that shows what these youth go through on a daily basis. Of course, this will be done only if given explicit permission, and it is in an effort to make their stories more accessible. Overall, I aim to identify trends amongst the backgrounds of these youth and to develop preventative strategies which target these specific and vulnerable demographics. This is in an effort to help mitigate the youth homelessness crisis in Los Angeles. I will ground these strategies in the understanding that these youth’s status as homeless, being youth of color, being members of the LGBTQ+ community, and other factors often position them to be at the greatest risk of political legislation and local laws. In her book *Shapeshifters*, Aimee Cox, articulates similarly how young black homeless women are more vulnerable given their status as black, youth, homeless, and poor, amongst other factors. (Cox, 2015). Adopting a similar strategic positioning will be key in understanding what these youth face, how their identities/backgrounds put them at risk, and how I can enable them, so they have agency to combat these conditions. Furthermore, I want to communicate with agencies, so they are in conversation with these ideas. This is an effort which will bridge the research I plan to conduct with past research, identifying how certain identities, environments, and institutions cause at risk youth to be in the streets of Los Angeles in disproportionate numbers. By providing a humanizing and alternative dimension to the issue, as well as effective strategies to help combat it, I envision this research can set a precedent for more personalized youth homeless research as well. This will help to provide a more accessible means of documenting the issue. I also imagine that it could lead me to further potential work such as a documentary, to share the problem with a more mainstream audience.

**Expected Results**

By conducting the aforementioned ethnographic research and building off previous research of youth homelessness, I seek to formulate a comprehensive understanding of which marginalized identities and environments cause youth to be at a greater risk of homelessness. I also seek to supplement these primary causes with other risk factors that contribute to this phenomenon as well as developing preventative strategies to help minimize the potential risks of this epidemic increasing. By creating a better understanding of how risk factors, at risk groups, and systemic institutions are key in heightening this problem, I will provide a groundwork to understand how these potential contributors can be combated. Overall, I seek a strategy which will lay the foundation for similar research in this field in areas other than Los Angeles. I will do so by providing an alternative and personalized perspective to previous work done on youth homelessness, while ultimately connecting my own findings and other research to formulate a comprehensive strategy toward the issue. What is paramount, is that this research provides an alternative and engaging perspective to the issue while also assisting in developing preventive measures to assist at risk and marginalized youth.

**Conclusion**

While homelessness is an issue which is highly prevalent in the city and county of Los Angeles and the subject of both discourse and scholarship, youth homelessness is a microcosm of this issue which is not frequently addressed despite its increasing prevalence and problematic nature. In an effort to promote a better understanding of how both childhood risk factors and marginalization disproportionately contribute to this crisis, I seek to conduct substantial ethnographic research which helps to supplement this understanding. I will conduct this process through visual and informal interviews, participant observation, and visual ethnographic footage, aiming to personalize this issue while collecting data to better understand factors which lead to the annual increases in youth homelessness. This will be in an effort to formulate comprehensive measures which could potentially aid in homelessness prevention/assistance and craft a more preventative approach toward these displaced youth. The perspective which this research will craft is in an effort to be grounds for further study both by those focused on homelessness and youth homelessness. In addition, this process will be fundamental in future pursuits I may have on the issue, focused on providing public awareness. Nevertheless, bringing awareness to the issue and better understanding of its nature through scholarship will be key in addressing the epidemic of homelessness, particularly in terms of youth, and potentially stopping its exponential increases.

**References**

Koegel, P., Melamid, E., & Burnam, M. A. (1995). Childhood Risk Factors for Homelessness among Homeless Adults. *American Journal of Public Health,* *85*(12), 1642-1649. doi:10.2105/ajph.85.12.1642

Homelessness Policy Research Institute. (2019). Mental Health Among Youth Experiencing Homelessness. University of Southern California. Retrieved from <https://socialinnovation.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Youth-Mental-Health-Literature-Review-Final.pdf>

Quintana, N. S., Rosenthal, J., & Krehely, J. (2010, June). *On the Streets: The Federal Response to Gay and Transgender Homeless Youth* (Rep.). Retrieved https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2010/06/pdf/lgbtyouthhomelessness.pdf?\_ga=2.197240294.878828931.1603253977-232499290.1603253977 (NTIS)

LA Times Editorial Board (2019, December). Opinion: Is L.A. County’s Foster System Raising the Next Generation of Homeless People? *Los Angeles Times*

Tino, Sarah. (2019, February). More Than 12,000 California Youth are Homeless. What’s Being

Done to Change That? *The Imprint*

Biagiotti, Lisa [Los Angeles Times]. (2016, January 11). Young and Homeless in Hollywood |

On the Streets Ep. 6. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fb8W7dlJxQM>

Kaufer, Michelle, Katzin, Erica, Pavlovsky, Jon. (Producers), & Leoni, Michael (Director).

(2016). American Street Kid [Motion Picture]. United States: Kandoo Releasing. Retrieved from <https://www.amazon.com/American-Street-Kid-Michael-Leoni/dp/B08BZ235XP/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=american+street+kid&qid=1603345008&s=instant-video&sr=1-1>

Morewitz, S. J. (2018). *Runaway and Homeless Youth: New Research and Clinical Perspectives*. Place of publication not identified: Springer.

Farrugia, D. (2016). *Youth Homelessness in Late Modernity Reflexive Identities and Moral Worth*. Singapore: Springer Singapore, Imprint: Springer.

Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority. (2020). Briefing on Youth Homelessness 2020 [PowerPoint slides] Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority Website. <https://www.lahsa.org/documents?id=4752-2020-greater-los-angeles-youth-count-presentation>

Morton, M. H., Samuels, G. M., Dworsky, A., & Patel, S. (2018). Missed opportunities: LGBTQ youth homelessness in America. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. Retrieved From: <https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/VoYC-LGBTQ-Brief-FINAL.pdf>

HEIDER, K. (2006). Ethnographic Film. Austin: University of Texas Press. Retrieved November 14, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7560/714588>

Cox, A. M. (2015). Shapeshifters: Black girls and the choreography of citizenship. Durham: Duke University Press.

**Budget**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ITEM COST | |
| Transportation | $300 |
| Subject Compensation (Meals) | $500 |
| General Supplies | $100 |
| Equipment Rental | $500 |
| Assistants/Support Staff | $1000 |
| Audio Equipment | $150 |
| Additional Costs | $100 |
| Total | $2,650 |

**Timeline**

Pre-Project: Receive IRB approval, formalize funding for the project.

Month 1: Contact agencies and meet officials, reach out and meet with homeless shelters.

Months 2-4: Meet with homeless youth and get to know them while working with them. In doing so, identify their challenges and informally document their stories and lives.

Month 5: With those willing, shoot visual interviews and additional footage that may help to document what has already been learned and shared.

Month 6: Compile and edit footage, formalize informal ethnography into a more well-constructed narrative.

Month 7: Bridge previous ethnographic works with my findings and develop a preventative approach to the issue and communities which are worst affected by the issue.

Once the Project is Complete: Publish my findings and research and share it with the youth who participated.