

Resident Perspectives on Life in a Transitional Living Program for Homeless Young Adults

Susanna R. Curry¹ · Robin Petering²

Published online: 20 January 2017
© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2017

Abstract Safe and affordable housing is critical for any young person’s well-being, and yet many youth are without a reliable place to live. Knowledge of the perceptions of housing programs and shelter among homeless young adults ages 18–24 is very limited. Using qualitative methodology, the present study explores the perceptions of homeless young adults on their experiences as residents of a transitional living program (TLP) by asking the following research questions: (1) What are TLP residents’ expectations of themselves and others in the program? and (2) How do residents perceive the rules and structure of the TLP? Sixteen interviews were conducted with residents at a TLP for homeless young adults, with participants ranging in age from 18 to 22. Findings illuminated residents’ strong emphasis on the values of hard work, self-discipline and a good attitude. Results revealed that residents felt that they are overly monitored within the program, particularly around daily living in the residence and felt a lack of flexibility in the rules and regulations. It is important that the structure of a TLP housing program so that rules are not disruptive to healthy development and successful transition from adolescence to adulthood. Further implications for practice are discussed.

Keywords Homeless young adults · Transition age youth · Transitional housing · Transitional living programs · Housing models

Introduction

Housing is an essential platform from which any young person can address health or mental health issues; pursue employment or educational goals; and feel safe and stable, and yet many young people are without a reliable place to live (Aratani, 2009). Homelessness is typically defined as doubling up or “couch surfing” with another person, living in a shelter, on the street, in a car, in an abandoned building, or another location not meant for human habitation (Foster, 2010). On a single night in 2014, approximately 39,500 unaccompanied young adults ages 18–24 were experiencing homelessness in the United States, and approximately half were unsheltered [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), 2014]. Further knowledge is needed regarding homeless young adults’ perceptions of housing and shelter services particularly in long-term yet temporary programs such as transitional living programs (TLP). The current study aims to assess experiences of TLPs designed for homeless young adults from the perspective of those who are currently living in these programs.

Literature Review

In this paper, the term “homeless youth” will at times be used interchangeably with “homeless young adults,” however in the literature the term “homeless youth” can also refer to those who are under the age of 18. Among the varying needs of this heterogeneous population, addressing

✉ Susanna R. Curry
currysu@uchicago.edu

Robin Petering
petering@usc.edu

¹ Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago and The University of Chicago School of Social Services Administration, 969 E 60th Street, Chicago, IL 60637, USA

² School of Social Work, University of Southern California, 669 W 34th St., Los Angeles, CA 90089, USA

housing and shelter needs is of utmost importance, as unstable housing and homelessness among youth have been linked to mental health and health problems, risk of exposure to violence, and difficulty maintaining employment (Aratani, 2009).

To address the housing needs of these youth, organizations typically offer emergency or short-term shelters, transitional housing programs and permanent housing programs. For homeless young adults, transitional living programs (TLPs) are a common model for longer-term housing. TLPs were originally funded at the federal level by the 1988 amendments to the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974 (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). Currently, federal funds to TLPs are provided under the provisions of the Reconnecting Homeless Youth Act of 2008 (Public Law 110–378) and fund 206 programs across the country serving ages 16–22 (though some restrict eligibility to 18–22) (DHHS, 2014). TLPs provide both housing and supportive services such as financial and interpersonal skills training, support for educational and vocational goals, and physical and mental health care, typically for up to 2 years. These programs differ from emergency shelters in that they provide longer-term housing, but differ from permanent supportive housing programs in that the housing support in TLPs is not guaranteed beyond two years.

Many youth who have experienced street homelessness may have had to prematurely take on adult roles in order to survive, and thus experienced high levels of “freedom” and independence, which could negatively impact the way that they experience shelter and housing programs after homelessness (Ryan & Thompson, 2013). The literature on experiences of shelter or housing programs for homeless youth suggests that some youth may choose not to stay in these programs if they are too restrictive (Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004; Ryan & Thompson, 2013; Thompson & Pollio, 2006). Studies regarding shelter or housing programs sampled youth who were not currently staying in shelters or housing and only one focused exclusively on previous experiences of such programs among young adults ages 18–24 (Ryan & Thompson, 2013). One study of minor homeless youth found that some did not use shelters because they associated them with too much structure and discipline (Armiline, 2005). Others have critiqued shelter programming for minor youth for their emphasis on control of behaviors (Wallerstein, 2014). Much of this work points to a potential tension in shelters and housing programs between providing safety and controlling individual behaviors in a shared living setting on one hand and fostering healthy and normative development on the other.

For the past 20 years the research on homeless youth has primarily focused on homeless adolescents or minors and the knowledge on homeless young adults and their housing

and other needs is much more limited (Ryan & Thompson, 2013). Those who are over the age of 18 may not be eligible for programs targeting minors and may be wary of housing or shelter for homeless adults because of fear of being victimized (Lenz-Rashid, 2006). In addition, the needs of homeless young adults may be different than those under age 18 because of the unique developmental stage often referred to as “emerging adulthood” in which, among other tasks, those ages 18–24 spend considerable time exploring their identities and seeking independence (Arnett, 2007). They often feel “in-between” adolescence and adulthood (Arnett, 2007). Those who have been homeless feel more like adults because of the independence they experienced while homeless (Ryan & Thompson, 2013). Therefore it is important that we understand the unique experience of those ages 18–24 in service programs.

We still do not know about the experience of these programs from the perspective of those who are currently living in them. It is important that we understand how those using these housing services view the rules of the program, as well as expectations of themselves and others, so that providers can bolster effective strategies to promote healthy development in the context of congregate living. The current qualitative study involved a thematic analysis informed by Constructivist Grounded Theory analysis methods (Charmaz, 2007) to explore the following research questions: (1) What are TLP residents’ expectations of themselves and others in the program? and (2) How do residents perceive the rules and structure of the program?

Methodology

Site

This study focuses on homeless young adults’ experiences in a transitional living program in a large metropolitan area in the Western United States. The site, which will be referred to as “St. James Homeless Services,” or “St. James” for short is a program that offers both emergency shelter and transitional living for homeless young adults. The emergency shelter (ES) has 60 beds and is open to young people ages 18–21. The 2-year transitional living program (TLP) has 20 spaces and is open to young adults ages 18–24. Residents are allowed to stay in this TLP for up to 2 years.

While in either program, both ES and TLP residents have access to the agency’s in-house medical and mental health care, employment and educational services, social outings and independent living skills classes. Within the St. James programming, residents are required to live in ES before being admitted into the TLP program. Typically young people are in the shelter for 2–5 months

before they are they are determined to be eligible to enter the TLP program and only if they have satisfied certain program requirements such as having made reasonable efforts to look for a job, having had an appointment with the on-site doctor, and having addressed other immediate needs. Residents in the TLP are required to be working, in school, or actively job-searching and may be in the program for up to 2 years, and these activities are monitored by case managers. TLP residents have more flexibility to store their own food in the kitchen and have a later curfew.

Despite the programs being separate, there is some overlap between the two groups of residents. The ES and TLP residents share the same entrance to the building and courtyard but have separate living areas and operate under different rules including curfew and dining times.

Upon move-in, residents to the TLP are provided a Resident Handbook. This handbook provides an overview of the program mission and an orientation to the structure, opportunities and rules of the program. The orientation to the program includes a discussion of which staff are available for which types of support (e.g. designated staff for case management, life skills, and for daily needs around the residence). Residents are required to meet with their case manager frequently to develop goals, review all bank statements, and ensure that transportation is arranged for all activities. Program structure guidelines include a discussion of access to the TLP building; chores requirements; curfew; dress code; meal times; medications; rules forbidding residents from having a personal car, using their personal cell phone on the premises, using a personal laptop in their bedroom, watching R-rated movies without staff permission, visiting in other residents' rooms; and rules regarding bedrooms. In particular, the handbook notes that bedrooms are inspected for cleanliness daily and that rooms are subject to random searches if needed. Residents are asked not to put anything on the walls but are provided a bulletin board for pictures.

Residents are required to attend Life Skills classes at least once per week unless they have a conflict with their work schedule or have already attended twenty classes. Following this orientation to structure, the handbook outlines consequences for various "infractions" to the TLP structure, which include extra chores, earlier curfew, inability to leave the premises for 1 day, requirement to sleep in the emergency shelter for three nights, or in serious situations discharge from the program. Each type of "infraction" is listed beside potential consequences, and a list of grievance procedures is provided. Additional components of the handbook include a list of opportunities for residents to be involved in peer activities and advocacy, and a list of resident rights and responsibilities.

Data Collection

From the period of January through October 2013 the first author volunteered and recruited interview participants during the Life Skills class for the TLP program, held on 2 weekday evenings of every week. Announcements were made at every Life Skills class inviting residents to participate in semi-structured qualitative interviews, and encouraged anyone who was interested to participate. Any young person who was living in the TLP program was eligible to participate, as were any alumni who had left the program within 2 months. Ultimately, a sample of 16 residents (out of 20 in the program) participated in interviews scheduled before or after Life Skills classes. After participants reviewed and signed the consent form, interviews took place either in a private office or a quiet corner of a deserted common room or courtyard. Semi-structured interviews were guided by the research questions that addressed the resident's experience in the program, their needs and their perception of the needs of other residents. However, in line with constructivist scientific methods in qualitative traditions, topics that arose in earlier interviews were further explored in later interviews with other residents (Charmaz, 2007). For example, when asked about their interactions with other residents and staff, many residents focused on their frustrations with communal living and with the rules of the program. Therefore, this was further explored in interviews with other participants. Interviews ranged in length from 25 to 60 min. Interviews were audio recorded with the permission of participants and were transcribed by the first author, two Masters-level students and another professional social worker. All residents who participated in an interview were compensated for their time with a gift card of \$15.

All human subjects' protocol was approved by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at the sponsoring university. Methods to enhance rigor included multiple coders and peer scrutiny of the data collection and analysis process (Creswell, 2008).

Ten of the interview participants were male and six were female. Six identified as Black/African American, seven White, two Hispanic, and one Southeast Asian. Four identified as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender or Queer. The average age of participants was 20.6 (SD 1.14, range 19–22). Four reported prior involvement in foster care. All except for one were currently living in the TLP program and one had graduated from the program approximately 2 months prior to the interview.

Analysis

Interview transcripts were used for analysis. Interview transcripts were coded following Constructivist Grounded

Theory coding methods (Charmaz, 2007). The primary researcher collaborated with another researcher to code the transcripts. First, the researchers open coded five interviews separately, then discussed codes, resolved differences in coding, and agreed on focused codes. The focused coding process involved using active codes using gerund-based phrases (Charmaz, 2007). Then two more interviews were coded separately and differences in coding were discussed and resolved. Next, half of the interviews were coded using focused coding analysis (Charmaz, 2007) by one researcher and the other half coded using focused coding by the other researcher according to mutually-agreed upon codes, after which discrepancies in codes were discussed and categories created. After these categories were created, properties and dimensions of the categories were identified (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The two major findings were: (1) a strong focus on hard work, self-discipline and a good attitude in the TLP program and (2) high monitoring of “small” day-to-day behaviors in the program.

Findings

Analysis illuminated two primary findings, including residents’ strong emphasis on the values of hard work, discipline and a good attitude and residents’ perception that they are overly monitored according to “small rules” governing day-to-day behaviors while in the program.

Theme 1: Youth Have a Strong Focus on Hard Work, Discipline and a Good Attitude

As the young people transition from the emergency shelter (ES) to the transitional living program (TLP), some take time to adjust to the TLP program, which focuses less on crisis management and more on long-term goals such as employment, building life skills, and monitoring one’s own behavior more closely. This can cause some tension between those residents who are viewed as “handling their business” and those who are viewed as “just hanging out,” “being lazy,” or generally disobeying the rules or structure of the program. When participants were asked about their interactions with other residents at St. James, it was evident that many hold harsh judgments of other residents or peers experiencing homelessness and their behaviors. While some talked about the close friendships they had created while at St. James, much of the discussion revolved around staying away from certain people, surrounding oneself with positive people, and distinguishing oneself from the “bad” residents.

The focus of the TLP program is on work, as opposed to full-time education, which meant that many of the

people in the program were actively seeking work, juggling multiple part-time jobs, or working full-time at one job. While many of the youth noted their interest in going back to school, work was of primary importance in staff interactions with residents, in rewards and commendation for working, and in self-regulation among the youth around job-seeking and hard-working behaviors and activities. For example, Dennis talked about his opinion of those who did not seem to be working hard to find a job, claiming that those who aren’t “handling their business” by working are wasting their time. He said:

It’s just like when I see this person that like, you know their parents are basically begging them to come home it’s just like, what are you doing, you know? You have a roof over your head, man. All you gotta do is just go handle your business, man, you know? So it’s like you’re wasting an opportunity, you want to be in a situation, you’re basically forcing yourself to be in this situation, you know?

As Dennis and others see it, residents who break the rules, or who are not working or otherwise productive while they are living in TLP are wasting an important opportunity, which can be frustrating to those who believe they are operating within the program structure and working hard. Dennis seems to suggest that part of being a responsible and successful young adult in the TLP involves taking action to make the best of the situation.

Many equated being an ES resident with laziness or bad behavior, while those in TLP were described as being more focused and mature. For example, Tyrone explained that people in ES don’t have the same mentality as those in TLP:

Some people in ES I don’t like, and some people in there are ignorant and you know, very not the type of person who is productive and mess around when they go places...some people here are not on the right track.

We see in Tyrone’s quote again that there is a central focus on individual change, which many of the residents believe starts with changing one’s attitude. Ultimately, those in TLP are expected by their peers to be responsible young adults by following the rules and being in the “right mentality.”

Multiple residents discussed differences between ES and TLP residents, highlighting the behavior expected of an ideal and deserving TLP resident. For example, in the following segment of the interview with Jonathan, he explained that he sees that some ES residents move too easily to TLP, noting that some come in,

J: ..from ES that don't deserve it..they'll even admit it, they say that, just get a free ride over here in TLP because they want to fill beds.

Interviewer: What do you think constitutes deserving?

J: Well, I think working hard and doing what you're supposed to do to actually earn. Not just sitting here, not getting a job, not doing an internship, not just hanging out in front of the building all day...

Here Jonathan is describing his belief that most residents in TLP have "earned" the privilege and therefore should continue to work hard, ideally by getting a job or an internship.

Theme 2: High Monitoring of "Small" Day-to-Day Behaviors.

In addition to distinguishing between "hard working" residents versus those who are not hard working, many of the TLP program residents feel that the mistakes and/or transgressions of others (particularly ES residents) affect those who are abiding by the rules and regulations. Some residents mentioned that they wanted the program to be stricter in order to control the ES residents and "bad" TLP residents who were making decisions that they felt led to the creation of extra rules for all residents. For example, when discussing the overall security at St. James, many highlighted the tension caused by a new rule regarding the entrance to the building, which is shared by both groups of residents. Approximately 1 month prior to the start of the research project at St. James, one ES resident had snuck a knife into the building past the metal detector by hiding it in his shoe, and was later caught with it. After this incident, the security team began implementing a policy in which all young people had to take off their shoes when going through security. Given that this was a recent change in policy, many residents discussed their thoughts on this policy, with some such as Dennis and Bianca highlighting the fact that the single incident had changed the process of entering the building to a great extent for everyone. Dennis said that "some people mess up and ruin it for the others," and Bianca commented that "everybody has to pay for one person's mistake in here." Some residents believe that the shared location of the two programs can create problems, and that the young people in the two separate programs tend to have different rules or enforcement of rules. One of the residents, Brian, explained his experiences of rules in ES versus TLP:

As a TLP resident, stuff that they get in trouble over there for like, like small stuff, like you know, over there they get in trouble for big stuff. Small stuff they kind of look over, but over here at TLP,

it's kind of like, you know, the smaller stuff is more important than the bigger stuff.

Just as in Brian's quote above, often the residents would make a strong distinction between the ES residents and the residents of the TLP. The TLP residents seem aware that ES is really crisis management—the purpose is to stabilize participants, and there is a large turnover rate. Once they enter TLP there is more flexibility, but given that the TLP program purpose is to build "life skills" and prepare them to live on their own, the rules and consequences for rules are somewhat different. The focus of attention by staff in TLP, according to the residents, is to monitor "small things" or enforce minor infractions such as the rules forbidding food in rooms or smoking in the courtyard. In contrast, "big rules" according to the residents would relate more to violent behavior, using drugs or alcohol on the premises, or disrespecting a security guard. Several residents elaborated on their perceptions of these rules, including Bianca who said, "Sometimes you get tired of the rules, you get in trouble for the littlest things..." Similarly, Daniel commented that "they take a little small problem and they enhance it to be four times, five times." In addition to feeling like there were too many rules for "small" problems, there was also a common perception among the residents that there wasn't enough flexibility when it came to consequences for breaking "small rules." Dennis discussed the issue, feeling that he understands the reason for a rule but feels that the consequences should be flexible depending on the situation:

I mean, the rules are pretty understandable... But it's just like, the consequences for if you like, break certain rules, or like, not even breaking certain rules, like, you know, just life happens, you know, certain stuff happens you have no control over.—Dennis

While Dennis desires flexibility in consequences for rules by claiming that "life happens," Denise spoke of her frustration with uneven enforcement of the rules. For example, Denise spoke about how she didn't understand why one resident was allowed to stay in the program despite "pissing on a security guard" when he was drunk, while others were kicked out for what she saw as lesser crimes. She noted that, "[the rules] are strict, just stricter for different people" meaning that she perceived staff as unevenly distributing consequences for breaking the rules. While many of the residents are working on gaining skills, working hard, and taking on responsibilities, they are also monitored more closely for minor offenses and still deal with the hassles of communal living on a daily basis. Because the focus of the program is on building "life skills" rather than the initial goals in ES

of finding stability and safety from the street, many feel overly monitored and scrutinized when staff pay more attention to day-to-day activities.

Discussion

Research in the context of shelters or housing for homeless youth is sparse, particularly for those serving homeless young adults (Ryan & Thompson, 2013). Previous studies on perceptions of homeless youth regarding shelters or housing programs suggest that youth desire flexibility of rules within these programs and respectful and caring relationships with staff (Armaline, 2005; Kidd, Miner, Walker, & Davidson, 2007; Raleigh-DuRoff, 2004). While these findings are useful for understanding some of the barriers to housing for homeless youth, they do not necessarily apply to the experience of those who are currently living in housing programs for homeless young adults. This may be due to the fact that those currently living in housing programs have (at least temporarily) been able to abide by program rules that can serve as a barrier for other homeless young people. We also know little about residents' expectations of themselves and their peers in these programs. Further, developmental needs of homeless adolescents differ in some ways from those of homeless young adults, necessitating an in-depth exploration of the unique experiences of young adults living in housing programs. This study explored the experiences of residents in a transitional living program for homeless young adults, including their expectations of themselves and their peers in the housing program as well as their views of the rules and structure of the program. Ultimately, we found that the rules in the program appear to be antithetical to how youth view themselves, their goals, and a "responsible" adulthood.

As indicated in the "St. James" Resident Handbook, the program has an inherent philosophy about how residents should behave that is built into the program structure. The requirement to attend "life skills" classes, the expectation that residents find and maintain employment, and the emphasis on adherence to the rules of the program as a way to prepare for the "real world" suggest that the program operates around controlling behavior and helping youth find a source of income, often in absence of developmentally-appropriate and relational strategies with long-term stability in mind. According to McKenzie-Mohr, Coates and McLeod (2012), such requirements reflect general trends in service provision for homeless youth, in which there is "a goal of fast-tracking these youth into responsible and productive roles in society" (p. 136). Further, they note that the focus on helping youth attain self-sufficiency is typically directed by government agendas that provide limited funding, which leads programs to focus narrowly

on employment and life skills rather than providing much needed comprehensive services (Klodawsky, Aubry, & Farrell, 2006; McKenzie-Mohr, Coates, & McLeod, 2012) and adequate staff training. In Armaline's (2005) examination of a shelter for homeless minors, he concludes that requiring attendance in "life skills" classes treats youth homelessness as an individual-level problem. Further, Wallerstein's (2014) discussion of the structure in homeless youth shelters for minors could be applied to findings in the present study of homeless young adults. In his analysis, Wallerstein claims that youths' "deviant" behavior is seen as the cause of their homelessness, for which the "cure" is compliance with rules and "strategic social education" (p. 22), in this case extensive rules. As has been discussed in the context of programs for youth transitioning out of foster care, a developmental approach in transitional living programs for homeless youth might prioritize relationship-building and youth self-determination (Goodkind, Schelbe, & Shook, 2011).

The current study's findings highlight the day-to-day manifestation of the TLPs focus on employment and rules. The value of work was emphasized in discussions among residents, and rewards and accolades from staff and other residents around attaining and maintaining employment. Residents face strong judgment by other residents if they do not seem to be trying to find a job or otherwise working hard, and those who aren't able to find a job are not seen as "deserving" of the housing program. In fact, the transitional living program is generally framed by residents as a privilege rather than a right. For example according to one resident (Dennis), those who are not working hard on their own goals are "wasting an opportunity." During interviews, participants emphasized the steps they were taking to be productive and to surround themselves with those they deemed to be worthy of the program. This implies that a central goal of the TLP is to prepare youth to be economically self-sufficient immediately upon exiting the program as a priority over the growth and development of the youth.

Residents in the transitional living program at St. James also expressed concern around lack of flexibility in the rules and regulations and stringent consequences for failing to abide by "small rules" such as those governing curfew or forbidding food in the bedrooms. The experience of homelessness itself can be traumatizing and many people feel powerless and a lack of control over their lives as a result (Hopper, Bassuk, & Olivet, 2010). Some of the residents may be reacting to certain close monitoring because they feel a lack of control (Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010). From a developmental lens, it may be inappropriate to forbid a young adult from eating in his or her own room, for example, when many of the young people are in need of self-determination. Further, as noted by Ryan and Thompson (2013), these strict shelter and housing program

policies can be especially difficult for homeless young adults who may have experienced tremendous freedom and flexibility on the street and are in a developmental phase in which they seek independence. Those who come from strict family situations or foster care settings likely experienced high levels of control over their everyday activities, and thus continuing to extend a high level of control in a TLP for youth ages 18–21 may be a source of continued frustration without room to learn from mistakes. This previous research among young adults with experience in shelters or housing programs suggested that these rules could be a barrier to entry (Ryan & Thompson, 2013). The current study extends this argument, noting that young adults currently living in housing programs also feel restricted and overly monitored, even if the rules have not served as a barrier to their entry into the program. Research in shelters for minor homeless youth has had similar findings regarding youth's disapproval of rules regulating individual behaviors (Armaline, 2005). While these rules serve an important function in promoting safety among residents, they can sometimes be perceived by residents as punitive measures to control them beyond basic safety (Wallerstein, 2014). They can also be implemented by staff in some homeless youth programs to teach youth how to “function more effectively in the ‘real world,’” (Joniak, 2005, p. 975), which may or may not have been the primary purpose of the rules when they were originally established. Findings in the present study complement findings in studies done regarding programs for minor homeless youth (Armaline, 2005; Joniak, 2005) and suggest that older homeless youth also feel overly monitored and scrutinized in these housing settings.

Limitations

Analysis included multiple coders and frequent peer scrutiny to improve rigor. However, a number of limitations remain. As is common in research, those who opted to participate in the one-on-one interviews may be different than those who did not choose to participate. In particular, recruitment took place primarily from Life Skills classes in the evenings, so those who do not attend Life Skills classes as frequently would have had less of an opportunity to engage with the researcher and indicate interest in participating. Further, this research was focused on one transitional living program in one region, which limits the transferability of findings to other programs or locations.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

While the present study is based on one housing program model, the findings point to several potential implications for housing services delivery for homeless young adults.

As has been found in previous research regarding homeless youth (Coward Bucher, 2008), the present study found that there was a great level of diversity in needs of the participants. While almost all indicated some level of frustration with the rules, it was very apparent that some found the level of monitoring distressing. This finding suggests a need to reconsider this level and method of monitoring of day-to-day activities of residents in transitional housing programs, particularly when it comes to programs for young adults. In many cases the rules of such programs provide safety and structure to the residents' living environment, and some similar rules will continue to exist in these young people's lives in future housing of their own (e.g. no smoking in the lobby of many apartment complexes). However, some of the residents perceived certain rules as disruptive to their healthy development. A focus on “small rules” rather than the larger concerns of preventing risk may prevent the program from reaching its goals. Part of what prepares youth to feel competent is a feeling of control, autonomy, and empowerment. Prior research suggests that homeless youth view factors such as personal interactions and agency climate as more important than other resources available through an organization (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Overly strict rules and consequences that are perceived to be unfair or overly punitive, and a low level respect or autonomy, may lead some youth to lose trust in staff at agencies (Darbyshire, Muir-Cochrane, Fereday, Jureidini, & Drummond, 2006; Slesnick, Dashora, Letcher, Erdem, & Serovich, 2009). These positive relationships are key to youths' confidence in their own abilities, which can in turn facilitate participation in skill development activities (Heinze, Jozefowicz, & Toro, 2010). This confidence and competence is critical to youth when taking steps to go out in the world and be responsible. When youth are not trusted to manage their own everyday behaviors, such as eating a snack in their room, this may send a message to them about what they are and are not capable of doing. These conditions may create a context that inhibits youths' healthy development at a very critical moment in their lives.

Approaches that focus heavily on reducing problem behaviors have a high risk of losing opportunities with youth to develop a necessary platform of trust from which to establish stability (Wallerstein, 2014). In fact, individual goals should be pursued in a setting that does not over-regulate behaviors. TLPs should focus their efforts on additional assistance in attaining higher education, achieving financial stability and goals for the future. As is necessary in group living, there must be rules in place, but programs should involve youth in making decisions about these rules and expectations (Slesnick et al., 2009). Ultimately, youth in this age group require flexibility, the feeling of control over their lives, and a sense of autonomy in order to pursue

independence and other personal goals. Just as young adults in the age group between 18 and 24 themselves feel “in-between” adolescence and adulthood (Arnett, 2007), so do programs for this age group need to form an identity distinct from programs for adolescents and yet also distinct from programs for the wider adult population (Table 1).

Some of the residents may be reacting to certain strict rules because of their feelings of a lack of control, which in some cases may stem from traumatic experiences prior to the program (Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010). While history of trauma was not a theme that was explored in the present study, it is likely that many of the youth interviewed have suffered a range of experiences that may influence their perception of and experiences with the TLP. Four out of the sixteen youth had a history of foster care involvement, and these youth may have experienced trauma and barriers associated with instability (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007). We also know from prior research that even homeless youth who were not child-welfare involved may have also experienced abuse, discrimination, high levels of instability, or other traumas (Tyler, Hoyt, Whitbeck, & Cauce, 2001). In the context of a larger focus on developmentally-appropriate rules, staff TLPs may need further training to assess and address the needs of young adults in a supportive environment and avoid re-traumatization (Hopper, Bassuk, & Olivet, 2010). As a function of experiencing powerlessness due to the experience of homelessness itself, young

adults need to be given choices and provided flexibility so that they feel control over their lives (Hopper, Bassuk, & Olivet, 2010; McKenzie-Mohr, Coates, & McLeod, 2012).

The co-location of differing levels of housing (i.e., emergency shelter, transitional housing, and permanent supportive housing) may be point of contention and distress for some young people. While it was likely not the intention of St. James to have so many overlapping spaces, these programs may want to consider stronger boundaries between emergency shelter and transitional housing. However, in some cases co-location may benefit those in emergency shelters, as they may be encouraged by the availability of longer-term housing nearby and the strong emphasis on finding employment. However, further research should explore the benefits and challenges of this kind of housing model.

Funding This study was funded by the Social Justice Award at the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, which was awarded to Susanna Curry. The authors wish to thank the youth who participated in the study and the agency that hosted this research. We also wish to thank the anonymous reviewers and colleagues who provided insightful feedback at various stages of this work.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest Susanna Curry and Robin Petering declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of interview sample

Name ^a	Race/ethnicity	LGBTQ ^b	Foster care history
Andrew	African American	N	Y
Ben	White	N	N
Bianca	African American	Y	N
Blair	Southeast Asian	N	N
Brian	White	N	Y
Charles	African American	N	N
Christina	White	N	N
Daniel	White	Y	N
Denise	African American	Y	N
Dennis	African American	N	Y
Fred	White	N	N
Juan	Hispanic	N	N
Jesuina	White	N	N
Jonathan	White	N	N
Paris	Hispanic	Y	Y
Tyrone	African American	N	N

^aAll names are pseudonyms

^bAs disclosed to the researcher

References

- Aratani, Y. (2009). *Homeless children and youth: Causes and consequences*. New York, NY: National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health. Retrieved from http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_888.html.
- Armaline, W. T. (2005). “Kids need structure” negotiating rules, power, and social control in an emergency youth shelter. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 48(8), 1124–1148.
- Arnett, J. J. (2007). Emerging adulthood: What is it, and what is it good for? *Child Development Perspectives*, 1(2), 68–73.
- Charmaz, K. (2007). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage.
- Coates, J., & McKenzie-Mohr, S. (2010). Out of the frying pan, into the fire: Trauma in the lives of homeless youth prior to and during homelessness. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 37, 65.

- Coward Bucher, C. E. (2008). Toward a needs-based typology of homeless youth. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 42*(6), 549–554.
- Creswell, J. W. (2008). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd edn.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Daining, C., & DePanfilis, D. (2007). Resilience of youth in transition from out-of-home care to adulthood. *Children and Youth Services Review, 29*(9), 1158–1178.
- Darbyshire, P., Muir-Cochrane, E., Fereday, J., Jureidini, J., & Drummond, A. (2006). Engagement with health and social care services: Perceptions of homeless young people with mental health problems. *Health & Social Care in the Community, 14*(6), 553–562.
- Foster, L.K. (2010). *Estimating California's homeless youth population*. Sacramento, CA: California Research Bureau. Retrieved from: <http://cahomelessyouth.library.ca.gov/docs/pdf/HomelessYouthPopEstimateReport>.
- Goodkind, S., Schelbe, L. A., & Shook, J. J. (2011). Why youth leave care: Understandings of adulthood and transition successes and challenges among youth aging out of child welfare. *Children and Youth Services Review, 33*(6), 1039–1048.
- Heinze, H. J., Jozefowicz, D. M. H., & Toro, P. A. (2010). Taking the youth perspective: Assessment of program characteristics that promote positive development in homeless and at-risk youth. *Children and Youth Services Review, 32*(10), 1365–1372.
- Hopper, E. K., Bassuk, E. L., & Olivet, J. (2010). Shelter from the storm: Trauma-informed care in homelessness services settings. *The Open Health Services and Policy Journal, 3*(2), 80–100.
- Joniak, E. A. (2005). Exclusionary practices and the delegitimization of client voice: How staff create, sustain, and escalate conflict in a drop-in center for street kids. *American Behavioral Scientist, 48*(8), 961–988.
- Kidd, S. A., Miner, S., Walker, D., & Davidson, L. (2007). Stories of working with homeless youth: On being “mind-boggling”. *Children and Youth Services Review, 29*(1), 16–34.
- Klodawsky, F., Aubry, T., & Farrell, S. (2006). Care and the lives of homeless youth in neoliberal times in Canada. *Gender, Place and Culture, 13*(4), 419–436.
- Lenz-Rashid, S. (2006). Employment experiences of homeless young adults: Are they different for youth with a history of foster care? *Children and Youth Services Review, 28*(3), 235–259.
- McKenzie-Mohr, S., Coates, J., & McLeod, H. (2012). Responding to the needs of youth who are homeless: Calling for politicized trauma-informed intervention. *Children and Youth Services Review, 34*(1), 136–143. doi:10.1016/j.chilyouth.2011.09.008.
- Raleigh-DuRoff, C. (2004). Factors that influence homeless adolescents to leave or stay living on the street. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal, 21*(6), 561–571.
- Roth, J. L., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2003). What exactly is a youth development program? Answers from research and practice. *Applied Developmental Science, 7*(2), 94–111.
- Ryan, T. N., & Thompson, S. J. (2013). Perspectives on housing among homeless emerging adults. *Evaluation and Program Planning, 36*(1), 107–114.
- Slesnick, N., Dashora, P., Letcher, A., Erdem, G., & Serovich, J. (2009). A review of services and interventions for runaway and homeless youth: Moving forward. *Children and Youth Services Review, 31*(7), 732–742.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Sage Publications, Inc.
- Thompson, S. J., & Pollio, D. E. (2006). Adolescent runaway episodes: Application of an estrangement model of recidivism. *Social Work Research, 245*–251.
- Tyler, K. A., Hoyt, D. R., Whitbeck, L. B., & Cauce, A. M. (2001). The impact of childhood sexual abuse on later sexual victimization among runaway youth. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 11*(2), 151–176.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, (2014). Transitional Living Program fact sheet. <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/fysb/resource/tlp-fact-sheet>.
- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development [HUD], (2014). *HUD's 2014 Continuum of Care homeless assistance programs: Homeless populations and subpopulations*. Washington, D.C.: Author. Retrieved from https://www.hudexchange.info/resource/reportmanagement/published/CoC_PopSub_NatlTerrDC_2014.pdf.
- Wallerstein, J. A. (2014). Elusive reconciliations: Ideological conflict in youth homeless shelters. *Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless, 23*(1), 19–31.