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“A Joke You Can’t Tell”: Using Photography to Understand the Lived Experience of Adolescents in Homeless Families

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Michael G. Reeves, MSW
University of Connecticut, 2018

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experience of adolescents in homeless families. The extant research lacks the perspective of homeless adolescents themselves, how they cope, and the assets that help them. Like their peers, homeless adolescents face many challenges, but in environments that can be less conducive to successful development. Housing instability can interfere with the social exposure often experienced in school and in communities, potentially leaving homeless adolescents more vulnerable to negative peer and social influences.

This exploratory research took a strengths perspective, using critical theory and phenomenology, to better understand the lived experience of homeless adolescents. A purposive sample of thirteen adolescents living in homeless families was asked to define and describe their experience of homelessness via in-depth interviews and photographs.

Thematic analysis using a phenomenological approach was conducted on the transcripts of the interviews, a group discussion, and the photographs taken by the participants. The qualitative analysis was informed by a very small quantitative assessment of hope using a survey given pre- and post-photography.
Major themes that emerged from this research included how homeless adolescents maintained old and developed new connections to people, places, and things that in turn helped them maintain, develop, and use internal coping strategies. Participants were more hopeful than expected as indicated by their scores on the Hope Scale and the qualitative analyses.

The results of this study articulate the self-identified strengths, assets, and coping skills of the cohort and identify potential strategies that may be helpful to other adolescents living with homeless families. Further, the results can be used by providers, especially school social workers, to better understand and integrate these strengths into their interventions. This research adds to the social work literature on adolescent homelessness, provides voice to this vulnerable population, promotes social justice, and informs practice.

Keywords: adolescents, homelessness, coping, photo-elicitation, hope
“A Joke You Can’t Tell”: Using Photography to Understand the Lived Experience of Adolescents in Homeless Families

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A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Connecticut

2018
Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation

“A Joke You Can’t Tell”: Using Photography to Understand the Lived Experience of Adolescents in Homeless Families

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University of Connecticut
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Chapter 1: Introduction

“We want to make it socially, morally, politically and religiously unacceptable to have substandard housing and homelessness.” Millard Fuller – cofounder of Habitat for Humanity

“It is not acceptable for children and families to be without a roof over their heads in a country as wealthy as ours.” President Barack Obama

This dissertation tells the story of thirteen adolescents in homeless families. While each had a different story to tell about how he/she became homeless and about what helps them cope, themes emerged that can help guide those who work with this vulnerable group. In the first chapter, the problem is summarized and a review of the literature on homeless youth, the role of social workers, especially school social workers, with this population, and relevant policies are presented. The guiding framework for understanding the interaction of these youth and their environment and the theories behind the design of the study are described. The significance, rationale, and justification for the study are then summarized.

Statement of the Problem

There are more homeless families in the United States than in any other industrialized nation in the world (Bassuk, Decandia, & Richard, 2015). Each year, more than one million people receive homeless services from the government (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), 2016). These individuals are literally homeless or at imminent risk of homelessness, may be fleeing domestic violence, or are considered homeless by other federal statute. Between 2015 and 2016, unsheltered homelessness grew by three percent. More than half a million individuals in the US were sleeping outside or in emergency housing (HUD, 2016). This does not include the seven million identified by HUD who are temporarily housed with friends or
relatives but not defined as homeless (Bassuk, DeCandia, Beach, & Berman, 2014). Further, hundreds of thousands of poor, housed families are at high risk for homelessness because their paycheck-to-paycheck lives and inability to save for emergencies make it highly unlikely that they will be able to pay their rent if they lose their income.

Counting the homeless population is inherently difficult regardless of the definition used by different federal agencies. According to local point-in-time (PIT) organizers, volunteers and staff go out into the community to areas where unsheltered homeless are known to be living (E. Hirsch, personal conversation, January 2016; D. Hall, personal conversation December 2017), such as parks, campgrounds, under bridges, or parking lots. Volunteers and staff implement a variety of strategies, including a straightforward street-count, a street-count with an interview, or via planned events likely to attract the homeless (United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), 2012). This data collection process is difficult and can be dangerous because volunteers go into potentially treacherous areas to seek out the homeless who are trying to remain invisible. According to a local PIT volunteer, homeless individuals have been known to deny their homelessness even when the PIT count finds them sleeping in a car packed with all their possessions (M. Angi, personal conversation, January 2016) or, according to a street outreach worker, to hide in the woods when it is time for the yearly count (S. Soto, personal conversation, January 2016).

Of the approximately two hundred thousand individuals in homeless families, 60% were under the age of 18 (HUD, 2016). According to homeless advocates, the
number of homeless youth has risen nationally to all-time highs in recent years (Vermont Affordable Housing Coalition (VAHC), 2015). The precise number of homeless youth is difficult to determine due to lack of a standard methodology of data collection and to the mobility of the homeless population (National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL, 2016). As noted, different federal agencies responsible for providing Congress and the public with statistics define homelessness differently. Until 2009, HUD did not include individuals and families in most hotel/motel living situations unless they met specific criteria. According to a local homeless prevention center director, in some regions hotels/motels are the only form of family shelter (D. Hall, personal conversation, September 2016). HUD also did not include those who are staying with family or friends, sometimes called “doubled-up” or “couch surfing”, until 2009 and continues to place restrictions on inclusion (National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE), 2017). HUD acknowledges there are at least seven million more individuals without permanent housing than are currently in the count. By including “doubling-up” – individuals who sleep on couches, extra mattresses, or floors in the homes of their friends and families – the number of identified youth may increase by as much as fivefold (Miller, 2011).

One national organization dedicated to preventing and ending youth homelessness is Voice of Youth Count (VoYC). Housed at Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, VoYC acknowledges the gap in knowledge about homeless youth and is mobilizing to provide broader and more complete knowledge to those trying to prevent and end youth homelessness. Through direct involvement with homeless youth, VoYC is working to collect better data on the number and characteristics of homeless youth,
how they survive, the services they access, and the influence of policies (Voices of Youth Count (VoYC), 2016). Yet a significant gap exists in the extant literature that involves the perspective of homeless adolescents and what they identify that helps them feel hopeful, cope, and adapt. This gap challenges efforts to implement supportive social interventions (Rogers & Kinsman, 2013). Normal childhood activities, including education, are disrupted by homelessness (Coles, 1970). Homeless youth are more often the victims of social isolation and rejection than their housed peers (Anooshian, 2003) and are more likely to miss a significant number of school days due to moving, bureaucratic delays, and illness. Public attitudes and public opinions about the homeless is repeated by peers and can affect homeless youth’s attitudes about themselves (Tompsett & Toro, 2004) and their sense of hope about their future. Additionally, stereotypical paradigms exist that impede strengths-based research with this population (Cronley, 2017).

Schools and especially school social workers are at the forefront of working with homeless students, through direct and indirect services and through the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (MVA), federal legislation that supports access to public education for homeless youth (Canfield, Teasley, Abell, & Randolph, 2012). Unfortunately, significant barriers to school social work practice with homeless children remain even with the MVA (Canfield, 2014), including in-school barriers such as school administrative policies and transportation, and general barriers, such as transiency and attendance. Canfield found that school social workers were often unaware of the impact these barriers were having on service provision. Social workers have an ethical responsibility to bring awareness to perspectives that have
been or are being suppressed (Padgett, 2008), and as such are required by the code of ethics to pursue social change on behalf of oppressed populations (NASW, 2017). This research gives voice to adolescents in homeless families and in doing so, provides insight into how to better address their needs.

**Introduction to the Adolescents in this Study and the Overall Study**

The goal of phenomenological research is to engage the reader in a story about the lived experience of a particular phenomenon. Meet Marco:

Marco was happy with his life in Puerto Rico. He, his parents, and his brothers lived a middle-class lifestyle. His parents had good jobs, they lived in a nice house, and they sent him to a good, private school. When his parents’ marriage fell apart, his mother could no longer afford their house nor the costs for her boys to attend good schools. “I wasn’t having the best time there. We used to go to a private school. We used to have our own house and stuff. She used to have to pay everything and the amount of like child support my dad pays. They got divorced is not the best. She had to; basically she had to pay everything by herself.”

Public school in Puerto Rico was not a viable option. Marco’s mother decided to move the family to the US to be closer to family support and so that her boys could attend public school. “She wanted us to get a good education. After a little while she decided to come here just because you can get a good education here in public school but you can’t there.”

Marco was not part of the decision to come to the US. Once here, his mother’s education and training did not lead to a job that could support housing. They stayed with family for a while, but they had no social connections and when they could no longer
stay with family due to a disagreement between his mother and her sister, they found themselves homeless. Marco’s 18-year-old brother had to find his own housing because family shelters will only take parents and minors.

Marco’s story is typical of the adolescent participants in this study in that family life events and parental decisions, including moving from other states or from the unincorporated US territory Puerto Rico, led to their homelessness. These adolescents were swept up in situations out of their control. For some, it was due to domestic issues or family responsibility. For others, it was immigration. For still another, it was a catastrophe. Most went through a period living with family or friends, sleeping on couches or in basements on air mattresses. Some lived in motels. Some were unsheltered. Marco’s situation also reflects the single-parent female-headed homeless household, most common in the Northeast US (Bassuk et al., 1996). Most homeless students are likely to attend more than one school during a year of homelessness (Moore, 2005). The students in this study reported relative continuity in their school placements, only having changed schools if they moved from another state or country or if they were attending alternative schools, making school continuity impossible, or by their choice.

The reader has been briefly introduced to Marco, one of the adolescents who agreed to share their experience. As noted, this dissertation tells the story of 13 homeless adolescents living with their families. While each had a different story to tell about how they became homeless and about what helps them cope, common themes did emerge. In this chapter, the literature on homeless youth, the role of school social workers with this population, the policies that affect homeless youth, and the framework
and theories that guide the study are described and the study rationale is provided. In the second chapter, the methodology, including data collection and analysis, and the steps taken to ensure trustworthiness, and the limitations of this specific study are described. The 13 participants are portrayed in Chapter Three and their stories and themes that emerged are reported in Chapters Four, Five, and Six. Chapter Seven pulls together the results in a discussion of the findings and their implications for the social workers and school social workers, potentially increasing their effectiveness with this group. The dissertation concludes with recommendations for future research.

Literature Review

Youth Homelessness. The two primary agencies responsible for collecting yearly homelessness data are the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Department of Education (DOE). The U.S. Census Bureau also collects homelessness data every 10 years with a Service-Based Enumeration (SBE) Operation. HUD bases its homelessness statistics on a Point-in-Time (PIT) count combined with a Housing Inventory Count. Member agencies of each state’s Continuum of Care are responsible for counting sheltered and unsheltered homeless in their area in January each year (HUD, 2016). Sheltered homeless statistics are reported by provider agencies.

There are at least five identified subsets of homeless youth: 1) those in homeless families, 2) those who have left their families due to abuse, 3) those who were “kicked out” of their homes (p. 309), 4) those who were in and have left state care, and 5) those who have emigrated to the US without guardians (Kurtz, Jarvis, & Kurtz, 1991). Within each category, there can be several reasons for homelessness, including economic
hardship, family violence, family responsibility, and crisis. This study attempted to understand the lived experience of adolescents living with their homeless families. This study focused on this subset of homeless youth because they were the most likely to be identified, the most reachable, are the largest group of homeless youth, and are the most likely to be attending school (Miller, 2011). One of the objectives of this study was to ascertain insights that could be applied to school social work. Homeless adolescents who do not live with their caretakers were not included in this study due to the difficulty identifying them and the potential risk to these adolescents in seeking caregiver consent.

Regardless of the definitions and statistics used, homelessness is a large and consequential problem in the United States (Schmitz, Wagner, & Menke, 2001). Histories of homeless families reflect high mobility and instability (Rog & Buckner, 2007). Homeless families rarely live in one place long enough to establish community roots or social networks, decreasing the children’s exposure to social connections that might develop in school, with children from their neighborhood, or with the children of their parents’ friends in housed families. Additionally, this transiency can interfere with ties to immediate and extended family and friends. These broken relationships can leave homeless families feeling isolated, without needed supports from family and friends (Domke, 2017).

Many homeless youth are homeless because of their family’s situation. Homeless youth are stuck in a situation that is not going away, despite contemporary public and private attempts to help people avoid and/or escape homelessness (Koegel, 2004). Often, the youth find themselves in a difficult situation, frequently without the
support of their parent(s) who are too overwhelmed with the crisis to help their children (Percy, 1995). Even if old enough to work to try to help the family, their transiency makes it difficult to hold a job, to get transportation to a job, and to develop the references need for a future job. In addition, homelessness can result in a disconnection from belongings, including personal items, mementos, and important documents (Boxill & Beaty, 1990).

The number of homeless students in U.S. public schools is at an all-time high (Kamenetz, 2016; Pannoni, 2014), having doubled since before the recession (Layton & Brown, 2015). One in thirty school-aged children is homeless (Phillips, 2015). The McKinney-Vento Act requires that public schools provide access and transportation to public education. Yet homeless students are chronically absent, at twice the rate of housed students (da Costa Nunez, Erb-Downward, & Shaw-Amoah, 2015). Absenteeism and school mobility are strongly correlated with poor academic achievement, grade retention, and dropping out (Buckner, Bassuk, & Weinreb, 2001; da Costa Nunez, Erb-Downward, & Shaw-Amoah, 2015; Utah Education Policy Center (UEPC), 2012). Even when they are in school, these adolescents’ educational needs can go unrecognized and unmet (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003). Homeless students face a higher risk of academic difficulties, including school failure, than their low-income housed peers (da Costa Nunez, Erb-Downward, & Shaw-Amoah, 2015; Kurtz, Jarvis, & Kurtz, 1991; National Association of Social Workers, New York State Chapter, 2015; Obradović et al., 2009).

Homeless adolescents face additional challenges related to a lack of connection with peer role models and a need to focus on basic survival. Some research indicates
that homeless youth face greater risks to their physical and mental health than their low-income housed peers (Buckner, 2008; Greenblatt & Robertson, 1993; Molnar, Rath, & Klein, 1990). Rafferty and Shinn (1991) found that homeless teens’ physical health could be hindered by a lack of proper nutrition, sanitation, and preventive pediatric medical care. However, others found no significant difference between these groups (Masten, Miliotis, Graham-Bermann, Ramirez, & Neemann, 1993; Masten et al., 1997; Schteingart, Molnar, Klein, Lowe, & Hartmann, 1995). This variation may have been due to the type of homeless youth addressed. If they were sheltered, their physical health may have been better than that of street youth.

**Adolescent development.** Adolescence is a period of great biopsychosocial change (Austrian, 2002; Sales & Irwin, 2013). All adolescents face biological changes beginning with the onset of puberty. In addition to hormonal and structural changes in their bodies, their brains continue to develop physically, emotionally, and cognitively. Adolescence is a period of high brain growth and neural plasticity. The reciprocal effects of genetics and environmental interactions lead to changes in brain physiology and can affect resiliency and mental health problems (Cozolino, 2006). Older adolescents in the dominant western culture tend to distance themselves from their parents, seeking autonomy and identity (Austrian, 2002). Peers strongly influence personality, decisions, and behavior (Tomé, de Matos, Simões, Camacho, & Alves Diniz, 2012). Self-esteem is often low and emotions fluctuate between extremes. Often, adolescents need protection but rebel against it.

The positivist and post-positivist paradigms of scientific inquiry prevalent at the turn of the twentieth century informed the theories of development established at that
time. Sigmund Freud’s theory of psychosexual development posited that adolescence was a period of turmoil dealing with the resolution of sexual drives (Freud, 2016). Anna Freud described adolescence as a period of developmental disturbance, including sweeping upheavals in character and personality (Freud, 1952). Ego psychologists shifted the focus from drives to the mastery of ego tasks and defense mechanisms (Blos, 1962; Erikson, Paul, Heider, & Gardner, 1959; Kohlberg, 1964; Piaget, 1972). These theorists assumed children followed established stages towards adulthood and were viewed as incomplete adults, not as fully formed individuals and not as reliable informants in research (Hogan, 2005). Ensuing ego theory differentiated between the ego tasks of males and females (Gilligan, 1993; Pollack, 1998).

Behavioral theorists such as Skinner and Watson saw children as passive recipients of learning from adults (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). Alternatively, modern social constructionists view children as social actors, with an active role in their own learning and development (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). These perspectives contradict the universal stage models of development, seek to understand children in their multiple contexts, and value their perspectives. These new theories are strongly rooted in the social constructionist paradigm and a child-centered perspective which values childhood for its unique qualities and which views children as fully formed, autonomous individuals, with rights of their own to be addressed when they are subjects of research (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). Further, these theorists stress relative plasticity across the life span, the effect of internal and external relationships on development, and the importance of place in history (Lerner & Castellino, 2002), all of which are syntonic with the ecological framework at the core of social work (Gitterman & Germain, 2008).
Perhaps part of the reason for the apparent disconnect between some researchers and adolescents may have been differences in communication style. Communication between adults and adolescents can be complicated (Pickhardt, 2011). Adolescents and adults, particularly adults in authority, often share mutually antagonistic styles that can interfere with effective communication (Drury, 2003). What is considered appropriate communication is often determined by the adult, thus adult-youth communication may begin with different goals and develop into a conflictual interaction (Drury, 2003). Adult interactions with adolescents need to emphasize openness, trust, and confidentiality to be effective (Ginsburg, 2001). This includes the posture of the researcher, respecting the adolescents as the authority on their lives, and as equal research partners (Checkoway & Gutiérrez, 2006).

Today’s youth communicate frequently with images. The prominence in adolescent communication of social media platforms such as Flickr, Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat demonstrates this (United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), 2016). The use of photography in research, as was used in this study, has been shown to improve adult-adolescent communication by inducing adolescent interest, thought, and pleasure (Sibeoni et al., 2017).

This researcher respects the unique perspective of youth, their unique communication style, and their importance as research participants (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). Adolescents have been studied at length, but rarely have they been included in developing, implementing, evaluating, and/or disseminating research findings, even though they have been shown to be effective partners in the research process (Checkoway & Gutiérrez, 2006; Harley, 2015). In many research studies about
youth, the youth were “not normally at the table” (Checkoway & Gutiérrez, 2006, pg. 5). The prevalent perspective of “adolescents as victims” and “adolescents as problems” can be shifted to “adolescents as resources” through involving them in research. Participatory research is a way to involve youth (Checkoway & Gutiérrez, 2006). Homeless adolescents can impart how they as individuals and as members of the homeless community face and adapt to adversity. They can have an important role in helping to define the problems, analyzing findings, and helping adults understand their situation and their strengths, if engaged effectively (Checkoway & Gutiérrez, 2006). Using different forms of participation – such as how this study used both semi-structured interviews and photography – is a viable approach for working with youth (Checkoway, 2011). Further, studies show that youth participation can positively affect the “social development, personal confidence, social connectedness, civic competencies and leadership development” of youth (Checkoway & Gutiérrez, 2006, p. 2). Youth participation in research can help them exercise their ability to act independently towards goals (James & James, 2008).

An area of research that could involve youth is understanding the factors that lead to success. While a large body of literature exists on the threats faced by homeless youth, much less literature addresses the factors that may contribute to their success (Israel & Jozefowicz-Simbent, 2009; Perron, Cleverley, & Kidd, 2014). Many studies document the negative impact of homelessness on children and youth, but few focus on their strengths and coping skills (Herth, 1998). Buckner (2008) identifies two generations of literature on homeless adolescents – that conducted prior to 1990 that focused primarily on individual deficits and that conducted after 1990 that focuses more
on the impact of policies and assets on outcomes. This later research found significant overlap in the experiences of homeless and low-income housed students, concluded that federal policies can have a positive impact on educational outcomes, but found that they were not consistently implemented or funded, and identified diverse assets that can increase positive outcomes. Knowledge of these factors can aid social workers in their interactions with homeless youth, whether they are providing services in the larger community or in schools.

**School Social Workers and their Role.** School social workers often provide services that help students overcome the barriers that interfere with their ability to benefit from education (Constable, 2009) and so may be of particular relevance to homeless youth who are in school. School social work has a history that goes back over a century (Kelly, 2008). Social workers were first hired by outside agencies to provide mental health services in schools, but by the 1910s, school districts were hiring social workers to outreach to truant students (Allen-Mears, Montgomery, & Kim, 2013). The passage of The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL-142) in 1975, later named The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, resulted in a dramatic increase in social work in schools to provide direct services (Kelly, 2008).

Frey and others have called for a national school social work practice model to better define and articulate the role (Frey et al., 2012; Frey & Dupper, 2005), however the practice description for the school social worker in U.S. schools remains fragmented (Kelly, 2008). The reality is school social work services vary widely, depending on the individual social worker’s skills and the needs of the locality. For many school social workers, their focus is on providing primary, direct service to students with Individual
Education Plans (IEPs) and 504 plans (Allen-Meares, 1994). IEPs document special education modifications to the regular education curriculum and 504 plans document regular education accommodations per the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (PL 93-112), such as extended test-taking time, directions being given verbally, or taking tests in a quiet space separate from the rest of the class. The plans are developed by school-based teams, which include special educators, specialized service providers such as school psychologists, school social workers, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and regular educators. Since school social work is provided in a setting when the primary goal is educating students, service provision is driven by this goal, and always starts with direct service to students with IEPs or 504s. These legally mandated services take priority and are driven by Medicaid reimbursement for special education services and the legal authority of the plans. In addition, surveys show school social workers are the mental health providers primarily responsible for the most challenging cases, while managing large caseloads and increasing administrative requirements (Kelly, Raines, Stone, & Frey, 2010; Kelly et al., 2015), again limiting their ability to intervene with other issues. Although national surveys show some school districts may be moving to a model where social work services are provided by outside agencies (Allen-Meares, Montgomery, & Kim, 2013), most students’ mental health needs continue to be served by district employees.

While research indicates homeless youth are more likely than other impoverished children to have special needs (Sparks, 2013; Staples, 2013), homeless students may not be known to their districts and many homeless students’ special needs go unidentified. Homeless students and families may choose to not identify themselves out
of embarrassment or due to the parents’ fear that their children will be taken away if they reveal their housing status to officials (NCHE, n.d.). Records, including those of previous special education testing and services, can be lost in the shuffle (Rafferty, 1997). Higher levels of absenteeism amongst homeless youth can hinder identification for special education services (Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness, 2017). Even when identified, some school administrators may not share this information about the student’s homelessness status with school social workers to protect confidentiality (A. Storey, personal conversation, October 2013). Thus, homeless students’ needs often fall into the overall regular education needs of the school.

Service provision to regular education students are often secondary to the legally mandated services that must be provided to students with identified special needs and service plans. Regular education interventions are not Medicaid reimbursable, although grants are available, nor does law mandate them. School social workers can negotiate with building and district administration if there is time left in their day to provide other services at other levels. The focus on services written into IEPs and 504s leaves school social workers with limited time for secondary or tertiary level interventions (Kelly, et. al., 2015) such as providing whole-school prevention activities, working with community leaders to address issues outside of school, or participating in school leadership opportunities. Such activities might also allow school social workers to better address the needs of homeless students (Kelly, et. al., 2010).

As of 2013, there were more than a quarter million practicing child, family, and school social workers nationally (Allen-Mears, Montgomery, & Kim, 2013). The National Association of Social Work (NASW) Code of Ethics (2017) and the NASW School Social
Work Standards (2012) guide school social work practice for those with a social work degree. Less than half of the states require that a person identified as a school social worker have a social work degree (Altshulter, 2006), resulting in school social work activities often being provided by individuals without social work degrees. Further, many districts evaluate school social workers’ practice by educator standards and, in fact, many school social workers are supervised and evaluated by administrators without social work training or experience (Kelly, 2008). Therefore, whether school social workers are evaluated as effective, which determines if they keep their job, is based on their performance as measured by classroom teacher standards. School social workers may feel pressured to perform the tasks that will be evaluated before expanding their interventions to regular education students or macro systems.

Despite competing demands and the fact that many school employees who do not have a social work degree are being called school social workers, school social workers are on the forefront of serving homeless students (Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006; North Carolina Public Schools, n.d.). They are in a critical position to engage homeless adolescents and to help them thrive (Buckner, Bassuk, & Weinreb, 2001; Daniels, 1995; Hunte, 2012; Miller, 2011). School social workers have the possibility of daily contact with their students over the 180-day typical school year. For homeless adolescents who are enrolled, school can provide one of the more stable, secure, and predictable settings in their lives (Groton, Teasley, & Canfield, 2013). School social workers are in a critical position to engage homeless adolescents, to support them to remain in school, and to help them thrive. Schools and school social workers can help to increase a feeling of rootedness, support, and normalcy. School social workers can
build on the strengths of homeless youth through direct service and by facilitating collaborative efforts, such as after-school programs designed by the youth themselves (Schmitz, Wagner, & Menke, 2001). School social workers can implement research-based programs that teach non-violent conflict resolution and social skills, and run groups that build social networks, to the benefit of all students, but which are particularly important for homeless youth due to their greater risk of struggling with these issues. Further, school social workers can help educators better understand homelessness and be more aware that they may have homeless students in their classes whose needs ought to be considered, and whose voices should be heard.

**Policies Related to Youth Homelessness.** Federal law addressing the needs of homeless students is celebrating its 30th anniversary. According to Rog & Buckner (2007), schools were unprepared to deal with the family homelessness crisis when it emerged in the 1980s. This led to homeless students being denied access to public education because their guardian could not prove residency and could not produce required documents for registration (Rafferty, 1995). The Stewart B. McKinney Homelessness Assistance Act was signed into law by President Ronald Reagan in 1987, but it was not implemented on a widespread basis until a few years later (Miller, 2011). Title VII of the Act includes authorization for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth Program (EHCY), and aims to ensure access to a free and appropriate public education for homeless youth (Canfield, Teasley, Abell, & Randolph, 2012). The Act has struggled to be fully funded since its inception, often receiving fewer funds than authorized by Congress (NCH, 2006). It was amended several times during the late 1980s and 1990s, including revisions in 1994 that granted more flexibility in the use of
funds to schools. The Act was renamed the McKinney-Vento Act Homeless Assistance Act (MVA) in 2000 by President Bill Clinton and was reauthorized in 2001 under President George W. Bush as part of the No Child Left Behind Act. The Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act reauthorized and amended the McKinney-Vento Act in 2009 as an amendment to the Helping Families Save Their Homes Act. The amendments included better information management, increased funding, increased prevention resources, and changed to HUD’s definition of homelessness to include some instances of doubling up (HUD, 2017). It also allowed funds to help families who were at risk of losing their housing in as little as seven days. MVA is currently authorized as amended under the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015. McKinney-Vento and the acronym MVA are frequently used by school districts and researchers when referring to Title VII (EHCY) and is used in this dissertation to refer to Title VII.

While the Act funds interventions to “support enrollment, attendance, and success of homeless children and youths” (Congress, 2016, p. 53) and to ensure access to a free and appropriate public education (Canfield, Teasley, Abell, & Randolph, 2012), it only provides non-regulatory guidance for how local districts implement services. It does not direct public schools to implement specific evidence-based strategies for homeless families or for homeless youth and does not address prevention. The MVA addresses the educational needs of homeless students by mandating that school districts allow students to remain in one district even if they move to available housing outside their district (US Department of Education, 2016). While each district must have a homeless liaison and each state must have a state director,
the McKinney-Vento Act leaves determining supports and staffing to the discretion of the school districts. The Act does not specify how the role of liaison should be filled. The homeless liaison, as described under Section 722(g)(1)(J)(ii), may or may not be a social worker or a human services professional. Per MVA, the homeless liaison must collect and report statistics on identified homeless students to a state coordinator, who in turn reports the statistics to the U.S. Department of Education. The thoroughness of these statistics is dependent on the role the liaison takes in engaging the community through education, outreach, and identifying local homeless families. Families may still decide not to self-identify and protect their anonymity, even though this may result in their not receiving the services they are entitled to (Gibson, 2011). NCHE reported 1.3 million enrolled homeless students during the 2014-2015 school year, using the MVA definition of homelessness (NCHE, 2015).

MVA provides funding to Continuum of Care programs to fund non-profits and governments to rehouse quickly the homeless and an Emergency Solutions Grant, which can fund street outreach, emergency shelter programs, homeless prevention, technology, and administration. Grant funds are available to school districts through the state educational authority. These grant funds can be used to support the goal of MVA – to ensure access to public education. However, school districts are frequently unaware of the availability of these funds and do not take advantage (Hasselle, 2017). Few districts have their liaison work to secure federal aid (Hasselle, 2017). According to a school liaison, MVA directs liaisons to work to provide academic stability to homeless students by making them aware that they can stay in one school or school system even if they move (S. DePerry, personal conversation, October 14, 2013). MVA does not
address the social problem of homelessness beyond ensuring access to a free and appropriate public education in an important effort to break the cycle of homelessness that can be perpetuated by lack of education. School districts and individual liaisons provide additional services by choice, such as providing toiletries, food, and clothing. Advocates for the homeless report that McKinney-Vento does not provide adequate training for those on the front line of identifying and intervening with homeless students, especially teachers, keeping key stakeholders in the dark (Hasselle, 2017). In fact, there is great variety in how school districts address homeless youth (S. DePerry, personal conversation, October 14, 2013) which may result in limited interventions or interventions that lack empirical evidence (Mawhinney-Rhodes & Stahler, 2006).

**Ecological/Systems Framework and Theoretical Perspective.** School social workers with a degree in social work have an educational foundation in the ecological/systems framework. Social work focus has included the individual and their environment since the early development of the profession (Ambrosino, Ambrosino, Heffernan, & Shuttlesworth, 2016). The ecological/systems framework allows for the inclusion of diverse factors from micro systems to macro systems when working to assess client needs and when planning interventions. Ecological/systems is considered a framework rather than a theory because it is “broader and more constructed than a theory” and has not been thoroughly tested (Ambrosino et al., 2016, p. 57). It is used in this study to guide the understanding of the interrelations between the individual homeless adolescents and their environment.

The ecological/systems framework, originally proposed by Carel Germain (1973) and operationalized in the life model of social work practice (Gitterman & Germain,
is used by social workers to assess phenomena in their environmental and social contexts. When the person and their environment do not have a good level of fit, stress is experienced. Goodness of fit is assessed by the social worker beyond the individual and their immediate interactions, to include other systems at the mezzo, exo, macro, and chrono levels. Ongoing lack of goodness of fit can lead to chronic stress, which can damage development, health, and social functioning (Gitterman & Germain, 2008). The ecological/systems framework also considers how the social and ecological environments reciprocally impact choices (Jennings, 2011).

According to this framework, homelessness is assessed as a poor level of fit between the individual and/or family and the environment. In ecological terms, the habitat of a homeless person or family interferes with physical and psychological health and is likely to lead to isolation and a sense of hopelessness. When habitats do not meet the needs of the individual or family, functioning is negatively affected (Hepworth et al., 2010). Additionally, the person’s niche can be disempowered and stigmatized (Germain & Gitterman, 1995). Niche is operationalized as the status of the individual in the system (Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney, Strom-Gottfried, & Larson, 2010). An ecological/systems framework guides social work interventions towards improving the person: environment fit through attention to reciprocal adaptations that enhance relatedness between people and with their environment and improve competence, self-esteem, and self-direction (Gitterman & Germain, 2008). Adolescent development, a life transition stressor, is seen as a predictable first-order stressor that may only require minor behavioral changes to enhance fit. First-order life stressors are events that occur frequently and can be predicted. On their own, they can often be managed within the
family system. Second-order stressors are life events that are unpredicted, resulting in serious challenges to normal functioning. Homelessness can be identified as a second-order stressor that requires a changed worldview where individuals and families may have to reinvent themselves in a new reality (Germain & Gitterman, 1995). Working in groups with peers dealing with the same issues or circumstances can be helpful during times of life transitions or for those with difficult life status, such as homelessness (Gitterman, 2005). Sharing their situation, whether in groups or individually by talking with others, can both help them feel that they are not alone and help them learn from others who have overcome difficulty.

Resilience is an ecological concept that has particular utility for homeless adolescents. Resilience involves successful adaptation in the context of significant threats to development (Masten, 1994). It involves the ability to overcome adversity and be successful despite high risk (Fraser, Richman, & Galinsky, 1999). Long-term exposure to adversity can disrupt adolescents’ ability to adapt to threats to their psychosocial development (Masten et al., 1999). Resilient adolescents, like resilient individuals in general, are better able to adapt and be successful despite these threats. Resilience develops through adolescence and relates to social competence (Martel, et al., 2007). In the ecological perspective, protective factors that influence resiliency include environmental resources, such as schools, in addition to familial and individual resources (Gitterman & Germain, 2008).

Resilient youth typically have more psychosocial resources than their less resilient peers (Masten et al., 1999). Homeless youth may lack important resources resulting from the impact of their transiency on establishing connections. They are more
likely than their housed low-income peers to withdraw when faced with problems than to seek help, they are not as likely to identify members of the family as sources of support, and they are less likely to try to face and work through their problems (Schmitz, Wagner, & Menke, 2001).

Few studies address the role of resilience with homeless youth (Cronley & Evans, 2017; Perron, Cleaverly, & Kidd, 2014), and what does exist mostly focuses on street youth. The majority of this research is qualitative. It identifies themes associated with resilience, such as independence, having street smarts, spirituality, motivation, positive attitudes, hope, determination, meaning and purpose in life, self-care, and readiness to accept help (Bender, Thomas, McManus, Landry, & Flynn, 2007; Perron, Cleaverly, & Kidd, 2014; Williams, Lindsey, Kurtz, & Jarvis, 2001). “Resilience narratives” (p. 291) gathered through lengthy exploratory interviews with homeless street youth described protective factors of personal strengths that helped to maintain their sense of self in the challenging situation, including connection with and support from others and the ability to reciprocate that support (Kidd & Davidson, 2007).

Youth in these studies indicated increased hope through their belief in a higher power, increased motivation and hopefulness by seeing the success of others in their situation, and intentional hopefulness (Bender, et al., 2007). The research also identified coping strategies that may be viewed as maladaptive, such as social distancing, if seen in normative youth (Kolar, Erikson, & Stewart, 2012).

The relatively limited quantitative research on this relationship negatively associates resilience with length of homelessness (Cleaverly & Kidd, 2011; Lee, Li-Jung, Rotheram-Borus, & Milburn, 2011) and psychological distress (Perron, Cleaverly,
Quantitative research also identified protective factors such as social connectedness with family, schools, and peers, and self-esteem as predictors of resilience with this population (Dang, 2014; Kidd & Shahar, 2008). Rew and associates found that resilience in homeless youth was positively associated with connectedness and negatively related to hopelessness, loneliness, and life-threatening behaviors. Self-perception of resiliency also was a protective factor with the homeless youth in their study (Rew, Taylor-Seehafer, Thomas, & Yockey, 2001).

Resilient homeless adolescents received national and international news coverage in 2014 for being the valedictorians of their high schools. Both saw their homelessness as a challenge, not a barrier. They identified motivation, ambition, and a sense of purpose – factors that are related to one mechanism of resilience – hope – as helping them be successful (Jerreat, 2014). The choice to assess hope came primarily from this identification by youth who had been successful despite their homelessness. It was also chosen because, having selected a critical approach for this research, the works of Paulo Freire identified hope as crucial in the “struggle to change the world” (Freire, 2006, p. 2). Freire recognized that this struggle to overcome oppression could be overwhelming and could lead to hopelessness and giving up. Therefore, hope was a necessary part of a critical pedagogy. He saw hopelessness as preventing this goal to change the world.

“When it becomes a program, hopelessness paralyzes us, immobilizes us. We succumb to fatalism, and then it becomes impossible to muster the strength to we absolutely need for the fierce struggle that will re-create the world” (Freire, 2006, p. 2).

Hope is also identified in the literature as a mechanism that can enhance resilience (Hirsch, 2013). It is operationalized as a cognitive state positively associated
with motivation (Hughes et al., 2010) and academic success (Martin, Rand, & Shea, 2011). Gitterman suggests resilience, a protective factor, helps individuals deal with situations that seem unbearable and that might lead to the loss of hope and trust (2012). In group work, hope is identified as an asset of resiliency (Hirayama & Hirayama, 2012). Gitterman and Knight suggest hope can be enhanced when individuals see others make progress (2016).

Hope is correlated with other aspects of social and emotional well-being. Individuals with higher hope tend to avoid crises, cope better with stressors, and have healthier lifestyles (Snyder et al., 1991a). High hope individuals tend to exhibit more positive emotional states. Further, hope is positively associated with perceived competency and self-esteem (Marques, Pais-Ribeiro, & Lopez, 2007), optimism, perceived problem-solving capabilities (Snyder et al., 1997b), and higher academic performance (Lopez, Bouwkamp, Edwards, & Teramoto Pedrotti, 2000). Hope provides a foundation for building positive outcomes (Farran, Herth, & Popovich, 1995). It has been negatively correlated with depression (Kwon, 2002), and internalizing and externalizing behavior problems (Gilman, Dooley, & Florell, 2006). Goal oriented and purposeful youth are more driven in their lives, happier, and less susceptible to risks (Hill, Burrow, & Sumner, 2013). Homeless adolescents who are more resilient are more hopeful and engage in less risk-taking behavior (Hughes et al., 2010). Hope plays an important role in identity testing, goal setting, help seeking, and coping, all of which can help an individual manage trying life circumstances.

Hope is socially primed (Snyder, Cheavens, & Sympson, 1997) and, as it develops through childhood and early adolescence, can be fostered by caregivers.
Hope is acquired through the socialization process (Averill, Caitlin, & Chon, 1990) in the family and in greater society. Snyder (2002) postulated “most people lack hope because they were not taught to think in this manner…” (p. 253). While studies have found no correlation between a parent’s hope and their child’s hope (Hoy, Suldo, & Mendez, 2013), one factor that does contribute to a child developing hope is an adult (not necessarily a parent) who helps the child feel special and appreciated (Coordinated Campaign for Learning Disabilities, n. d.). Typical adolescents need a strong support system to manage their developmental challenges: homeless adolescents may need even stronger psychosocial supports to overcome the barriers to success created or exacerbated by their homelessness.

C. R. Snyder and colleagues operationalized hope the impact of an individual’s cognitive appraisal of his/her ability to reach goals, defined by as “contingency thinking” (1989, 1994). Snyder posited that an individual’s sense of hope comes internally from their self-assessment and is typically an enduring disposition. Accordingly, once developed, hope is resilient. Therefore, it is important to attempt to build hope before the end of adolescence. While hope can fluctuate depending on the presenting stressor, it is theorized to do so only within overall dispositional boundaries (Snyder, Sympson, Ybasco, & Borders, 1996). Snyder and his colleagues defined hope as “…a positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of agency and pathways” (Snyder, Irving & Anderson, 1991, p. 287). Agency refers to the determination to achieve goals and pathways refers to plans to meet goals. The two elements are reciprocal but not synonymous. Neither is sufficient by itself to define hope. Individuals can “have the will but not the way” (Snyder et al., 1991a). Agency
thinking is especially important to youth and other individuals who face impediments to their goals (Snyder, 1994). Negative life events, such as homelessness, can interfere with the development of hope in children (Snyder, 2000). Snyder’s theory is the basis for the Hope Scale that is used here to measure level of hope before and after participation in the study.

Critical phenomenology was chosen as a theory for this study to better understand the lived experience of this particular group of adolescents. Critical phenomenology is used to understand and critique the lived experience of a phenomenon. It is not merely a description or an exploration but a process of exposing the assumptions and conditions that impact the lived experience (Puncta, 2017). Critical phenomenology also tries to understand the economic and societal forces that impact that experience. This is congruent with the ecological/systems framework in that it looks at macro forces that impact the individuals and/or groups being studied. Critical phenomenology combines phenomenology and critical theory. Phenomenology is both a theory and a methodology (Belsito, 2016). The methodology will be articulated in Chapter 2. As a theory, it is a way to understand the structures, experience, and consciousness (Zahavi, 2003). The theory posits that objects and events in the world are only real because we are conscious of them; they do not exist without human consciousness (Gallagher, 2012). Edmund Husserl called this approach to reality as “whatever appears to be as such.” (Moran, 2002). Understanding the study participants' experience and whatever appeared to them as reality was the object of this inquiry. Further phenomenological theory supports the value of the first-person perspective sought by this study.
Critical theory posits that true social change cannot happen unless the existing structure of society and power imbalances are addressed (Freire, 2000). It was used in this study to support giving voice to homeless youth to develop a better understanding of their experience and to give them more power in the research process. Freire stressed the importance of people’s sharing and speaking from their own experience in their own education and that of others. Through critical education and critical pedagogy, the oppressed can develop a better understanding of the social and political structures that affect their experience. By raising critical consciousness, they can challenge what they take for granted, rethink their role in perpetuating oppression, and learn that they can fight against the culture of silence and be heard. In some cases, critical pedagogy can have an emancipatory function, in that through increased social knowledge – or social literacy as Freire might have called it - the oppressed may stand up to resist and challenge the structural roadblocks to their self-actualization (Schmidt, 2014). Increased critical consciousness can also help participants feel empowered to change their lives and may increase their hope; conversely, it may lead to a negative outlook on their ability to change their lives and decrease their hope. Critical theory supports a role for the oppressed in and a pathway towards overcoming their oppression.

Freire believed the oppressed have much to offer in terms of understanding the human condition outside of the dominant culture and that such understanding needs to be voiced and heard for both the benefit of the oppressed and to raise the consciousness of the oppressors (Freire, 2000). Critical pedagogy is applied to this study by helping the participants understand that their perspectives are valuable and their emic perspective can help those in the dominant class better understand them and
the phenomenon. This study offered the participants the opportunity to speak to their experience, while reflecting their intersectionality, with the goal of increasing understanding.

**Significance, Rationale, and Justification for this research**

Little research has involved this population (Toro, Dworsky, & Fowler, 2007). In 1995, Melanie Percy conducted a study similar to the study described here wherein she used photography and drawings to understand what homeless children 6-12 living in shelters regarded as special (Percy, 1995). Dana Harley used photography to explore hope and hopelessness with inner city African American youth (Harley, 2015). No studies were found that had homeless adolescents living in family shelters use their own photography to explore their lived experience.

Public and private strategies to address the needs of homeless youth have not significantly decreased their numbers. As noted, normal childhood activities, including education, are disrupted by homelessness (Coles, 1970). Homeless youth are more often the victims of social isolation and rejection than their housed peers (Anooshian, 2003) and are more likely to miss a significant number of school days due to moving, bureaucratic delays, and illness, leading to poorer educational outcomes. Disrupted education results in long-term educational deficits, negatively impacting future employment and social integration (Obradović et al., 2009). Negative public attitude and public opinion about the homeless are repeated by peers and can affect homeless children’s attitudes about themselves (Tompsett & Toro, 2004) and their sense of hope about their future.
Social workers are required by the code of ethics to pursue social change on behalf of the oppressed (National Association of Social Workers, 2017). Social workers have an ethical responsibility to bring awareness to perspectives that have been suppressed (Padgett, 2008). School social workers who are licensed social workers share this ethical responsibility as specifically articulated in the NASW School Social Work Standards (NASW, 2012).

By bringing to light the strengths of homeless adolescents, this study is intended to help social workers better address homeless youth’s needs through the strengths-based approach of the generalist model of social work practice. The generalist model bases assessment and intervention on the interaction between systems, using the clients’ strengths and the systems they interact with to improve their person-in-environment fit (Ambrosino et al., 2016). Research that focuses on the deficits of this population and that positions the researcher as the expert typical of the medical model has not resulted in an improved understanding of the lived experience of this population nor helped social workers develop effective interventions. Individuals are more likely to grow and improve when their strengths are emphasized (Ambrosino et al., 2016). This study presents the self-identified strengths of this group of homeless adolescents via phenomenological research.
Chapter 2: Methodology

Objectives and Research Questions

The goal of this research was to better understand the lived experience of adolescents living with homeless families. As a phenomenological study, the following objectives and questions address that goal.

The objectives of this research were as follows. For homeless adolescents in families:

1. To better understand their experience of homelessness,
2. To identify, if possible, what helps them cope, and
3. To develop an example of research using photo-elicitation with homeless adolescents for practitioners.

The research questions were as follows:

1. What is the lived experience of adolescents in homeless families? How do they view their homelessness?
2. What, if anything, do they identify that helps them feel more hopeful and cope?
3. What is the impact of participating in a research project on homeless adolescents?
4. How do more hopeful homeless adolescents differ from their less hopeful homeless peers?

Rationale for the Research Design

A primarily qualitative research design, using critical phenomenology, photo-elicitation, and a very small quantitative analysis, was chosen for this study to better understand the phenomena of adolescent homelessness in its natural setting (Aurini, Heath, & Howells, 2016). Qualitative research seeks meaning, collecting data in the natural setting, and identifying themes or patterns. An emic perspective possible through qualitative research allows the researcher to acquire in-depth, personal information that gives voice to an underserved population and can “make their world visible” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 7). Qualitative research should be the methodology
of choice when something needs to be explored or when the purpose of the study is to empower people to tell their stories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research gives voice to the underrepresented and minimizes the power differential between the researched and the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These are critical social work values and are relevant for this study.

Qualitative methodology offers a rich or thick description of “what” is going on (Gibbs, 2007). This type of study presents a rich description of both the individual experience of the phenomenon and an analysis of the commonalities to generate a description of the lived experience from an inductive approach. The methodology is also nomothetic and idiographic, looking at both commonalities and individual factors and circumstances (Gibbs, 2007).

Phenomenology, and more particularly critical phenomenology, was chosen as the qualitative methodology for this study because the research goal was to understand the lived experience of homeless adolescents and to examine the structural forces that impact their lives, especially their niche or positionality as adolescents. There was also scant published literature about the strengths of adolescents living in homeless families and how these strengths may help them cope with their situation. Critical phenomenology was chosen over grounded theory because the purpose of this study is to explore the phenomenon and give voice to those experiencing it, not explain it or to try to create a theory about it. Additional data beyond interviews was collected for analysis, including photographs, and field observations, but this study does not attempt to find emergent theory. Field observations came from the researcher’s interactions with members of the sample, schools, experts in the field, key informants, and informal
interactions in the shelter. Phenomenology was also chosen over ethnography as the purpose of this study was to understand the experience of homelessness for these adolescents, not to exclusively gather observational data on the population. Extended immersion with the population was not possible. The research design was not to select a research site, engage in extended observation, and select specific individuals for more intensive observation. Rather the research design was to engage individuals experiencing the phenomenon in intensive one on one interviews, a group interview, and photo-elicitation, supplemented by field observation.

Phenomenology was also chosen because of its history of use in research with adolescents, including adolescents with mental health disorders (Cridland, Jones, Caputi, & Magee, 2014; Melhelm, Moritz, Walker, Shear, & Brendt, 2007), adolescents, family, and staff in a psychiatric unit (Ward, 2015), and adolescents with incarcerated parents (Kautz, 2017). It has been used to study school social work interventions (Linton & Rueda, 2014; Pulla & Kay, 2016) and sensitive, private topics, such as sexuality (Christensen, Wright, & Dunn, 2017; Dewinter, Van Parys, Vermeiren, & van Nieuwenhuizen, 2017). Phenomenology has been used with adolescent girls who have become homeless due to domestic violence perpetrated against their mothers (Bowyer, Swanston, & Vetere, 2013) and the lived experience of homelessness and adolescent homelessness (Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2011; Partis, 2003; Rogers & Kinsman, 2013). Phenomenology, or more precisely critical phenomenology, was also chosen because of its ability to empower those who were part of the research, valuing their perspective and their interpretation of their lives, as opposed to the researcher’s interpretation of his or her observations.
Phenomenology pushes aside theory and doctrine to get at the experience. Akin to reflexivity as a method to address credibility in qualitative research (Padgett, 2008), phenomenologists must be aware of their own preconceptions, put them aside or bracket them, suspend judgment, or what Husserl called **epoché** (Gallagher, 2012; Moustakas, 1994; Padgett, 2008). Phenomenologists must be aware of and identify potential biases to increase the trustworthiness of the research. They must let go of things they may have presupposed in their initial thinking about their research. The process, called phenomenological reduction, focuses on the phenomena as experienced (Gallagher, 2012). As a methodology, phenomenology is not just a description of participants’ experiences: the researcher must also interpret these lived experiences to produce a thematic narrative (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This research study sought to tell the participants’ stories, not give a list of facts about adolescent homelessness. The human brain seeks out a good story and is more likely to retain knowledge from a story than from data (Gillett, 2014). Qualitative methods, particularly critical phenomenology, are the appropriate methodology to tell a story. Phenomenology gathers the first-person experience of those who share in a common phenomenon. The participants in this research were adolescents living in a homeless family. They were not asked to describe homelessness as a concept; instead, they were queried about their first-person experience of homelessness.

Phenomenology also claims objectivity via the intersubjectivity of the participants. The individual experience becomes a piece of how an object or event is understood. “*The world is not just my world since it is experienced by others in ways that do not reduce to my own experience of it*” (Gallagher, 2012, p. 185). These individual
experiences may be different and even possibly conflicting (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), but are truths and valid interpretations, individually and collectively. These truths also may change as experienced and discussed amongst the participants and between the participants and the researcher. The researcher studied the participants’ experiences, as well as experiences in the field process. Skeptics often challenge the accuracy of the first-person experience because it has come and gone and cannot be reviewed (Cerbone, 2012). However, phenomenology describes the experience; the person living that experience is the expert. “Phenomenology is not especially interested in questions of accuracy or detail-by-detail fidelity” (Cerbone, 2012, p. 16). This study presents the experiences of the participants.

In summary, critical phenomenology was chosen because it can increase the critical consciousness of study participants and allow participants to teach those in positions of privilege about their experience. Further, a critical phenomenological approach was chosen for use with this population to better understand the impact of structural forces on their lived experience, especially their niche or positionality in research as adolescents.

**Predissertation research and entré into the community**

The catalyst for this research was a conversation between the researcher and a school social worker colleague in 2013. In passing, she said that there were approximately 100 homeless students in our school district, a number that seemed unbelievable, given that there were only approximately 3100 students enrolled in the district. The percentage of homeless students in this one district (3.3%) was five times higher than the aggregate level of student homelessness reported by other districts in
the state (.67%), and more than the aggregate of the levels reported by the four core urban districts (.59%). Through exploration of these numbers and the environmental factors that possibly impacted them, the researcher became aware of the federal initiatives to address student homelessness and local services being provided under federal law. The researcher learned about the physical, mental health, and social risks to homeless adolescents as the literature was reviewed. Gaps in published research were identified about the perspectives of adolescents living in homeless families and the lack of analyses of the strengths they identify that help them cope.

As a school social worker for the city, the researcher was already involved and familiar with social service providers. The researcher was a member of a committee that met monthly to discuss community needs and had connections with local and state providers for the poor and the homeless. These key informants helped the researcher understand more about the population of homeless families in the city and helped to gain entré to the agencies that served them. The researcher learned that there were no family shelters in the area and limited transitional housing for homeless families and that a local ecumenical group had been formed to raise funds for transitional housing for homeless families in the area. The researcher started attending meetings and volunteering at events, and was soon asked to be on the steering committee.

The administration of the school district where the researcher was employed as a school social worker was asked for help recruiting adolescents for the study. The assistant superintendent would not allow direct access the identified students or their families, citing confidentiality concerns. The superintendent supported the need for the research and granted permission for the homeless liaison in the district to send
recruitment materials to identified homeless families. The researcher also approached social service providers in the community who agreed to distribute recruitment cards. However, initial recruitment efforts were unsuccessful. After working with additional school districts and facing similar struggles, the researcher was referred by one superintendent to the local Department of Human Services. That office referred the researcher to a large family shelter. Most of the study participants lived or had lived in this shelter.

**Design modifications**

The study could not be conducted as initially conceptualized, due to difficulty accessing the population. The original design was to study adolescents in homeless families who were enrolled in school, using the community-based participatory research strategy Photovoice. This design was chosen to give the homeless teens voice and power while allowing the researcher to better understand their circumstances, working in collaboration with the schools’ MVA homeless liaisons. Several school districts’ interpretation of the laws that protect all schoolchildren (FERPA) and the homeless families’ natural reluctance to agree to let their minor children participate in such a study without some connection to the researcher meant that zero potential participants contacted the researcher via the indirect outreach. Modifications to the study design were necessary for the study to move forward. These modifications were approved by the IRB. These modifications, including the use of passive consent in two school districts, gaining access to a family shelter, and interviewing the participants individually as they joined the study, allowed the researcher to establish a connection with potential participants. However, given the transient nature of homeless families in homeless
shelters, the researcher was not able to conduct focus groups central to the Photovoice methodology. The design was modified to use photo-elicitation and individual interviews, with the potential of one possible focus group to wrap up the study. In the end, only four of the 11 adolescents who completed the photography participated in the final focus group.

**Sampling and Data Sources**

Purposive sampling was used due to the difficulty in accessing the population. Inclusion criteria were:

- Being between 14 and 19 years of age,
- Being homeless as defined by the McKinney-Vento Act,
- Having a caretaker who was willing to and could sign the consent form,
- Possessing expressiveness, as demonstrated by the ability to carry on conversation during the first paperwork meeting,
- Having no previous relationship with the researcher, and
- Willing to maintain confidentiality, as indicated by verbal acknowledgement.

The age range of 14 -19, which reflects the older age range of adolescence defined by the World Health Organization (n.d.) was chosen because older teens were more likely than younger participants to use the cameras appropriately and safely and to be able to articulate why they were taking pictures if challenged. School districts and the family shelter were chosen because of the researcher’s previous contact in the settings or with the administrators. This sort of familiarity increases the likelihood of access to the population (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006).

The primary data sources were the teens themselves, their photos, and the researcher’s field observations. In addition to basic demographic surveys of the adolescents (Appendix A), data sources included the interviews with the adolescents and the focus group (Appendix B), field observations and the participants’ photos.
Photos were taken over a three-week period using digital cameras given to adolescents by the researcher. Field observations were noted by the researcher throughout the study.

In total, 35 adolescents were identified initially by providers and schools personally as meeting the participation criteria. None of the potential participants responded to indirect recruitment. The study was introduced to 18 adolescents by the researcher at their schools after passive consent was initiated, or through the shelter where they were told about the study by staff. Thirteen were enrolled and participated in the first interview and completed the Hope Scale. Eight of the initial 18 students were homeless in their community and 10 were living in a family shelter. In the community, one student self-identified as homeless but his parent denied homelessness and would not allow his son to participate. One student wanted to participate and although the parent initially gave verbal permission, they did not respond to attempts to get written consent. One student’s parent provided written consent but did not respond to attempts to schedule meetings. One student expressed interest but no further contact was made. One student had written parent permission but missed three consecutive initial interviews. 11 completed the photography and second interview, one from the shelter moved back to Puerto Rico and one from the community withdrew because she did not have time to complete the photography. Four completed the presentation and focus group. The nine who did not participate had left the shelter and could not be contacted or could not secure transportation and/or supervision for the presentation. Nine of the 11 who completed the second interview were re-administered the Hope Scale. The
sample size was typical of phenomenological research, for which sample size is generally 6-10 (Padgett, 2008).

**Table 1. Attrition Table**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>35 adolescents identified as meeting study criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 met with researcher to be given information about the study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 did not complete consent/assent forms or did not attend first meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 completed consent/assent forms and completed first interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 did not complete photography or second interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 completed photography and second interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 did not participate in presentation and final interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 participated in presentation and final interview</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data collection**

**Photo-elicitation.** Photography was chosen as a data collection strategy and technique to engage this sample because of anticipated difficulty with communication between the researcher and the youth, possibly due to language, power, and lack of rapport, as discussed in Chapter One. It is the nature of adolescence to challenge the need for adults in their lives and to focus more on connection with peers, which may limit their willingness to engage with an adult researcher (Drury, 2003). Thus, attention was paid to enhancing effective communication between the researcher and the participants, resulting in the choice to use photography. Photography helps bridge the gap if there is a weak common language connection between the participants and the researcher (Holm, 2014). This is important when interviewing people who are...
considered English Language Learners (ELL) or English as a Second Language (ESL). This study had six participants who self-identified as ESL.

The photo-elicitation interview (PEI) was first described by Collier in 1957 (Padgett et al., 2013). Harper (2002) described the use of the photo-elicitation interview where photos about the participants' lives were used to stimulate the discussion. Padgett et al. (2013) used photo-elicitation with formerly homeless adults. They found the process enhanced empowerment and enabled creativity. PEI offers a different style of interviewing than the typical verbal-only method (Padgett et al. 2013). Bukowski and Buetow (2011) report that the use of photography in research helps the participants verbalize their feelings, memories, and thoughts when used in the interview. Images also aid in storytelling (Gillett, 2014). Marketing professionals have long understood the impact of visual aids. In addition to helping the participants communicate their stories, using images can help the reader connect with the story and the storyteller. Voice is given to the photographs by allowing the creators to share their associated meaning (Berg, 2004).

All forms of media are valuable tools to preserve history (Padgett, 2008). Artistic techniques have been used successfully by researchers to engage children in health research (Jennings, 2011). Research indicates that most homeless individuals have cell phones or have access to them (Post et al., 2013). Many of these cell phones have cameras (Richter, 2012), thus exposure to digital photography is broad amongst adolescents. Using photography as a data collection strategy is consistent with the constructivism paradigm (Freeman & Mathison, 2009), as it allows the researched to construct and describe their meaning of the phenomenon. The use of cameras can help
level the playing field between the researcher and the participants (Wang, 2006). Participatory photography, where the participants take the pictures that drive the discussion, is the most frequently used method of using photography in research (Holm, 2014). Researchers have found the process allows the participants to feel in more control of the interview (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004).

Although Photovoice (Wang, Burris, & Ping, 1996) was the data collection strategy originally proposed for this research, difficulty in accessing and retaining all members for the duration needed for the type of focus groups needed for Photovoice was not possible. From the date of the first meeting to when the last participants were consented and assented, four months passed. Nine weeks passed from the first interview to the final focus group. Rather than relying solely on focus groups, participants were interviewed individually and their respective periods of photography were staggered over the time of the research. Due to the transient nature of the sample and difficulties with transportation, only a few participants could participate in the final presentation to decision-makers (described further in the section on the sequence of study events). Thus, several core methodological aspects of Photovoice were not part of this research (D. Padgett, personal conversation, 2017). Although Photovoice and photo-elicitation are terms often used interchangeably, photo-elicitation is a component of Photovoice, and Photovoice is a research strategy (Bugos et al., 2014). Other researchers have chosen to call changes to the model “modified Photovoice,” but for this study the term photo-elicitation was used as it was thought to be more accurate (E. Bojaczuk, personal conversation, September 14, 2017; A. Chill, personal conversation, September 4, 2017).
Photo-elicitation is not a community-based participatory research method. Photo-elicitation uses photographs to stimulate discussion, with the purpose of evoking meaning and attitudes toward the subjects of the pictures (Moe, 2010). Photo-elicitation has been used with youth and students (Kaplan, Lewis, & Mumba, 2007; Thompson & Gunter, 2008), with young adults experiencing homelessness in Philadelphia (Cannuscio, Bugos, Hersh, Asch, & Weiss, 2012), in research with street children (Campos Monteiro, & Dollinger, 1998), to explore family interactions (Sibeoni, et. al., 2017), and with homeless adults (Padgett et al., 2013).

Images can trigger richer discussions than oral interviews (Clarke-Ibañez, 2004) and can serve as a bridge between the researcher and the participants (Epstein, Stevens, McKeever, & Baruchel, 2006). While too literal an interpretation of the photographs by the researcher has been argued against because it could lead to limiting dialogue (Kaplan, 2008), images can help researchers understand the viewpoints of youth (Capello, 2005). In this research, the youth lead the interpretation of the photographs. The researcher did not see their work until they met together to discuss the images, preventing any a priori interpretation that could have limited the discussion. Content analysis of the photographs took place following the completion of all interviews.

The Hope Scale. In order to supplement the qualitative data, participants were asked to complete the Hope Scale before and after their participation in this study, not to make any statement of correlation or causation between the two, but to augment the study. Hopefulness can be a coping strategy that helps homeless youth be resilient in the face of a difficult situation (Hinds, Martin, & Vogel, 1987). As stated in Chapter One,
hope can have a positive impact on resilience, coping, and other areas of adolescent performance. Snyder’s Hope Scale was chosen for use in this study to provide supplemental data regarding the participants’ level of hope before and after their participation. No claims are made that the participants’ involvement caused any change in their level of hope, as the sample size was too small. The plan was to look at the adolescents’ Hope Scale scores in comparison to scale norms and demographic characteristics. The scale is a 12-item measure of an individual’s level of hope (Snyder et al., 1991a). As Snyder and his colleagues posited, hope is composed of the individual’s sense of agency and pathways. Four questions measure agency, four questions measure pathways, and four questions were used as filler. The scale was scored on an eight point Likert scale ranging from “Definitely False” to “Definitely True.” It has been validated and evidences internal consistency (.74 to .84), and is relatively stable over time (.85, p < .001, over a 3-week interval; .73, p < .001, over an 8-week interval (Snyder et al., 1991b)). Coefficient alphas ranging between .90 and .95 for the overall scale have been reported in numerous studies since its initial validation in 1991 (Snyder et al., 2002). Additionally, the scale exhibits convergent, discriminant, and incremental validity (Snyder et al., 1991b). See Appendix C for a copy of the Hope Scale.

The sequence of study events and key components of each of these events.

First meetings – introduction to the research. Inclusion criteria were described on the recruitment forms and reiterated at the initial meeting (Appendix D). All meetings with families and adolescents were held at facilities convenient to families, limiting travel costs for those who were interviewed in the community. Homeless
adolescents from the school districts who expressed interest in the study were given information about the study by the researcher to bring to their caregiver(s). The youth were asked to discuss the study with their caregiver(s) and inform them that they needed written consent to participate. The researcher followed up with caregivers if they had not responded in a week. Caregiver(s) met individually with the researcher to sign the consent forms and for the researcher to answer any questions and address any concerns. Adolescents and caregivers from the shelter who were interested met as families with the researcher for the same purposes.

Caregivers who consented completed a consent form and the adolescents completed an assent form. Participants were assigned a randomly generated participant number that linked their demographic data, Hope Scale responses, and content from transcripts. Demographic data were collected via a short, written questionnaire. The date of the first interview was scheduled at the end of this initial paperwork meeting. These initial meetings were not digitally recorded, but field notes were written following the meetings.

Second meetings. Participants met individually with the researcher for the second meeting. All meetings between the researcher and the adolescents were either held in public spaces, such as a donut shop or the mall food court, or where there was video observation, to protect the researcher and the participants from allegations of misconduct. All attempts were made to protect confidentiality in these public spaces, such as sitting far away from other customers or using a private space with video cameras. These interviews were digitally recorded.
The second meeting focused on participant perceptions and experiences of being homeless. The Hope Scale (Appendix C) was completed at the beginning of this interview. Upon completion of the survey and scale, the participant and researcher engaged in a discussion that was guided by semi-structured interview questions (Appendix B). The guide was modified throughout the interview process to keep the conversation moving, to keep the adolescents engaged, and to ask questions about issues brought to light during earlier interviews. This approach allowed the interviews to seek greater depth and breadth in responses from the participants (J. B. Wise, personal conversation, August 2017). Modifications were made to the interview process with most, if not all participants, regardless of their demographics. These modifications were effective in clarifying the questions asked and in engaging participants who had been circumspect in their communication with the researcher.

Following the discussion, the researcher gave participants digital cameras and reviewed the training protocol for photography, which included technical guidance for the use of the camera and guidance for safety and confidentiality. The researcher described how the photographs would be used to visually depict their experience and initiate a discussion about what helps them cope. Digital cameras were chosen to allow participants to take and delete as many pictures as they choose before submitting their work to the researcher. The digital cameras also allowed participants to practice with the researcher, using the actual cameras they were to use in the field. Although there was a risk these digital photos would end up on the Internet (Feuer & George, 2005), the researcher is not aware of any such instances happening. Participants were given time to practice using their cameras, and to ask any questions about the cameras,
photography, or the project. The time and place to return the cameras as well as the follow up interview was scheduled at this meeting. Participants were given a $10 gift card to an accessible fast-food restaurant of their choice and their family was entered into a raffle for a $100 supermarket gift card to be drawn at the end of the study.

Following the second meeting, quantitative data from the survey and Hope Scale were entered into a spreadsheet and the original paper documents were shredded.

**Photography.** Participants were given three weeks to take photographs. All participants eagerly engaged in the photography process. During the months the study was active, some participants were in the second interview stage, some in the photography stage and some in the third interview stage. These concurrent stages meant that the researcher was at the shelter two to three times a week, managing photography issues that arose, such as batteries, lost cameras, and accidentally deleted photos. This regular contact also helped to keep the participants focused and engaged. Participants were eager to talk with the researcher about their progress during check-in and other informal contacts.

**Third meetings.** Photographs were reviewed with their photographer at the third meeting. The discussion was guided by the semi-structured interview guide, including a modified version of the “SHOWeD” mnemonic used in Photo Voice research (Wang, 2006, p. 151). (See Appendix 6). This mnemonic aligns with the root-cause questioning and discussion that is primary to Freire’s critical pedagogy (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001), which guides the discussion from a surface-level analysis of what is in the picture to a deeper understanding of what the photograph means to the photographer in relation to their lived experience. These discussions were also digitally recorded. Based
on the discussion, each participant selected 1-2 photographs that best represented his/her day-to-day life, and possibly, whatever helped him/her cope, for a group presentation of their work at the end of the study. For those who did not want to participate in the presentation, the Hope Scale was re-administered and their participation complete. Participants were again given a $10 gift card for participation and their families were entered into the raffle again.

**Presentation and focus group.** The final stage of the study was the presentation of the photographs and discussion with adult decision-makers by participating group members. The photographs were presented to shelter staff, program administrators, parents of the participants, and one town councilperson, selected because of their real or potential influence on the lives of these adolescents. The researcher printed and mounted the pictures chosen for display. Based on the critical dialogue in the second interview, one or two-word descriptions were printed at the bottom of the photographs. Photos were displayed on easels throughout the shelter common room. Audience members were informed that they were participating in a research project and asked to sign a form indicating their consent to use their unidentified comments in the narrative of the research and indicating their willingness to protect the confidentiality of the participants with whom they met. The adults viewed the pictures, mingled with other adults, and asked questions of the four photographers/homeless youth who attended. Field observations were noted throughout the presentation by the researcher, but no recordings were made. Participants and photographers were provided pizza and drinks. After the presentation, participants met for a final focus group to discuss the presentation, guided by semi-structured questions.
This discussion was digitally recorded. The Hope Scale was re-administered. The adolescents who participated were given $10 restaurant gift cards and families were entered into the raffle. Following the final discussion, the raffle was drawn and $100 gift card recipient family was identified.

**Data analysis**

Survey results were analyzed using Microsoft Excel 2016. The researcher transcribed the digital recordings into Microsoft Word 2016. Transcriptions were read twice while the researcher listened to the recording to ensure accuracy. Spell checker had picked up a variety of presumed errors, but some presumed errors were the way the participants spoke and were in fact correct. There was frequent background noise that necessitated careful re-listening. Since the researcher was transcribing his own recordings, he was familiar with the subject and with what was said, in context, which provided an advantage (Gibbs, 2007). As the researcher read the transcripts checking for accuracy, he took notes and made observations. Once the transcriptions were checked, the digital recordings were erased to protect confidentiality. Transcriptions were uploaded into NVivo 11, a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) program. This program allowed the researcher to create “nodes” as the transcripts were read, codes to which data chunks could be continually assigned throughout the process of analysis, and allowed for links to be created between the transcriptions and the photographs. These initial codes were then redistributed into hierarchies, leading to themes.

Qualitative analysis began with attribute precoding of the interview transcriptions (Saldaña, 2009). The transcriptions were read to identify descriptive information, which
was used to supplement the qualitative descriptive data. Structural precoding was used, identifying in the transcriptions where the research questions were asked and answered. The results of structural precoding were reviewed with members of the committee.

At this point, transcriptions had been read at least four times, which prepared the researcher for the first stage coding. This stage involved simultaneous initial, descriptive, and in vivo coding, examining parts, coding chunks of data, and using verbatim participant wording, assigning more than one code per datum as appropriate (Saldaña, 2009). Linguistic connectors that indicated possible causal relations were sought out (Bernard, Wutich, & Ryan, 2017), such as “which” and “because of.” These phrases helped the researcher look for the consequences of the phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). After the first four transcriptions were coded, a codebook was developed which identified the code assigned to a chunk of data, other chunks that were coded the same, and a description of why the code was chosen. The initial codebook included 13 hierarchies and 76 codes. Some of these codes were words assigned by the researcher and some were in vivo. This helped guide future code development, provided auditability, and served as a tool for review by members of the dissertation committee to see what was being coded as the analysis continued, and how. Interpretive coding was also conducted, in which the researcher interpreted what the participants said to add to a particular code, such as “optimism” when they made a positive statement about their future or “worry” when they expressed concern, without necessarily using the word (Gibbs, 2007). Commonalities were sought in the data, using an inductive approach, to code different chunks of text in each interview, between first
and second interviews, and between the interviews of different participants. After initial coding of the transcripts from the first, second, and post-presentation transcripts, 140 codes were identified, organized into 37 hierarchies, including family, definition of homelessness, couch surfing, sharing, school, other homeless kids, feelings, history, future, and hope objects.

Second cycle coding included pattern coding where the first set of codes were reviewed, looking for patterns and trying to pull them together into more meaningful units of analysis (Saldaña, 2009). Focused coding was also conducted to identify the most significant first cycle codes in an attempt to determine categories that made sense (Saldaña, 2009). After secondary coding, there were 14 hierarchies and 134 codes. These 14 hierarchies became the themes of the findings of this study: Connection to family, connection to friends, connection to other adults, and developing internal resources.

Univariate qualitative analyses on the answers and scores from the demographic survey and Hope Scale were conducted using Microsoft Excel 2016, a spreadsheet program that allowed the data to be sorted and summarized easily.

**Trustworthiness**

This research explored the first-person experiences of a unique group of homeless adolescents. It made no claims to represent the perspective or experience of all homeless adolescents. It did not attempt to meet the quantitative standards of generalizability, such as random sampling and statistical significance (Padgett, 2013). Further, validity and reliability, concepts typically associated with rigor, were not the goals of this qualitative research study (Padgett, 2013). This research did its best to
provide trustworthiness, as defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), by attempting to represent the lived experience of the participants as closely as possible (Steinmetz, 1991). Trustworthiness includes credibility, transferability, auditability, and confirmability (Padgett, 2013). Credibility is addressed in this study by paying attention to how closely the interpretations of the researcher match the participants’ views. Thus, after analysis began, the researcher constantly went back and reread the transcripts as themes emerged. Transferability addresses the generalizability of the findings. The goal of this study was not generalizability but an in-depth exploration of a sample of lived experience with the phenomenon. This does not mean that the results of the study have no transferability to other homeless adolescents. The reader who may be working with this population may extrapolate these results to improve their practice or launch further research (Padgett, 2013). Notes were taken to provide auditability and were incorporated into the description of the data analysis procedures and methodology. Confirmability was achieved by comparing the analysis with the transcripts.

Threats to trustworthiness – such reactivity, researcher bias, and respondent bias (Padgett, 2013) – were addressed in this research through methodological/data triangulation and peer debriefing. Prolonged exposure and member checking were not feasible as most of participants moved out of the shelter and before transcriptions were available for review. During this study, the researcher worked diligently to bracket any positive or negative bias towards the phenomenon and the participants. However, all researchers are affected by their experiences, histories, and identities (Gibson, 2011). True bracketing is the ideal, but is extremely difficult to achieve completely (Creswell, 2018). Thus, potential researcher bias was acknowledged and identified and the
researcher engaged in reflexivity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008), discussing these biases, such as culture and housing status, with the dissertation committee and the experts from the field who functioned as advisors. As a phenomenologist, the researcher identified any preconceptions and engaged in epoché or bracketing (Gallagher, 2012), as best as possible. The researcher also engaged in reflexivity around respondent bias in the discussions with the dissertation committee. For instance, the possibility that using the Hope Scale biased the respondents to answer with more positive responses was reviewed. The committee also discussed the researcher’s presupposition that the participants would be in poor physical, dental, and mental health and would be struggling in school.

**Ethical considerations**

This study included a doubly vulnerable population – minors who were homeless – therefore a full Institutional Review Board review was warranted. To protect participants, signed consent was required from the caregivers and signed assent from the participants. Following the principle of fully informed consent, meetings were held with the participants and their parents where they were given information regarding their rights as part of the consent paperwork, including the right not to participate or withdraw at any time (Gibbs, 2007). Informational meetings were held prior to enrollment to answer any of the caregivers’ questions. To maintain anonymity, participants were given an ID number to link their interviews and survey results. For the purposes of the narrative, randomly chosen pseudonyms were used rather than ID numbers to engage the reader.
Guidelines suggested for the ethical use of photo-elicitation were followed (Bugos, et. al, 2014). Participants were informed during training of the ethical and safe use of the cameras. Confidentiality and privacy in the photography process were addressed by ensuring the participants did not take identifiable pictures of people. All participants used similar digital cameras. The previously assigned ID numbers were used to link photographs to the study. Transcripts did not include the names of individuals. The researcher reviewed all pictures and transcripts to assure anonymity of those who were not part of the research. Participants were also trained to stay away from dangerous or illegal areas or activities.

Summary

Critical phenomenology was used in this study to gain an understanding of the lived experience of adolescents in homeless families and to explore the impact of structural mechanisms on their experiences. Photo-elicitation was used to both visually depict their experience and to assist in initiating discussion, anticipating potential language barriers. The ecological/systems framework helped guide the exploration of the effect of interactions across and between systems. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, field observations, photographs, and surveys. Transcriptions were analyzed, coded, and organized into hierarchies and themes.
Chapter 3: Description of Participants

Demographics of the sample

Thirteen adolescents enrolled in this study, completed their assent forms, and had parental consent. Table 2 summarizes their demographic characteristics. Ten were living in a family shelter, one was doubled-up with a family friend, one was in temporary housing, and one was in transitional housing. The shelter was a two-story structure with 20 single-family units upstairs and a community space, a community kitchen downstairs. The shelter had staff on site, including security. Temporary housing was an apartment provided by a property owner while damage from a fire was repaired. Transitional housing was an apartment owned by the shelter provider as the family moved towards a place of their own. Although most of the participants in the study were living in the same family shelter, they came from widely varying backgrounds and had different demographic characteristics. These differences kept the study from being overly homogeneous.

Two participants dropped out of the study before completing their photography, one because he was moving back to Puerto Rico and one because she did not have the time to participate. They both agreed that their first interview, their responses to the Hope Scale, and their demographic survey could be included in the results.

All thirteen participants completed the Hope Scale and demographic survey at the second meeting, eleven completed the photography, and nine completed the Hope Scale after their photography. Four participated in the presentation of their work and the follow-up focus group and completed the Hope Scale then instead of at the third
meeting. They were also the only ones still living in the shelter at the time of the focus group.

The sample included one family with three brothers and one family with two sisters. The three brothers were Hispanic/Latino and spoke English as a second language. They struggled to communicate verbally and produced fewer pictures than their peers. They shared similar ideas about what helped them cope, including their mother and church. They were all happy to be together and expressed appreciation for what they had. The two African American sisters also shared similar feelings about their homelessness. The older sister found more strength in her role with her younger siblings and her relationship with her mother while the younger found more strength in the support from school and being out in nature.
Table 2: The participants’ demographic characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Primary language</th>
<th>Preferred language</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Good Grades</th>
<th>IEP</th>
<th>Living situation at time of study</th>
<th>Times homeless</th>
<th>Reason for this instance of homelessness</th>
<th>Doctor visit</th>
<th>Dental Health</th>
<th>Mental Health</th>
<th>Someone</th>
<th>Supported at school</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emilio</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>LH</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>shelter</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<tr>
<td>David</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>LH</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>shelter</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>L</td>
<td>F</td>
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<td>L</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>G</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>V</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>G</td>
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<td>Y</td>
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<td>E</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>L</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<td>E</td>
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<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Temporary apartment with family</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Fire</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>Transitional housing</td>
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<td>Another country</td>
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<td>E</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<td>shelter</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Another country</td>
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<td>VG</td>
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<td>E</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>L</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>W, B,</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>E</td>
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<td>LH</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
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<td>L</td>
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<td>W,</td>
<td>LH,</td>
<td>E</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Conflict with landlord</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>VG</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>Y</td>
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</table>

David, Juan, and Emilio were brothers. Kimmie and were Tianna were sisters. Christian and Emelia both withdrew from study before completing photography.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RACE/ETHNICITY</th>
<th>LANGUAGE</th>
<th>PHYSICAL, DENTAL, MENTAL HEALTH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LH – Latino/Hispanic</td>
<td>S - Spanish</td>
<td>E – Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B - Black</td>
<td>E - English</td>
<td>VG - Very good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W – White</td>
<td>SEX</td>
<td>G – Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA -Native American</td>
<td>F – Female</td>
<td>F – Fair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOCTOR VISIT</td>
<td>M – Male</td>
<td>P – Poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L – Less than a year ago</td>
<td>GV – Gender Variant</td>
<td>SOMEONE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M – More than a year ago</td>
<td></td>
<td>Someone who makes me feel special</td>
</tr>
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</table>
History with homelessness

The participants in the study had different experiences with and histories of homelessness. For some this was their first time being homeless and for others they had a chronic history of homelessness. Brothers David (16), Emilio (17), and Juan (14) came to the US from Puerto Rico with their mother five years ago before the start of this study, originally moving to a rental property in a southern state because their grandfather was ill. When they first moved to the area, they lived with mother’s boyfriend, but had to leave that location because children were not allowed there. After briefly staying with their grandmother and their aunt, they entered the family shelter because they preferred to live together at the family shelter. This was their first time in a shelter and they had been there for a month prior to the start of their interviews. They have remained in the same school since moving to the area.

Seventeen-year-old Louisa also came to the US from Puerto Rico with her mother and her eight-year-old brother four years ago, first settling in a southern city with their stepfather. Her father remained in Puerto Rico and Louisa had no contact with him. Her mother and stepfather came to the US for better work opportunities. They rented an apartment and her stepfather was employed as a truck driver. Louisa attended public school and had many friends. When her grandmother became ill two months prior to the interviews, her mother felt she should take care of her and so moved to the study area. Louisa’s stepfather did not accompany them. Her extended family did not have enough space for the three, but the mother moved the family anyway. They stayed with their grandmother in senior housing while the mother looked for a job until the staff asked them to leave. The family shelter had an opening, and the family moved in about a
month before engaging in the study. Louisa had to start a new school when her family moved from their home in a southern state, but she remained in the same school when she moved from her grandmother’s home to the shelter. When the family moved to another shelter near the end of the study, she chose to switch schools.

Seventeen-year-old Marco moved from Puerto Rico with his mother and brothers a year and a half before his start in the study. His parents had divorced and his mother was unable to afford a home in Puerto Rico. She felt that the US could give her school-aged boys a better education, especially her youngest son who has autism. When they first came to the study area, they lived with the mother’s sister in an over-crowded house. They eventually moved to the family shelter, but Marco and his brother remained in their first school district even though they were in a different city because the school district provides transportation for homeless students per MVA. Unfortunately, Marco’s older brother was not able to be in the family shelter as he was 18, and so lived in an adult shelter. The mother worked full-time as an office assistant, but could not afford the first and last month deposit and security deposit for a subsidized apartment. While in the shelter and most recently in transitional housing, the mother saved enough for the deposits. Marco, his mother, and younger brother moved into their own apartment just before the end of the study.

Fourteen-year-old Christian and his mother had also moved to the study state directly from Puerto Rico. He and his mother spoke very little English, but there were many bilingual families in the shelter and several bilingual staff. He was only enrolled in the study for a week when he and his mother moved back to Puerto Rico.
Seventeen-year-old Tiana and fifteen-year-old Kimmie were African American sisters. They had been homeless several times for brief periods during the three years prior to the study, totaling 17 months. This most recent time, their parents had a dispute and their mother took them and their four younger siblings from their father and lived with their mother’s friend. Their mother could not secure housing without a job, so they were at the family shelter for four months prior to the study.

Fifteen-year-old Kendra identified as African American/Native American. She, her mother, and her four younger siblings had lived at the family shelter for six months prior to the study. They had been homeless four times for a total of 14 months. They came from a domestic violence shelter after her father assaulted her mother, who was disabled due to the domestic violence. Kendra attended middle school in an adjoining city, where she was living when they first became homeless. The school district provides transportation to her school per MVA. Kendra did not identify any school friends. She would get on the bus in the morning and come back to the shelter directly after school. Her friends were in the shelter.

Jack, a 14-year-old Caucasian male, and his family were forced to leave their apartment due to a fire. The property owner was providing temporary housing. Jack had lived in the same town and had been a student in the same public school system all his life. His family was not identified by the school district as homeless.

Fifteen-year-old Damon identified as White, African American, and Native American. He lived at the family shelter with his mother and father. Damon continued to attend school in an adjoining city. He chose to take the public bus to avoid the perceived stigma of being identified as a special needs student. The type of mini bus
that the district provided for out-of-district transportation for homeless students was also used to provide transportation for special education students. His older brother lived in the next city and Damon would frequently go there after school to socialize with him and friends from school.

Alyssa was a 14-year old White female who identified as gender-variant. Alyssa and her father lived at the shelter for two months prior to the study. Alyssa was living in a different homeless shelter in a different city with her mother before her father took Alyssa to live with him. The father was assaulted at their previous home and they were told by the state child welfare agency that Alyssa would be removed if they continued to live in the same place, and so they moved to the shelter. Alyssa was not sure if dad worked during the school day, but she knew he could not afford housing. He was planning to find housing with a friend so that Alyssa’s younger sister, who continued to live with her mother, could also live with them.

Fifteen-year-old Emelia had a long history of conflict with her mother and her mother’s boyfriend and had left home several times to stay with friends, with her mother’s “blessing.” She had a history of behavioral challenges and was attending an alternative school. She was living with her mother and her mother’s boyfriend and some of their friends in another city at the time of her interview, but was attending school in her original district. She indicated a history of frequent but brief individual homelessness, the most recent being the month before the study. She was struggling with school attendance as they had not identified themselves as homeless and were not being supported by the district’s homeless liaison.
Characteristics of subsets

All participants who identified exclusively as Latino/Hispanic also identified as having English as a second language (ESL). They were less expressive than their White, Black, and mixed-race peers as indicated by the number of words they used in their interviews. They also took fewer pictures. There was no major variation by gender. Female youth were more expressive than their male peers were, but this could be confounded by the fact that more of the males were ESL. There was no major variation by gender in the number of pictures they took, but the Black girls took the most pictures. Younger participants were more expressive than older participants were, but once again, more of the older participants were ESL. Most of the youth were living with their mothers. There was no major variation in expression or pictures for those who were living with their father or both parents.

In summary, the participants in this study ranged from 14-17 years of age, were of varying races and ethnicities, and had become homeless for several different reasons. All were living with at least one parent and many were living with their siblings. Many were living in one particular family shelter in an urban area; the remaining few were temporarily housed in apartments. There was one family with three brothers and another family with two sisters who also participated in the study. All participants were enrolled in school, three attending school in districts where they lived before becoming homeless.
Chapter 4: Findings: The Understanding of Homelessness and the Importance of Family

Understanding of homelessness

The first stated research question asks “What is the lived experience of adolescents in homeless families?” and “How do they view their homelessness?” Throughout the following chapters of findings, the participants will describe their multifaceted experiences with homelessness through their pictures and their words. Particularly in this chapter, the participants answer how they viewed and understood homelessness through their own lens. They all defined themselves as homeless as shelter residents, but many did not understand that their situations prior to coming to the shelter could have been homelessness as well. Most had no understanding of the expanded definition of homelessness according to the McKinney-Vento Act. Their understanding of homelessness varied greatly and was limited to living in shelters, motels, cars, or outdoors. They did not know that staying with friends or family – doubling-up or couch surfing – meant that one was homeless according to the MVA. For some, this knowledge, imparted for the first time by the researcher, affected their responses to the questions about how long and how often they had been homeless.

Jack identified homelessness with the people he saw on the streets, begging for food.

“There’s people on the streets, that kind, that have a sign that says homeless, please help or please feed, like that. And they get kicked out of their house and they have nobody.”

Kimmie defined homelessness as physical and financial.

“Nowhere to stay. No money.”

For Juan, being homeless meant not having control over things usually taken for granted.
“Like not having a, not having your own house, not having your own space, like your personal space. And not be able to cook the food that you want to eat.”

Alyssa visualized unsheltered and sheltered living situations.

“When I picture homeless I think of people out on the streets, but then I remember there are these shelter thingies.”

Emelia did not consider herself homeless until she was approached about participating in this study.

“When I think of homelessness and when the idea of this project first came up I was like homeless? I was asking myself am I homeless? I had heard it before but I don't generally consider myself homeless. You know what I mean? I know that I'm homeless but I don't I don’t... If someone asks where I live I say at my mom's boyfriend’s. Before when I thought about homeless I had a picture in my head about someone sleeping on the streets. I thought you know I'm not homeless you know what I mean like I have I don't have my own home, but I have a home not like I'm completely homeless.”

Others she spoke with promoted this perspective, which reinforced it in her mind.

“I am homeless but I don't think other people see it as homeless. Like I live in a house. When [I tell] other people here that I live with a friend, they don't think of me as being homeless because I live in a home.”

Tiana understood she could be housed, but still homeless.

“Even though I was homeless, I would always have a home but I was still considered homeless because it wasn't always my house. So, I think it just means not having a house of my own, my family [not] having a house of our own.”

For some of the participants, their understanding of homelessness went beyond a physical structure. Louisa initially defined homelessness as having no home. She indicated that having to live with relatives, in a shelter, or on the streets was also homelessness to her. She then described an internal feeling of homelessness.

“Like when you have trouble in your home and you like feel alone, something like that.”
Kendra described homelessness as less to do with a physical space and more to do with who set the rules.

“[It’s] kind of like a place of your own. I guess it’s like your own rules, um it’s kind of complicated.”

Living in a motel or staying with friends did not always qualify as homeless to her.

Emilio described homelessness as a feeling.

“It’s like um, feeling alone.”

While their understanding of homelessness varied, as did their circumstances for becoming homeless, they all agreed about the importance of being with family. Before they began taking pictures, the participants spoke about their processes of coming into homeless housing and the importance of being with family. Marco explained that his mother moved him and his brother after her divorce from their father, to ensure they would get a good education. Damon relayed how he and his family had been evicted because of a disagreement with their property owner about a rental payment.

“We got into a place in a way that was unfair and unreasonable so we had, excuse me, we had tough times with the landlord we had been um what’s it called, evicted?

He was living with both parents at the shelter. They had been homeless for about five months before moving into the shelter, staying with family and friends, which sometimes meant being apart. The desire to be together lead them to the shelter the week prior to the beginning of the study.

“We were staying place to place, around. We came here because uh we wanted to stay as a family.”

He identified the importance of proximity to his parents during our first interview.
“See the plus is being with my parents and being like I can actually hug them instead of having to call them and ask them how they been. I am there and like they’re in front of me in real life.”

“So instead of me going to my friends’, my mom and dad going to a shelter, that they’re split, I said I’m going to go, so there was this place and we were talking to the people who run it and we ended up staying here.”

Even though he could have stayed elsewhere, he wanted to be with his parents.

Several participants talked about becoming homeless because of family responsibility. Louisa, her mother, and her brother chose to leave their housing behind in a southern state because their grandmother was sick and they wanted to be near her, even though her mother did not have a job and they had no place of their own to live. They temporarily lived with their grandmother, but had to leave and had no other housing options. Becoming homeless to meet family responsibility was acceptable.

“I move from [a southern city] and I don’t have any home in here. I’ve been staying with my grandmother but I could stay no more with her. We come here because my grandmother was sick and we are going to stay here to stay more like close to her.”

Emilio and his family also left housing in a southern state out of a sense of family responsibility.

“We had a place there. Somebody was renting it. We like had to help our grandfather.”

They had housing when they first moved, but were forced to leave.

“We, um, couldn’t be there. They didn’t want teens living there.”

They stayed with relatives briefly but came to the family shelter about a month prior to the study. He felt like he communicated more with family in the shelter.

“Like I talk more with my relatives.”

His younger brother David also was happy to be with family.
“Yeah happy to be with family, having time with them.”

Some of the participants were homeless due to traumatic events. Kendra described how her mother took them out of their home with their stepfather to keep them safe, and this which led to their homelessness. She indicated in the demographic survey that she and her family had been in a domestic violence shelter prior to coming to the family shelter. In the second meeting, she spoke about the incident that put them on the path to homelessness.

“About two summers ago her and my stepdad, which are my siblings’ dad, um got in an argument and he had pushed her out the window and her leg was badly broken.”

Alyssa also became homeless due to violence involving a parent. Her father was assaulted in the previous apartment. In order for her to continue to live with him, they had to move.

“When dad got assaulted, my caseworker said they would take me away from him if I stayed there because it was endangerment to me. And yeah so we moved…”

Keeping families together in tough times was very important to her.

“If you push your family away then you might never have a chance to be with your family again. I mean I know this not just from the shelter, I mean I’ve witnessed, well not witnessed fully, I just heard about it, and it’s someone is in a predicament about it here with their family and now things are hard for them and I hope it gets better, but you should always keep your family close, keep connected.”

For Jack, a fire caused him and his family to lose their home. He was thankful that their property owner provided them with a temporary place to live while repairs were made to their apartment.

“We still got my fam, I still got my family.”

He identified members of his family as helping him get through being homeless.
“My brother, my sis...my little brother, my little sister, sometimes my bigger sister. Also, my mom, my aunt, and once in a lifetime my uncle.”

Some of the participants had been staying with family or friends, providing them a place to stay while they tried to secure their own housing. Kimmie and Tiana’s family was too big to stay together. Kimmie indicated that the shelter was their only option with enough room for them all to stay together.

“They’ve tried letting us stay with them, for a while like we were in different spots with different family, but there wasn’t enough room for us to all be there.”

Her sister Tiana felt family kept the situation from being worse.

“I think we haven’t had to beg yet because there’s always somebody there to help, like when we got evicted my aunt was the first to come, well you need a place to stay, stay here even though it was only a 2-bedroom apartment. She let us stay there until we got into a shelter or something.”

She indicated being in a space that was big enough for her family was a positive about the shelter.

“In this place, we’re together. At a relative’s house, it’s kinda weird. They created a bunch of rules. Like all your family has to stay in this one little room that’s not big enough for everybody. Here they try to find a right-sized room for you. Not everybody’s cramped up.”

Louisa’s family tried to support their housing needs in appreciation for them moving to support their grandmother, but it did not work out.

“They helped me because I was staying with my grandmother and they, how do you say that, they helped my mother to um to get a job and an apartment for me and my brother but then when I was staying with my grandmother the staff say that we cannot stay with her because she lives in a senior apartment.”

She left her friends and her school behind, but she was with her family. She was asked if there were positives about living in the shelter.

“It’s ok. I feel good in here. I don’t feel like bad or… or sad. In here I have my family.”
Even though she missed them, thinking about the family she left behind in Puerto Rico helped her remain positive.

“All the time I’m thinking about my friends and family, my family in Puerto Rico, so I think that is help me.”

She explained how being together helped her feel safe even though they were homeless.

“Well, staying with my mother and my brother, they uh, I don’t know how to say it, I, they uh, they make me feel safe when I am with them.”

The participants in this study differed in their definitions of homelessness and reasons for becoming homeless, including family obligation, traumatic events, and eviction. For this group, the particular precipitating events did not matter as much as remaining with their family. They were all grateful that they were together, even if there were occasional tensions.
Chapter 5: Findings: Connection to people, places, and things

“Everyone who gets sleepy at night should have a simple decent place to lay their heads, on terms they can afford to pay.” Millard Fuller – cofounder of Habitat for Humanity

The second research question asked “What, if anything, do they identify that helps them feel more hopeful and cope?” This chapter analyzes the theme of external resources that was identified by the participants as helping them develop or maintain existing inner resources, which in turn helped them feel more hopeful and cope. This analysis classifies several subthemes together: people/relationships includes family, friends, siblings, other caring adults, and pets; places includes physical structures, the activities that took place in those structures, and access to open space and nature; things includes objects that served as distractions from their situation and personal belongings that reminded the participants of a time they were not homeless. Unlike the last chapter, which did not include photographs as most of the dialogue for that chapter came from discussions that preceded the photos, in this chapter stand-alone quotes as well as quotes that refer to the photographs are included.

Content analysis of photographs

To help the reader understand the physical pictures that were taken by the participants, the pictures themselves and the subjects were quantified. Eleven participants produced 86 pictures.

Table 3: Content analysis of photographs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>People</th>
<th>Pets</th>
<th>Places or spaces</th>
<th>Other objects</th>
<th>Tech</th>
<th>Music</th>
<th>Spirituality</th>
<th>Pride</th>
<th>Food</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Writing</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Objects that represent people</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participants took 86 pictures. Some pictures fit into more than one category.
Fifty pictures were taken to represent people. Eleven were taken of people who could not be identified in the picture, such as a picture of an eye, a hand, or the back of heads, and 39 were taken of objects used to represent people. Ten pictures were of pets, 11 were of places or spaces, and 27 were of objects that were not used to represent people.

To the participants, people mattered and it was important to find creative ways to represent them. Participants took pictures of hands, eyes, legs, and backs of heads. They found ways to get an arm or a leg into a picture of something else and then talked about that person. They also took pictures of things that belonged to the person they wanted to represent. Of the 50 pictures of, or representing, people, 13 were of siblings, 22 were of parents, 10 of friends, and three of other helpful adults. The remaining pictures were of pets, place/spaces, or objects. Four pictures were of objects in the shelter, positive messages, or things created by the participants. Three pictures were of technology they used to entertain themselves and four were of technology they used to communicate to the outside world, family, or friends. Four pictures were of music that they played and two were of the music to which they listened. Three pictures were of objects from their childhood. Six pictures represented the role of religious practices and spirituality, including churches and Bibles. Three were of things they had either created or won and which brought them pride, including an American flag. Three were pictures of food. Three were of reading and writing materials. Six were of clothes, including their shoes and shoes of others.
Connection to People/Relationships

**Family.** Regardless of the definition of family, developmental theory suggests adolescence is typically a period where most teens try to distance themselves from their family, seeking autonomy and identity (Austrian, 2002). Although not all adolescents go through this period in the same manner or at the same time, there is a desire for freedom and independence to which family can be seen as getting in the way. Although parents are frequently not appreciated and family can often be taken for granted by adolescents (Pickhard, 2010), this was not the case for the teens in this study

**Keeping families whole.**

Participants took and discussed 29 photographs representing family members and how being with family was an important aspect of their lives. Many photographs represented a particular family member, most frequently the mother. Louisa took pictures representing her family unit. Although she often struggled during the interviews to use words, her pictures represented the importance of the connection with her family.

“*That represent the union we have in here the love and I don't know how to say like in English, yeah the union.*”

She found that being in the shelter with her family helped them be more connected.
“I was like we don’t talk much like in here. In here we are more union, I don’t know how.”

Kimmie’s message to people trying to help homeless kids was:

“Stick with family. Keep families together. We were almost split up. But they couldn’t split us up. I’m glad they didn’t. I would have been really sad. I woulda lost it. It happened to us when we were little. We got split up with my mom. There was five of us at the time. So, I didn’t get to see my little brother or my little sister for a while.”

Emilio felt the same way about family. His message to decision makers was to keep families together.

“Like they can so like they can like be with their families. In hard times.”

Parents. Participants used their pictures to represent their parents, going to great effort to find ways to represent them even though they were not allowed to take identifiable pictures of people. Some photographed objects that belonged to their parents, such as a sweater or their cell phone; some took pictures of a body part, such as an eye or a hand.

Most of the adolescents interviewed were living with their mothers and at least one sibling, some as many as seven siblings. Except for Emelia who was struggling with her relationship with her mother after several months of living on her own, and Alyssa who was in the shelter with her father, the participants all spoke of the appreciation they felt towards their mothers, how they worked to keep their family together and worked to find their own housing. Juan appreciated the work his mother was doing with the shelter staff.

“My mom, when she look on the internet, looking for an apartment or a job and she went to a place today and they say they’re gonna help us. I feel happy for her.”

Louisa took three pictures of the hands of her family. In this particular picture, she photographed her mother holding up her and her brother’s hand. She explained this one
was different from the previous pictures of three interlocking hands as it represented the role of her mother.

“Well in this picture my mom is carrying my hand and the hand of my brother. My mom is always with my brother and me and I think it’s important that our mom being with her sons or daughter. Um the love that she have for my brother and me, her responsibility, um, well she always talk to me and my brother and say that everything is gonna be ok. That soon we’re going to have an apartment or a house. Well um I think that the way that she is with me and my brother, that gives me hope. Because if I don’t have my mom, I don’t have hope”

She also spoke of how her mother kept their goal to find a home.

“Well she always talk to me and my brother and say that everything is gonna be ok. That soon we’re going to have an apartment or a house.”

Kendra and her mother found more time to connect in the shelter. Shelter rules required an earlier bedtime for younger children, supervised by their parents. When her younger siblings went to bed, they found time for each other.

“I kinda stay up with my mother and we talk about other things that happened during the day or something.”

Emilio highly valued that he was able to be with his mom. He found something belonging to his mother to photograph to represent her and her importance to him.
“That’s how I can say that, yeah I’m still in a shelter but I’m with my mom. It’s about mom. Like, she, she, when I get in trouble she help me to not do it again and gives me advice. Mother has to be there. We would be in trouble.

His younger brother Juan also spoke of the role mother plays in his life. He represented her with a sweater she liked to wear.

“She helps me stay positive… she helps me stay positive when she says, ‘pretty soon we’re gonna get out of here’, when she finds a job. She keeps saying positive things.”

Alyssa appreciated that her father moved them into a shelter to keep them safe.

“A person, the girlfriend of the owner of the building, threatened to pull out a gun and basically was going to kill everyone in the house, but she couldn’t get the clip in right, so… And I just, yeah, when I lived with dad I felt more at home.”

She chose to represent her relationship with her father in several of her pictures.
“So, dad was talking with [his friend] at the time about like plans with money and all that and you can see his arms stretching out as he was talking and yeah see we were talking about living arrangements at the time. I think it helps with the situation a little and it’s also teaching me on what I need to be able to do when I’m older if I get into something like this.”

“Dad and I were just talking about some stuff and I was sitting on the ground. Yeah, it’s more about dad. The soda is representing him in that moment, helping me to relax. He is the one that is making things better and I figured I should give him some pride in this. He keeps me focused by pointing out to me that I need to stay focused. Because he’s the one that caused us being here. A good thing being here instead of [the other place].”

Marco saw that his mother was setting the example.

“I know my mother is trying like her best, so I’m doing my best too.”

Even Kimmy, who focused a good deal of her frustration on her mother, would not want to be anywhere else. She represented her mother with a photograph of her eye.
“Mom is helpful because she listens. My mom, she’ll like talk about it. I can talk to my mom. Can’t talk to my dad.”

In the focus group after the presentation of their pictures, the four participants indicated that even though having their parents there made them nervous, they were happy to have them see their work and maybe understand a bit more about their lives. The photography presentation gave them a new way to communicate with their parents.

“I was a little bit nervous. Because she was there and I don’t like getting into deep discussions with my parents.

Even though this new type of communication made them uncomfortable, they were glad they did it.

Emilio: “No it was good. It was good.”
Damon: “Yeah so they understand why we took the pictures.”
Juan: “Yeah how we feel.”

Being able to be with their parents was extremely important to these adolescents.

During a developmental period when teens are typically trying to distance themselves from their parents, these teens wanted to be together with their parents and were much more willing to assist and support their parents in any way they could.
**Siblings.** The participants also indicated being with their siblings was helpful. Similarly, aged siblings provide support for each other. Older siblings helped parents take care of younger siblings, while they felt encouraged by the love they experienced. Juan spoke about how his older brother helped him stay out of trouble.

“*He helps me stay out of trouble I think maybe and … Tells me not to do stuff, do my homework, uh, …don’t talk back to mom, and like that and stay outta drugs and don’t steal and, and… um, … that’s it.”*

David spoke of the positives of being able to interact with his younger brothers since they were in the shelter together.

“*Cuz when I see them, so I can play with them, they make me happy, if I don’t see them, I be sad, I don’t see them I don’t know what’s going on, with them.”*

Alyssa thought fondly of her sister who was not living with her. She used a notebook to represent her sister.
“Well she helps, just thinking about her, sometimes it makes me happy, sometimes I get really irritated, she helps me get up during the day, in a way, just...it’s hard to explain, she just reminds me that I need to help dad out, and getting an apartment soon.”

Tiana’s youngest brother was an emotional support and her reason to stay positive. Knowing that she was helping to keep him positive kept her from letting any negativity control the decisions she made. She took a picture of his onesie.

“He’s part of my family. Makes me happy. Getting to see him every day. He’s always there. When I’m sad, he’ll come cuddle with me, if I’m mad he’ll try to play around with me and he makes me happy again and knowing that I have to be strong for him, be a good influence on him, so he’s not sad, be the big sister....Focused....Strong.... Not only for yourself but for other people too.”

She felt this way about her relationship with all her younger siblings.

“They look up to me so I have to do what’s right. Be a good example. They follow me. All that cuz everybody else in my family is old enough to know what to do and what not to do, but my baby brother and sister look at me and do what I do. Cuz they’re babies and they’re still learning. So, then I set, put a good example for them.”
Observing her younger brother reading to their younger siblings was a positive for her.

“They were reading books and putting stickers in the books. And knowing that he’s teaching them makes me happy. And he’s calm. He’s usually rambunctious. Bouncing off everything. He’s showing them how to match the stickers to the story and put them in the right order instead of just having stickers all over the place.”

Tiana described what helped her stay positive.

“Knowing that my brother and sister are ok. That makes me positive. I can’t really be sad or depressed around them. Because I don’t want them to know that something is wrong. I know, but they don’t have to.”

For Marco, his family was split up because his older brother was 18 and program rules only allowed for parents and their minor children in the family shelter. This was a frustrating and concerning situation.

“Me my mother my little brother my older brother was living with us too. But he had, he was like over 18, so he couldn’t stay with us. He had to go to the other shelter. For like people who got problems. My mother didn’t feel very comfortable with that. She didn’t think it was going to be safe cuz of the type of people that were there. My brother was over 18 so he didn’t qualify to be there so he had to go to the other shelter. That shelter was people who use drugs but have no place to go.”

Siblings provide an additional source of generally positive interactions for these teens. While there was some typical “sibling rivalry” with teens that were of a similar age, they were happy they were together, and worried when they were not.
“It’s like a joke you can’t tell” - Friends. The adolescents in this study had friends, both in the shelter and in school, who helped them stay positive. For several of the participants, being in the shelter with other homeless families and other homeless youth helped them feel more understood. These adolescents were in crisis and being around others in their same situation was a comfort. Even though they might have friends from school or other settings, their homeless peers understood them. The supportive adult staff members at the shelter, at school, or in other community settings did not truly understand them unless they had been homeless themselves. Living in the shelter and school continuity made developing and maintaining friendships achievable for these adolescents. Their friends, especially the ones who were also homeless, “got” them. Louisa struggled to make friends when she first moved into the shelter, even though she was pleasant and outgoing.

“So, no friends in the shelter, no friends at school.... [At lunch] sometimes, somebody come and talk to me, but not much.”

She said she left friends behind when she moved and tried to stay connected on the internet.

“I talk to them in Facebook in Instagram.”

By the end of the study, Louisa made friends both in school and in the shelter. She only took five pictures, but one was of her new friends.

“They are my new friends. I think that is something important too. Having friend.
I get distracted to him, I talk to him.”

She indicated it was good to have friends who understood her.

“They are passing the same that, uh, are going through the same as me.”

Alyssa was struggling with being in the shelter. However, one thing she found positive was being with other homeless youth.

[I like that there’s] free food [laughs] that isn’t exactly the best, but, and I also made a few friends here.

Connections were the first thing that came to mind for Damon during the first interview. In addition to his family, his friends helped him deal with his homelessness.

“For the time that I have been homeless um basically people who help me stay positive, the friends I’ve had for four five years my parents and my friends’ parents because I’ve been around them for years.”

Being able to interact with his friends before he had to be in the shelter at curfew helped him acquiesce to the rules. He took a picture of where they hung out.

“It represents the um freedom I feel when I’m with my friends, not a lot of people act the same when they are just around their family. They act differently around their friends. Even though I’m stuck here with my parents, I still get to hang out with my friends and be myself.”

Kendra made a friend in the shelter who had moved on to permanent housing. She wore her friend’s pin to remember her.
“The pin I got from a friend who actually has her own place now with her family. For me it means you’re not ever alone, and just because you’re homeless doesn’t mean you can’t have friends.”

It also helped her to think that her friend’s family was no longer homeless and that someday she would be someone else’s positive reminder.

“They were homeless before and now they’re not, so when I think of them I think someday that will be me and maybe somebody I’m friends with here now will think of me and it will make them feel better that someday they will get out too. I think when I think about them, just, well, that they are doing good makes me think we will do good too. It kinda helps me because I keep it in my pencil case when I’m not wearing it and sometimes it will remind me, um, she was here once, so one day you’ll get your own place, don’t worry about it.”

She felt it was her peers who understood her best.

“It’s one of those things that kinda hard to explain. It’s kinda like a joke you can’t tell. I mean sometimes you tell a joke and part of it the person doesn’t get, they don’t think it’s funny. I don’t mean homelessness is funny.”

Her perspective speaks to the need for connection, for someone to “get” you and your situation, in addition to the support they received from their family.

Juan and Emilio responded to interview questions that it was friends that helped them cope.

R: “Is there anything else you think helps you deal day to day?”
Juan: “um talking to friends”

R: “Is there anyone at your high school that knows about your homelessness?”
Emilio: “yeah. My friend from Puerto Rico….From he’s homeless too.”
Marco made close friends at school when he was living with family members, so it was important that when he was sheltered in another city, he could stay in his school.

“Most of my friends are in [the original city]. I don’t want to say this but I really don’t like the people here in [the new city]. But my friends pretty much like I said they’re from my school my best friend he plays volleyball with me so I stay over his house sometimes.”

He took pictures of their shoes to represent them.

“These are my three closest friends. I took this picture because um it was hard for me when I like moved here. Not to make friends in a way, but to yeah, make real friends like not acquaintances. Um but I can probably say that I found three friends that I know do care for me and have been there like since I moved here. Yeah just to know that people who might be going through these experiences who might be in high school like there’s always a friend there’s always there that’s going to care. When you have friends and you have people to talk to you don’t have to like keep everything to yourself so I think expressing yourself to others is really helpful, like talking to others.”

Tiana’s friend in the shelter helped her stay positive. She found a way to creatively represent her.
“I couldn’t find her but that’s hers and I wanted to include her. I sleep with it every night. Just like my blanket. I don’t know. Knowing that I’m so close with her helps. A lot. And knowing that we get closer and closer every day.”

Being around other homeless youth helped these particular adolescents cope with their homelessness. This would have been much more difficult if their community used motels to house homeless families. The shelter provided them the opportunity to interact with other homeless youth, to build friendships, and to see that other kids in similar situations had successfully returned to their own housing. Only one of the participants from the shelter did not express that she valued her relationships with peers. She did not like being in the shelter and did not actively engage in relationship building. She did not seem interested in relationships and was focused on getting out of the shelter as quickly as possible.

She's always in my business - Supportive Adults/Mentors. Some of the participants felt their connection with non-family supportive adults helped them feel accepted and supported. For some, this supportive adult was at school. Marco spoke of supportive connection with a teacher.
“This is my history teacher. Um, like this can relate to friendship too, but him personally I feel like he’s helped me a lot cuz it’s been one of the few teachers who knows what I’ve been through and that I can actually talk to and he offered to talk to me whenever I want and just the conversations we have, like for instance someone who’s listening, they hear you out and they don’t even have to say anything sometimes you talking to other people, even if you don’t get the response you want I think it’s helpful.”

He did not feel the supportive adult needed to be a support professional, such as a social worker, but that the relationship be the choice of the adult and the youth.

“I don’t really think that it has to be a professional. I think it should be something that’s totally up to the person, to you, like not have to be forced to like open yourself to this exact person. Like you should get the chance to choose the person you want to be open to.”

A typical adolescent might not like it that an adult was regularly checking in with them, asking how they were doing, asking if they needed anything, but not Kimmie. She took a picture of art on the hallway wall of her school to represent the importance of the connection to her advisor.
“That’s, uh, well that’s, um, a painting inside my uh well the stairway of my school….I have my advisor and she just does everything for me. She’s on me all day every day. She asks if I need something every single day. In the morning and after school, in advisory, what if I need a ride anywhere, if I need anything, if I need clothes, shoes, or help with homework or if I needed to talk to the teachers about why I’m not getting my homework done, or yeah….So she’s always in my business I guess. I can’t really hate on her for that.”

Kimmie appreciated that her advisor was an adult she could count on.

“And then um this was also from my advisor’s class, well art class and yeah, my advisor again is one of the supportive people and just having her…with me I guess, makes me happy.”

She felt like the connection between students and teachers was a strength of her school.

“Yeah, even the new teachers are really connected to all the students. I don’t, the teachers are, I don’t know at our school, its better, the teachers are, it’s easier to have contact with a teacher. The teachers know all the students; most of the students get along with the teachers. And vice versa so…”

Tiana found a supportive adult in the mother of one of her shelter friends, who she would not have met if she were not in the shelter. She found it helpful to have an adult mentor that was not a member of her family.
“Her mother is more like… a…lifetime friend. She’s kinda outside my family. I can also talk to her. About anything. She’s kinda been through the same things that we have. She listens. And she cares. She can relate to how I’m feeling.”

They planned to maintain their connection after they left the shelter. Before the end of the study, they had moved to an apartment together.

David spoke of the positive feedback and encouragement he received from his pastor.

He took a picture of his Bible to represent him.

“The pastor says never be sad cuz if you be sad it will be worse. So be happy and it’s better.”

His brother Juan also felt their pastor was a positive influence.
“Cuz coming from bad time, to have, I can call my pastor and he can give me advice.”

Louisa felt her ESL teacher supported her.

“Well, that my teacher in the easel [ESL] class, she try to help me. So, she talk to me and try to help me. When I got to the, when I go to my other class, nobody talk to me.”

While these adolescents were similar in many ways with their typical peers, such as the need to fit in and to be accepted, they differed in the importance they placed on maintaining connection with the parents, siblings, and non-family adults. Relationships were the most common subjects of their photography and discussions about what they felt helped them cope with their homelessness and keep them positive. Parents, siblings, peers, and other non-family adults all played an important role in their success.

**Connection to other living things.**

Participants that had pets prior to becoming homeless discussed how maintaining their connection with their animals helped them. They took photographs of their dogs and cats. Jack’s animals made it out of the fire that consumed his apartment
and he had them with him in his temporary apartment. He looks forward to seeing his dog after a day at school.

"I have long memories with her, like a funny part when she runs circles in my back yard, she flipped me over 3 times when I was little. When I’m on the bus I’m like I can’t wait to see [her]. Like that. Cuz I love her….Yeah, so we’re on the first floor and all we really had was water damage and falling debris. We weren’t allowed to go in they were afraid I would…and then my mother went in and got her."

The family shelter did not allow animals. This was tough for Damon, but he was able to kennel his dog and visit regularly. He talked about how his dog helped soothe him.

“For shelter kids, if you have any animal that you have been with for the past 3 or 4 years, you know you’re close, if you um like dogs and they comfort you, um make sure you have a staff member or get an ok with staff member to go see or have them take you to a park or animal shelter just to um to look at and treat, be comforted by an animal.”
Pets are non-judgmental and loyal. They reminded these homeless adolescents of a time when they had housing of their own. For those that had pets prior to their homelessness, maintaining their connection was supportive and comforting.

**Connection to Places.** Not knowing where you are going to sleep, when or if you are going to have your next meal, or where you may spend your day can be disturbing. It can make the world a scary place. The participants discussed and photographed the importance of dependable, supportive, and safe places that met their needs.

**Shelter.** Several of the participants felt the shelter was a safe place. It may have been the first place in a while where they knew they had a bed of their own, with their family. Before coming to the shelter, some had been sleeping on couches, some on floors. At the shelter, they knew that no one could come into the building without approval of a staff member. They knew at 7pm, the residents had to be in the shelter, so people were not coming and going all night. They knew that there was a security guard on the property who monitored the shelter inside and outside. This was different for Alyssa than other places she had stayed.

“*There were things not as safe or private as being here.*”

She did not feel safe where she and her father lived prior to coming into the shelter. Although she did not have to share a bathroom, which was an issue of privacy for her, there was significant violence. Living in the shelter helped her feel safe.

“*It’s safe like that and it makes you feel better. It makes me…hope that I will be living out of here sometime soon.*”

Sometimes the youth living in the shelter complained about the rules, such as curfew, but they knew that the rules were designed by the program and enforced by the staff to
keep them safe. They understood that families were moving in and moving out frequently and could be unknown, especially when they first came to the shelter. The shelter rules, including the rule requiring parents to always be with their children, annoyed the adolescents, but they were pleased that the program was committed to their safety. Alyssa described this duality.

“They help your family. Staff is just there trying to help even though sometimes they make crazy rules; they’re still meaning to help.”

Damon shared a similar opinion.

“All the rules and the curfew here um that’s what sucks. I know that the rules are just to be safe.”

Juan did not like the rules but he understood why they had rules.

“Like they are telling you what you gotta cook, what you gotta do, like what to eat. Like having to having your mother go with you to use the bathroom and stuff like that. Yeah pretty much the same thing. I don’t know…it’s like safety [or] something…”

The shelter had inspirational posters and quotes written on white boards to remind the residents to keep positive. Juan commented on something that staff wrote on a white board and placed in the common area.

“It inspired me somehow. I don’t know. I just read it and I just took the picture.”
David liked a particular poster. He felt it represented his attitude since coming to the shelter.

“I’m always excited, I’m never sad... I’m happy with my family, and people here they’re happy to be with their family too.”

The shelter also provided activities that the participants liked and said that they wanted more. Some of the activities were a distraction, some were opportunities to interact with other teens in the shelter, and others gave families an opportunity to bond.

Kendra enjoyed doing activities at the shelter with her family.

“This is a kind of another family bonding kinda thing because together we kinda, we painted the pots down here for the shelter activity um they first put flowers but we decided to plant the seeds that my mother had got....So we all kinda pitched in to help take care of it so when we get our own place she’ll already have her seasonings and onions, like me and my mother and brother and sister and the younger ones they kinda just helped with the dirt.”
Alyssa suggested more activities.

“Well some type of radio, ok so there could be some type of dance teacher. Or some other way to let kids get their energy, you know.”

Damon suggested that staff find what activities the adolescents were interested in and try to provide opportunities for that activity.

“Um for me since it’s sports and football, find the interests, since it’s homeless kids, find their interests and if it is the same, have a project on that or plan activities. It could be football, art, whatever it is.”

The participants living in the shelter appreciated that they had access to computers, videos, books, and video games in the shelter common space. Alyssa recommended that it was important to have access to Wi-Fi to connect with the outside world.

“For teenagers, I would suggest Wi-Fi access is important because most teens are obsessed with the internet but we can’t get Wi-Fi here. It helps connect with the outside world while I’m stuck here after 7.”

The participants appreciated the tangible and intangible things the shelter provided. They recommend that there be more programming specific for teens that would align with their developmental needs.
School. For some of the participants, school could be a struggle academically and behaviorally. For most, school was a place where they felt good about themselves, and felt accepted and supported. For Marco, school had always been an important part of his life.

“We were little and when they got divorced my parents, she didn’t want to take us out of private school. She wanted to keep us there cuz she wanted us to get a good education. After a little while she decided to come here just because you can get a good education here in public school but you can’t there.”

Being at school was his safe place. He had been at the shelter, but now he was in transitional housing with his mother and brother, without other families or support staff. He did not feel safe in the location of the transitional apartment, so he had no problem staying late at school until his mother picked him up.

“This is another example um I would do homework or just walk around the whole four hours when I had to wait for my mom. But it was a safe like safe place I was in school there was heat. I wasn’t outside. Sometimes they want to be outside like in the other picture when it was cold but I personally got access to the inside and had heat when it was too cold outside.”

School staff was aware of his situation and granted him special access.

“Yeah we’re not supposed to be in school but just because they know my situation...”

When transportation was not available, he was allowed to stay in a lobby or in the band room until his mother finished work and was able to pick him up.
“I mean like you're in a safe place I could've been outside being open to everything that can go on outside but I was in school like I got the privilege to be in school in a safe place with heat. So, like it's better.”

Marco also played in the band at school. He said it helped soothe him and release negative feelings depending on the instrument he was playing.

“When I’m frustrated but I feel like the saxophone can help me out whenever I just feel any type of way. Sometimes I play drum set sometimes I play one of the four saxophones I pay for either band it is, sometimes I play guitar it depends on the location. Percussion wise I feel like it's a really cool way to like just get out the anger.”

Kimmie took a picture of a mural at her school. She discussed how she participated in community service. This made her feel good about herself.

“In my school, we have to do extra-curricular and one of the classes we had to choose from was housing and homelessness… then we visits foster homes…we get to like choose where we wanna go to help. I mean we do drives, we get to go to goodwill and stuff and do drives with them, we did a backpack drive, a food drive, and a hygiene products drive. Um we did a coat drive and we helped um we helped at a soup kitchen and, um, yeah”
School was a place of consistency for these youth. Due to McKinney-Vento, they were able to stay in the school they had been in prior to their homelessness. This was one less thing that had to be disrupted in their lives.

**Church/Spirituality.** Religious organizations have a long history of intervening on behalf of the poor and the homeless. Several religious organizations in the city where these participants lived provided temporary shelter for individuals, soup kitchens, and clothing. Faith was a positive aspect for some of the participants. For some this included a particular place - an organized church. Brothers Juan, David, and Emilio saw church as a place that gave them positive, empowering messages. They regularly went to church not because they were homeless, but despite being homeless. The pastor was a mentor, the parishioners helped with items they needed, and their reading of Scripture reminded them of their responsibilities and rewards as Christians. The brothers went to church with their mother sometimes three or four times a week. It got them out of the shelter and off the streets. For Emilio, it was a soothing place.

“Like I can feel more calm and I don’t get into that much trouble. Like it helps like when we got problems, like the pastor helps us.”

For Kimmie, her sense of spirituality not about organized faith or a church building, but a place to talk to God. Outside was her church.
“Well church doesn’t have any meaning for me, not church specifically, but mostly God. Well me, I talk to God a lot, I don’t know about my other siblings, but I talk to Him a lot. About um just hoping that He gets me out of this situation and that my mother finds a job and is able to do things on her own cuz we always had my dad to depend on and now we don’t so yeah.”

Being outside in nature was a spiritual experience for Kimmie. While she enjoyed being outside, she sometimes spent time thinking about her deceased grandmother.

“Not necessarily prayers, but like I had a grandma who just recently passed away.”

Damon had a prayer card from his deceased aunt’s funeral that he turned to in difficult times.

“I have, uh, two cards one from my, my, I was going to say niece, my cousin, my baby cousin’s, um, mother died and funeral and... I don’t even know where I put it...oh I had it up here. I read it or I memorized it or, I didn’t memorize it cuz I didn’t look at it in a long time, but um yeah, I take this out whenever I’m mad I read it and it calms me down, cuz I know she’s with me....it’s basically if I read it I know she’s watching over me, but, um, she’s right there with me, holding me or telling me it’s going to be alright.”

For these particular youth, faith and spirituality eased their stress associated with being homeless. It guided them to not be negative in their thinking or towards others. For some it provided another supportive community, while for others it provided a focus when their thoughts might otherwise wander to the negative.

**Space and being outside in nature.** Many of the participants felt cramped in the shelter and some felt the need the opportunity to get outside in nature. Being outside provided physical space that was not available inside the shelter. For some, nature helped them focus on the bigger picture when they were feeling down about their current situation. For others, nature was soothing. Kimmie talked about nature both as a spiritual experience and as a chance to get out of cramped spaces with lots of people.
“I was just out for a walk and I was walking back home and I felt the need to take a picture because it, I don’t know, it was something that made me happy. Like when I look outside and it’s beautiful outside I always think wow this is awesome… Sometimes if I’m having a really bad day, once I go outside it, like see things beautiful. Sometimes, plenty of times, I don’t feel that it’s fair that I’m in this situation. I don’t know why, I just don’t always think so….Sometimes I get mad, at my family and sometimes myself and my siblings and yeah, and then always I don’t want to be here or be in this life or in this situation at all so I’m usually, I’m usually like ain’t really that happy. So when I go outside and I get to see how nice it is, and I just realize that things are not that bad…. Teens should just get a chance to go out and get a chance to get space by themselves. Not everybody needs a lot of people around them…. Sometimes being alone and just being alone helps me think and it, usually when I’m walking it usually makes me think about the situation and I tell myself to do better.”

Damon liked being in the rain.

“I took a picture of the sky. It’s cloudy. It’s when it was starting to rain, about to start raining. Just basically everything about rain comforts me. I’m…people call me a dog cuz I like rain. I don’t know why. They used to call me a dog cuz I like rain. I don’t know why. Not a lot of dogs don’t like rain. It’s just everything about rain comforts me I guess.”

Marco liked being outside at school.
“I took the picture um because that's where I used to walk when I couldn't be in the band room because there was something going on um I would just have to wait there for hours outside, but I like took another picture of a tree [after this] and it's just like it's actually really calming to just sit there and you're like surrounded by nature and like read or do your homework.”

Kimmie also liked that there was a playground on the shelter property where she and her family could have fun without getting on each other's nerves in the contained space of the shelter.

“So, this is a good day for everybody and we were all on the swing, all seven of us. everybody was having a good day and then that made me happy cuz he days that none of us are fighting, like the days that we actually get along, is rare.”
Having a space other than inside was a release.

“I mean, it doesn’t really have much space to be honest. Well for me it doesn’t. Um, but, I don’t know how to explain it. It’s, I, I don’t know. It’s not always…bad. This space is something you, you know, you’re not always crowded, but then if all the families come down here, then it gets noisy. There’s always like, there’s a lot of babies here so it’s always screaming. That’s just not how I like it and then the rooms are kinda close together.”

Sometimes having an indoor space that allowed for a nice view of the outdoors and some fresh air helped the participants feel less confined. Kendra liked that her room had windows.

“The whole time we’ve been here we’ve had that room so I don’t know what it would be like to have a room without a window. Um, a lot of people say that they wish they could have windows cuz it’s always either too hot or too cold, or whatever it may be.”

The participants identified safe, secure, and soothing places as positive resources in their lives. These included physical structures and the outdoors. They had more psychological and physical energy to cope with the stressors associated with being homeless with their basic physiological needs were met.

**Connection to Things**

Homelessness often involves a loss of personal possessions. Those who become homeless often take with them only what they can carry. Those who become homeless because of a crisis/traumatic event sometimes lose everything. For this group of homeless adolescents, they had relatively few personal possessions from before they were homeless. The shelter provided things they would not have had living on the streets.

**Distractions.** Participants had things that they used to distract themselves. As mentioned earlier, they had personal issues and problems that could have consumed them, yet they did not dwell on them, partially due to keeping themselves distracted.
Some distractions were things they brought with them from previous housing, others were provided by the shelter. All helped keep them from dwelling on their situation.

Jack had an Xbox that made it out of his house fire.

“Whenever I play video games...like Minecraft, Mortal Combat vs DC Universe, it is important to me. Video games have been part of my life since I was five. And...well...it's the best, Xbox, my DS, well it got ruined, but they, they feel like they're my prized possessions.... It helps me calm down.... Well video game lovers can understand.... It helps me deal with a lot of things.”

David was happy the shelter had an Xbox.

“It distracts me when I'm bored and like that down here. That I want to play, move around. The Kinect, it make me play”
Kendra immersed herself in reading epic fiction.

“Yeah, I mean it could distract you when you’re stressed, so…”

Alyssa enjoyed reading and listening to music.

“I like reading a lot and that my escape from reality…. He’s from Maine. Yeah and just thinking of Maine sometimes makes me feel a little bit better I guess I mean I’m still adjusting to the city so it’s hard sometimes to stay positive about the place. I mean thinking about my home state it’s a little bit better.”

“There are so many bands that have helped me so much with not only this place but my mental state and just when I lived with mother and no one was there for
me, it was, Linkin Park was one of the main bands that I was listening to, like Breaking the Habit, was a song I listened to, and then it’s just like that’s the only bracelet that I had at the time too. Music is just, keeping me sane here…. Listening to some music can help out with a lot, helps you relax, helps you feel connected, the lyrics maybe give you some advice.”

These things that other teens might take for granted were very meaningful to these homeless adolescents. They provided distraction and filled time that could otherwise be taken up by dwelling negatively on their situation.

**Having things other teens have.** Clothing and shoes helped some of the participants feel better about their situation, fit in with their peers, and hide their socioeconomic status. One of the most frequently used objects to represent people for the African American and Latino/Hispanic participants was their shoes - mostly well-kept, expensive high-top sneakers. Several participants indicated that the pictures of sneakers represented friends or siblings, but sneakers for poor kids often taken on meaning in themselves. Sneakers may be the one thing they do not deny themselves (Wade, 2015). Tiana specifically mentioned sneakers represented a sense of normalcy or fitting in with her peers at school. She photographed the sneakers that her friend gave her and said they helped her fit because she did not have to wear the “beat up slippers” that survived her homelessness.
“Not being bullied or made fun of is why I wear the shoes. Because if I wear the other ones then everybody is gonna make fun of me.”

Sneakers also represented for her a better future.

“I could be wearing the same beat up slippers. So, I feel like sometimes things get better.”

Having nice sneakers can help teens fit in with their middle-class peers, masking their socioeconomic situation. They can be used to portray an image about the owner, a message that may not be realistic (Moise, 2012). They helped Tiana hide her status.

For some kids, basketball sneakers represent a pathway out of their situation, representing the star athletes who may have grown up poor and homeless like them, even if they are not athletic themselves. For some they represent rebellion, as Air Jordan’s were originally banned from the National Basketball Association (Smith, 2011). They and their peers may not even remember why, but they know they are rebellious and they want them. All the sneakers photographed for this study were well taken care of, possibly different from the rest of the things in their lives.

Participants also talked about wearing contemporary clothing, which helped them to not stand out. Tiana and Kimmie’s principal bought them clothes to start the school year after she learned their clothes were stolen out of their car before they moved into the shelter. She had used this picture previously to communicate the importance of shoes, but used the picture this time to point out her jeans.
“Those are actually the jeans that my principal bought me. Like the week before school restarted after vacation, she bought me and my sister like a couple outfits. We went shopping before we got evicted and we had new clothes and stuff that our principal had bought us cuz we didn’t have money for new clothes for school. So, she had took me and my sister shopping and then we went shopping for the babies.”

Distractions helped keep these participants from dwelling on their situation. This included books, music, and electronics. Fitting in was also very important. For several participants in this study, shoes were the most important way to not give away their socioeconomic or housing status, but pants and “outfits” were important as well.

**Hope objects/memories.** Previous research had indicated that hope objects help teens in difficult situations stay positive (Harley, 2015). Several of the participants had personal possessions that they had from before the time they were homeless. They represented memories of a better time and optimism that they would get back there someday. Some had things that they had been able to keep when they became homeless. Juan had a tee shirt from when he was much younger. It barely fit him anymore, but it gave him hope that someday he and his family would be housed again.
“It helps me remember when I was little and I always had my house and apartments. And I always had a place to live. I remember when I got it when we was in Louisiana. It helps me remember when I wasn’t homeless and I had a home for me.”

Tiana had a blanket that had come with her through different housing situations.

“I got my blanket that I’ve had since I was like three. It’s a Rugrats blanket. I had the whole bed set. That’s the only thing that got saved…. It’s only the blanket. That’s all I have is only the comforter. But I have to have it…. I feel like it’s a part of my childhood…. If I lose that blanket it’s over. I would be so sad.”

“Losing your home is a lot. And they took all our stuff. I’m surprised I still have that blanket. Some people, my brothers and sisters, don’t have anything from our house.”

Jack had his blanket and pillow from before the fire.
“That’s my bed. It kinda looks weird. It’s got Mickey Mouse all over it. It’s dumb but…yeah….This is because whenever I sleep I have good dreams most of the time.”

Damon was able to keep funeral cards from relatives that had passed away as he moved from place to place.

“I have uh two cards one from my, my I was going to say niece my cousin, my baby cousin’s um mother died and funeral and….yeah I don’t even know where I put it…oh I had it up here. I read it or I memorized it or, I didn't memorize it cuz I didn't look at it in a long time, but um yeah, I take this out whenever I’m mad I read it and it calms me down cuz I know she’s with me. I’m just angry that they died at such a young age um so…”

Alyssa kept a red nose she got when her family went to the circus.

“And I mean the circus does inspire people to do stuff. I went with dad and my younger sisters. Yeah so, we went to the circus and I got to hug a clown and everything. It was just, I got to meet a few of the circus workers. Because dad used to work in a circus. It was really cool and it inspires me to be in a circus maybe or something. To have something that inspires, a really dull life otherwise being homeless, it’s a certain way to get hope, I don’t even know how to explain it, how much it made me happy.”
In general, the participants expressed appreciation for what they had and rarely complained about what they did not have. Nor did they complain about the circumstances that lead to their homelessness. They did not expect to be treated any differently than their housed peers. Small things were not taken for granted. Gratitude was expressed for the efforts others made in trying to help them and for the limited possessions they had. In spite of their situation, the adolescent participants in this study maintained strong *connections to people, places, and things*. Although probably fewer in number than those of their housed peers, these fewer and stronger connections were very important to them.
Chapter 6: Findings: Internal Resources

Just a place in time

The participants identified internal resources that helped them feel more helpful and cope with their homelessness, also answering the second research question. This chapter analyzes those of internal resources. These inner resources were developed or maintained in the environment of the external resources that were presented in the previous chapter. The adolescent participants in this study shared commonalities in their lived experience of homelessness, including external resources. They had a safe place to sleep at night, their own bed to sleep in, they went to school every day, and they had food prepared for them, providing for their basic physiological needs (Maslow, 1943). They all resided with at least one parent and most lived with their siblings. The participants who lived in the shelter had other adults, including the shelter staff and other adult residents, who cared about them and tried to make their lives tolerable. These common resources, along with their own unique external resources and experiences, may have helped them develop and maintain internal resources, ways of thinking.

Enduring worry and stress. While the study was presented to the participants as focusing on the positive influences in their lives, several spoke about their worries and stressors. Marco worried about his older brother who was in an adult shelter. He never directly said he was worried as he described his mother’s concern, which he raised at the first meeting.

“That shelter was people who use drugs but have no place to go…. My mom didn’t feel very comfortable with that. She didn’t think it was going to be safe cuz of the type of people that were there.”
He also expressed concern about their neighborhood.

“[Our transitional housing] is not the greatest like place because the area is not the safest.”

Kimmie spoke of the stressors involved with the conflict between her mother and father.

“We were staying with my dad at his girlfriend’s house and he wouldn’t let us see our mom and when our mom tried to explain it to him he said she could take his kids. Then like started a whole fit and then my mom came and picked us up and we had to find someplace to go because she had nowhere to go.”

Kendra was exposed to domestic violence between her mother and stepfather. She spoke about how these conflicts led to different instances.

“A few of them have been with because of relationship issues with my mom and her husband.”

Although Juan did not directly say that he worried, he spoke of how his mother helped him.

“She tells me not to worry, that very soon we are gonna get out of here.”

Alyssa described her stress living in the shelter.

“I am constantly irritated about this place and dad’s getting irritated too because I keep on giving an attitude, which I don’t mean to but it’s not like I mean to but I’m stressed out all the time about this place and then...I think it’s just the stress of having no money with him, and then it’s being here with a bunch of people and my anxiety kicking in, and having to take a shower when other people are in the same room showering in the other showers.

However, like the others who described stress and worry, she chose to focus on the positives of her life.

“I’m hopeful. I try to think of the good things with my dad when he’s feeling down. I try not to think about the negative cuz that’s what my counselor at [her counseling center] said not to do.”

While participants were asked to photograph and discuss the positive influences on their lives, they were not prevented from discussing the struggles that they faced or worries they had. Their responses to the semi-structured interview questions gave them
the opportunity to identify the struggles of being an adolescent living in a homeless family. Homelessness was a challenge, but their connections and resources may have helped them adapt.

**Defiance of stereotypes.**

**Just a place in time.**

The participants in this study did not define themselves by their homelessness and tried to live normal lives. This group of adolescents saw themselves as typical kids in a temporary, albeit unpleasant, situation. Kendra chose to explicitly defy those stereotypes using the words “just because you're homeless...”

“Just because you're homeless doesn't mean you can't have friends.”

“Just because you're homeless doesn't mean that you’re not capable.”

“Just because you're homeless doesn't mean you can't do something you enjoy.”

She described how she saw her homelessness as a temporary situation.

“Please Sir, I want some more.” Oliver, in Oliver Twist.

Contrary to the cultural stereotype of poor and homeless kids eating anything placed in front of them, participants took pictures of food they bought outside of the shelter. They discussed resisting eating foods they did not like, while they appreciated that they had food at all. Knowing that there was food prepared for them every day, they chose to be fussy. Families were observed eating food purchased across the street at the corner market. They often spent some of what little money they had on treats. Alyssa described the meaning of Pop-Tarts.
“It’s rare, even as a non-homeless person, it’s rare to get treats and stuff, so when I do it’s special. It’s hard to get sometimes, like in other countries, it’s special, to have pop tarts….It makes everyone positive. C’mon it’s Pop-Tarts.”

They also defied other cultural stereotypes such as the poor and homeless are lazy, they do not care about school, and they do not want to work. These youth wanted to be active, often doing all they could to help their parent with family responsibilities. Those with younger siblings helped parent them. Several of the adolescents became homeless because their parent honored a responsibility to a grandparent, even when the parent did not have housing. They enjoyed going to school and found it helpful, both as a means to reach their goals and teach them responsibility.

Kimmie spoke of how much she enjoyed school.

“I always liked education…um, I don’t know, I always liked school, I don’t know why…like I would always bring home extra work, and so school was always really fun for me. I would always, I saw it as fun and easy and a good way to get out of the house. It was fun for me.”

Several of the teens that were old enough to be employed wanted to get jobs nearby. They saw work as providing them with an income that they could use to help their parents find housing. None said they wanted a job so they could buy things for themselves. David had put in an application to the local McDonald’s and was hopeful to start work soon. Tiana had been hired.

“[I’m going to be] working [at] McDonald’s. I start next Tuesday”
The adolescents in this study did not look or act like a stereotypical homeless person. They were clean, well fed, cared about their education and wanted to work to help support their families.

**Being a kid.** Several of the participants described enjoying getting messy and having fun. Some of these adolescents had few chances to be kids due to growing up in homeless families. For those who had been housed earlier in their lives, it had been quite a while since they enjoyed acting like a kid. For this study, some of the participants took pictures of people being silly. They took pictures of art they or others had created and discussed how enjoyable it was to be messy. They kept blankets and T-shirts from their childhood. Tiana talked about how she did not have a chance to be a kid growing up in unstable housing.

*I was never a child....I always had to help take care of my little brothers and sisters. Not really a parent but a co-parent. My dad wouldn't really help so I had to step in and help. My dad wasn't really there.*

Kimmie talked about liking to get messy...like a kid.

*“Art is really messy for me and I like being messy....A lot of times I have um I feel the need to make a mess.... I like playing around with the paint. I kinda brings me back to the days when uh in preschool when you had to paint your hand and do the paper.”*
Tiana took pictures of other kids in the shelter playing footsie.

“They were kinda playing footsie…. It’s like, seeing them every day and my mother and my brothers and sisters, their mother and their sister it makes me happy. Even if I’m in a bad mood like cuz school was horrible had a bad day at school, come back and seeing them just makes it all go away.”

The adolescents in this study whose families had been repeatedly homeless reported they had little opportunity to be kids when they were kids. This may have been because their parents were too overwhelmed to interact with them as children or they were parentified. The shelter provided them with the opportunity to be a kid – to be silly and to be messy.

**Motivation, ambition, and a sense of purpose.** The participants of this study were motivated by goals for their future. None of them indicated they felt that their current homelessness would prevent them from reaching their goals, even those who were closer to being adults.

Juan thought about college.

“Maybe go to college, get a career. I like to like build stuff.”

Kendra’s goal was to be a chef

“I want to go to Texas for college. I’m not really 100 percent sure for what though….I heard that there was a good college there for um future chefs and I thought maybe I could do cooking.”
Damon’s ambition was to be an auto mechanic so he photographed a car to represent his hopefulness for the future.

“I took a picture of a car cuz like I said earlier my dream is to basically build my own car from scratch, so this is what this picture describes. I have a dream to build cars. Muscle cars…. this is my uh dream. A way that cars or um whatever cars or your dream can help is kids, or the shelter kids that you’re working with is take um or get to know them as individuals, not just the kid in a homeless family, see what their dreams are and try to if you can take them to a place or help them see their dreams, maybe just the general area where their future career could be…. I know I’m doing what I’m doing and so still on the right track going to school doing all the stuff I have to do to get to get to where I’m trying to go.”

Louisa continued to be motivated by goals for after high school.

“Well, I am going to be a photographer and a makeup artist so in 2 years I see making photos and um makeup people. I want to go to college and then find a work.”

Jack’s purpose in completing school was to be a graphic designer and a good citizen.

“First I would want to say that I would go to [a local arts school]. Then I’d be a graphic designer. And my first job I’d say would be working at game stop….Um, having kids, getting married, having a roof pay for my being a really good citizen.”

David’s ambition was for his family to be housed.

“Like we don’t have a home but we’re gonna get a home. We are on the housing list. You don’t know if you’re gonna wait until there is housing or if there is an apartment.”

These adolescents maintained a focus on their future and did not indicate that
their homelessness would prevent them from reaching the goals. They continued to be motivated towards bettering their lives. Several acted with the purpose of reaching their goals by staying invested in school and trying to get a job.

**Optimism and hope.**

The dictionary defines optimism as the expectation of a favorable outcome (Optimism, n.d.a.). It is also defined as hopefulness about the future (Optimism, n.d.b.). Hope is defined as an expectation of a particular outcome (Hope, n.d.). The adolescent participants in this study were both optimistic and hopeful. They did not see their homelessness as interfering with what they wanted to do with their lives. They saw their current situation as a detour, and felt they still had the agency and pathways be able to reach their goals. They all saw their lives as eventually getting better.

Louisa saw her homelessness as preparing her better for the future.

> “It’s difficult. But I think this is going to help me be more successful when I grow up. I think this is going to help me be more success[ful] in my life. Maybe I will know I can do things.”

She struggled at first with making friends. When she was living with family, she did not make any friends, even at school. When she moved to the shelter, she was optimistic.

> “Well I think that in here, I don’t know, maybe I’m going to find friends. Now I don’t have any friends, but I think maybe the next week or the next week I can find friends.”

She felt that finding permanent housing would get her back on track.

> “I think so much it’s gonna change if my family is gonna be in a house it would change that.”

She expected she would be successful in life.

> *All the time I think I can be a success in life.*
Marco took two pictures of the sun shining through a window. He said this represented
his optimism.

“That's the empty room after we moved this past two weeks; I took them both
pictures like to just show that things will get better. One door closes another one
opens and from that place to a better place now.”

Kendra’s picture of the pots her family painted together also had meaning for her in that
she stayed optimistic even though there were good days and bad days.

“That one I took in that way because on the left there's the healthy plant and on
the right there's more of a dying one. And I did that because there are positive
times and negative times in every situation and especially when you're
homeless.... There are more healthy plants than the dead one so I guess you
want to try to make more positives than negatives....Me and my mother always
try to make sure nothing bad happens, and sometimes even when you try really
hard bad things do happen but hopefully something good will come of it. And if it
doesn't, than you can always try to do something else, focus on something else
to try to make it turn around.”

When Kendra looks at the pin her friends left her, she also thought about her friend who
had been in the shelter who was now housed. If they could do it, so could her family.
“I think when I think about them, just, well, that they are doing good makes me think we will do good too. It kinda helps me because I keep it in my pencil case when I’m not wearing it and sometimes it will remind me, um, she was here once, so one day you’ll get your own place, don’t worry about it.”

Hope Scale Results

As explained in the methodology section, Snyder’s Hope Scale was chosen for use in this study to provide supplemental data regarding the participants’ level of hope before and after their participation. The mean of the participants’ Hope Scale scores prior to the study was 48, which was slightly below Snyder’s overall scale mean of 49, reported from his 1991 study with a college and non-college student sample (Snyder, et al., 1991a). This mean was also confirmed in his 2002 review of other researchers’ use of the scale with undergraduate college students, graduate students, psychiatric outpatients, and several others participant groups (Snyder, 2002). The mean score for this group increased to 54 when the survey was retaken after participation, within one standard deviation (7) above Snyder’s mean score. Scores ranged from 39 to 62 before participation, including the scores from participants who did not complete the study. Scores after the study ranged from 47 to 61.
Subsets. Hope Scale scores were not used to determine correlation between hope and the demographic characteristics of the participants or to suggest change in hope was due to study participation. However, it was noted that the scores for eight of the nine participants who completed the study improved by more than 5.5 points. One participant’s score decreased by 3 points, while another increased by 10. Hope Scale scores only slightly varied by language spoken. White participants’ post-participation mean was 48, Latino/Hispanic 52.5, Black 56, and Mixed race 56.3, all at or above Snyder’s mean.

The participant living in transitional housing scored the highest (62). Congruent with Snyder's description of higher hope individuals (2002), he was managing his stress, had many goals for his future, and engaged in goal directed behavior. However, his behavior was no different from many of his peers who scored closer the mean. There was no connection between Hope Scale scores and how verbal the participant was, how connected the participant was with family and friends, or the amount of hopeful and optimistic language used by the participants in the interviews. However, those with lower scores took fewer pictures. Due to the size of the sample and the relative homogeneity of the Hope Scale scores, the research could not answer the fourth research question “How do more hopeful homeless adolescents differ from their less hopeful homeless peers?”

Summary of Findings

The adolescents in this study developed or maintained strong internal resources, even while faced with the difficult situation of family homelessness. This appears to be directly related to the strength of their connections with external resources and the fact
that their basic physiological needs were met in the shelter, temporary housing, or transitional housing. There were issues in their lives that cause worry and stress, but they were not overwhelmed. Overall, they were hopeful, motivated, and optimistic, as indicated by their photographs, discussion, and Hope Scale scores.
Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experience of adolescents in homeless families. The objectives were to better understand their experience of homelessness, to identify, if possible, what helps them cope, and to develop an example of research using photo-elicitation with homeless adolescents for practitioners.

The research questions asked were:

1. What is the lived experience of adolescents in homeless families? How do they view their homelessness?
2. What, if anything, do they identify that helps them feel more hopeful and cope?
3. What is the impact of participating in a research project on homeless adolescents?
4. How do more hopeful homeless adolescents differ from their less hopeful homeless peers?

The findings presented in the previous three chapters met the goals and objectives of the research and answered three (1-3) of the four research questions. This study offers an understanding of some adolescents living with homeless families. The participants described their lived experience as a part of a homeless family, including their interactions with their family, school, and community, and their inner resources. They described what helps them cope and what worried them. The methodology of the study provided an effective model of using photo-elicitation to engage adolescents and demonstrated an increase in communication between the researcher and the participants, answering the third research question “What is the impact of participating in a research project on homeless adolescents?” The participants in the final focus
group also discussed the impact of the study on their understanding of homelessness, themselves, and their relationships with adult decision makers. However, the qualitative analysis did not identify differences between participants with relatively lower versus relatively higher hope scores, which may be due to the fact that 6 of 13 participant scores prior to the study and 8 of 9 participant scores after the study were at or above the Snyder’s mean, suggesting that the study participants were hopeful.

The participants in this study did not fit the picture of homeless youth frequently portrayed in the media. The media has a significant influence on the way the public understands social problems, including homelessness (Council for Homeless Persons, 2017). It can also influence the way homeless individuals are seen and how they see themselves. The picture of children picking out the oakum and begging for gruel in *Oliver Twist* (1948) or Charlie Bucket sleeping in one bed with his entire extended family in *Willie Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* (1971) are classic examples of the negative portrayal of poor and homeless youth. News outlets have been known to perpetuate negative stereotypes of the homeless with loaded phrases such as ‘ridding the streets of homelessness’ (CHP, 2017). However, there are more recent media portraits of true-life resilience, such as Liz in *Homeless to Harvard: The Liz Murray Story* (2003) or Moonee in *The Florida Project* (2017), both who succeeded in the face of poverty and homelessness. Homeless youth have been the subjects of newspaper and magazine articles for becoming valedictorians (Koehl, 2014; Lopez, 2017) and managing directors at Fortune 500 companies (Rampton, 2015). More like the latter, the youth in this study were relatively successful in the face of homelessness.
Theory

The study findings align well with the ecological/systems framework, the core framework of social work practice. The participants had relatively strong connections with their environment prior to the study. Participants were with their families, were going to school, and most had friends. Most were positive, had a relative goodness of fit with their environment, were able to cope with their circumstances, and had a hopeful attitude towards their future. These youth had the determination to achieve their goals despite their situation. This “agency thinking” is especially important to youth and other individuals who face impediments to their goals (Snyder, 1994). Even in the difficult situation of homelessness and with relatively few external resources compared with their housed peers, those who were well connected with what they had – people, places, and things – indicated that these connections played a pivotal role in their determination, their attitude, and their continued success. For most, the ability to be open in their relationship with other systems – other families and the shelter staff – had positive results. The one participant who was less open and not as connected outside her family had a less positive perspective of herself and her situation.

The ecological/systems framework guides social workers to consider the impact of interactional patterns between individuals and their environments when assessing how their connections may be impacting their functioning. These participants in general had positive relationships with their families, not typical for adolescent/family interactions. The definitions of family and home have significantly changed since the middle of the 20th century. Typically, a 1950s family was defined as a social unit consisting of two parents, male and female, and one or more children (Rich, 2015).
Today’s families defy categorization (Hussung, 2015). They are extremely diverse in composition (Sparling, 2009) and frequently do not meet the “ideal” representation from the 1950s (Hussung, 2015). This was reflected in the family compositions of the participants in this study. Only one family in the study included two parents and only two of the families included the father. Many of the families of the Latino/Hispanic adolescents in this study became homeless after honoring a responsibility to their elders. Family was important to all the participants, not just those who identified as Latino/Hispanic.

Habitat had both a negative and positive impact on the participants. While shelter living was not an ideal habitat, they identified the positive impact of sharing their experience with other homeless families, especially their homeless peers. This would not have been possible with a different model of housing for homeless families, such as individual motel units. Separated from their original community, the adolescents identified the common space and common activities such as meal time as positive aspects of shelter living. Their habitat also provided a different experience than is generally the case for many homeless people. These families had a roof over their heads, food in their bellies, and a relative sense of safety. Street homelessness and “couch surfing” do not provide this relative stability. The literature has shown that homeless youth without these benefits struggle more, both physically and psychologically (Elliot, 2013; Gibson, 2011). For the adolescents in this study, their basic physiological needs were met – food, water, warmth, rest, safety, and security (Maslow, 1943). Most had a sense of belonging and love within their family and community as they worked towards enhancing their self-esteem in terms of dignity and
independence. These adolescents may have also perceived an improvement in their positionality, or niche, within their families, with the shelter staff, and as co-researchers following their participation in the study.

The quality of interactions with schools and in the community can also have an impact on goodness of fit and perceived positionality. The youth in this study whose families chose to identify themselves as homeless benefited from the supports required by McKinney-Vento Act, with a primary support being that youth can attend school in the district of their original residence. Several were sheltered in a city different from their city of original residence, and yet they continued to attend school in their district of original residence. Two others were not identified as homeless by their district per the family’s choice to not disclose their homelessness, but continued to attend their school of origin. In those cases, parents provided transportation to and from school. Other families continued to live in their original city, making access to school a non-issue. School continuity had a positive impact on goodness of fit. However, families that chose to not self-identify may not have received all the available supports of MVA. One adolescent chose to switch to the district where her shelter was located.

Trauma can also be considered within the ecological/systems framework as having a negative impact on the goodness of fit between the participants and their environment, leading to an increase in stress. Trauma can be both a cause and a consequence of homelessness (Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010). Homelessness itself is traumatic, especially to children and families (Bassuk & Friedman, 2005). It brings significant loss and adjustment. Homelessness because of a traumatic event can make the homeless individuals and families doubly vulnerable to other forms of trauma.
(Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010). For four of the participants in this study, personal trauma lead to their homelessness, including domestic violence, interpersonal violence, and a home fire. These adolescents did not indicate that their additional trauma history caused them any ongoing psychological difficulties. None indicated they were receiving mental health services. However, providers need to be aware of the additional risk to these individuals and families. Children and youth’s abilities to cope with trauma can be influenced by how they see their caregivers dealing with the crisis (Jones & Ollendick, 2013). Parents may need to be supported so they can be good role models for their children.

The narratives and observed behaviors of these participants were far more resilient than initially expected by this researcher. Their narratives reflected the existence of many of the protective factors previously identified in the literature. In particular, through their pictures and in their words, they described the importance of connection to and support from others, spirituality, motivation, positive attitudes, determination, meaning and purpose in life, increased motivation and hopefulness by seeing the success of others in their situation, belief in a higher power, and intentional hopefulness. Only one of the thirteen was observed to engage in social distancing which did not appear to be a protective factor.

Overall, it appeared that participation in the study had a positive impact on the adolescent’s relative goodness of fit, in that they felt several of the adults in positions of authority – their parents, the shelter staff and administration, and the public official – had heard what they had to say and possibly understood them better. One issue that several participants raised during the study was the lack of programming and privileges
for adolescents. Their perception that no attention was paid to their developmental “place in time” – the chronosystem in the ecological/systems framework – was a source of frustration. In the final focus group, one participant specifically felt the process changed the relationship dynamic for the better between the shelter manager and the teens.

Developmental theory also guided this study. This included understanding the role of peers and family. A concern expressed by the participants in this study was fitting in with their peers. Some were concerned about riding a special bus when being transported to their school from another city. Others did not want to reveal their homelessness by how they dressed. Shoes were especially important. Several of the participants photographed shoes and described the role of having the right shoes in peer acceptance. The importance of peer relationships and peer acceptance is supported by the adolescent development literature (Ausubel, 2002; Erikson, Paul, Heider, & Gardner, 1959), and poor peer experiences, such as rejection and bullying, have been linked to adult mental health difficulties (Parker, Rubin, Erath, Wojslawowicz, & Buskirk, 2006; Pollack, 1998).

While peer relationships and acceptance were as important to these adolescents as the literature suggested, the participants did not want to distance themselves from their parents. The adolescents in this study highly valued their relationships with their parents and siblings, and appreciated being with them in troubling times. All but three of the participants in this study had all their siblings with them. For those who did not, it was usually a source of worry, unless the siblings were housed. For the participants
who had siblings who also participated in this study, they helped each other with technical issues using the camera and kept each other motivated to complete the study.

In these homeless families, the eldest child was often in a caretaking role with their younger siblings, even when there was another teen-aged sibling, regardless of the sex of the eldest child. Those participants in the role of caregiver gladly accepted the responsibility. For one participant, while her siblings could be a source of stress, taking care of them helped her feel good about herself and hopeful about the family’s future. None of the participants complained about parental favoritism. In the one family with three teen-aged boys, they looked out for each other and felt responsible for protecting their mother. For this family, birth order did not play a role, as it was the middle boy who was the most responsible for watching out for his siblings.

Critical pedagogy was another one of the theories chosen for this study, partially because the initial study design was to involve CBPR. As discussed in the literature review, critical pedagogy can have an emancipatory function when participants’ increased social literacy leads them to stand up to resist and challenge the structural roadblocks that exist in society (Schmidt, 2004). The participants in this study only had a brief window into the role they could have in influencing decision makers, both as research participants and in their direct communication with decision makers and policy makers. Those that took part in the presentation spoke of feeling empowered when adult decision makers listened and heard them. Whether or not they benefit from the potential emancipatory function of this critical pedagogy will be up to them as they decide the roles they might have in resisting and challenging the structure of dominant culture.
Strengths of the study methodology

A major strength of the design of this study was its engagement with a population – adolescents – that generally does not want to communicate very much with adults in positions of authority. This can lead to at least limited communication and at worst miscommunication. When these participants first met the researcher, and were introduced to the study, the participants were generally quiet and let their parents do the talking, unless they first met the researcher at their school. This was especially true for the Latino/Hispanic adolescents. Some were more talkative at the second meeting, especially those who were not ESL, but there was a significant increase in communication by the participants from the second meeting, which was the first 1:1 interview with the researcher, to the third meeting, during which the participants described their photographs. Participants were much more engaged during the photo-elicitation interviews. The design of the study allowed for rapport to build over the course of the study, as the researcher frequently interacted informally with the participants while at the shelter to interview others. The participants also saw the researcher interacting with other residents of the shelter and with staff, which added to their comfort level with someone who once had been a stranger.

This was the first time any of the participants had been part of a research project and this may have been one of a few times that an adult told them their perspective was valuable. This study gave the teens the opportunity to work as research partners with a professional researcher. Through their informal and formal interactions with the researcher over two months and through the photo-elicitation methodology (which allowed them to produce their own research data), the participants became much more
expressive, as seen in the length of their discussions in the third interviews and final focus group.

Overall, there was greater than a 63% increase in the number of words spoken by the participants between the second to the third interviews. In particular, there was a greater than 82% increase in words spoken by participants who identified as ESL. This increase was reflected in the length of the interviews. The combination of photo-elicitation interviews and frequent contact with the researcher resulted in significantly improved communication. The presence of two sets of siblings amongst the participants aided in their comfort with the researcher and the process and allowed for a comparison of sibling groups.

As Padgett et al. found, (2013), the process of phenomenology enabled creativity. The participants were very creative, finding multiple ways to represent people without violating confidentiality. For one participant in particular, her participation aligned with her goals for after high school. Louisa said she wants to be a photographer when she graduates. She was excited to hear about this research and immediately told her mother she wanted to participate. During the first interview, she expressed during the first interview that she was especially attracted to the photography as her reason for wanting to participate. She found creative ways to represent the impact family has on her ability to cope with her homelessness, by photographing her family’s hands in order to represent them. She expressed how much she enjoyed the process and how it reinforced her desire to become a photographer.

“I am going to be a photographer and a makeup artist so in 2 years I see making photos and um makeup people.”
Participants had much to offer and as they became comfortable with the process and the researcher, they spoke in greater detail about their lived experience. As noted, none of the participants in this study had ever been asked to participate in research before and they did not know what to expect. As posited by critical theory, they were not consciously aware of societal attitudes towards them, and they may have accepted the dominant cultural image of adolescents having no voice in research or how they were being treated. Through this study, they became increasingly aware of the role they could have in educating others as to the reality of their particular kind of homelessness. At the beginning of the study, they identified their willingness to participate as either due to an interest in photography, a desire to do what their peers were doing, they had nothing better to do, or they were enticed by the incentives. As the research process developed, some participants became intrigued by the knowledge that they could have a voice on how homeless adolescents were seen and heard. More than half were willing to participate in the public presentation of their photographs and to talk with staff and public officials towards the goal of improving their lives and the lives of other homeless adolescents in situations similar to theirs, even though the prospect made some of them nervous. Unfortunately, several who wanted to participate were unable to attend the presentation because they had left the shelter or were unable to secure transportation and supervision. After the presentation, the four that did participate shared that it made them the most nervous to share their work with their parents, but they still went ahead with the process.

Padgett and her colleagues found in their 2013 study that participants in photo-elicitation interviews felt empowered by the processes. Similarly, the participants in the
photography exhibit responded affirmatively to queries about feeling empowered, describing how they felt the adults had listened to them and maybe they would have an impact on their homelessness and that of other youth.

**Limitations of the study methodology**

**Sample and sample size.** This study, by design, was limited to adolescents living with homeless families who had a parent/caretaker who would consent them. As stated earlier, the natural reluctance on the part of families to allow their minor children to participate in a study with an unknown researcher may have kept potential participants from varied housing situations from joining the study. The eventual sample was relatively homogenous, being mostly residents of one particular family shelter from which most were ultimately recruited. This sample was perhaps “better-off” than a broader sample of teens in homeless families might be and might account for the higher than expected hope scores. The size of the sample and of the final focus group made it difficult to assess if the participants had gained an awareness of the impact of macro forces on their situation or the impact of politics, beyond their positive feedback regarding their interaction with one member of the City Council.

The sample was relatively small (13) and the number of families in the study was even smaller given the sibling groups (10 families). The multiple levels of adult gatekeepers also had a negative impact on the sample size. The population to be researched was considered vulnerable and therefore highly protected. Recruitment posters were placed in areas seen by adolescents, such as recreation facilities and parks, and recruitment letters were sent to the registered mailing address of potential participants, but the community gatekeepers would not allow direct contact with
potential participants, regardless of assurances to not interview anyone until written consent/assent was obtained. Only when passive consent was allowed, and when a particular cohort of adolescents was accessed at the family shelter, was an acceptable sample size reached. Snowball sampling was also not effective.

**Cross-cultural communication.** Communication was a challenge, particularly for the ESL participants. Teens are not known for being talkative with adults in positions of authority (Drury, 2003), so research with them that is dependent on their voice and photos may suffer if there is less discussion and fewer photos. The interviewing technique involved asking open-ended questions followed by more specific prompts if the questions were met with limited response. This may have led to some respondent bias, although the researcher felt this technique allowed the participants to remain engaged, based on the researcher's experience interviewing adolescents in a clinical setting.

Language differences with ESL participants and the need for additional explanation of the questions were discussed as potential sources of bias. However, any potential respondent bias with ESL participants due to explaining or rewording the question can be viewed as being no different than rewording questions or asking further prompts when a participant did not understand a question and needed further explanation, regardless of their language. Questions posed by the researcher could be “heard” differently in the different cultural contexts of the participants, not just the Latino/Hispanic adolescents (L. Werkmeister Rozas, personal conversation, January 2018).
Length of contact with participants. The length of time for a dissertation research study did not allow for full development of the emancipatory function of critical pedagogy. Homeless transience, specifically with their participation in the presentation and focus group, interfered with longer involvement. This may have given the researcher more insight into the development of critical consciousness.

Transferability. The sample in this study does not claim to be representative of all adolescents living with homeless families. It presents the unique lived experience and multiple realities of the participants. Rather, the study represents the multiple realities of the participants themselves, which is one the strengths of phenomenological research.

Confidentiality. Total confidentiality was not possible in this study for several reasons. Safety concerns for the teens and the researcher prevented the interviews from being conducted in total privacy. The meetings took place either in public spaces or in a semi-private room in the shelter which had video cameras. While the reason for this lack of privacy was explained to the participants at the beginning of the study, this may have been a factor in their early discomfort with the process.

Recommendations for future research

Based on the difficulty found during this research in gaining access to the youth population, it may be helpful for future research to compare and contrast different means of entré into the lives of homeless adolescents. Since the primary place of gathering for youth is school, it would be helpful to determine the most helpful strategies for accessing homeless youth in schools, taking into consideration FERPA protections. Current gatekeeping procedures consider the rights of guardians over the rights of
youth. This perspective of youth continues to view them as “less than adult” whose opinions are secondary to the parents/guardians. Youth can and should be given information about potential participation in research and allowed to make decisions for themselves when there is no substantial risk of harm. Those in a protective role need to better understand the difference and implications of doing research “on” and research “with” youth. For participatory research projects, youth who are interested in participating have the right for their voice to be heard (Walker, Schratz, & Egg, 2008). They cannot make their own decisions if they are prevented from knowing that there is an opportunity.

Further research is also warranted regarding the impact of the McKinney-Vento liaison on identification and service provision to homeless students. Conversations with school social workers indicated a number were either unaware of the law, unaware of who the liaison was, unaware of the role of the liaison, or not in regular consultation with the liaison. The school district where the liaison was known to the school social workers and engaged with them identified and serviced many more homeless students than in districts where there was a disconnection between the liaison and the school social workers.

Future research with other samples of homeless adolescents may confirm or contradict these particular findings, and would give providers more specific information about their population. As this study did not claim generalizability, its transferability can be used to guide attempts to identify and engage this population to give them the voice they deserve.
Future research with a more structured interview guide may address respondent bias potentially created by the interview style of the researcher. A larger sample size could also be used to potentially replicate these results. Interviews with a bicultural researcher could also determine if the culturally dominant position of the researcher affected the results in any way.

**Implications for social work and school social work practice**

“Social workers labor to improve the quality of life of people, to prevent, minimize or ameliorate social problems, and to maximize human potential” (Androff, 2016, p.1)

The social work profession is committed to social justice. As professionals, social workers are mandated by the Code of Ethics to “pay particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” (Reamer, 2013). Those suffering from family and youth homelessness are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty and they demand a strong response from social workers in schools and in the community.

Social workers can intervene at the individual, family, group, organizational, and community levels with and on behalf of adolescents in homeless families. Social workers can work with the adolescents to support their mental health needs, to express themselves in a meaningful and creative way, and to contribute to the knowledge base. Social workers can reach out to homeless family shelters to provide social and psychoeducational opportunities. Social workers can provide recreational and social groups in family shelters. Social workers can work with homeless families to be respectful of the developmental needs of all members. Social workers can work with shelter administration and staff to provide training in youth development, recognizing
mental health issues, and group dynamics. Social workers can bring this vulnerable population to the attention of decision makers.

The impact of Hurricane Maria on Puerto Rico will accelerate the exodus to the United States that has been at historic numbers for the past decade (Vick, 2017). Social workers need to be prepared for the needs of the growing Puerto Rican diaspora in the United States. It is estimated that a half million Puerto Ricans could migrate to the United States by 2019 (Echenique, 2018). More than 19,000 Puerto Rican families have migrated to the US, including more than 24,000 students enrolled in a US school before the hurricane (US Census Bureau, 2016). While most Puerto Ricans have migrated to Florida, Hampden County, Massachusetts and Hartford, Connecticut have seen some of the highest numbers in the country. Most of the migrants are of reproductive age and their children, which has a direct impact US public schools and may result in continued growth of the US Puerto Rican population after the hurricane exodus, as it may be decades before Puerto Rico has recovered from the devastation (Echenique, 2018).

The needs of these US citizens will need to be addressed by US communities, including the public schools. Social workers will need to guide these communities to address these needs through a culturally-informed lens. Social workers can work with paraprofessional “natural helpers” while there are not enough bicultural professionals to address the needs. This will include helping Puerto Rican individual and families navigate the US system, understand their rights and responsibilities, access social supports, and ensure school-aged children are enrolled in school and receiving the services they need. The National Institute of Mental Health promotes the use of “family
navigators” to engage youth and families in needed treatment and services (Pintello, 2016). This model could be used to address the needs of the diaspora.

Social workers need to assure that the voice of homeless adolescents is heard when adults are planning interventions and programs. Their needs are as important as the needs of any other member of the family. Programming that focuses exclusively on adult needs neglects the developmental needs of adolescents, regardless of their being sheltered. Social workers can advocate for programming that includes in-house, age-appropriate social activities and help finding jobs for those of age, or age-appropriate chores in-house for those too young to work outside the shelter. Further, research indicates pets help homeless youth feel loved (Rhoades, Winetrobe, & Rice, 2017). Social workers can help families maintain their relationship with their pets. They can help shelter staff and administrators understand these needs in providing a stable supportive environment for the teens.

The social work literature clearly identifies the potential impact of school counselors, school social workers, teachers, and other nurturing adults on the lives of homeless adolescents (Miller, 2011). “School social workers have a pivotal role to play in advocating more programs to meet the educational needs of homeless children and youth and in enlisting the support of school personnel and the larger community in implementing these strategies” (Dupper, 2003, p. 102).

Already faced with challenging developmental tasks, homeless youth often lack the stability and support they need to successfully navigate these challenges. As noted, homeless youth have reported a sense of rootlessness and a disruption of normal childhood activities, including their education (Coles, 1970), which can be addressed through regular contact with a supportive adult at school. School social workers can
provide “roots” for homeless students, in a setting where they spend up to seven hours a day 180 days a year.

While the adolescents in this study described a positive outlook on their future and reported they were relatively successful in school, they still identified issues symptomatic of homelessness - parental discord, having to care for younger siblings, frequent moves, and leaving friends - as disruptions of their education. School social workers need to be aware that even homeless adolescents with relative continuity in their education still may struggle with challenges, including regular attendance and tardiness.

Although Moore (2005) found that homeless students were likely to attend more than one school during a year of homelessness and the subsequent lack of continuity negatively impacted their academic success. Most of the participants in this study reported relative continuity in their school placements, only having changed schools if they moved from another state or country or if they were attending alternative schools. They reported they were doing well and felt happy at school, further corroborating the positive impact of school continuity reported in the literature. However, some participants still identified absences and poor academic “abilities”, which they further identified as not having access to educational resources, as interfering with their education.

Groton, Teasley, and Canfield (2013) reported that social and behavioral challenges create barriers school attendance and academic achievement for homeless students. The adolescents in this study identified few behavioral issues related to school and their parents and staff supported their claims. In fact, the adults described most of
the students as respectful. Jozefowicz-Simbeni and Israel (2006) found that the coping skills many homeless youth developed on the streets or in shelters were incompatible with the behavioral expectation at school. However, most of the adolescents in this study spoke positively about school, enjoyed the academic structure, and liked how school taught responsibility. They reported they had no significant disciplinary issues. They got up regularly to attend school, even though that might include having to ride a special bus that had the potential to cause embarrassment and possibly keep them from being able to participate in after-school extra-curricular activities. Some found ways to stay after school without access to transportation and some walked miles through difficult neighborhoods to work with peers on academic projects or to participate in extra-curricular activities. This may have been due to the structure of the shelter and the support they felt living with their family and their peers.

Social skills are intrinsically developed in the day-to-day interactions with adults and peers in schools (Lawson, 2003). For many homeless youth, this aspect of where and how social skills are developed may be missing, leading to them feeling disconnected (Lawson, 2003). Homeless youth may suffer from a lack of social connection, often developed with school peers, because of transiency, attendance issues, and poorly developed social skills. For enrolled homeless students, a certain level of engagement already takes place during the school day, but because they may have to attend school away from their living situation or are embarrassed by where and how they live, they may not have the ability to engage socially with their peers outside of school. While engagement in activities at school, in the community, and in the shelter were identified as things that helped them cope, the participants in this study identified
that actually engaging in activities outside of school was difficult. One explanation was due to visitor and curfew rules at the shelter. Another challenge was transportation. Although schools provide extracurricular activities, homeless students without transportation options do not have the choice to stay after school for these activities. This is especially true for students in larger and more rural districts where school could be a significant distance from the shelter, ruling out walking. Walking is also not a safe option in some districts and is dependent on the weather. The adolescents in this study indicated that when possible, participating in extracurricular activities and staying after school to study or use the library helped them cope with their homelessness and be more academically and socially successful. Without such participation in extracurricular activities, their day was limited to being in the shelter or being at school during normal hours.

School social workers cannot work specifically with a homeless student unless the student and their family chooses to be identified or their lack of housing is interfering with the student’s academic performance. While the housing status of homeless students and families are protected by the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA, 2017), district aggregate data is available through state and district sources. School social workers can collaborate with the district homeless liaison to better understand the aggregate data, and then provide supportive programming in the schools where homeless students have been identified, without knowing the individual students. School social workers can advocate for and implement regular education supports such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). When homeless students are known, school social workers can ensure that someone regularly checks in
with the homeless student to give them the assurance that they are noticed and cared about. While school social workers can and should cast a wide net at their school to include regular and special education students, those students with particular needs can be more effectively addressed if they are known.

School social workers can advocate for full implementation of MVA, including aiding liaisons to secure available grants that can help districts provide non-regulatory supports and training for frontline staff, such as teachers and social workers, in the identification of homeless students. School social workers can reach out to the homeless liaison to collaborate on training teachers and other front-line staff to look for signs that may indicate a student’s struggles are due to homelessness or housing instability. Social workers can work with liaisons to apply for grant funding or help the liaison connect with community resources that may help homeless family and youth. School social workers need to take this initiative as homeless liaisons may be overwhelmed in the role, especially if they have been given the role as an add-on. Liaisons may not have the time or energy to implement more than the minimally required interventions to ensure access.

The case management model used by special education may also be an approach used by school social workers to assure the needs of regular education homeless students are being met, even if they are not providing the service. For students with special needs any potentially many service providers, this is an essential service (PsychologySchoolGuide, n.d.). With a case manager, one school-based provider monitors all service provision to the particular student and assures the services are delivered, even if they are not the service provider. The special education model
demonstrates the value of this service for students with disabilities. Often there are multiple professionals involved with a special education student, performing complimentary, but different, services written in to an IEP. The case manager is a licensed provider, usually the special education teacher or evaluation specialist. The case manager assures continuity of services, aids in communication between professionals, acts as an advocate for the student and family (School District 662, n.d.), and provides their direct service. For special education students, the case manager monitors modifications to the regular education curriculum.

For regular education students, 504 plans are written for students with mental or physical disabilities that do not need modifications to the regular education curriculum. A 504 plan outlines accommodations to prevent discrimination if the disability substantially interferes with the student’s ability to benefit from the regular education curriculum. There is no standard plan required by law. Each school district manages this regular education intervention as they deem fit. Often this is the role of an educational administrator.

The case management model can be implemented for regular education supports for homeless students. The school social worker may not have a direct role with a homeless student, but many schools have student intervention teams with school social worker as members. If a homeless student is struggling and brought to the attention of the Student Intervention Team, the social worker would have information about their housing, understand the potential impact, and guide interventions, while protecting the student’s and family’s privacy.
MVA requires public schools to ensure access to public education. It does not require public schools to address the underlying causes of homelessness, including housing, either for individual families or as a societal issue (Pannoni, 2014). School social workers can use their first-hand knowledge of the impact of homeless on their students to advocate on the macro level for increased funding for affordable housing and help their homeless families connect with resources. Many homeless families are not knowledgeable about the resources that are available to them and may not access them without the guidance of a school social worker or a shelter-based case manager, if one is available at the school or shelter.

Although the students in this research indicated that they did not feel it was necessary to receive direct services from a social worker, they did value a mentor or some level of regular contact and check-in with a school-based adult. If this is not the school social worker, then the school social worker can ensure that someone has regular contact with each homeless student. Districts can be assured that social workers use the same FERPA confidentiality protections that are in place with all public school students. These youth need to be identified to those whose primary role it is to service youth in crisis – the school social worker. Whether dealing with learning difficulties, physical or mental health issues, or homelessness, youth in crisis should be identified and helped. While providing school-wide interventions can be helpful, ensuring each homeless youth is being supported is a more effective intervention. Without specific knowledge of individuals, school social workers can educate teachers and administrators of the challenges faced by homeless students and can advocate for district-wide supports, such as before- and after-school transportation for social
opportunities outside the school day. School social workers can implement researched-based programs for the benefit all students, including skills that are particularly important for homeless youth such as non-violent conflict resolution, social skills, and group activities to build social networks. School social workers can also help educators understand the prevalence of homelessness and that they may have homeless students in their classes whose needs need to be considered, and whose voice should be heard. School social workers can also advocate for transportation options for extracurricular activities for all students, ensuring that no students who would like to participate in such activities are limited because they cannot get back to their housing.

For those students and families who have chosen to identify themselves and choose to work with school social workers, they can adopt the strategy of building on the existing goals and aspirations of their students, at the individual, family, neighborhood, and community level, seen as vital to supporting homeless youth (Schmitz, Wagner, & Menke, 2001). The youth in this study had not given up on their goals due to their homelessness, speaking of their goals with anticipation. Some students needed guidance from staff at schools with knowledge of the pathways to success. For instance, David spoke of wanting to be a welder, but did not know with whom to speak. His mother was supportive but she may not have known either. The school social worker may know the process or at least be able to put David in touch with staff who do know.

Information about a student’s living situation is protected under the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act. School districts must gain parental consent to disclose this information. However, it can be disclosed to school officials if there is a
legitimate educational interest (DOE, 1974). Schools and school social workers have a long history of dealing with the private personal information of students receiving special education services under IDEA. Confidential information is kept in a separate file with need-to-know protections. Regular education staff does not have access to this file. This information is critical to providing the appropriate services for special education students. Social workers can advocate that information about student homelessness is a legitimate educational interest.

**Implications for social work education**

Social workers have an obligation to educate themselves on social justice issues, including family and youth homelessness. All accredited social work programs need to include curriculum on family homelessness, the impact of homelessness on adolescents, and the factors that have been reported to promote resilience and hopefulness. Social work programs should also provide students with opportunities to engage with homeless prevention programs in the community through their field experience. In programs where it is not feasible to access homeless prevention programs, attempts should be made to bring staff from these programs to the schools for classroom presentation and discussion. Professional development should be made readily available on the subject. School social workers are especially obligated to educate themselves on youth homelessness, due to their prevalence in schools and their positionality to identify and intervene with this population.

**Implications for research**

As discussed in the literature review, adolescents are rarely included in developing, implementing, evaluating, and/or disseminating research findings, even
though they have been shown to be effective partners in the research process (Checkoway & Gutiérrez, 2006; Harley, 2015). The extant literature identifies the risks of youth homelessness, including risks to physical and mental health and education. There is limited literature regarding the factors that support homeless youth. Ethnographic studies have been conducted with homeless youth who have been separated from their families (Gibson, 2011), but few studies have been conducted with homeless adolescents living with their families. In this research, it was extremely difficult to gain access to the adolescents. Parent/guardian consent was required by both the IRB and most of the agencies/school districts for the researcher to contact the potential participants, even though there was little to no risk of harm. The adolescent voice needs to be heard more frequently in research and the adolescents should be given the right to choose whether or not they participate. While the intent to protect is valiant, it may prevent adolescents from having more of a role in research about them. Social workers need to understand the implications of the difficulty gaining access to adolescents for the purpose of research and its impact on the availability of information that can guide practice.

Implications for policy

Social workers have an obligation to advocate for new or revised policies and funding to better meet the needs of adolescents in homeless families. While the MVA has been successful in ensuring access to public education for homeless students, it does not address the education, training, or responsibilities of the homeless liaison. MVA should be revised to include regulatory guidance for school districts that requires liaisons to have a human service degree, preferably social work. Social workers are
specifically trained in the ecological/systems framework that gives them the understanding and ability to conduct holistic assessments and interventions.

The McKinney-Vento Act should be revised to require liaisons to regularly participate in ongoing professional development on the findings of research on homeless students. It should require that the liaison responsibilities be the primary responsibility of the person in the role, not an added responsibility without added time. Too frequently, the liaison responsibilities are assigned to an overburdened administrator. Districts should also be given guidance to the supports that may help prevent absenteeism and tardiness even when the student has access and transportation. These needs are not currently addressed by the non-regulatory guidance of the MVA and are left up to the discretion of the school districts.

The adolescents in this study all indicated their preference for being housed with their parents. Secure attachment with a caring adult is imperative for child development (Bowlby, 1969). Secure attachment bonds help children feel secure, understood, and be calm (Institute of Medicine, 2000). Splitting families up to be sheltered interferes with the development of secure attachment bonds. Policies for the housing of homeless families need to provide funding for family shelters. Family shelters can provide regular interactions with staff members and adults from other homeless families, facilitating the creation of bonds with trusted adults. The participants also expressed a preference for being housed with other homeless families and youth. Safe interactions with other adults are important to developing youth, as youth learn that the world is safe through trusted adults (Durden, 2011). The participants expressed that they coped with their situation better when they were with other kids who understood them and their situation.
For several, these relationships persisted after placement in the family shelter. Funding for family shelters should be a priority.

**Conclusions**

Most research of homelessness focuses on risk factors and deficits. It is well known that homeless children and adolescents are at great risk for a variety of mental, social, and physical health issues. Youth in general have been portrayed as either part of the problem or in need of help. Homeless adolescents are frequently portrayed as needing to be saved. Little attention has been paid to their strengths.

This study found that this unique group of homeless adolescents has a set of connections to external resources, including family, friends, other adults, special places, and important objects that help them develop and maintain internal resources such as optimism and hope for their future. Each individual participant’s story and the commonalities shared by the participants can help community and school social workers assist the youth coping with their housing situation as individuals, and can help guide interventions and future research with the broader population. The core social work values of dignity and social justice mandate that social workers intervene on multiple levels to improve the lives of this vulnerable population. While social workers must be aware of the individuality of the strengths and needs of the population, and refrain from stereotyping all adolescent or all homeless youth, they must also be aware of the systemic barriers faced by homeless adolescents and work to address the barriers at an organizational and policy level.

Federal interventions to address homelessness have slightly reduced the numbers of homeless families and youth, but this is still the fastest growing portion of
homelessness in the US (Laham, 2017). School social workers can play a pivotal role with homeless youth and should advocate for greater involvement at the individual and organizational level. Front line school staff need to be made more aware of the warning signs, such as erratic attendance, poor preparation, and poor hygiene, that homelessness may be an issue for their students and become more aware of available resources.

This study demonstrated the usefulness of photography and photo-elicitation as an effective participatory methodology with the population of homeless adolescents. Participants were much more open and verbal as the study proceeded and they developed rapport with the researcher. The participants enthusiastically demonstrated their desire to creatively tell their story through their pictures and words, to try to help other homeless adolescents and to try to influence decision makers. They proved themselves to be important research participants, not simply research subjects.
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List of Appendices

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APPENDIX A: Demographic survey

Demographic survey

Assigned participant number_____

1. How old are you? _____ age in years

For the following question, please circle one answer.

2. What is your gender?  Male   Female Gender variant

For the following questions, please circle all answers that apply or write in your answer.

3. What is your race/ethnicity? White Black Latino/Hispanic Asian Native American Other
   3a. If you answered White, do you identify as:
       Italian Irish German English Other: ____________________________
   3b. If you answered Black, do you identify as:
       African American Caribbean/West Indian Dominican Other: __________
   3c. If you answered Latino/Hispanic, do you identify as:
       Puerto Rican Mexican Dominican Cuban Other: ________________
   3d. If you answered Asian, do you identify as:
       Chinese Japanese Korean Lao Cambodian Other: _________________
   3e. If you answered Native American, do you identify as:
       Narragansett Niantic Wampanoag Other: _______________________
   3f. If you answered other on question 3, please specify:
       ___________________________________________________________

4. What language is primarily spoken in your family? ___________________

5. What language do you speak most often? ___________________
For the following question, please circle one answer or write in your answer.

6. a) Are you currently attending school? Yes No
   If YES -> b) What is the name of your school? ______________________
   c) Do you have an IEP? Yes No
   d) Do you have a 504 plan? Yes No
   GO TO QUESTION 7
   If NO -> e) Have you: not registered dropped out home schooled
   GO TO QUESTION 7

7. What is the last grade you completed? ______


9. How long have you lived in this city/town? ______years _________months

According to the law that defines homelessness, these types of housing are considered homeless:

- sharing housing due to loss of housing, economic hardship or a similar reason (sometimes referred to as doubling up),
- living in motels, motels, trailer parks, or camp grounds due to lack of alternative accommodations,
- living in emergency or transitional shelters,
- abandoned in hospitals,
- awaiting foster care placement,
- primary nighttime residence is not ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation (e.g. park benches, etc.),
- living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations

10. Currently, we live in:
    an apartment a trailer
    a shelter a car
    a motel/hotel outdoors (woods, beach, park, etc.)
    with a friend with a relative
    Other ________________________________
11. We are currently homeless due to:
   Family dispute  Job loss
   Divorce/separation  Domestic violence
   Death of parent/guardian  Parent/guardian is in jail
   Eviction  Other: ___________________________

12. How long have you been homeless? _____ years ________ months

13. I/we have been homeless ________ (number of times)

YOU MAY NEED ASSISTANCE WITH THE QUESTIONS ON THIS PAGE FROM YOUR CAREGIVER. DO YOUR BEST AND YOU CAN ASK FOR THEIR HELP ONCE YOU HAVE COMPLETED THE QUESTIONNAIRE

14. List the members of your family with whom you are currently living.

   Are they working? How many hours a week?
   Relationship  Working  Hours working a week
   (mom, dad, sister)  (Yes, No, don't know)  week

Use back for more if needed

For the following questions, please circle one answer

15. Do you have health insurance? Yes No Don’t know

16. The last time I saw a doctor for a regular checkup was

   Never  More than a year ago  Less than a year ago

17. The last time I saw a dentist for a regular checkup was

   Never  More than a year ago  Less than a year ago

18. The last time I saw a counselor outside of school was

   Never  More than a year ago  Less than a year ago

19. The last time I saw a doctor because I was sick or for an emergency was
Never needed       Needed, but never went      More than a year ago
Less than a year ago

20. Is there an adult(s) in your life who makes you feel special and appreciated? Yes No
   If YES -> a) What is your relationship to that person?

21. Is there an adult(s) at school that you feel supports you? Yes No
   If YES -> a) What is the role of that person?

22. In general my physical health is: Excellent Very Good Good Fair Poor
23. In general my dental health is: Excellent Very Good Good Fair Poor
24. In general my emotional health is: Excellent Very Good Good Fair Poor
25. In general my grades are/were: Excellent Very Good Good Fair Poor

Is there anything else you would like me to know?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME COMPLETING THIS SURVEY

Please give the completed survey to the researcher.

You will be given a brief survey about your goals to complete independently.
APPENDIX B: Semi-structured interview guides

Two semi-structured interviews will take place with all participants; one before pictures have been taken, and one after pictures have been developed and discussed. A focus group will take place after the presentation with those who choose to participate. If participants’ housing has changed since the last meeting, such will be documented by the researcher. If they have turned 18, they will need to sign their own consent form. The following questions will be used initially to guide the discussion:

Pre-photography focus group

“BUSINESS” QUESTIONS

Are there any issues that we need to discuss before we begin our focus group?

Do you have any questions or concerns that came up after the paper work meeting?

Do you have concerns about sharing personal information?

1. What does “homeless” mean to you? Discuss definition to be used in the research and prompt if they consider themselves homeless according to that definition.
2. Do you discuss your living situation with others? Prompt for details – how does their living situation affect their definition and whether they consider themselves to be homeless.
3. How do you feel about where and how you are living? Prompt for positives and negatives, frustration, sadness, hopelessness, hope, coping, adaptation.
4. How do you feel about your future? Prompt if they have goals for themselves. What are they?
5. Is there anything that helps you cope? Prompt for themes suggested from research - connectedness, inner resources, cognitive strategies, energy, hope-objects, spirituality, caring connections, “gonna make it mentally”, “basic needs”, external constraints; but remain open for other themes.
Post-photography focus group

“BUSINESS” QUESTIONS

Are there any issues that we need to discuss before we begin our focus?

What was it like taking pictures for the last two to three weeks? Did you have enough time? Too much time?

Were there any problems taking the pictures? Mechanical? Privacy? Safety?

Did you want to add to or clarify anything we discussed last time?

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1. Each participant will be asked to answer the following questions about their pictures:
   - What do you see here? Describe the picture.
   - What is really happening here? Why did you choose to take this picture?
   - What is going on behind the scenes, outside the frame?
   - How does this relate to your life? How does it help you cope? How does it affect your hope?
   - What can this photo do to help others understand you and your housing situation?
   - How can or does this picture represent something that can be done about your housing situation?

2. Now that you have participated in the focus groups and in taking pictures, do you feel differently about yourself, your goals, aspirations, and dreams? Prompt for deeper explanation.

3. What if anything did you find helpful about this evening? What specifically did you find helpful or not?

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“BUSINESS” QUESTIONS

One of the purposes of Photovoice is to use the pictures to influence people who have a decision-making capacity in your life? Who might those people be? Are there people at your school who can have that kind of influence?

Would you like to participate in a display of your photographs?

What are your concerns and/or expectations for participating in a display?

To whom in the school department would you like to present your photography? (list)
Post-presentation focus group

1. How did you feel about sharing your work before the presentation? How did you feel afterwards? Did that feeling change? Prompt for specifics about how and what.

2. Do you feel that the adults who viewed your photos heard and respected your views? Do you feel that their participation tonight will have an impact on you? Prompt for if and how they feel the presentation affected the adults, how that might impact them.

3. Now that you have shared your photos with adults who make decisions regarding your education, do you feel that your input will have an impact on how you and others like you are treated at school? Prompt for details.

4. Now that you have participated in the focus groups, photography, and tonight's presentation, do you feel differently about yourself, your goals, aspirations, and dreams? Prompt for details.

5. What if anything did you find helpful about this evening? What specifically did you find helpful or not?
APPENDIX C: Hope scale

Goals survey

Please complete the following scale so we can get to know you better. Read each item carefully. Using the scale shown below, please circle the answer that best describes YOU.

1. I can think of many ways to get out of a jam.

| Definitely false | Mostly false | Somewhat false | Slightly false | Slightly true | Somewhat true | Mostly true | Definitely true |

2. I energetically pursue my goals.

| Definitely false | Mostly false | Somewhat false | Slightly false | Slightly true | Somewhat true | Mostly true | Definitely true |

3. I feel tired most of the time.

| Definitely false | Mostly false | Somewhat false | Slightly false | Slightly true | Somewhat true | Mostly true | Definitely true |

4. There are lots of ways around any problem.

| Definitely false | Mostly false | Somewhat false | Slightly false | Slightly true | Somewhat true | Mostly true | Definitely true |

5. I am easily downed/defeated in an argument.

| Definitely false | Mostly false | Somewhat false | Slightly false | Slightly true | Somewhat true | Mostly true | Definitely true |

6. I can think of many ways to get the things in life that are important to me.

| Definitely false | Mostly false | Somewhat false | Slightly false | Slightly true | Somewhat true | Mostly true | Definitely true |
7. I worry about my health.
   Definitely false
   Mostly false
   Somewhat false
   Slightly true
   Slightly true
   Somewhat true
   Mostly true
   Definitely true

8. Even when others get discouraged, I know I can find a way to solve the problem.
   Definitely false
   Mostly false
   Somewhat false
   Slightly true
   Slightly true
   Somewhat true
   Mostly true
   Definitely true

9. My past experiences have prepared me well for my future.
   Definitely false
   Mostly false
   Somewhat false
   Slightly true
   Slightly true
   Somewhat true
   Mostly true
   Definitely true

10. I’ve been pretty successful in life.
    Definitely false
    Mostly false
    Somewhat false
    Slightly true
    Slightly true
    Somewhat true
    Mostly true
    Definitely true

11. I usually find myself worrying about something.
    Definitely false
    Mostly false
    Somewhat false
    Slightly true
    Slightly true
    Somewhat true
    Mostly true
    Definitely true

12. I meet the goals that I set for myself.
    Definitely false
    Mostly false
    Somewhat false
    Slightly true
    Slightly true
    Somewhat true
    Mostly true
    Definitely true

(from http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/hopescale.pdf)

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME COMPLETING THIS SURVEY
APPENDIX D: Recruitment materials

The following letter was distributed by the homeless liaison to homeless families with adolescents identified by schools.

School of Social Work
1798 Asylum Avenue
West Hartford, CT 06117-2698

Dear parents/guardians;

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter and share it with your adolescent. Their help is needed in an important research project!

I am conducting my doctoral research study in your community where adolescents can take pictures about how they cope and adapt to their homelessness. Too often, decisions are made without considering the perspective or input of those affected. This is their chance to be heard! There are many homeless kids in RI and we want to hear from them. We think they have a lot to say!

If you and they are interested, we'll meet together to discuss the project and to complete two brief questionnaires. Your child will be given a digital camera, trained in its use, and asked to take pictures for three weeks of the places and things in their lives that help them cope and adapt. After the pictures are developed, we'll get back together to discuss their pictures. If they choose to continue, they will meet in a focus group with other homeless teens where we'll talk about their pictures, tell some stories, talk about the project, eat some dinner, and play some games. We'll make a plan together to share what we learned and the pictures. At the end, participants can keep the cameras. They'll also get a $10 gift card for coming to each of the meetings and receive a photograph of their choice from the pictures they took. Your family will also be entered into a raffle for a $100 grocery store gift card every time they attend a meeting to be drawn at the end of the study.

Adolescents - if you are between the ages of 14-19, you don't have permanent housing, and you are interested or would like further information, you are eligible to participate in this research. You will need parent/guardian permission. Please contact me (401)647-3892 or by email at Michael.Reeves@UConn.edu.

Sincerely,

Michael G. Reeves
Doctoral Candidate
University of Connecticut
School of Social Work

This research project is supported by [school department]
REMINDER POST CARD

REMINDER LETTER

To be mailed 10 days after the first letter

Date

Last week a letter was sent to you by the [school department] because your family is experiencing homelessness and because you have an adolescent between the ages of 14-19 who is registered for school. The letter let you know about a research project being conducted in Westerly with homeless adolescents.

If you have already responded to the letter, please accept our thanks. If you have not and you would like to participate, please call or email the researcher at Michael.Reeves@UConn.edu or call (401) 647-3892.

If you did not receive a letter, please accept our apologies. We will be glad to send another in the mail today. Please contact us if that is the case.

Sincerely,

Michael G Reeves, LICSW
Doctoral Candidate
University of Connecticut
School of Social Work

This project is supported by [school department]
WE NEED YOU!!

ARE YOU WILLING TO SHARE YOUR STORY?

ADOLESCENTS HELPING ADOLESCENTS

Are you interested in participating in research about adolescent homelessness?

We are recruiting homeless adolescents in Westerly and nearby communities to take pictures and discuss with a researcher in a group what it is like to be homeless.

Can I participate?

If you do not have a permanent place to live and you are between the ages of 14 and 19.

What do I have to do?

Participants will fill out a brief survey, meet with the researcher to talk about their homelessness, take pictures for three weeks, and review the pictures with other adolescents and the researcher in a small group. If you want, you can take part in a display of the pictures to staff from your school.

What's in it for me?

There will be food at each group meeting. After each group meeting, you will receive a $5 gift card to a local restaurant. You will get to keep the camera used in the research. You will get to choose one of your pictures to be printed for you to keep.

How do I sign up?

Call the researcher at (401)647-3892 or send an email to Michael.Reeves@uconn.edu.

This project is supported by [school department]
Do you want to be heard? Tell your story in pictures!

PHOTOVOICE

You can be part of a photography project in your community.
Photovoice is a way to use photography to share your experience with others. If you are between 14-19 years old and don't have permanent stable housing, you can be part of this project.
What's in it for you?
You keep the camera when the project ends and you get gift cards for attending meetings. Your story may help other kids in the same situation.

YOUR VOICE MATTERS

Want to join? Call or email
Michael Reeves (401) 647-3892 or Michael.Reeves@UConn.edu
APPENDIX E: Consent Forms

Parental Permission/Child Assent Form for Participation in a Research Study

Principal Investigator: Brenda Kurz, PhD.
Student Researcher: Michael Reeves, MSW
Study Title: Adolescents and homelessness: Using Photovoice to understand the experiences of homeless adolescents

Introduction

Your child is invited to participate in a research study that will have him/her take pictures of his/her life and to discuss what affects his/her day-to-day functioning. Your child is being asked to participate because he/she is part of a homeless family.

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this study is to understand the experience of being a homeless adolescent and to identify what adolescents use to cope with and adapt to their homelessness. We will also be assessing if his/her participation in this research impacts his/her level of hope.

What are the study procedures? What will my child be asked to do?

First, if you are interested in allowing your child to participate, you and your child will meet with the researcher to discuss the project and the expectations. You can ask any questions and you can decide at any time during this meeting or after that you do not wish to participate. If you decide to participate, you and your child will be asked to sign consent and assent forms. Your child will complete a survey and a questionnaire about their goals. If needed you may be asked to help your child with their answers with a couple of answers to the survey after they have attempted to complete it. You will be asked to sign up for an interview from a list of available times.

Second, your child will attend an initial meeting with the researcher during which time they will be asked about their experience being homeless. They will be given a digital camera to practice taking pictures. The researcher will discuss with them how to safely use the camera and about respecting privacy. They will take the cameras with them for three weeks to take pictures of what they identify that helps them manage day-to-day.

Third, after they return the camera and the pictures are downloaded, they will be asked to participate in another meeting with the researcher to discuss their photographs. We will discuss their willingness to participate in a display of their photographs to an audience that they will choose. If they do not want to participate in the display, they will be asked to complete a final questionnaire about their goals. They will then have finished their part of this research.

Fourth, if they do want to participate in the presentation, they will take part in a one hour group presentation with other focus group participants. After the presentation, they will take part in a focus group about the presentation and to complete the final questionnaire about their goals.
Focus groups will be recorded. These recordings will be transcribed and used in the research, in addition to the photographs. Once recordings are transcribed, they will be erased. Transcriptions will be password protected. All identifying information will be removed.

Interviews will be recorded. These recordings will be transcribed and used in the research, in addition to the photographs. Once recordings are transcribed, they will be erased. Transcriptions will be password protected. All identifying information will be removed.

Your child's specific interview will be scheduled at your convenience. Each group will last two hours. Participants will be given a $10 gift card to a local restaurant at the end of each interview and they will be able to keep the cameras when they complete the project. They will keep all printed photographs and may also choose a photograph to be framed for them to keep. Participants may be contacted in the future to determine their willingness to participate in any other displays of their photographs.

What are the risk or inconveniences of the study?

Anticipated risks of harm to the participants in the study are minimal. If the discussion causes participants to become upset, the researcher is an LICSW experienced in providing clinical services to adolescents. He is able to provide immediate mental health crisis supports and referrals to a list of outside providers as needed. There is a risk that participants will disclose information from the focus group outside the focus group. This risk will be discussed several times throughout the research and participants will be cautioned to keep group discussion confidential.

Only the researcher will know who has participated in the research. Participants can choose whether or not to participate in the display to the school personnel, at which time others may learn of their participation and therefore their living situation. This part of the research is your and their choice. Participants will be asked to adhere to confidentiality standards. The researcher will ensure confidentiality of the data. A possible inconvenience may be the time it takes to complete the study.

What are the benefits of the study?

Your child may not directly benefit from this research; however, we hope that your child's participation in the study may improve their belief and hope that they can manage and overcome the day-to-day challenges of being homeless. We also hope to impact the perception of homelessness of those who view the photographs.

Will my child receive payment for participation? Are there costs to participate?

There are no costs to you and your child for participating in this study beyond getting to and from the focus groups. Your child will not be paid to participate in this study. Food will be provided at each focus group and they will receive a $10 gift card at the end of each interview as a thank you. They will be able to keep their cameras after completion of the study and will keep a framed photograph of their choice. The participant's family will be entered into a raffle for a $100 grocery card for each meeting they attend. This will be drawn at the end of the research. The gift card will be given directly to the head of household within 7 days of the last meeting.

How will my child's information be protected?

The following procedures will be used to protect the confidentiality of the data collected from your child. No identifying information will be included in the surveys or transcripts of the focus groups. After each group, the digital recording will be transcribed, cleaned of identifying information, and uploaded with any notes taken by the facilitator and photographs onto a password protected laptop computer and onto a password protected external backup drive. The recording will be immediately erased. The transcription will be securely stored in case data is corrupted at a later time. No raw data will be stored in clouds or on other internet sites. The
researcher will be solely responsible for the security of the data. We will do our best to protect the confidentiality of the information we gather from your child but we cannot guarantee 100% confidentiality. Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus groups and in cases of suspected harm.

Can my child stop being in the study and what are my and my child's rights?

Your child does not have to be in this study if you do not want him/her to participate or if they do not want to. If you give permission for your child to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may withdraw your child at any time. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want your child to participate. Your child does not have to answer any question that he/she does not want to answer. Your child will be informed of this right during the initial meeting and it will be included on their assent form. No services will be taken away or changed if they decline to participate. Participants can be asked to leave the study if they fail to adhere to procedures, for disruptive behavior, or if they have adverse reactions. Participants who turn 18 during the study will be required to sign individual consent.

Whom do I contact if I have questions about the study?

Take as long as you like before you make a decision. We will be happy to answer any question you have about this study. If you have further questions about this study or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact the principal investigator, Brenda Kurz, at 860-570-9153 or via email at Brenda.Kurz@UConn.edu or the student researcher Michael Reeves at 401-647-3892 or by email at Michael.Reeves@UConn.edu. If you have any questions concerning your child's rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of Connecticut Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 860-486-8802.
Parental Permission/Child Assent Form for Participation in a Research Study

Principal Investigator: Brenda Kurz, PhD. Student Researcher: Michael Reeves, MSW

Study Title: Adolescents and homelessness: Using Photovoice to understand the experiences of homeless adolescents

Documentation of Permission/Assent:

I have read this form and decided that I will give permission for my child to participate in the study described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of my child's involvement and possible risks and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw my child at any time. My signature also indicates that I have received a copy of this parental permission form.

_________________________  __________________________  __________
Parent/Guardian Signature  Print Name  Date

Relationship to Child (e.g. mother, father, legal guardian):____________________________

_________________________  __________________________  __________
Minor Child Signature  Print Name  Date

_________________________  __________________________  __________
Signature of Person  Print  Name  Date

Obtaining Consent

______ Assigned participant number (to be filled in on copy given to caregiver)
Adult consent for Participation in a Research Study

Principal Investigator: Brenda Kurz, PhD. Student
Researcher: Michael Reeves, MSW

Study Title: Adolescents and homelessness: Using Photovoice to understand the experiences of homeless adolescents

Introduction

You are invited to participate in a research study that will have you take pictures of your life and to discuss what affects your day-to-day functioning. You are being asked to participate because you are part of a homeless family.

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this study is to understand the experience of being a homeless adolescent and to identify what adolescents use to cope with and adapt to their homelessness. We will also be assessing if your participation in this research impacts your hope.

What are the study procedures? What will I be asked to do?

First, if you are interested in participating, you will meet with the researcher to discuss the project and the expectations. You can ask any questions and you can decide at any time during this meeting or after that you do not wish to participate. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign consent and assent forms. You will complete a survey and a questionnaire about your goals. You will be asked to sign up for an interview from a list of available times.

Second, you will attend an initial interview with the researcher, during which time you will be asked about your experience being homeless. You will be given a digital camera to practice taking pictures. The researcher will discuss with you how to safely use the cameras and respecting privacy. You will take the cameras for three weeks to take pictures of what you identify that helps you manage day-to-day.

Third, after you return the cameras and the pictures are downloaded, you will be asked to participate in another interview with the researcher to discuss your photographs. We will discuss your willingness to participate in a display of the photographs with an audience that is chosen by the group. If you do not want to participate in the display, you will be asked to complete a final questionnaire about your goals. You will then have finished your part of this research.
Fourth, if you do want to participate in the presentation, you will take part in a one hour group presentation with other participants. After the presentation, you will take part in a focus group about the presentation and to complete the final questionnaire about your goals.

Interviews will be recorded. These recordings will be transcribed and used in the research, in addition to the photographs. Once recordings are transcribed, they will be erased. Transcriptions will be password protected. All identifying information will be removed.

Specific feedback from the focus groups may be used to tell the story of a particular photograph, but individually identifying information will be removed. If a participant discloses that you are being harmed or will harm someone else, I will refer you for help.

Your specific group time will be scheduled at your convenience. You will be given a $10 gift card to a local restaurant at the end of each group and you will be able to keep the camera when you complete the project. You will keep all printed photographs and may also choose a photograph to be framed for you to keep. You may be contacted in the future to determine your willingness to participate in any other displays of your photographs.

What are the risks or inconveniences of the study?

Anticipated risks of harm to the participants in the study are minimal. If the discussion causes participants to become upset, the researcher is an LICSW experienced in providing clinical services to adolescents. He is able to provide immediate mental health crisis supports and referral to a list of outside providers as needed. There is a risk that participants will disclose information from the focus group outside the focus group. This risk will be discussed several times throughout the research and participants will be cautioned to keep group discussion confidential.

Only the researcher will know who has participated in the research. Participants can choose whether or not to participate in the display to the school personnel, at which time others may learn of their participation and therefore their living situation. This part of the research is your and their choice. Participants will be asked to adhere to confidentiality standards. The researcher will ensure confidentiality of the data. A possible inconvenience may be the time it takes to complete the study.

What are the benefits of the study?

You may not directly benefit from this research; however, we hope that your participation in the study may improve your belief and hope that you can manage and overcome the day-to-day challenges of being homeless. We also hope to impact the perception of homelessness of those who view the photographs.

Will I receive payment for participation? Are there costs to participate?

There are no costs to you for participating in this study beyond getting to and from the focus groups. You will not be paid to participate in this study. Food will be provided at each focus group and you will receive a $10 gift card at the end of each focus group as a thank you. You will be able to keep the cameras after completion of the study and will keep a framed photograph of your choice. The participant’s family will be entered into a raffle for a $100 grocery card for each meeting they attend. This will be drawn at the end of the research. The gift card will be given directly to the head of household within 7 days of the last meeting.
How will my information be protected?

The following procedures will be used to protect the confidentiality of the data collected. No identifying information will be included in the surveys or transcripts of the focus groups. After each group, the digital recording will be transcribed, cleaned of identifying information, and uploaded with any notes taken by the facilitator and photographs onto a password protected laptop computer and onto a password protected external backup drive. The recording will be immediately erased. The transcription will be securely stored in case data is corrupted at a later time. No raw data will be stored in clouds or on other internet sites. The researcher will be solely responsible for the security of the data. We will do our best to protect the confidentiality of the information we gather from your child but we cannot guarantee 100% confidentiality. Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus groups and in cases of suspected harm.

Can I stop being in the study and what are my and my child's rights?

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. If you consent to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may withdraw at any time. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate. You do not have to answer any question that you do not want to answer. No services will be taken away or changed if you decline to participate. Participants can be asked to leave to study if they fail to adhere to procedures, for disruptive behavior, or if they have adverse reactions. Participants who turn 18 during the study will be required to sign individual consent.

Whom do I contact if I have questions about the study?

Take as long as you like before you make a decision. We will be happy to answer any question you have about this study. If you have further questions about this study or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact the principal investigator, Brenda Kurz, at 860-570-9153 or via email at Brenda.Kurz@UConn.edu or the student researcher Michael Reeves at 401-647-3892 or by email at Michael.Reeves@UConn.edu. If you have any questions concerning your child's rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of Connecticut Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 860-486-8802.
Adult consent for Participation in a Research Study

Principal Investigator: Brenda Kurz, PhD. Student  
Researcher: Michael Reeves, MSW  
Study Title: Adolescents and homelessness: Using Photovoice to understand the experiences of homeless adolescents  
Documentation of Permission/Assent:

I have read this form and decided that I consent to participate in the study described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of my involvement and possible risks and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. My signature also indicates that I have received a copy of this form.

____________________  ______________________  ______
Signature  Print Name  Date

____________________  ______________________  ______
Signature of Person  Print  Name  Date

Obtaining Consent
Consent form for Adult Participation in a Research Study

Principal Investigator: Brenda Kurz, PhD.
Student Researcher: Michael Reeves, MSW

Study Title: Adolescents and homelessness: Using Photovoice to understand the experiences of homeless adolescents

Introduction

Students from homeless families in your area are participating in a research study that includes taking pictures of what helps them cope and adapt to their situation. You have been invited by the participants to participate by viewing the presentation and talking with them about the research.

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this study is to identify what adolescents use to cope with and adapt to their homelessness. We will also be assessing if their participation in this research impacts their level of hope and if it impacts your understanding of adolescent homelessness.

What are the study procedures? What will I be asked to do?

Your part of this research study is to view the pictures presented by the participants and engage them in discussion regarding their pictures. The researcher will be taking notes throughout the presentation. Your comments will not be specifically linked to you but will be part of an aggregate collection that will be discussed with the participants in a focus group following the presentation and included in the dissertation.

What are the risks or inconveniences of the study?

There is no anticipated risk to you from this research. You will be asked to adhere to confidentiality standards by not identifying the students you see at the presentation. A possible inconvenience may be the time it takes to complete the study.

What are the benefits of the study?

We hope that your participation in the study may improve your understanding of the impact of adolescent homelessness in your school and community.

Will I receive payment for participation? Are there costs to participate?

There are no costs to you for participating in this study beyond getting to and from the presentation. You will not be paid to participate in this study. We hope you enjoy the provided snacks.

How will my information be protected?

The following procedures will be used to protect the confidentiality of the data collected at the presentation. No identifying information will be included in the notes.
taken by the researcher. The notes will be typed into a Microsoft Word file and uploaded onto a password protected laptop computer and onto a password protected external backup drive. The notes will be destroyed. The typed notes will be uploaded to into an analysis software program. The Word file will be securely stored on a backup hard drive in case data is corrupted at a later time. The researcher will be solely responsible for the security of the data. We will do our best to protect the confidentiality of your participation and comments, but we cannot guarantee 100% confidentiality. Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in groups.

Can I stop being in the study and what are my rights?

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to participate. If you sign consent for your comments to be used in the study, but later change your mind, your comments will be purged from the data collected. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate before, during, or after the presentation.

Whom do I contact if I have questions about the study?

Take as long as you like before you make a decision. We will be happy to answer any question you have about this study. If you have further questions about this study or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact the principal investigator, Brenda Kurz, at 860-570-9153 or via email at Brenda.Kurz@uconn.edu or the student researcher Michael Reeves at 401-647-3892 or by email at Michael.Reeves@uconn.edu. If you have any questions concerning your child's rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of Connecticut Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 860-486-8802.
Consent form for Adult Participation in a Research Study

Principal Investigator: Brenda Kurz, PhD. Student
Researcher: Michael Reeves, MSW

Study Title: Adolescents and homelessness: Using Photovoice to understand the experiences of homeless adolescents

Documentation of Permission/Assent:

I have read this form and decided that I consent to participate in the study described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of my involvement and possible risks and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. My signature also indicates that I have received a copy of this form.

__________________________________________  ____________________________  __________
Signature                      Print Name                      Date

__________________________________________  ____________________________  __________
Signature of Person                      Print                      Name  Date

Obtaining Consent
Dear parents/guardians;

One of our district social workers, Mr. Michael Reeves, is conducting his doctoral research study with students in our district. He wants to talk with adolescents who live in families with unstable housing. This includes families living with family and friends, living in motels or motels, living in cars, and living in shelters. Your child has been selected to participate!

Mr. Reeves would like to meet with your child to give them more information about the research. He will not collect any data from them until you and they agree in writing to participate. After meeting with them, if they are interested, he will give them consent forms to take home for you to sign. He will not meet with them again until he receives consent from you.

All of the data collected in this study will be confidential. Your child’s school will not know if you decide to participate or not and will not know their answers to the research questions. Your child can participate in a presentation of their work at the end of the research if they like. If you and they do decide to participate, your child will receive a $10 gift card for each meeting they attend. Your family will also receive an entry into a raffle for $100 gift card to Stop and Shop each time they come to a meeting. The raffle will be drawn at the end of the study.

If you decide to participate or not, it will not affect in any way the services you and your child receive from the Cranston School Department.

If you DO NOT want Mr. Reeves to speak with your child to share information about his research, please contact him directly within the next 10 days at (401) 647-3892 or Michael.Reeves@UConn.edu.

Sincerely,

name
Assistant Superintendent
School department
Training will be conducted by the researcher as part of the first focus group. It will cover the technical aspects of the cameras, ethical and safe photography, and what to photograph.

**Technical training**

- Use of the camera, adjusting for light conditions, use of the flash, autofocus, other automatic or manual features of the camera.
- Using a tripod or something to support the camera
- Using the timer feature
- How to delete a photo

**Ethical and safe photography** – will be discussed and socially constructed by the participants and the researcher, using the following guidelines:

- Privacy: intrusion into one’s private space, disclosure of embarrassing facts about individuals, being placed in false light by images, and protection against the use of a person’s likeness for commercial benefit. (Wang and Redwood-Jones 2001)

- Use of pictures of identifiable subjects – identifiable faces will be digitally altered
Dangerous situations

Photography at night

Unsafe areas – train tracks, airport, highway/roads, ocean, heights, condemned property

Unsafe subjects – criminal behavior, private property

No photo is worth the risk to personal safety

How to respond if challenged

Your safety is worth more than the camera

Delete if requested, give up camera if threatened

Framing the question

Questions are used to guide participants to choose subjects for their photographs that are meaningful to them and serve the goals of the project. Four questions will need to be answered yes if the participants will take the picture.

Will I be safe taking this picture?

Will the rights of others be protected if I take this picture?

Does this object or place affect my ability to cope with my homelessness?

Will this photograph convey the impact of this object or place?