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“I’ve seen my friend get chopped”: The Influence of Peer Networks on Exposure to Violence Among Homeless Young Adults

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PEER NETWORKS AND EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

Abstract

Homeless young adults report being exposed to substantial violence and victimization. This often arises through street culture and norms associated with subcultures of violent behavior. In this exploratory study, we applied a decolonizing lens to conduct semi-structured interviews with 18 young adults experiencing homelessness in Victoria, Australia. In this study, we provide a contemporary description of peer relationships among homeless young adults. We examine how these relationships influence exposure to violence, and how young adults perceive and respond to injuries sustained by their peers because of exposure to violence. Findings showed bonds and relationships between homeless young adults appear to imitate the rapport and functions of sibling-kinship that typically exist in supportive family environments. Despite the care and protection provided within close peer relationships, these relationships may also contribute to exposure to violence by way of young adults witnessing violence perpetration and incidences of peers being physically victimized. There is an important duality between the perceived normalization of witnessing peers' experiences of violence and young adults' self-reflexive disclosure of vulnerability and helplessness in witnessing these incidents. Study findings have important research and practice implications for recognising the influence and importance of peer relationships in the delivery of homelessness support programs.

Keywords: homeless young adults; peer relationships; violence perpetration; victimization; qualitative research.

PEER NETWORKS AND EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

***“I’ve seen my friend get chopped”*: The Influence of Peer Networks on Exposure to Violence
Among Homeless Young Adults.**

Young adult homelessness is a complex and ongoing problem in Australia. Although definitive prevalence estimates for the numbers of persons experiencing homelessness are difficult to achieve (Busch-Geertsema, Culhane, & Fitzpatrick, 2016; Chamberlain & Mackenzie, 1992), it is estimated 15% of Australian adolescents and young adults (12-24 years of age) experienced homelessness in 2017 (Fildes, Perrens, & Plummer, 2018). Homelessness in young adulthood is commonly associated with a range of negative health and social outcomes (e.g. Bearsley-Smith, Bond, Littlefield, & Thomas, 2008; Goodman, Saxe, & Harvey, 1991; Greenberg & Rosenheck, 2008; Heerde, Hemphill, & Scholes-Balog, 2014). Existing Australian studies have shown that while homeless, young adults are frequently exposed to physical and sexual violence, as both perpetrators and victims (Alder, 1991; Alder, Sandor, & Clunne-Ross, 1989; Heerde & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2019; Watson, 2017). Injuries sustained as a result of this exposure to violence contribute to a range of health morbidities among these young people (Heerde & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2019; Mackelprang, Qiu, & Rivara, 2015).

In navigating the contexts of insecurity and instability posed by experiencing homelessness, young adults often develop interdependent relationships with homeless peers (Bender, Thompson, McManus, Lantry, & Flynn, 2007; De la Haye et al., 2012; Kurtz, Lindsey, Jarvis, & Nackerud, 2000). Supportive peer relationships are important factors in harm minimization approaches targeting the modification of problem behaviors (e.g. Barker & Maguire, 2017; Bean, Shafer, & Glennon, 2013). Likewise, interaction within peer groups where engagement in problem behaviors (e.g. violence) are socially approved, influences exposure to or engagement in these behaviors (as described in the Social Development Model; Cambron, Catalano, & Hawkins, 2019). A deeper understanding of the role of peer relationships for homeless young adults, and the influence of exposure to violence within these relationships, is required to inform the development of homelessness support programs. In the current study, we

PEER NETWORKS AND EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

investigate these lines of inquiry and explore how young adults perceive and respond to injuries sustained by their peers because of being exposed to violence.

For many homeless young adults, prior maltreatment and abuse within the family environment has been commonplace (e.g. Bearsley-Smith et al., 2008; Embleton, Lee, Gunn, Ayuku, & Braitstein, 2016; Heffron, Skipper, & Lambert, 1995; Shelton, Taylor, Bonner, & van den Bree, 2009; van den Bree et al., 2009). Regrettably, these early life experiences of violence are often compounded by being exposed to violence while experiencing homelessness (Heerde & Hemphill, 2019). This is often a result of street culture and social norms associated with subcultures of violence in this setting (e.g. Baron, 2003; Baron & Hartnagel, 1998; Gaetz, 2004; Gwadz et al., 2009; Heerde et al., 2014; Kennedy & Baron, 1993; McCarthy & Hagan, 1991). Rates of assaulting another person(s) range between 10% and 45% while rates of having been physically assaulted are estimated to be as high as 81% (Heerde et al., 2014). In an early study by Kipke, Simon, Montgomery, Unger, and Iversen (1997) which examined specific forms of physical assault among homeless adolescents and young adults, 51% had been slapped, punched, hit, kicked, burned, or beaten up.

The safety of young adults experiencing homelessness is compromised not only by their exposure to violence, but also their social isolation and being on societal margins. A lack of positive relationships with adult family members or other trusted significant adults is common (Kurtz et al., 2000; Lindsey, Kurtz, Jarvis, Williams, & Nackerud, 2000). Thus, the intensity and importance of peer relationships becomes paramount (Rice, Milburn, Rotheram-Borus, Mallett, & Rosenthal, 2005). Peers provide an important basis for friendship, consultation, emotional and instrumental support, and physical protection. The size and function of peer networks among young adults experiencing homelessness varies, as does the quality and support provided in these relationships (Ennett, Bailey, & Federman, 1999; Rice et al., 2005). Peers are also important influences on behavior, both increasing and decreasing risk for engagement in risky behaviors

PEER NETWORKS AND EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

(Ennett et al., 1999; Gaetz, 2004; Heerde & Hemphill, 2019; Kipke et al., 1997; Rice et al., 2005).

The Influence of Peers on Exposure to Violence

Given the unpredictable nature of homelessness, social disconnection, lack of access to shelter and other resources required to meet basic needs, and the threat of exposure to dangerous situations, peer relationships are essential to young adult's attempts to preserve their personal safety. While some prior research has examined risks posed by (and within) peer interactions, the protective nature of peer relationships among homeless adolescents and young adults is less well understood (Heerde & Hemphill, 2019). For instance, Heerde and Hemphill (2019) showed exposure to peers' problem behaviors (e.g., antisocial behavior) increased the likelihood of young adult's exposure to violence. Similar results have consistently been reported in relation to engagement in physical violence (Baron & Hartnagel, 1997; Baron & Hartnagel, 1998; Crawford, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2011). It has been suggested that engagement with supportive peers may reduce engagement in survival sex (i.e., consensual or nonconsensual exchange of sexual practices for money, food, shelter, alcohol, or drugs; Heerde & Hemphill, 2017) among young people experiencing homelessness (Heerde & Hemphill, 2017; Watson, 2017). How supportive relationships between peers influences exposure to violence among young adults experiencing homelessness, remains unclear (Heerde & Hemphill, 2019). Qualitative explorations of homeless young adult's peer relationships, including the influence of these relationships on exposure to violence, will be of benefit in providing a deeper understanding of the role of peer relationships and their influence on personal and health outcomes.

The Current Study

The current study is a part of a broad qualitative project examining exposure to physical violence among young adults experiencing homelessness, the influence of peer networks on this exposure, and young people's use of support services in seeking help for injuries sustained as a result of being exposed to violence. A detailed account of young people's own exposure to

PEER NETWORKS AND EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

physical violence, as both perpetrators and as victims, and their help-seeking behavior has been previously published (Heerde & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2019). In this study, we present a qualitative investigation into peer relationships among homeless young adults, particularly in relation to exposure to violence. Three research questions were explored: (1) How important are peer relationships for young adults experiencing homelessness?; (2) How do peer relationships influence homeless young adult's exposure to violence, both as perpetrators and as victims?; and (3) How do young adults perceive and respond to injuries sustained by their peers' as a result of violence?

Method

Defining Homelessness and Exposure to Violence

Young adults experiencing *homelessness* include those without accommodation (suitable and permanent), who may be unsheltered (living directly on the streets or in other spaces not intended for habitation), or in temporary or emergency accommodation that is reserved for homeless persons (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2016). This global definition aligns with the Australian statistical definition of homelessness (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Exposure to violence is defined in accordance with the World Health Organization's (2002) definition of violence. *Perpetration of physical violence* is the intentional and unwanted physical handling or threat of physical harm performed by an individual(s) against another person without consent (e.g., hitting, punching, mugging and robbery, assault, use of weapons against another person, threats to harm) (Heerde & Hemphill, 2019; Heerde et al., 2014). *Physical violence victimization* includes the physical handling or threat of physical harm experienced by an individual at the hands of another person (e.g. assault, being threatened with harm with or without the use of weapons, being physically harmed, and being mugged or robbed) (Heerde & Hemphill, 2019; Heerde et al., 2014). Herein, unless otherwise specified, *exposure to physical violence* includes both perpetration and victimization.

Ethics approval

PEER NETWORKS AND EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

Approval for this study was provided by the Australian Catholic University Human Research Ethics Committee (2013 258V), the institution the lead author was affiliated with at the time of data collection.

Participants

Eighteen young adults, 18-24 years of age and at risk of or experiencing homelessness, participated in this study. At the time of interviewing, all young adults were receiving assistance with housing and/or case management from one of two youth organizations. These organizations provided a range of specialized services to at-risk adolescents and young adults (up to 25 years of age) including outreach support, addiction services, housing assistance and crisis accommodation, support for young adults transitioning from the justice system, and intensive case management for those with complex treatment needs, on statutory orders, and for whom other services had been ineffective. Chief Executive Officers of these organizations provided permission to conduct the research at their service.

All but one participant, who was born in South Asia, identified as White and Australian-born. All participants were proficient in speaking and understanding the English language. Ten young adults identified as female. Eleven participants had disengaged from school at or prior to Grade 10. Young adults reported their first experience of homelessness occurred between the ages of 12 to 18 years (13 participants at or before the age of 16 years). Twelve participants reported experiencing homelessness on at least three separate occasions. During these periods, they reported living directly on the streets, in abandoned buildings, temporary accommodation reserved for adolescents and young adults at risk of homelessness, or staying with a friend, boyfriend/girlfriend, or other known/unknown acquaintances. Seven participants reported having no fixed address in the past 4 to 12 months, while ten described feeling unlikely they would have a safe place to stay for the next month.

Research Design and Practices

PEER NETWORKS AND EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

Few extant studies of young adult homelessness have drawn upon decolonizing research methodologies (Heerde & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2019), despite the use of these approaches with other marginalized groups (Moreton-Robinson, 2013; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2016b, 2018; Smith, 2013; Zavala, 2013). Decolonizing practices (Moreton-Robinson, 2013; Smith, 2013) draw on standpoint theory to bring attention to the concerns, perspectives and recommendations of participants (Moreton-Robinson, 2013). Thus, the adoption of a decolonizing lens in this study is appropriate given its central focus on the lived experience of participants. Like other qualitative collaborative and participatory methods, adopting a decolonizing lens positions the researcher as an active listener, building rapport, earning trust, and establishing credibility with the participant. Participants drive the research, in both its content and direction, and engage in a relationship with the researcher that is free from exploitation and appropriation (Smith, 2013).

The safety and anonymity of participants is paramount in empowering them to openly share their lived experience and raise and discuss issues of importance to the research even where these issues have not been prompted through the interview questions (Liamputtong, 2010). The use of participants' words, their feelings and understandings, and the processes by which understandings are formulated through language and demonstrated through behavior, can be gained through applying a decolonizing lens. Respecting and accurately presenting the words, perceptions, perspectives and thought processes of participants is integral to the writing and recommendations of the research (Smith, 2013).

Participant Recruitment

To be eligible to take part in the study, participants were required to be between 16-24 years of age, at risk of or experiencing homelessness, and be receiving support from youth homelessness services. There were no stipulations placed on the type of homelessness young adults had/were experiencing; rather, young adults navigating the definition of homelessness provided earlier in this section were eligible to participate. This included young adults without accommodation (e.g. couch surfing, temporarily living with peers), who were unsheltered (e.g.

PEER NETWORKS AND EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

living directly on the streets), or who were currently in temporary, emergency or supported accommodation that is reserved for adolescents and young adults experiencing homelessness. Eligibility requirements were not placed on participant's ethnicity or their history of exposure to physical violence. Prior to the commencement of data collection, the lead author spent time attending both organizations described in this section, to establish rapport with site staff and young adults. This resulted in the development of trust, mutual understanding and rapport between the lead author, site staff and young adults; features imperative in qualitative research with vulnerable and marginalized population groups (Liamputtong, 2009, 2010).

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants to the study to ensure they held insights and perspectives most relevant to the research questions (Minichiello, Sullivan, Greenwood, & Axford, 2004). Recruitment occurred in two stages. First, young adults were approached by their case manager, who provided a verbal introduction to the research and assessed their interest in the project and capacity to participate. Case managers then facilitated an appropriate time for the researchers and the participant to meet at the site of the organization. During this meeting, the researcher presented the study in detail and young adults were provided with the opportunity to make an informed decision about their participation. As described earlier, the recruitment strategies resulted in 18 young adults agreeing to participate in the study. Details on the number of young adults that were available at the two organizations or the number of young adult's case managers approached to participate are unavailable. Of those young adults who expressed interest in participating, only two participants did not attend at the scheduled interview time. Both young adults were contacted by their case manager and invited to reschedule an interview time, however declined to participate.

Interview Administration

A standardized open-ended interview, with a semi-structured interview guide (Patton, 2002), was used in conducting all interviews. The study was explained within an advocacy framework of using participants' interview responses to understand their lived experiences of

PEER NETWORKS AND EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

homelessness and exposure to violence, including their peer relationships. Participants were informed that their interview data would be used to produce a summary report and other publications for individuals working with young adults experiencing homelessness.

Young adults were provided with written information about the project and a consent form. As participants were at an age where they possessed the cognitive capacity to provide informed consent (at least 16 years of age; Sancu, Sawyer, Weller, Bond, & Patton, 2004) parental consent was not required. Allowing for the fact that literacy skills may have been limited in some participants, the project information and consent form were read aloud to each young person. The researchers explained that involvement in the interview was voluntary, and that participants were able to leave the interview and withdraw their participation at any point, without consequence. Consent was obtained in writing from all young adults prior to commencement of the interview and assurances of confidentiality were provided.

Interviews were conducted over the period of July 2014 to November 2015 and lasted 45-60 minutes. Interviews focused on participants' exposure to violence while experiencing homelessness, including their relationships and interactions with peers. The interview schedule was developed by the lead author and was designed to qualitatively explore behaviors examined within established quantitative measures including the Exposure to Violence and Criminal Behavior on the Streets Questionnaire (Kipke et al., 1997) and the Violence Involvement Scale (Brady, Tschann, Pasch, Flores, & Ozer, 2008). "How many of your friends have gotten into physical fights?" "How many of your friends have been assaulted?" and "Have your friends been injured in any of these situations?" are example questions. Given the dialogic and interactive format of the interviews, these questions were followed by questioning and probing phrases such as "Can you tell me about ...," "If you feel comfortable can we talk about ...," and "Can you say a bit more about" Some demographic data (i.e. gender [male/female], age, country of birth) was also collected as permitted by the participant.

PEER NETWORKS AND EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

At the completion of the interview, participants were asked if there was anything further, they wished to raise, discuss, convey, or share with others. All young adults received a \$10AUD groceries voucher as reimbursement for their time, which was given prior to beginning the interview. At this point, the researchers reiterated that participants were able to leave the interview and/or withdraw their participation at any point without consequence. Given the structurally vulnerable position of participants, this process was important in ensuring they did not feel pressured or coerced into taking part in the interview in exchange for the voucher. All interviews were recorded on a digital recorder and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service.

The safety and anonymity of young adults was paramount. Considering the potentially triggering nature of asking participants to talk about their peer relationships and peers' exposure to violence, ensuring participants had access to debriefing and support services during and/or following the interview was paramount. The conduct of each interview was supported by a distress protocol, developed to effectively respond to emotional distress expressed by participants (Draucker, Martsof, & Poole, 2009). A staff member at each of the participating organizations was also available in the event a participant became distressed during the interview and needed support. Project information provided to participants also contained the contact details for two external homelessness support services.

All identifying information contained in the interview transcripts was removed. Names of people, agencies, or specific locations (e.g. suburbs, train stations) were replaced with pseudonyms or fictitious names. Interview transcripts (including language used by participants) were deliberately not edited or "cleaned." Speech habits (e.g. 'um') were edited, however participant's narratives, ideas and wording were not rephrased. The words, phrases and vernacular of young adults provides a linguistic insight into their lived experiences, vulnerabilities, and the ways in which understandings are formulated through language and acted upon.

PEER NETWORKS AND EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

Consistent with adopting a decolonizing lens (Moreton-Robinson, 2013; Smith, 2013), young people were provided with the opportunity to listen to the audio recording of their interview, and to review and edit their interview transcript. All participants appeared appreciative of the opportunity to take part in the interview and appeared content with the interview process and their responses. Although young adults' review and editing of their transcripts may have resulted in additional data, the lead author received no requests from participants to undertake this process. Participants were provided with the contact details for the lead author in the event they wished to do so in the future.

Data Coding and Analysis

Data coding and categorization was supported by NVivo 11 software (QSR International, 2016). As a method of qualitative analysis, and complementing the use of a decolonizing lens, narrative inquiry was used to understand participants' lived experiences in their own words, and the social, cultural and environmental contexts in which these experiences occurred (Brown, 2012; Clandinin, 2006; Haydon, Browne, & van de Riet, 2018).

Each interview transcript was thoroughly read multiple times using a categorial narrative approach to elucidate patterns, themes, and categories in the participants' narratives (Earthy & Cronin, 2008). The lead author individually completed the coding and categorization of these patterns which involved several processes to ensure rigorous data analysis (Morse, 2015). First, after reading the transcripts, the interview schedule was used as a framework by which to identify emergent themes that related to young adult's peer relationships, as well as data indirectly related to the research questions (e.g. conceptualizations of social and cultural norms attributed to homelessness). Next, a list of framing codes and categories was generated, and sub-categories and sub-themes then devised. The identification of connections and patterns across the data was aided by multiple re-readings of the interview transcripts. Data for sub-categories and sub-themes were then condensed, refined, and collapsed into higher-level, more detailed themes. Given the narrative approach, the use of multiple coders as measures of reliability and

PEER NETWORKS AND EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

validity was not essential (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). However, over the course of the analysis and writing process, the authors discussed the emergent categories and themes, patterns in the data, and each other's interpretations of the data as well as their personal assumptions and beliefs.

Results

The Importance of Peer Relationships

Young adults in this study spoke of the significance and value of peer relationships, and the supportive and trusting nature of these connections. Their narratives suggested the relationships they had with peers were supportive connections within which home and homelessness experiences could be shared and understood. For the young adults interviewed, relationships with peers appeared to be important personal connections within a street culture where young adults often seek invisibility from broader social contexts. In discussing their peer relationships participants' narratives reflected shared understandings of themselves, their struggles, and their behaviors were developed through connections with peers. The importance of friendships was framed by two main themes: first, that peers formed the 'family' that young adults had not previously had; and second, young adults carefully formed supportive and trusting relationships with their peers.

Peer relationships provided important personal and social connections, where participants' felt included and supported. Participants spoke warmly of their friends and described friendships in a way that symbolized relationships which they did not have with biological family members: *"One of my mates, he's like a brother to me ..."* (Participant 12, female). Other young adults recalled the close bonds with friends through descriptions of common experiences and understandings: *"You get to know each other; you get to know the stories. It's mostly just like family stuff, like what I've gone through."* (Participant 17, female) and *"same problems with family, same problems with being on the streets"* (Participant 18, female). In general, peer relationships for the young adults in this study appeared to be shaped

PEER NETWORKS AND EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

not only through a shared experience of homelessness, but also through mutual experiences within other social contexts (e.g. the family).

Young people's recollections and reflections encompassed themes of trust, respect and support. They spoke perceptively and with a sense of empowerment about choosing who (or who not) to befriend or trust: *"There's the friends that you trust and the ones that you don't."* (Participant 15, male) and *"I choose my friends wisely"* (Participant 5, female). Other young adults mentioned practical considerations in developing peer relationships. In one example, this young man described his discernment was based on peer behavior, saying *"If someone does carry a weapon, I don't want anything to do with them."* (Participant 9, male). Participants recalled having a small number of close peers: *"I only have a very small handful of friendship groups"* (Participant 17, female) and *"I only hang out with one or two people"* (Participant 2, female). The themes of trust, support and a small network of peers were commonly described as adaptive strategies, developed to increase security, safety and protection that had not been previously experienced:

"They [friends] respect me, as I respect them [my friends]. But they wouldn't put me in a place where I would be in danger or be threatened or would do anything ... so they're kind of very caring and very loyal people..." (Participant 5, female)

Peer Relationships and Exposure to Violence

Perpetration of Physical Violence. Participants described the physical violence perpetrated by friends and peer affiliates with a sense of normality and ordinariness. As one young man explained, *"All the time. Yes, dead set all the time. I mean they're [friends] just - to me this stuff that happens every day [violence] it seems like just normal ... my mates are always getting into fights and shit"* (Participant 1, male). For some participants, descriptions of peers' engagement in physical violence appeared to be predicated by emotions of anger or aggression: *"my mates all used to get into fights. We all used to be pretty hot headed"* (Participant 13, male) and

PEER NETWORKS AND EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

“The sort of friends I had they were very mouthy. They'd pick fights with anybody. They used to go around stealing people's phones straight out of their hands sitting on the bus and stuff. They were just those sorts of people” (Participant 18, female).

For others, peers' anger and aggression was described pragmatically and explained as occurring in response to perceived wrongdoing or as a response to exploitation. As this young woman described in relation to buying drugs, *“If they [dealers] rip them off [friends] and give them salt instead or something [leads to physical fights]...”* (Participant 14, female).

When asked about their peers' use of violence, some participants described violence occurring as a means of constructing ascendance and authority over another person(s). For example, *“their [friends'] first resort is usually to threaten, ‘if you don't do this, I'm going to hit you’...”* (Participant 16, male) and *“Well one of my friends walked past all these younger people and said something to them and then they got into a fight with them”* (Participant 10, female). In some instances, peers' perpetration of violence intersected with violence being used to obtain a commodity(ies). As these young men described, *“he found some random person in the street and went after him for his money and that's because he saw him draw money out of the ATM so he knew he had money”* (Participant 15, male) and

“... a bloke pissed him off at the station because he [friend] asked – he [friend] needed a cigarette and he asked him for a smoke and he wouldn't give him a smoke and he turns around and goes, “Give me a fucking smoke or I'll kick your head in” (Participant 13, male).

Peers' use of violence was described as progressive and sequential in nature. Young adults described their peers' perpetration of violence as beginning with an aggressive or hostile verbal exchange (e.g. threats), followed by a physically violent exchange. In describing this sequence, participants' tones and expressions were self-assured and reflected ordinariness and familiarity - that this exchange and use of violence was appropriate and normal within their social context.

PEER NETWORKS AND EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

Participant's narratives suggested peer relationships did not buffer against or subjugate young adults' exposure to violence. Rather, these relationships increased their exposure to violence as bystanders (i.e. being present at the violent event but not as a participant), witnesses (i.e. seeing an event unfold), and passive observers (i.e. not being a participant but watching the event happen and being affected by it). As these young women explained, "*They [peers] had a beef with other lads - I never really got into part of the fights. I was sort of more the person to stand back*" (Participant 18, female) and "*There was one point, around about two years ago, that I had to distract this girl. She wanted me to distract her [unknown girl] and she [friend] grabbed her wallet*" (Participant 7, female). Participants often recounted these experiences with expressionless faces and detached postures, however the tone and nuances in their words appeared contradictory to this disconnection. Often these tones conveyed a sense of shame and discomfort with the behavior participants had witnessed and (or) their responses at the time. For example, Participant 7's use of the terms "had to" and "wanted me to" reflect a minimization of responsibility or agency in the events she saw, and discomfort with her status in the peer relationship. Young adults' attempts to minimize the impact of peer violence are further exemplified by this young man's recollections:

"I was in the park and I was having a drink [with my friend] and I thought everyone was there to have a good time and this guy ... he was my age. He said "Do you want to go rape someone" and I was put on the spot and I'm like I want to see if he's actually serious so I said "Yes, let's go" and I walked five steps with him and he's gone "Where can we find" - I've gone "Dude I was just joking." That's fucked. That woke me up. I was like what the hell's going on?" (Participant 9, male)

Young adults were pragmatic in their descriptions of violence perpetrated by peers. Where some participants expressed attempts to separate themselves from this social context, most were matter-of-fact in describing violence as a typical occurrence in their lives; "*I don't*

PEER NETWORKS AND EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

have any friends that haven't been in the justice system or have never done anything wrong."

(Participant 1, male).

Participants often expressed disparate emotions when describing their peers' exposure to violence. While some practically and rationally described this exposure, the descriptions of others were expressed candidly and with a sense of urgency. For instance, in describing a fight between a male friend and an unknown associate, a young woman recounted her verbal attempts to protect her friend:

"They assaulted him [friend] and I was there, and I said, "Stop. Stop punching him. You're going to put him in a coma. He's like dying." "No, no, no. I'm going to keep beating him up and beating him up." I'm like, "No, no. Just stop. Just stop." (Participant 6, female).

Other young adults described their peers' engagement in violence as a form of protective behavior:

"My friend was protecting me. A security guard from [shopping center] started to mouth off at me and threatened to hit me so he jumped in [my friend] and used a chain around his hand and smacked him [security guard] in the face." (Participant 12, female)

Physical Violence Victimization. Participants gave frank, detailed descriptions of having witnessed their peers endure serious physical victimization. They described physical assaults with and without weapons, often intertwined with seeing peers have their personal possessions stolen. As with physical violence perpetration, descriptions of physical victimization were conveyed with a sense of normalcy. For example, *"One of my friends had a gun pulled on him and someone put a needle in him, and he's been through a lot of stuff."* (Participant 9, male). The use of the phrase "a lot of stuff" by this young man not only suggests multiple victimization experiences but is also a generalization of the emotional impact of the violence witnessed.

While several participants spoke of acute assaults withstood by their peers, for instance *"I think one of them [friend] has had his phone stolen"* (Participant 11, male), assaults of much

PEER NETWORKS AND EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

greater severity were described by others. In some cases these assaults were described in a resigned or matter-of-fact manner; longer narratives, however, were marked by a sense of melancholy as participants recalled their peers' struggle to surmount vulnerability. In remembering separate assaults on his friends, this participant described,

“Someone came up with a metal pole and threatened to hit them [friends] if they didn't hand over the money” and “One of my mates, he's like a brother to me, was accused of stealing money so two guys, I think in their mid-30s, mid-40s bashed him, put him in hospital” (Participant 12, male).

Emotional detachment and resignation such as that evident in the above narrative were not apparent among other participants. In these instances, descriptions of peer victimization were some of the only times throughout the interview in which emotion was expressed. The experience of witnessing peers being severely assaulted appeared to evoke feelings of disbelief and helplessness. As these participants explained, *“I've seen my friend get chopped with a meat cleaver. He [assailant] just came over the top and he [friend] tried to put his arm up to protect himself and he just cut straight through his bone.” (Participant 15, male) and “One [friend] OD'd and got mugged while he was half dead. I called the ambulance, the ambulance came, he almost died” (Participant 7, female).*

Notably, few participants explicitly described the relationship or association between their peer(s) and the assailant(s). Young people's narratives suggested victimization occurred because of both internal hierarchies between homeless peers and from external attacks. Descriptions of victimization originating from internal hierarchies often depicted one person attempting to reach ascendancy over another person or as reprisal for an earlier harm. For example,

“My best friend, we met at the youth refuge where I was staying, and she was walking back to the youth refuge late one night and she got bashed and accosted on the way there

PEER NETWORKS AND EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

by someone who apparently knew her and had a long-standing grudge against her”

(Participant 16, male).

Comparatively, provoked attacks on peers often occurred following aggressive exchanges with another person. As these participants explained, *“He [adult male] kicked the shit out of an 18-year-old because he wouldn’t give him a smoke.”* (Participant 13, male) and *“It was a gun and he [adult male] had it to my friends’ head until he gave him some ice.”* (Participant 14, female)

Responding to Peer’ Injuries

While young adults gave detailed accounts of their peers’ perpetration of violence and victimization experiences, few spoke of injuries sustained by their peers in these incidents or resultant interactions with health professionals. Where injuries were described, these were depicted in a matter-of-fact list-like manner, where the severity of the wounds was often downplayed. For instance, Participant 16’s listing of physical wounds was conveyed with order and categorization, with his use of the word “only” minimizing the injury severity:

“Black eye, bruising across the face and upper body and around the stomach where she’d been kicked, and defensive injuries on her arms and legs. It was only bruising so she just basically let it go away by itself, there’s not much you can do about bruising.”

(Participant 16, male)

Without prompting, other participants described injuries sustained in a controlled and emotionally regulated manner: *“...put him in hospital”* (Participant 12, male), *“he [assailant] just cut straight through his bone”* (Participant 15, male) and *“...he almost died”* (Participant 7, female).

Young adults showed some reluctance to engage in conversation about their peers’ help-seeking behavior. Most used the phrases “I don’t know” and “not sure” when asked about their peers’ injuries and instances of seeking assistance for these injuries. Only one participant spoke of their peer seeking help from a health professional: *“Yeah [friend] not sure how it works [the*

PEER NETWORKS AND EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

medical system], how to go about getting the process going, that kind of thing” (Participant 16, male). Participant’s tone of voice and body language often signaled disengagement from conversation on these topics. For example, the following young person began to fidget, subtly moved their chair backwards, and increased the speed of their speech when asked about peers’ injuries and said: *“My memory's really bad. I don't know. I don't know.”* (Participant 9, male). In another instance, this young person said, *“I don't really keep information about my friends.”* (Participant 11, male) while adjusting himself to sit upright on the couch and block himself by crossing his arms across his chest.

Discussion

The current study explored peer relationships among young adults experiencing homelessness, particularly in relation to exposure to violence, both as perpetrators and victims. The young adults interviewed described having supportive, family-like relationships with peers, often based on shared understanding of their lived experiences. Instances of their peers engaging in violence, being physically victimized and injuries sustained through these incidents were described. The narratives and mannerisms of participants suggested the use of emotional detachment as a mechanism for managing personal vulnerability and distress associated with witnessing peers’ exposure to violence. Our findings add to the body of literature highlighting the complexities of experiencing homelessness in young adulthood, and as discussed in this section, extend prior research on peer relationships among homeless young adults by providing a deeper understanding of the role of these relationships and their influence on exposure to violence.

The Importance of Peer Relationships

Navigating homelessness requires the development, adaptation and use of coping skills beyond those which are required in broader society (Bender et al., 2007). For many young adults, navigating homelessness occurs in the context of managing the complexities and reverberations of childhood and early adolescent trauma (e.g. Bearsley-Smith et al., 2008;

PEER NETWORKS AND EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010). Thus, it is not surprising that these young adults develop supportive and emotionally interdependent relationships with their homeless peers (Bender et al., 2007; De la Haye et al., 2012; Kurtz et al., 2000). The results of this study suggest peer relationships among homeless young adults move beyond superficial companionship. Rather, these are trusting interdependent relationships where peers provide important personal connections and sources of support and kinship. These shared experiences and understanding may allow young adults to address and decrease feelings of isolation commonly associated with experiencing homelessness (Rew, 2000). Our study findings mirror that of prior studies which report that relationships among peers are vital sources of instrumental, emotional and social support for young adults experiencing homelessness (e.g. Bender et al., 2007; De la Haye et al., 2012; McCarthy, Hagan, & Martin, 2002; Smith, 2008; Tyler & Melander, 2011).

Our study findings extend that of previous research and suggest that relationships with peers provide important personal connections. These connections are symbolized by expressions of inclusion and comfort, and often expressed as ‘familial’ relationships which had not been previously experienced with biological family members (e.g. brothers or sisters; Bender et al., 2007; Greenblatt & Robertson, 1993; McCarthy et al., 2002; Smith, 2008; Whitbeck & Simons, 1990). Young adults’ perceptions of ‘family-type’ peer relationships suggest that bonds and relationships between these young adults may imitate the rapport and functions of sibling-kinship that typically exists in supportive family environments (Ennett et al., 1999; Smith, 2008). This perception resonates with the term “family of choice” often used in LGBTIQ studies to distinguish the deep bonds of support, loyalty and commitment within queer friendships that may have been absent in heterosexual “families of origin” (e.g. Bertone & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2015).

The importance of relationships with non-familial peers has been noted by many scholars regarding homeless young people’s disconnection from their family of origin, friendships developed prior to homelessness and other community-based supports (e.g. Bender et al., 2007;

PEER NETWORKS AND EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

De la Haye et al., 2012; Smith, 2008). In the current study, young adults referred to their having agency in choosing which peers to befriend and trust. It is possible that the importance of this agency stems from both having experienced family-based harms and the constantly changing conditions and demands of homelessness. This agency enabled young adults to feel no longer trapped by or vulnerable to others (e.g. Bender et al., 2007; Greenblatt & Robertson, 1993). These harms and demands are consistently identified as posing considerable risk to homeless young people's sense of safety and feelings of self-control (e.g. Bender et al., 2007; Goodman et al., 1991; Smith, 2008; Unger et al., 1998). The trust, support, and protection provided by connections with peers, as described in this study, may mitigate the disorder and demands associated with experiencing homelessness.

Peer Relationships and Exposure to Violence

Experiencing homelessness requires young people to develop relationships with peers who are experiencing similar social circumstances (Heerde & Hemphill, 2019). These relationships are a necessary resource for survival (Heerde & Hemphill, 2019; McCarthy et al., 2002; Rice et al., 2005; Smith, 2008). Despite this, our study findings suggest that there is a propensity for peer relationships to increase young adults' exposure to violence, as they bear witness to their peers' perpetration of violence (e.g. assault) and/or their being victimized (e.g. being assaulted with weapons). Our findings are consistent with previous studies that report homeless young people's exposure to physical violence may be associated with peer connections and affiliations (De la Haye et al., 2012; Ennett et al., 1999; Gaetz, 2004; Kipke et al., 1997; McCarthy & Hagan, 1991; Rice et al., 2005; Smith, 2008). The young adults in our study described their peers' use of physical violence in ways that suggested these behaviors were intended to protect against vulnerability, or as a means by which to obtain a commodity.

Few studies have examined victimization among homeless young people's peers (e.g. Huey & Berndt, 2008; McCarthy et al., 2002; Whitbeck & Simons, 1990) or the witnessing of peers' exposure to violence (Baron, 2003; Kipke et al., 1997). Our study contributes to

PEER NETWORKS AND EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

addressing this research gap; however, there is little comparative research with which to compare our findings. Our findings suggest witnessing violence, whether this be peers' perpetration of violence or their being victimized, is an additional form of trauma to which young adults are exposed. For homeless young adults, prior experiences of childhood maltreatment and abuse (e.g. Bearsley-Smith et al., 2008; Embleton et al., 2016; Heffron et al., 1995; Shelton et al., 2009; van den Bree et al., 2009) are likely to be compounded by their own experiences of violence while homeless (e.g. Baron, 2003; Baron & Hartnagel, 1998; Gaetz, 2004; Gwadz et al., 2009; Heerde et al., 2014; Kennedy & Baron, 1993; McCarthy & Hagan, 1991) and, as suggested here, that of their peers (e.g. Huey & Berndt, 2008). The unprompted emotionality of some young adults during the interviews suggested vulnerability and discomfort in having witnessed their peers' experiences of violence. Other young adults appeared to minimize and subvert the effects of what they had seen by describing their peers' injuries in a regimented, list-like order. An important direction for future studies of peer relationships among homeless young adults will be to include detailed information on peers exposure to violence to provide a stronger basis on which to examine the impact of witnessing this violence and potential mechanisms to target in applied programming and intervention approaches.

Implications Arising from the Study Findings

This study offers a contemporary insight into peer relationships among homeless young adults, once again emphasizing these relationships are important sources of protection and support (e.g. Milburn et al., 2007; Rice et al., 2005; Thompson, Kim, McManus, Flynn, & Kim, 2007; Unger et al., 1998). Our findings illustrate homeless young adults form strong social bonds with their homeless peers, constructing these relationships as kin or families of choice. While the shielding and helpful capacities of these peer relationships must be acknowledged it is imperative to recognise that these relationships can also be sources of harm. This is particularly important in considering applied approaches to working with young people experiencing

PEER NETWORKS AND EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

homelessness, and that exposure to violence is considered a normative occurrence in their daily lives (Heerde & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2019).

The relationships young people form with their peers are considerable influences on exposure to violence; young people are bonded with peers who are also engaging in, or being victimized by, violence. Young adults' accounts of their own experiences of violence (Heerde & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2019) were similar to the descriptions of peers' exposure to violence depicted in this study. The normalcy and ordinariness with which participants described their own and their peers' exposure to violence is consistent with suggestions that violence is common within homelessness contexts (Kipke et al., 1997; McCarthy & Hagan, 1991). This is despite wider community and social norms which prohibit and reprimand violence perpetration and support those who have been victimized.

How do we use the findings of the current study to inform programming and intervention efforts in youth homelessness support settings? First, the agency young adults expressed in choosing the peers they befriended and trusted, the value placed on these social bonds, and the support gained from these relationships, must be acknowledged and integrated into programming and intervention approaches. Next, as described by Rice et al. (2005), approaches targeting homeless young people as individuals (e.g. case management) do not take into account the social environment and social influences within which young people reside in and are embedded. Thus, it is recommended approaches drawing upon young people's agency and collaborating with young adults within their social networks, occur alongside established case management approaches. As described here, and in our previous study (Heerde & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2019), young adults are entrenched within a social network and culture where exposure to violence is commonplace and related to ensuring survival. Working within young adults' social networks and recognizing the reasons for and grounds upon which violence occurs within these networks, may help in reducing risk for further violence exposure (Heerde & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2019) and

PEER NETWORKS AND EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

supporting those who have been victimized (including those who have witnessed violence and victimization).

The study findings have important implications for addressing the range of health morbidities experienced by homeless young adults (e.g. depression, post-traumatic stress disorder; Ensign, 1998; Ensign & Bell, 2004; Farrow, Deisher, Brown, Kulig, & Kipke, 1992; Hwang, Tolomiczenko, Kouyoumdjian, & Garner, 2005). The violence described by participants presented significant risk to their lives and that of their peers; these experiences are commonly referred to as traumatic experiences (Herman, 1992). The demeanour of young adults in this study was often melancholic despite their perceived acceptance of the normality of the violence they witnessed. This acceptance of normalcy may be reflective of participants detaching from their emotional thoughts and reactions to the exchange of violence being witnessed (Heerde & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2019). This detachment is likely to be a trauma-based coping response (Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010; Goodman et al., 1991; Herman, 1992; Wong, Clark, & Marlotte, 2016). In applied settings, programming and intervention approaches already recognize homeless young adults have childhood and adolescent histories of violence and victimization (Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010; Heerde & Halliday, 2020) and that these experiences are compounded by exposure to violence experienced while homeless (Heerde & Halliday, 2020; Heerde & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2019). However, young people themselves may not perceive or acknowledge their experiences are abnormal or irregular, despite the feelings of shame, vulnerability, and disempowerment that arise from their exposure to violence. In line with these considerations, and the findings of our work, it is important for practitioners working with homeless young adults to understand the cumulative effects of multiple forms of trauma.

Research Limitations

Several limitations to the current study are acknowledged. First, there exists social stigma in reporting experiences of homelessness, including behaviors and events which occur during this time (Kidd, 2007). All participants were provided with assurances of confidentiality and

PEER NETWORKS AND EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

anonymity and expressed comfort that their experiences would be treated accurately and respectfully. However, it is possible that sensitivity to this perceived stigma may be intensified in a one-one interview where participants' identity details were known to the researcher. Relatedly, although participants were provided the opportunity to read and edit their interview transcript, they all declined this offer. Further data relating to the research questions may have been gained following participants' reflections and editing.

It could be contended that assurances of confidentiality and anonymity may have led to exaggeration and embellishment in young adults' recollections of their lived experiences. As researchers, we were attuned to this possibility but do not believe it eventuated for several reasons. First, the interview protocol and procedures allowed for detailed conversation with participants about their experiences, thereby leading to several opportunities in each interview to cross-check, re-tell, and reflect upon their stories to confirm consistency. Second, participants were referred to us by case managers at the specialized homelessness services. To safeguard participants wellbeing, case managers informed the researchers of a young person's context and experience before the interview or, in open discussion with the young person and the researcher after the interview, thereby corroborating their narratives. Last, data saturation was achieved, and there was similarity in participants' emotional responses, confirming the reality and validity of their accounts.

Further limitations are the lack of heterogeneity among research participants and the subsequent absence of an intersectional lens in the analysis (Crenshaw, 1989). This resulted in "exclusion by inclusion" into homogenizing categories of gender- and hetero- normativity (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2016a). Constraints imposed during the initial institutional review of the project meant interview questions did not ask participants about their gender identity nor their sexual identity or orientation. It has been suggested gendered experiences of homelessness are associated with behaviors in which young adults may engage (O'Grady & Gaetz, 2009; Watson, 2017), however few studies on this issue exist (Huey & Berndt, 2008). Examining differences in

PEER NETWORKS AND EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

young women's and men's exposure to violence is beyond the scope of the current study, however it is a critical area of investigation for future studies. Likewise, further research could examine how ethnicity, geographical location (urban/rural), identifying as LGBTIQ, and living with a disability may affect young adults' peer relationships and exposure to violence. Research of this nature will inform strategies for service provision and intervention to these groups. It is possible that exposure to violence, and the responses of health providers, differs among participants of varying personal, family and social histories and identities. Thus, an intersectional approach in future studies is recommended (Crenshaw, 1989; see also Durso & Gates, 2012). It is acknowledged the study participants are not representative of all young adults experiencing homelessness, and further research which explores the intersections of various demographics is recommended.

Conclusion

Homelessness among young adults is a multifaceted and significant social problem associated with various negative health and social outcomes. In this study, we have explored the influence of peer networks on exposure to violence among young adults experiencing homelessness. The findings suggest peer relationships provide important personal connections for homeless young adults. These relationships are reflective of sibling-kinship that typically exists in supportive family environments. Homeless young adults' exposure to physical violence appears to be influenced by peer connections and affiliations, such that they are exposure to their peers' perpetration of, and victimization from, violence. There seems to be an important duality between young adults' perception of violence as normative and their self-reflexive expressions of detachment about this violence. Programming and prevention efforts that recognize the importance of peer relationships among homeless young adults and include resources for violence prevention and support are required in the development of homelessness support programs.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

PEER NETWORKS AND EXPSOURE TO VIOLENCE

The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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PEER NETWORKS AND EXPSOURE TO VIOLENCE

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