From Independence to Interdependence: Redefining Outcomes for Transitional Living Programs for Youth Experiencing Homelessness

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Transitional living programs (TLPs) are a housing intervention authorized by the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act to provide services for older youth experiencing homelessness. Preparing youth for independence is a chief program outcome for TLPs across the country. The findings of this qualitative study, with 32 former participants in TLP services, suggest that the primacy of this outcome may warrant reexamination. A dominant focus on the achievement of independence as a determination of program success does not (a) capture the most important roles TLPs serve from the perspective of youth and (b) account for the possible structural roots of youth homelessness in the United States that may prevent young people from maintaining stability after exit.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Housing is critical, but not enough; young people value services that invest holistically and authentically in nurturing their development and future goals while simultaneously building a community of support and culture of belonging that will endure.

- Providers of youth housing must also be working to dismantle systems of structural violence that cause and maintain homelessness, and advocate for policies that protect the rights and futures of young people.

Youth in housing crisis are at increased risk for victimization, mental and physical illness, and involvement in the criminal justice system, and they face serious threats to their education and future economic stability (Edidin, Ganim, Hunter, & Karnik, 2012; Toro, Dworsky, & Fowler, 2007; Whitbeck, 2009). Research in the area of youth homelessness shows that the lack of safe and stable housing exposes young people to a host of threats and conditions that jeopardize their safety, compromise their physical health and emotional well-being, and frequently force them to make dangerous decisions in order to survive (Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010; Levin, Bax, McKean, & Schoggen, 2005). While there is no shortage of studies on the threats facing youth both prior to and during experiences of homelessness, little is known about the impact of the services currently being implemented to mitigate those threats. Transitional living programs (TLPs) were established during the 1988 reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) to provide services for older youth experiencing homelessness. The purpose of the program is to provide safe, stable living accommodations and a range of support services for up to 21 months to help young people ages 16 to 21 develop the skills necessary to become independent (Reconnecting Homeless Youth Act, 2008 [most recent reauthorization of RHYA], P. L. 110-378, Title III, Part B, Section 322a). Services provided by TLPs include housing through a congregate-living model; mental and physical health care; and education, employment, and life skills support. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the impact, if any, of TLP services over time from the perspective of young people who have participated in services.

Ecosystems Theory

General systems theory, originally articulated by von Bertalanffy (1968), describes systems as interactions between a range of elements, living and nonliving, that compose an organized whole. Each system is unique, has boundaries that distinctly define it, and interacts dynamically with the larger environment, adapting to each new context in order to achieve a sense of equilibrium or balance (Friedman & Neuman Allen, 2011). When applied to social work practice, general systems theory suggests a movement away from understanding behavior as linear cause and effect to examining the reciprocal relationship between a person and their environment (Andreae, 2011). It is a method of organizing and understanding interacting components in order to holistically understand the behavior of people and societies.

Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological perspective similarly outlines the mutual influence of individuals and their complex and layered contexts. Bronfenbrenner's model suggests that all humans are engaged in five distinct systems: (a) microsystem—immediate environment directly experienced by an individual such as their family or neighborhood; (b) mesosystem—interaction between two microsystems, such as the interface between a child's home and school; (c) exosystem—interaction between two or more settings, at least one of which is not directly experienced by the individual, however the setting affects them, such as the impact of a parent's experience at work on a child; (d) macrosystem—larger cultural context, such as belief systems,

bodies of knowledge, socioeconomic status, and oppressive structures; and (e) chronosystem—events related to the passage of time, such as physiological changes as a result of aging as well as experiences related to one's position in history. Ecological theory assumes continuous dialogue between individuals and these five contexts, where they are mutually influencing one another and ultimately shaping development over time.

Transitional living programs are an intervention intended to prevent future episodes of homelessness and prepare youth for a healthier adulthood. The services provided are designed to assist youth with the complex transactions they will experience with the world around them, and therefore those exchanges must be incorporated into any understanding of the program's potential impact on the lives of youth. Through a merger of principles drawn from both ecological and general systems theories, the ecosystems theory perspective ensures "that attention is paid to the case in its full transactional complexity, reducing the danger of artificially amputating the client system from its environment in assessment and intervention" (Mattaini, 2008, p. 357).

Outcome-Based Funding and the Impact of TLPs

Increasingly, funders are moving to performance-based funding models in social services. This reflects a well-intentioned effort to support programs and services that are truly making a difference in the lives of others and, likewise, eliminate those found to be ineffective. It is imperative in this effort, however, that the performance measures identified to assess the effectiveness of programs be appropriate reflections of what those interventions can realistically achieve within complex social environments, as well as what participants personally desire as outcomes of their involvement in services. Many funders, and therefore TLPs, measure program success solely through an assessment of a young person's housing, employment status, education attainment, and general health at their time of exit from the program and, for some, also a short-term period following their exit when possible to locate these youth. These are undeniably critical outcomes to both understand and work toward; however, as it is difficult to track youth over time, little useful information is known in the field about what is actually happening for young people over the long term after they leave TLPs.

Currently, only one study has examined the impact of TLP services for young people in the United States beyond their exit from the program.[1] Rashid (2004) analyzed the outcomes of 23 youth experiencing

homelessness in Northern California 6 months after exit from a TLP. Although the results are based on a small, nonrandom sample, Rashid found preliminary descriptive evidence that TLPs may be effective interventions, reporting that 87% of the youth able to be located at 6 months had remained in permanent, stable housing. Although this is an important starting point, more research must be done. There are currently no data indicating what happens in the lives of young people beyond 6 months after they exit, and the perspectives of youth as to the usefulness of services over time has not yet been investigated.

Study Aims

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceived impact, if any, of the housing and support services provided by a TLP on the lives of formerly homeless youth over time. Qualitative research methods were used to privilege the expertise of young people who have experienced homelessness, thereby giving voice to those most impacted by decisions about program funding and prioritization. The following research questions guided this investigation:

1. What are the experiences of youth after leaving the TLP?
2. What are young people's perceptions of the impact, if any, of the TLP on their lives?
3. How do young people view the usefulness of specific services offered by the TLP?
4. How do youth perceptions of the impact of the TLP on their lives compare with standard indicators of stability utilized in the field, such as sustained housing, stable employment, educational achievement, and health?

Methods

This study was conducted with individuals who previously resided at a TLP operated by a nonprofit agency serving youth in housing crisis in Chicago, Illinois. The organization was one of the first in the country to operate a TLP following the genesis of the program model in the 1988 reauthorization of the RHYA, and it has been at capacity (currently 24 beds) ever since.

Participants

A maximum variation sampling strategy was used, whereby eligible participants were selected to reflect a range of diverse individual characteristics of youth served by the TLP (see Holtschneider, 2016, for more detailed information on sampling and recruitment and for a breakdown of individual participant characteristics). These included variation in participant gender, race, sexual orientation, length of time in the program, nature

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[1] The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau is currently conducting a study measuring TLP outcomes at 6, 12 and 18 months after exit; results are expected in 2018 (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2016).

of exit from the program, and time out of the program. A total of 32 participants who had exited the TLP between 1 and 11 years before the start of the study were interviewed. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 32 years old, with an average age of 26, and included 19 females (59%) and 13 males (41%; one male-identified participant is transgender). Regarding sexual orientation and race, 21 participants identified as heterosexual (66%) and 11 as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (34%); 28 participants identified their race as African American (88%), one as White (3%), one as Latino (3%), and two as African American and Latino (6%). Participants were selected to represent a range of reasons for exit from the TLP (including both voluntary and involuntary discharge) as well as exit destinations. At least one participant who exited each year from 2003 to 2013 was selected, and length of stay in the program ranged from 61 to 659 days ($M = 250$ days).

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semistructured interviews. In all, 27 interviews were conducted in person, and five youth currently living out-of-state were interviewed via telephone. In-person interviews were conducted in settings chosen by participants as most convenient for them and included their homes, the study site's drop-in center, coffee shops, and restaurants. All interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder. Data related to demographics, stay in the TLP, and selected outcomes were obtained through a brief questionnaire completed directly following the interview.

Data Analysis

Each interview was transcribed verbatim. Participants were given a pseudonym of their choosing, and any other names or information that could feasibly jeopardize their confidentiality were eliminated from the transcript (names of other youth present at the TLP are represented by first initial only, and the name of the specific program was changed to "the TLP"). A phenomenological approach to analysis outlined by Moustakas (1994) was utilized to capture the depth and breadth of both *what* youth experienced and *how* they experienced it. To enhance the credibility of the findings, two methods of triangulation were used. The first was the use of a maximum variation sampling strategy to recruit a range of participants with diverse characteristics, and the second was the use of an additional coder during data analysis.

Findings

Data collected to answer the first research question guiding this study (What are the experiences of youth after leaving the TLP?) revealed that since leaving the TLP most participants continued to experience financial and housing instability. While the majority (66% of the sample) were in stable housing at the time of their interview, for most, the road there was filled with continued financial stress as a result of inadequate income.[2] The economic challenges facing participants led to eviction; couch surfing (temporarily staying with friends, relatives, or sometimes with complete strangers for brief periods of time); moving to undesired locations; and, for 59% of the sample, subsequent episodes of homelessness. Participants struggled to find employment with wages sufficient to meet all financial obligations, and they frequently had to take positions at a great distance from their residence and work multiple jobs to make ends meet. Expenses increased as participants became responsible for family members who were also struggling and/or had their own children whom they needed to support. Participants reported that the stress and time accompanying ongoing efforts to regain stability left little time and no financial resources to further educational goals, leaving many participants further away than they anticipated from the careers and futures they envisioned while in the TLP.

Though participants continued to struggle after leaving the TLP, data related to the second research question (What are young people's perceptions of the impact, if any, of the TLP on their lives?), shows the program as having a significant and positive impact on their lives today. This was the case because the young people in this study did not define success for their time in the program through the attainment of indicators of self-sufficiency regularly used in the field to determine program effectiveness, such as sustained housing, stable employment, educational achievement, and health. Rather, participants identified four outcomes distinct from these metrics that they believed to be the most significant results of their participation in TLP services: safety and survival, permanent connections, giving back, and personal development.

Safety and Survival: "The TLP Saved My Life"

The most sobering outcome that participants attributed to their time in the program was simple, yet of the utmost gravity: their lives.

> I can guarantee you that if [the TLP] didn't exist, I would not be alive right now. That's, there is no question about that…. I had just come out of doing a stint at [hospital] for attempted suicide … coming out of that I had nowhere else to go. I was literally sleeping on the dirty clothes pile in my friend's closet. I wasn't at bottom in the sense that I have slept in worse conditions, but I was at bottom in the sense that I was emotionally drained and didn't want to do this game anymore … [the TLP] saved my life. That's all there is to it. (Blythe, 32)

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[2] "Stable housing" as defined by the criteria established by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2015).

Nearly half of the participants (47% of the sample) believed that without the TLP they would not be alive today. To contextualize these beliefs, participants described the threatening circumstances they were coping with before entering the program. They experienced violence at home, on the street, and in intimate relationships. They were struggling with addiction and sleeping in perilous conditions. They were putting their lives at risk constantly in order to survive. They reported that when they got to the TLP, they found respite and safety, and they described how it directly led to feeling that they wanted more for their lives.

> A lot of bad things happened to me before [the TLP]—that's why I often say that it's the best thing that ever happened to me. Just wanting more, just wanting more for yourself, just not wanting to go down that same path that your grandmother or your mom went down. I just didn't want to make the same mistakes…. I was homeless for 4 years before I got to [the TLP]. And that goes beyond couch surfing, it was riding on the train, sleeping on the train and in parks. That stuff was really dangerous. (Renee, 25)

Participants reported that the TLP supported their survival most directly by providing safe shelter. However, they were clear that just a bed was not enough to accomplish this outcome. Kennedy was at the TLP when the most significant funding losses for the program over the 10-year period studied occurred. As a result of these cuts, education and recreation services provided by the program were dramatically reduced. Directly before he shared the following thoughts, Kennedy asked if TLPs were funded proportionately to the number of youth residing in the building. When asked why he was curious about that, the following was his response:

> The reason I say it felt like that is because it's like why would the recreation program get cut? I think that education specialist that we had, I think they cut the program and just put it in with somebody else's program. That's how that works. What's the point? This is just a shelter after that. You know what I'm sayin'?…When you cut recreation and you cut education, I think that's part of the reason why I would say okay, yeah, our bodies are just worth money 'cause you're not helpin' us no more. You're just gettin' us off the street. The recreation, education is most important. I think that every shelter should have that. I think that's the most important thing. I think that if we don't have that, then there's no purpose 'cause once we leave there we still gonna be people who don't know a little bit more. It becomes just a regular shelter.

> I had the benefit of bein' there throughout the whole thing. I think it got cut right after I left, but I think the recreation, we need recreation, because without recreation we not gonna know that you can have fun in other ways because when you're a youth you think fun is drugs, you think fun is alcohol, you think fun is gang bangin'. You don't know that fun is goin' out to play sports, fun is goin' to amusement parks, fun is goin' to museums. You don't know that. I think that that's what recreation is for. When you're a youth and homeless, school is not important. You don't go to school. You barely picked up a book. I know people who can't read. You know what I'm sayin'? I think that's something that they should be pushin' in [the TLP]. So why cut those things? It's like you don't care no more. That's just like sayin' okay, we gonna stop giving ya'll food. It's just like that. Or we gonna take the beds out. We can't afford beds. Gotta sleep on the floor. It's just like that. It's just as important. It's those things is what I'm sayin'. Like I said, I don't know what they have. I don't know why they cut there, but I don't think that shoulda' been the things they cut. (Kennedy, 24)

Kennedy's statement of, "you're not helping us anymore, you're just getting us off the street," describes the feelings of a majority of participants who saw the value of the program, and for half of the sample it's direct connection to their safety and survival, as intimately tied to the support they received in areas beyond basic needs. Data collected in response to the third research question guiding this study (How do young people view the usefulness of specific services offered by the TLP?) revealed a consensus by all 32 participants that the supportive services provided by TLPs were the services that made the most significant and lasting impact on their lives. The five most frequently discussed supportive services were recreation, education, employment, health, and life skills training. Without these services, participants expressed that they would likely not have remained in the program and would have returned to high-risk situations.

Permanent Connections: "They're Not Going Anywhere"

While saving their lives was arguably the most poignant outcome participants discussed, the most prevalent was that of permanent connections. Many of the relationships participants built with their peers and staff members during their time in the program have persisted through the years. Of the 32 participants, 30 (94%) currently had regular contact with at least one other peer or staff person they had met at the TLP, and 13 participants (41%) identified their current closest friend as another former resident of the TLP whom they met during their stay.

But I'm glad that it did exist because I would of never met the people that I became friends with, actually family with. I'm still friends with K, M, [and] E. Those are my three best friends. They're not going anywhere. (Aaron, 29)

The bonds built between youth during their time in the TLP proved robust, lasting for most well beyond their exit from the program. When participants experienced future housing and financial instability and no longer had the TLP to return to for support, they turned to one another. They provided one another with not only ongoing emotional support but also a range of instrumental support including but not limited to housing, child care, food, clothing, and financial assistance. Participants believed that their time in the TLP strengthened their network of social support, a network that most described as continuing to play a critical role in their lives today.

It was just hard. But once I got into [the TLP], everything just started looking up. I got to meet new people I'm still in touch with. We were really close: J, K, R, M. I was talking to A for a while at one point. But you know, those were people that were there in the transitional stage of my life. We all are at different points in our lives right now, but no matter what, we just all come together and we just have a good time. It's almost like we're just like one big family … we kind of look out for each other, that little group that was there. We really do. (Melissa, 23)

In addition to the enduring relationships they built with one another, 15 participants (47%) were still in regular contact with a staff member from the TLP. When participants faced difficult circumstances after leaving, they often turned to these staff members for support. Likewise, staff continued to check in with participants in order to help sustain their stability after exit. Chunky Chip describes a period of psychiatric hospitalization following her exit:

[Staff person] came to see me out there. Oh my God. If it wasn't for [staff person], I probably wouldn't have survived in there. She really helped me out with that, and she really helped me out when I'm lookin' for my apartment 'cause she was really pretty much the whole reason why I got my furniture, especially my bedroom stuff. She looked after me, too, while I was in there—yeah. A lot of people looked out for me. Even after I left [the TLP] and she left [the TLP] and everything, she still looked out for me.… It's like even when I had disappeared with the whole [hospital] thing, I called her and told her where I was. She was there in under 30 minutes. (Chunky Chip, 22)

Participants and staff members continued relationships built in the TLP even when the program and organization were no longer present to financially support them. They had built genuine, lasting connections with one another—connections that even a decade later would provide an important source of social support. Of course, this was not true for all participants, and feelings related to program termination in light of the strength of relationships built also surfaced in participant responses. When describing how she would design her own TLP for youth experiencing homelessness, Austin focused on this issue of ensuring that young people remained connected:

I think a lot of times we forget; after they age out, we forget about them. So, like, nobody ever really follows up. I'll say, "Hey Austin, you know it's been about two years. You okay? You need any adult services?" And sometimes the lack of adult services, they don't understand that those homeless adults were homeless kids that just transitioned into a homeless adult. Because after you stop getting the support you kinda lose it … we're not gonna—we're not just gonna completely cut the limb off like you didn't exist. You're part of a body of people. (Austin, 28)

Austin's analogy of leaving the program as reminiscent of cutting off a limb communicates the feeling of loss many participants experienced after leaving. Participants had physically and emotionally become a part of a community; they described that no longer having contact with that community felt unnatural and completely avoidable. When asked what she thought she needed the most from the TLP when she walked up to the front door 6 years earlier, Renee responded:

Somebody who gave a shit. That was the biggest part of it. Even to this day, that's still the one thing. That's why I've stayed so close to [the TLP], because I need to know that somebody cares. It's more the fact that somebody cared and they shared that they cared. (Renee, 25)

The importance of affirmation and social connection to our survival as human beings is well documented in disciplines spanning from anthropology to neuroscience (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). Participants believed that the TLP played an important role in building relationships with others that would provide these critical functions. That, for some, these relationships persisted for years following exit from the program is noteworthy, suggesting the TLP may impact the actual survival of youth well beyond the duration of their stay in the program.

Giving Back: "Pay It Forward"

The third outcome participants directly attributed to their time in the TLP was the desire to now help others facing similar circumstances. Despite varied experiences with stability since leaving the program, they were overwhelmingly grateful for the support they received in the TLP and wanted other young people to have the same assistance.

> People that was working at [the TLP], you know, they saw something; they saw potential and they gave me a chance. And I tell my husband every day that I want to pay it forward because somebody—I was helped, somebody helped me, and I want to pay it forward, and if I ever come across a situation where somebody needs help that I can relate to, I want to pay it forward, I want to help them because I know I would not be where I'm at today if it wasn't for [the TLP]. (Emily, 29)

Every one of the 32 participants had at some point informed another youth of the program and encouraged them to access the services it provided: "I've given people advice about [the TLP]. I tell people all the time about [the TLP].…I would love to help somebody who went through the same thing I went through" (Kennedy, 24). In this way, participants were not only still taking care of their fellow residents after the program, but they were also impacting the lives of strangers. By their account, the 32 participants in this study had directed over 100 youth experiencing homelessness to services as a result of their stay in the TLP. They provided information on how to get in contact with the program and about services provided. They offered motivation by sharing their own personal stories of coping with homelessness and assuaged fears by describing what the experience of the TLP was like. Sometimes, they even paid for a youth's transportation to get there or accompanied them right to the door: "I keep telling them, you get ready to go there, I will go with you" (Diana, 24). Most social service agencies are well aware that word of mouth is an essential strategy when it comes to dissemination of information about available services, and many even track this as part of an analysis of referral source. However, rarely do organizations interpret the desire of participants to bring others into services as an outcome. The findings here suggest that as a result of the TLP, participants are sharing resources and potentially saving countless additional lives.

Personal Development: "Built a Newer Me"

When reflecting on how their lives may or may not have been different if the TLP had not existed, 81% of the participants discussed the role of the program in their journey of personal development.

> I already had built a newer me when I had moved into [the TLP] because that's when I really got the chance to be myself and find myself there. When I went there, it gave me a whole other type of—because it's like okay, I've never been here before. How did I let myself get here? Why did I let this get me here and that I can't really do nothin' about it so I gotta make the best of the situation.… So [the TLP] was pretty much my outlet and it helped me grow as a person a lot really. (Chunky Chip, 22)

Participants described their time in the program as a period of self-discovery and maturing; it was a period when they felt as though they grew up. Given the stage of development that youth are in, this is not surprising. They are biologically programmed to be carrying out this work of figuring out who they are and how they fit into the world. It is an incredibly exciting and, for many, even in the best of circumstances, a simultaneously stressful time of transition. Participants believed that the TLP represented an opportunity to be a support in this developmental process. They described three primary areas in which they felt this occurred: increased capacity for empathy, reevaluation of values and priorities, and movement toward self-actualization.

Empathy. Participants described how the TLP enhanced their ability to understand the struggles of others. Hearing the challenges that their peers in the program had faced put into perspective their own circumstances and fostered greater consideration for others:

> I can sit here and tell you all about my bad situation …, but at the end of the day, I know somebody who knows nowhere at all to stay, who has no friends, who has no kind of job, who's actually wondering who they're going to sleep with just to find somewhere to stay at. (Eshawn, 23)

Values and priorities. Many participants identified that at some point during their stay in the TLP what mattered to them changed. Some no longer wanted to get high or drink as much as before. Some wanted to make new friends whom they saw as "positive" and "going places." Others stopped stealing and selling drugs or decided to start going to school. Sharing his concerns for his younger brother who remained heavily gang-involved, Rupert talked about how things shifted for him during his time at the TLP:

> So when that gangbanging stuff [started], it was funny because we in the same gang.… It's just like, dude, I do not see a future in that stuff. I don't see nothing … I just grew up, man. I was fooling myself. I had like a crazy train of thought. I was feeling myself sometimes. When you're so used to being

out there, man.… He doesn't know. He just living for the moment. That's what it is. He living for the moment.… I can't live for the moment anymore, man. (Rupert, 21)

Self-actualization. The third area of personal development experienced while in the TLP discussed by participants was the concept of self-actualization. Participants considered their stays in the TLP as a period in their life of moving toward the person they knew they could be. They reported they were often physically and emotionally leaving one life behind in exchange for the hope of what they believed they could become. Consequently, participants believed the TLP had a powerful opportunity to provide youth with the support required in this process. Shortly after he discussed his concern for his brother and his own experience of solidifying his values, Rupert shared:

> People don't understand we all have limitless potential. We all have something we could be great at.… I just realized that there's so many aspects of a human being like you never know.… I just want people to realize their potential. You know what I'm saying? There are so many, like I said it took me so long just to figure out that I like making music. I was one of the kids, you know, I always wanted to learn, like when I was in [the TLP], like people thought we was on Facebook all day. I was Googling stuff. I was Googling who's Picasso. Who's Jean-Michel Basquiat? Who is that? You know what I'm saying? I was learning … that's when I learned so much man, in that time. Because I learned so much from the kids in there, from the staff. I learned from everyone. I learned a lot about myself. I developed my passion. (Rupert, 21)

Implications for Practice

The implications of this study are grounded in data collected to examine the fourth research question guiding this study (How do youth perceptions of the impact of the TLP on their lives compare with standard indicators of stability utilized in the field, such as sustained housing, stable employment, educational achievement, and health?). Participants described their time in the TLP as one of the happiest of their lives. They reported that the TLP provided respite from the victimization and uncertainty they had faced before and during homelessness, and they felt as though they were a part of a community—one that provided strength, a range of critical supports, and a place where they felt they finally belonged. Participants described a sense of home and family while in the TLP and believed they grew substantially as a

person as a direct result of their involvement in the program. With that said, the findings of this study as they relate to traditional outcome indicators commonly used to determine success for TLPs pose an important question for those of us concerned about the well-being and futures of youth experiencing homelessness: If young people believe their time in the program was so highly beneficial, why are so many still facing crisis and instability years after leaving? To answer this, two questions must be explored. First, are we missing the mark when it comes to developing outcomes for TLPs that youth themselves perceive as most important to their future? Second, if committed to an ecosystems approach to social work practice, are we failing to acknowledge and address the structural roots of youth homelessness in the United States that may prevent young people from maintaining stability after leaving TLPs?

Defining Success for TLPs

There is an emphasis in the field on preparing youth for independence and self-sufficiency. It is written into the RHYA legislation and, as a result, is a program outcome for TLPs across the country. The results of this study suggest its primacy may warrant reexamination. Young people certainly need to obtain stability. Programs should strive to support youth as they work to acquire the skills necessary to be successful tenants, employees, and students. The findings of this study suggest, however, that stability for youth leaving TLPs may not be achieved through a state of self-sufficiency generally understood as self-reliance, but rather that true self-sufficiency is dependent on strengthening one's community of support. As theories of social support describe, other people provide a range of protective buffering properties in times of stress, including the resources, opportunities, and nurturance required for survival (House, Umberson, & Landis, 1988). A continued focus on self-sufficiency as self-reliance may therefore not be consistent with the experience of most human beings. According to the participants in this study, successful TLPs build lasting connections, encourage personal growth, and develop competencies. As such, it may be the case that useful performance measures for TLPs would not only examine future housing, employment, education, and health stability for young people but also prioritize and value these intermediate outcomes of building relationships, proficiencies, and self. Doing so could allow for the evaluation of the effectiveness of TLP programs that shifts the focus from one of *achieving independence* to one of *strengthening interdependence*, thereby responding to well-established theories of social support as well as what participants in this study articulated to be the enduring benefits of the services received in the program over time.

In addition to developing more holistic performance measures, the findings suggest that we must also acknowledge that determinations of program effectiveness and, therefore, decisions about continued funding may not be accurately measured by solely examining outcomes at exit from a program or for a short period afterward. Several participants experienced traditionally successful exits from the TLP; however, though they left to independent living with stable employment and were enrolled in higher education, they would go on to experience homelessness again years later. Without efforts to improve the ability to track youth over extended periods of time after exit, reports of successful program outcomes based on short-term stability may be inauthentic gauges of the impact of the program on their lives, and likely not sufficient if we are truly committed to ending homelessness for young people for good.

Structural Injustice

Ecosystems theory locates the experiences of participants at the center of intertwining and reciprocal contextual influences such as families, neighborhoods, schools, and structural oppression (Mattaini, 2008). Young people are leaving TLPs to live in a range of complex environments and systems that, for this sample, included record levels of unemployment for youth of color, a national crisis related to a lack of affordable housing, and living in the most racially segregated city in the country—three conditions with well-established connections to limiting housing mobility and, therefore, stability (Arnold, Crowley, Bravve, Brundage, & Biddlecombe, 2014; Fogg, Harrington, & Khatiwada, 2015; Glaeser & Vigdor, 2012). Often, youth who have experienced homelessness must also face these conditions following years of inadequate access to education. High rates of school mobility and absenteeism are common for unstably housed youth and are associated with poorer academic achievement, grade retention, and dropping out of school (Cauce et al., 2000; Edidin et al., 2012; Rafferty, Shinn, & Weitzman, 2004). The connection between obtaining a high school diploma and attaining economic stability in adulthood is well established (Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness, 2011). Individuals without a diploma or high school equivalency are likely to have fewer job opportunities, work fewer hours, and earn lower wages—all conditions that complicate the road out of homelessness as well as increase the probability of return.

Compounding these threats, unlike many of their stably housed peers, youth who have experienced homelessness are often unable to return to family for instrumental support when facing economic instability in the future. According to an analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data by the Pew Research Center, in 2012, 56% of young people ages 18 to 24 and 16% of individuals ages 25 to 31 resided at home with their parents (Fry, 2013). Further, a study conducted by Clark University surveyed a nationally representative sample of 1,006 parents of children ages 18 to 29 and found that 74% continued to provide financial support to their adult children (Arnett & Schwab, 2013). The three most frequently cited reasons for youth homelessness are family conflict, a history of family residential instability, and poverty (Edidin et al., 2012; Moore, 2006; Toro et al., 2007). As a result, many young people who have experienced housing crisis are not able to return home or access financial support from their families after their exit from the TLP for the very same reasons they experienced homelessness in the first place.

Arguably, it is the intention of a TLP to supersede all of these contextual influences to successfully move youth to permanent safety and stability no matter what circumstances they may encounter along the way. As discussed, the participants in this study, 97% identifying as persons of color, believed the support provided by the TLP had a positive impact on their lives, but they would largely go on to experience continued financial and housing instability in the years after leaving. Although the small, nonrandomized sample and study design used in this research preclude any definitive conclusions, the findings suggest that for this particular group of youth, certain conditions such as institutionalized poverty and racism may be too pervasive and too embedded in our country for a TLP to effectively surmount them.

The question becomes: Is it *possible* for a TLP to implement services that can better prepare youth to overcome challenges they encounter in the future as a result of the macro- and chronosystems they are a part of, and if so, what must a TLP do differently? Structural social work theories direct our attention to the dramatically uneven distribution of power in the United States and its role in the creation and sustainment of conditions such as poverty and homelessness (Mullaly, 2007). A structural perspective understands the charge of social work as twofold: first, caring for the victims of oppressive structures, and second, taking action to create the social, economic, and political changes required to eliminate them (Mullaly, 2007). According to the particular sample of youth in this study, TLPs appear to be successful in tackling the first of these; however, if we are to truly end homelessness for young people, we must also address the second and work to change the conditions that led to their situations of homelessness in the first place. With that said, the findings presented here suggest we need TLPs while we complete this work. Participants believed that TLPs serve a critical function by keeping young people safe, supported, and nurtured—a purpose of great value while we continue to work toward comprehensive social change. Further, the results of this study suggest that young people need the relationships

and competencies they build in a TLP to bolster their continued survival after leaving, to keep them going until the social change required finally comes.

Further Suggestions for Change

While some participants referenced the impact of structural oppression on their lives during their interviews, most did not explicitly attribute their continued experiences of poverty and housing instability to external causes. In fact, for participants who had experienced great success during their time in the program, only to return to homelessness and struggle a few short years later, they expressed a feeling of failure and shame.

> Every now and again, I sit back and I think if I could go back, what would I do, you know, what did I do wrong, I retrace myself and think what mistakes did I make? My life has been, you know, I was so young, but those was my happiest days in [the TLP]. I felt great about who I was and what I was doing, and when I lost it, it was like it would never go back to being the same. (Marcus, 28)

Participants were confused by the dissonance experienced when they evaluated their progress while in the TLP against the losses incurred since leaving. They internalized fault and blamed themselves. Like Marcus, they found themselves wondering, "What did I do wrong?" In addition to prioritizing more holistic measures of program success, the findings of this study indicate three other areas where TLPs can make changes to prevent this: enhancing aftercare support, reevaluating professional boundaries, and incorporating structural social work practice.

Enhancing aftercare support. Required standards for aftercare for U.S. Department of Health and Human Services–funded TLPs can be satisfied by simply indicating that the program provided a youth exiting the TLP referrals to other assistance and/or offered exit counseling before they left (National Clearinghouse on Youth and Families, 2006). This is insufficient. Young people coping with poverty move in and out of situations of subsequent homelessness and crisis and need ongoing support. While they may not be able to reenter housing, youth should be able to return to the TLP for emotional, appraisal, informational, and, to the extent feasible, instrumental assistance no matter how long it has been since they left. TLPs must not only be encouraged to offer more substantial aftercare support but also provided the financial means to meaningfully do so. Further, TLPs should develop a formal process for regular follow-up with all participants for as long as it is possible to reach them. Programs could send annual birthday cards via email, and set a schedule to call or email twice a year to check in, see if youth need any ad-

ditional support, and most importantly remind young people they remain a valuable member of the community. Also, in the age of social media, staying connected with youth is easier than ever before (Rice & Barman-Adhikari, 2014). Programs can create a Facebook page and/or Twitter account operated by the TLP for participants only. This would allow the program to maintain a presence in the lives of young people in a way that is easily accessible, not time-intensive, and effective even when addresses and phone numbers of youth change.

Reevaluating professional boundaries. While professional boundaries should remain an area of practice determined solely by each individual social worker and their organization (and, of course, the *Code of Ethics* [*of the National Association of Social Workers*]), the findings suggest it may be useful to reevaluate some of the generally accepted practices in this area. For example, relationships with staff members after leaving the program proved to be an important source of social support for participants in this study. Many organizations do not allow staff members to share private contact information with those they work with and/or to continue their relationship after program exit. When youth form relationships with staff that are so meaningful that they are described as family members, such a policy feels prohibitive and unnatural. Paul Farmer (2013), a physician and global humanitarian, called for a change in how we understand the work of supporting others from that of providing *aid* to rather providing *accompaniment*. Our work must be more than that of providing temporary assistance. We must find ways to truly accompany young people as they move through life after leaving the TLP—to continue to walk beside them for as long as they need us.

Incorporating structural social work practice. Staff working in TLPs can reduce stigma and feelings of personal failure by helping young people understand the links between their housing instability and oppression by societal structures. Further, they can provide the tools youth need to effectively respond. Workers can accomplish this by providing information to young people about structural oppression and their rights; encouraging youth to question unjust policies and practices; coaching youth to defend themselves against victimizing systems, places, and people; connecting youth to others who are experiencing similar struggles; partnering with youth to provide resources and support when they choose to take action; and sharing power with youth with regard to decisions being made both in their work together and in the TLP and the organization as a whole (Hick, Peters, Corner, & London, 2010). Additionally, agencies can support movement toward greater social change by providing staff working in TLPs with information, time, and opportunities to join existing advocacy groups in their work to promote policies that

protect the rights of young people facing poverty and housing crisis.

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APPENDIX. *Q & A With Special Issue Authors About the Grand Challenge of Ending Homelessness*

AASWSW has identified ending homelessness as a "grand challenge" for social work (http://aaswsw.org/grand-challenges-initiative). Briefly, how does your research contribute to meeting this challenge?

The findings of this study suggest that we must look beyond standard outcome indicators that solely measure short-term stability after program exit if we are truly interested in supporting services that will end homelessness for good. Instead, we must make a greater effort to better understand what is happening over time for individuals in the years after they leave services, as well as prioritize the perspectives of those served by programs as to what outcomes they believe are most important.

How would you use your findings to improve the practice of social workers and others at the front line of meeting the needs of those who experience homelessness or housing instability?

The findings indicate that young people would benefit from enhanced supports and continued relationships after the period of program housing ends. Social workers can follow-up more frequently with youth after leaving programs to (a) see if they need continued assistance and (b) remind them that they are part of a community that will be there to support them should they face challenges in the future. Workers can also add elements of structural social work practice to address systemic harms that often prevent individuals from maintaining housing stability long term. This could include: providing information to young people about structural oppression and their rights; encouraging youth to question unjust policies and practices; coaching them to defend themselves against victimizing systems, places, and people; connecting youth to others who are experiencing similar struggles; partnering with youth to provide resources and support when they choose to take action; and sharing power with youth with regard to decisions being made both in their work together as well as in the housing program and the organization as a whole.

How would you use your findings to improve the administration of a social service program for serving the needs of those who experience homelessness?

The findings of this study offer guidance for administration on the development and implementation of meaningful tracking of impact. Foremost, the voices of those being served by programs should guide the evaluation process. Also, agency leadership can work to secure additional funding for aftercare services as well as support structural approaches to social work practice within their organizations.

What would be the advocacy or policy point(s) that can be inferred from your work and used to support additional services for homeless populations?

If we are to truly end homelessness for young people, we must work to change the conditions that led to their situations of homelessness in the first place. Young people of color disproportionately experience poverty and youth homelessness. They have higher rates of unemployment and are victimized by structures in this country that perpetuate racism. The majority of youth in this study grew up in neighborhoods characterized by substandard housing, underresourced schools, gang violence, and scarce opportunities. These are all issues where policy change is indicated.

Agencies can support movement toward greater social change by providing staff working in TLPs with information, time, and opportunities to join existing advocacy groups in their work to promote policies that protect the rights of young people facing poverty and housing crisis.

If you were teaching social work students, what is a key point or points that you would want them to know about serving the homeless population described in this article?

The two key points to consider are: (a) The perspectives of whomever you are serving as to the usefulness of services must always lead the way in practice and policy decisions, not just be included. Without this we may be missing what is most beneficial and in what ways, as well as what else remains to be done. (b) The "work" of social work must be about providing care for those who have been harmed by existing social structures and simultaneously working to change those structures if we are to eradicate systems of oppression for good.