Homelessness on College Campuses: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This qualitative study sought to examine the lives of homeless college students in the United States. We recruited nine participants from college campuses throughout the United States and conducted in-person, email, phone or Skype interviews using a semi-structured protocol. Preliminary findings have revealed several common themes to the experience of homelessness that we explore in our discussion section.

Homelessness on College Campuses: A Qualitative Method

Homelessness has been a prominent political and social issue on the national stage for many decades. However, homelessness is not limited to the person on the street holding up a brown sign as you hurry past to your favorite lunch spot. The homeless person may also be attending your university, seated in the row just behind you in economics class. She may be the girl in the dorm room right next to you who has nowhere to go during the summer or Christmas breaks when classes are not in session. The homeless college student is a subgroup of the homeless population that is quite invisible on campuses nationwide and is generally not known about by the greater public. Over 58,000 students surprisingly identified themselves as homeless on the Free Application for Federal Student AID (FAFSA) during the 2012-2013 academic year (Ringer, 2015, p. 103). The FAFSA adopted its definition of homelessness from the McKinney-Vento Act, which asserts that an individual may be considered homeless if, outside of college, they can affirm that they share housing with others due to economic adversity or loss of past housing, that they live in hotels, campgrounds or trailer parks, that they currently reside in transitional or emergency shelters, or that they have been living in abandoned buildings, parks, cars or other spaces not designed for sleeping. Each of the 58,000 individuals who marked one’s status as homeless on the FAFSA confirmed that he or she fit into one of the categories; thus, the individual, according to the McKinney-Vento Act, lacked a “fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence” (The Washington State Education of Homeless Children and Youth Office, para. 2).

A significant amount of research has been conducted on homelessness, most of which is accounted for by quantitative studies that report data regarding the rates of homelessness, perceptions of homelessness, and the demographic makeup of homeless populations. However, while there is a plethora of research on homelessness in adult males, adult females, single mothers, families, veterans, and youths, there are fewer than a handful of studies that examine the problems faced by homeless youths after their high school years. 58,000 homeless youths pursue higher education soon after graduating high school; this statistic is also most likely underrepresented since it is possible that many homeless students do not report themselves as homeless on the FAFSA because of the stigma attached to homelessness and the lengthy paperwork process it involves. Additionally, many young people may not realize that they are indeed homeless according to the criteria for homelessness established by the federal government; others may view their situation as temporary, and therefore decide not to identify themselves as homeless on the FAFSA application. Nevertheless, the fact that there are 58,000 *reported* homeless college students nationwide suggests that this problem deserves greater attention in research.

While the problem of homelessness among college students has not been studied much by academics, a number of newspapers and magazines have begun to report more frequently on the phenomenon and have brought to public attention the stories of a few homeless students. For example, an article in the *Huffington Post* introduces Sean McLean, who commutes two hours each way to his university from a shelter. Having to work a part-time maintenance job while ensuring that he returns back to the shelter before the 10pm curfew, McLean reports that he lacks time to study, socialize, and be a part of club events. While newspaper articles, such as this one, reveal to us how a homeless college student’s situation may differ from the typical college student, they do not illuminate much about what the experience of being a homeless college student is really like.

Even in the minimal sources of academic research on homeless college students, the focus of the research tends not to explore the experiences of homeless college students themselves. For example, an academic study by Ringer (2015) approaches college homelessness by analyzing how failed macro policies may have led to the prevalence of homelessness in college students. In another study, Paden (2012) proposes several policy-oriented solutions that she thinks may help universities better support homeless college students, while, additionally, briefly addressing potential forces that give rise to or sustain homelessness among college youths. However, a dissertation of particular importance to our study by Quinton D. Geis (2015) provides an approach to college homelessness that examines the academic and social experiences, as well as the needs of this unique group of students. It employs as method a qualitative design.

Four themes that emerged from Geis’s (2015) qualitative study of college homelessness are particularly noteworthy. The first was that homeless college students tend to hide their identity from their universities and peers. The second illustrates that homeless college students report having little support, and that their support groups rarely include people from their universities. Third, Geis found that the living situations of homeless college students vary greatly, suggesting that students who experience homelessness come from diverse backgrounds. Lastly, the homeless college students who participated in Geis’s study embodied a sense of determination and were overall hopeful that their education would bring them a more positive life and future. Geis’s research has inspired the current project, which seeks to better understand the *experience* associated with being a homeless college student, as well as the strategies or attitudes that sustain homeless college students through the challenges associated with their college years.

Homeless college students are an invisible population not only because they often live “double lives” in trying to balance being a student with managing their homeless identity, but also because there are so few policies in place to recognize these students both as individuals or as a group with a unique set of needs. While the number of homeless students pursuing higher education is rapidly increasing, colleges and universities are not required to keep record of students who either enter the school homeless or who become homeless during their enrollment (Ringer, 2015, p. 103). The lack of information not only limits contact between administration and homeless college students, it also makes it difficult to track the increasing prevalence, and makes it impossible to address individual needs. Miller (2011) found that feelings of “social isolation, rejection, and withdrawal” were present in students who had experienced homelessness for a prolonged period of time. In addition, Miller (2011) found that among homeless youth, there was relatively little social support as well as high rates of mobility among students, making it difficult to develop meaningful relationships and engage in their communities (2011, p. 324). Although these results pertain particularly to the general population of students who are homeless youth, it is highly likely that many of these experiences and feelings exist among homeless college students as well. The National Center for Homeless Education (2015) also asserts various factors such as poor nutrition, financial instability, lack of a mentor, and poor living conditions make it hard on homeless college students to remain enrolled in higher education.

The present study sought to investigate the experiences of homeless college students. We were interested in better understanding this population and wished to learn more about some of the factors that motivate their persistence as they pursue an education in a college or university setting. In addition, we wanted to hear about some of the goals these students have, what unique stresses may be present in their lives, what their relationships with their peers, professors, and families are like, and how they balance their academic responsibilities alongside other important priorities.

Since there is so little research on this topic, we decided to approach our study without proposing any specific hypotheses or expectations about what we would find. The questions that we posed to our volunteer subjects were informed by previous literature but were kept vague so as to allow for anything that was meaningful to the participant to arise. As Ringer argues (2015, p. 104), “in the interests of social justice, and decreasing disparities in education and income, the needs of this population should be addressed.” Through this effort we hope to create a strong foundation for future research and to awaken greater interest in aiding and understanding the special needs, concerns, and capacities of this unique population of young adults.

**Method**

In the course of our study, we reached out to nine individuals who *are* currently or *were* at some point homeless during college. Four of our participants were female and five were male. Our questions were aimed at extracting information particular to the *experience of what it is like to be a homeless college student*. Our interview questions were intentionally open-ended, as we wanted the participants to lead us through what they thought was most important to share (for a full list of interview questions, please refer to appendix 1). For example, one of the questions that we asked was, “How did homelessness impact your college application process?” Each participant chose to answer the questions in their own way. While some devoted a lot of time responding to certain questions, others chose to focus on others. Because we wanted our participants to lead the conversation, the interviewer tailored the questions to fit the flow of the interview. As a result, each interview was uniquely tailored to each individual so that they could share what was most prominent about their experience.

After the open-ended interview questions were constructed, we began to look for participants. Most of our participants were contacted through social media sites such as Facebook. Many of our participants’ names appeared in the newspaper articles that we read in order to construct our literature review. We plugged these individuals’ names into Facebook and contacted them by messaging them. In our messages, we introduced ourselves, told them about the purpose of the study, and invited them to respond if they were interested in participating. In addition, we also posted flyers around a small, well-established liberal arts college in the northeast of the United States. In our flyers, we asked any interested homeless (or previously homeless) college students to set up an anonymous email account in order to contact us if they were interested in participating in order to keep anonymity. We had one participant who responded to our fliers. The research team contacted this student and set up an in-person interview.

Once recruited, all of the participants signed an electronic informed consent form (in order to maintain anonymity), stating that they understood the purpose of the study and were consenting to let us use their stories in our research report. Once they completed this form, they were contacted in order to set up an interview date. One of our participants, in choosing the in-person interview, consented to giving up their anonymity to the researchers.

The interviews were conducted primarily over the phone, though one participant was interviewed in person, another was interviewed over Google Hangouts, and another over Skype. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed. From the transcriptions, we were able to observe several themes and experiences that we found were especially important to our participants. These themes will be discussed at length later on, but first, it is important to get to know each of the participants. Please note that pseudonyms are used to refer to all of our participants except for Aris Nance, Grace Conyers and Gregory Brandt, who wished that we would use their real names (they are marked below with an asterisk).

Eric is a young African American male from Florida who became homeless at the beginning of his freshman year of college due to not being able to afford housing. Eric usually slept on the streets and in the school practice room. Eric is still currently in college, and after transferring, is no longer without housing. He devotes most of his time to playing the piano and hopes to pursue a career in music.

Amy is a Hispanic female from Florida who was homeless for most of her adolescent years, although she did not recognize herself as homeless at first. Amy usually stayed with distant relatives during college breaks and during the summertime. She is currently a senior at a university in Massachusetts and is pursuing a B.A. in Business Administration. She is deeply involved in public policy and advocacy work. She is especially passionate about social justice issues.

Katie is a 23-year old Caucasian female who graduated college in May of 2015. \ Katie was able to stay in the dorms during the academic semesters, but had to spend more than one school break outside. Katie attended a small Catholic college in Michigan and graduated with a B.A. in Sociology, as well as a B.A. in Community Leadership. She is currently working full-time for a homeless youth organization.

Sarah is a 21-year old Hispanic female from Pennsylvania. She has been in and out of homeless shelters and foster care since age 12. Sarah stayed with coworkers and friends temporarily while she was homeless. Sarah has a license in cosmetology, but always wanted to work in the criminal justice field. She currently attends college with a major in Forensic Sociology.

\*Aris Nance is a 24-year old, African American male from North Carolina. Growing up with a single mother, he lived in and out of homeless shelters as a child. At age eight, he was placed into foster care, moving from state to state when he switched homes. Aris became homeless again when he ran away from his foster home at age 15. He attended 14 different high schools and 10 different colleges. Throughout most of college, Aris remained homeless, where he stayed on the streets and in shelters during school breaks and the summertime. He currently studies computer programming at a college in Seattle.

\*Grace Conyers is a 36-year-old Caucasian female who moved from England to the United States when she was 17 years old. She achieved two undergraduate degrees, one in Anthropology and one in Archeology, and went on to receive her master’s degree in Geochemistry. Grace became homeless during her senior year of college when her four roommates decided to withdraw from a lease, and she was unable to pay the lease alone. Grace was inflicted with cancer while she was homeless and lived in one of her professor’s laboratories at school. She now owns her own company that helps others develop their own research ideas.

Matthew is a 21-year old, Caucasian male who was taken custody from his parents at young age. He became homeless when he left his guardians’ home at age 16 due to the abusive household. After spending three years in a small college in Pennsylvania, he decided to withdraw. He is currently the manager at a regional office of a non-profit organization.

\*Gregory Brandt is a 35-year old Caucasian male who received his undergraduate degree in Journalism from an institution in Austin, Texas. He entered into homelessness when his father disowned him around the age of sixteen. Gregory has since written two memoirs on his homelessness experience, and currently works as a janitor at a homeless shelter in Hawaii.

Alex is a 21-year-old male in his senior year of undergraduate studies at a small college in Pennsylvania. Alex is an international student from Southeastern Europe who was sexually abused in his childhood and decided to bring the case to court during his sophomore year in college. At the time of the investigation, his parents publicly disowned him. He lost all support from his family, friends, police officers and lawyers, who were part of his hometown. His case was the first same-sex case to appear in court in his homeland, and he won. Alex is currently pursuing a double major in physics and business, with a minor in math. He owns an online perfumery with some friends from his home country and is applying to graduate school in hopes of becoming a consultant or owning a financial services company.

**Discussion**

What we found was that homelessness on college campuses is very much a personal phenomenon. There is no one experience that encompasses the challenges and concerns faced by all of our participants. Each of them experiences or has experienced homelessness in a different way. They all have different backgrounds, varying degrees and sources of support, endure different struggles, maintain different levels of motivation, and they also each carry a particular attitude toward their homeless situation. The following results illustrate some of the themes we saw in our participants’ experiences, each of which convey just how personally the phenomenon of homelessness is experienced by young people on college campuses.

**Entering Into Homelessness**

While many of our participants entered into homelessness at different stages in their lives, many of them came from broken homes. Mathew, for example, shared that he was the “*son of a heroin addict and a drunk*.” He was taken from his parents’ custody, and was placed with another family who was abusive towards him. Matthew became homeless at age sixteen due to this abusive atmosphere. Gregory, too, came from an abusive and neglectful home. He also had to deal with the trauma of his mother killing herself at a young age. Aris, a 24-year-old male, who has attended a number of colleges in pursuit of stability and a degree, lived in homeless shelters as a child with his mother and siblings until he was entered into the foster care system at eight years old. After that, he was shuffled around in-between foster homes and group homes, and decided to run away at age fifteen. This is when he first experienced homelessness on his own. Sarah, too, a 21 year old female, also first experienced homelessness at the age of twelve due to the abuse she was suffering from her mother and stepfather. She slept over at homeless shelters, with uncaring relatives, and was also entered into the foster system, within which she endured additional physical abuse. Throughout high school, she also experienced high mobility, as she spent many nights “couch-surfing” with friends and coworkers, living in homeless shelters, or briefly spending time with relatives. Amy, too, a current fourth-year student in college, did not even realize that she fit the criteria set by the U.S. government for a homeless person since she often stayed with friends and extended family. Additionally, one of our participants, Eric, who is currently enrolled in college, knew that going to college would mean that he would become homeless because he could not afford housing. While all the reasons for becoming homeless differed in detail among our subjects, many of them were, at some point, in the foster system, had parents or relatives that were abusive or neglectful, or their families were also homeless.

**Everyday Hardships and Obstacles Experienced by Homeless College Students**

As Katie, a recent graduate, states, “*getting into college is the easy part. Staying in college is the trick.*” For Katie and most of our other participants, being unable to meet even basic needs was a tremendous hardship during college. Katie reported, “*I cannot tell you how many nights I went to bed just being hungry.*” She shared that she always had to choose between the basic necessities. She would ask herself, “*do you get toothpaste or do you get deodorant?*” Adding that she “*always would get toothpaste*.” For Eric, homelessness was something new that he encountered when he went to college. Being unable to afford housing, he slept outside his freshman year. At one point, he was approached by a group that said they could offer him protection, but this group made him feel unsafe so he chose instead to risk sleeping inside the music building under the piano. Eventually his professor discovered him and took him in. Gregory also lacked a stable living situation during college. He notes that he and his “*brother were doing day-to-day labor and we were living in a car at Walmart and I was just going to school and I didn’t have much hope for or anything.*” Katie, too, although she lived in the dorms during her academic semesters, spent Christmas break of her freshman year living outside a building on her campus since her college’s dorms did not stay open. Later in her college years, she successfully campaigned for the college to shame this policy. During a particular Christmas break, she had to get surgery on her knee. She noted that “*Liz, my physical therapist, would wash it out because she was so worried that with my staying outside that it was going to get infected, that it was going to get frostbite, that it would impede on the healing process*.” Katie said that this was one of her most trying feats during college. For Aris, even getting in a weekly shower was difficult:

“*I took a shower like maybe once a week...I need to steal my food...When I was starving, I just got creative...I'll go to a bar and I'll use my appearance...I'll get in there and I'll tell them I'm bouncing for the night...Like maybe work the door or I'll just go, “hey can I get a burger man.” If I got really desperate, I'll go to like a Red Lobster and I'll just sit there. I won't leave. Even if they close at 10 o’clock, I would just sit there. Cause I was like where am I gonna go.*” -Aris

However, access to housing, food, and hygiene were not the only things that homeless students struggled with. Loneliness, depression, anxiety, and trauma from their past were also significantly present in many of their lives. In addition, the atmosphere of college further enforced the feeling of isolation for the majority of our participants. Sarah told us that “*being in college and being homeless can be uniquely difficult*,” Sometimes she felt that she was all alone and that no one could relate to what she was going through. Grace, who is currently enrolled in college, confessed, “*right now I feel hopeless and I want to kill myself*.” Aris, too, admits to struggling with depression since he was young, stating that it is something he has received medication for throughout the years.

Although depression, loneliness, anxiety, and trauma are pathologies that many college students encounter, these factors place a unique burden upon homeless students since they must struggle with a multitude of additional problems associated with securing their basic needs. The struggle to secure necessities makes it difficult for them to focus on their academic work. Even though some may have been able to stay in the dorms during the academic term, this did not diminish the severe anxiety and stress they felt as a consequence of not knowing what they were going to do over breaks. Additionally, the closer the semester moved toward breaks, the closer finals were as well. This meant that most of these students had to deal with academic stress on top of trying to figure out where they were going to stay during the winter or summer. Katie reports that just having her basic needs met “*would be momentous*,” it would “*make the difference between [her] being able to study Craigslist, and [her] being able to study for [her] finals*.”

**Taking on Homelessness without Adequate Support**

When asked about what forms of support were available to them at college, most of our participants’ expressed that they lacked financial support, social support, and administrative support. Eric stated that it “*seemed like people didn’t care about you if you’re homeless. They just always assumed the worst...that I was just there to get free money or something. It made me feel really upset about it.*” Eric, as well as most of our other participants, felt that the lack of support he was experiencing was connected to his being homeless. Aris expanded on this: “*you can never connect with your peers seriously, cannot connect with anybody...Because they don't understand. They can't communicate with that and so it's hard to find that support group.*” Because no one understood what Aris was going through, it was extremely difficult for him to relate to others. Jane said that being homeless made her feel depressed, like a “*rotten human being because I was feeding off other people.*” Jane was very conscious of how her situation was viewed by others. Katie, too, felt that her homelessness was a barrier to connecting with other people. She reported that when she was “*networking*” or “*meeting with people,*” she would “*try to shift the focus*” if her homelessness ever tried to “*crawl into the picture*.” Being connected socially meant trying to detach one’s self from the homeless identity. Because the stress of being homeless was something that our participants were constantly struggling with, having time to truly connect to peers was very difficult.

The little social support that they received usually came from one mentor. For Jane, this mentor was her advisor. He recognized the difficult time Jane was having between academics, her job, and the fact that the shelter she stayed at had a strict schedule. As an alternative, she shared, “*He let me stay in the lab…he had a couch in there that I had found somewhere….I had worked for this man forever; I loved working for him…We had found a couch and we put it in the lab as kind of a place to have, like, relaxing time and we had a microwave and a fish tank.*” Katie too, reports that her professor, Dr. Kate, played a big role in her life during college. She states, “*she had me stay with her a few times, she helped me out with school, when I had questions, she had the answers*.”

However, when it comes to having social connections beyond one or two mentors, our participants reported that they felt that connecting with professors and peers was rather difficult since no one was able to understand them in their situation. Many of our participants stated that they did not think telling people about their situation would yield anything but pity and stigma.

As for support felt from the administration, most of our participants all agreed that there was a serious lack of both administrative policies to aid them with their particular experience of homelessness, as well as a lack of support from those in administrative positions who were responsible for the well-being of students. Angela stated that the administration “*didn’t really take me serious...I often felt that ultimately I was left to fend for myself, and the administrators on campus that are responsible to keep me safe and enrolled in school weren’t necessarily willing to go that extra mile to make sure that I was able to acquire permanent housing while on semester break*.” Angela reported that she felt extremely alone in trying to meet even her basic needs, which she felt were the responsibility of the administration whose job it was to make sure that needs such as housing were met. Katie, too, said that, “*there were people that I knew that really didn't have much of an interest in helping out, or would say things that were rather insensitive. And there were other members of administration that I knew in my heart of hearts wanted to do something, wanted to help, but their hands were completely tied*.”

Lacking financial support was also extremely difficult to deal with. Like many students in college with either subsistence-level personal or family incomes, paying for classes, meal plans, and housing meant taking on a lot of college loans. Aris noted that he was not even aware that any grants were available to him when he applied for college. He wanted to go to college to prove to others that he could make it, but he was not aware of the FAFSA until after he had been enrolled for quite awhile when his girlfriend told him about it. He states, “*I wasn't getting any sort of grants...My ex- girlfriend told me about financial aid. She helped me apply for grants. And I'm like what- they give away free money? What the hell is a grant, like how does this even work?*” Most of our participants, also were working at least one job. Matthew held two. Aris held three. He shares, “*I got a job working in the college center and I worked at Starbucks, and I also worked at Buckle in the mall, you know, which is why I failed two classes.*” Grace shared that the many jobs that she held as well as managing her other needs really impacted her sleep. “*I didn’t sleep,*” she said.

**Invisibility and Stigma**

Because of the stigma associated with homelessness, most of our participants chose to hide their situation from their peers and professors as much as possible. Matthew noted that he has only told “*very few people that are close to me.*” Alex, too, said that he only told one friend that he was homeless. He also said that a lot of the people around him thought he was arrogant, but they really just did not know his story. This led Alex to feel isolated; he stopped talking to a lot of the people around him. Sarah stated, “*I just feel like I have to remove the label of ‘homeless’ off of myself, and I have to tell myself that I’m a normal girl.*” For Sarah, being labeled as ‘homeless’ carried a lot of stigma, stigma that kept her from being able to feel like a “normal” college student. Additionally, Amy, Eric, and Aris all felt that it was nobody’s business that they were homeless. Amy told us that being homeless “was often humiliating”:

“*I had to let professors know that the reason why I’m coming into class a week later than the semester begins is because this was the only flight that I could afford to get back to Boston, due to the fact that I had no place to stay during the semester break and I had to go back to Florida. Or you know I didn’t really get a good night’s sleep last night, I worked all night, or I worked all evening, worked on homework and I slept through the alarm*.”

Because of all that she had to deal with, Amy describes homelessness as being “*detrimental*” to her academic work. Eric, too, did not feel the desire to tell others about his situation. He noted that everyone already has their own problems to deal with. However, he eventually told his music professor that he was homeless after he was discovered sleeping under the piano in the music room. His professor took him in, and this became a major turning point for Eric.

**Themes Related to Blame and Responsibility**

As researchers, we were also curious about our participants’ attitudes towards their homeless situation. Did they blame others? Did they feel that homelessness could somehow be viewed as positive? While our participants often said that they felt that their experience with homelessness made them stronger and more aware of homelessness as a societal problem, only one of them communicated that they felt positive towards it. Katie states that “*homelessness is never positive.*” “*Being homeless itself is a traumatic experience,*” she said. However, Matthew noted that he embraces his struggle and journey with homelessness. He said, “*I think there were a lot of negative effects, but I embrace it because it's who I am. And specifically in my position at least, it makes me very special that I was able to kind of navigate it persistently, and even though I struggled and I fell many times, I kind of worked my way through it.*” He added, “*I am, of course, I am so proud of myself.*”

While our participants had different attitudes towards their homeless situation, they also attributed the responsibility of their homelessness to a variety of forces. Aris noted that he blamed his family for his being homeless. But he put the responsibility to get out of homelessness on himself. Amy said that she blamed the administration at her school for their lack of support and motivation to help her. She felt that they could have done a lot if they wanted to. Sarah said that “*even though being homeless is negative within itself, there is a positive outcome from it.*” She said that once she was able to escape the toxicity of her “*mother and her boyfriend….[she] realized how much happier [she] became.*” She could “*finally be [herself] without wondering what they would do to punish [her] for [her] actions*.”

**Motivation and Resilience Factors**

Amidst their adversity, the motivations that our participants reported having during college were threefold. Some felt that they did not have the option to drop out of college, some had particular hobbies and activities that they felt kept them going, and others felt very strongly about overcoming their homelessness and rejecting the stigma of homelessness by finishing college. In addition, we also had one participant who decided not to finish college. He left his institution his Junior year.

Katie falls into the first group of motivations. While she was driven by her passion for homeless youth, she knew that if she gave up on college she would lose the little stability she had. She states, “*I think there is always, like, a sense of not having another option...you know? Okay, so I could quit...what's next? What do I do in the morning? I can't keep my dorm, then if I quit school, I can’t really keep my job because that is on campus...yes, I could give up, but I didn't really have a give up...There was no give up.”* Similarly, Amy states that she felt she “*had no other option but to graduate, [she] didn’t allow [herself] to have any other option but to graduate*.” Gregory shared that being in college was “*first time in my life I considered giving up on something,*” yet he still pulled through.

However, Eric and Alex, both current college students at different institutions, reported that their motivations came from their passions and hobbies. For Eric, who is a pianist hoping to pursue a master’s degree in music, it was his ability to play the piano that motivated him to continue through college. It was something that he “*looked forward to everyday….It was a huge dream of [his] to keep that part of [himself] alive.*” Alex, stayed motivated by keeping himself busy. He did sports such as running and swimming to help him “stop thinking about all [his] problems.” Performing sports allowed him to “keep [his] breath and [his] head out of the water.” If he stayed busy, he would not have to think about his homeless identity.

Lastly, there also was the theme among our participants that was expressed by the rejecting of the homeless identity. Aris states, “*In order to just stay simply happy in my life, I can't be homeless because it doesn't agree with who I am*.” Aris was greatly motivated with the desire to prove others wrong. When he applied for college, he told his friends, and they laughed at him. Getting through college, for Aris, who is currently enrolled, means not only proving all of his friends wrong, but it means proving the stigma of homelessness wrong, and attaining happiness. Grace, too, felt the desire to overcome the stigma of homelessness. She tells us of a time in which she was crying outside of a coffee shop. The owner saw her and invited her in. She told him that she wanted to kill herself, and he challenged her to change the world instead. His belief that she could is what created a turning point for her. She describes it as “a little bit of a push to keep going.”

Not all of our participants were motivated to stay in college. Matthew stated, “*I was always wondering if all of this is going to amount to something, you know, ‘cause there would come a day when I would graduate and I really didn't know what I was going to do at that point.*” For Matthew, college did not provide the direction he needed. He notes that while he was in college he “*couldn’t completely focus on it...because, you know, all of the time, [his] actual life needs were in the forefront of [his] mind*.” Matthew stated that he dropped out of college because he “*just didn’t have anything” and he thought that “school was something [he] could finish on [his] own time*.”

**What do they want us to know?**

The last question that we asked our participants in their interviews was what they wanted us to know that we had not already asked them. Almost all of them had something else to say. While there were various responses, many of them felt that it was most important to share that college is worthwhile, yet there are not enough resources available to homeless students on college campuses. Aris noted that in looking for a college, it really came down to a search for resources that he was never able to find. He states, “*I tried to do so much research but they don't have certain things that need answered. And then when I call these schools...I have to explain my cake and my situation in order to get a customized solution that nobody has a solution to, a life that nobody knew existed. You know, and I'm like, it's just hard. It's hard to feel comfortable in class when you're homeless. And people know about it and then people are talking.*” Aris said that the resources he needs to succeed at college are simply not available to him. As a result of this, he feels uncomfortable and isolated because of his unique circumstance, and his inability to mend it on his own. He argues that “*at college, there needs to be more programs for homeless students. You know...they say, oh we don't have homeless people. Yeah, you do. You have one right here. What are you gonna do about it?*”

Matthew shared that just having someone “*in some office, you know, who consolidates a group of these students...to bring them together*” would be very helpful. Instead of “*doing that whole orientation*” freshman year, Matthew felt that he would have really benefited from a group of students being brought together who shared his situation, under the leadership of “*a person like a dean...who understood the situation and whose aim was to help place and solidify their space in college*.” Matthew adds that this “*probably would have changed [his] trajectory while [he] was there*,” and perhaps he would not have felt that he had to drop out.

Alex wanted to encourage other homeless individuals speak up. He said that although this will be hard to do, “*afterward it’s going to be a lot easier*.” Eric, too, shared this feeling: “*the biggest thing that will help is being able to talk about it. I want people to know you don’t have to be by yourselves. If I had been able to trust people, maybe I wouldn’t have gone through that as long as I did.”* Eric would have changed the fact that he chose to remain invisible and go through his homelessness alone. Perhaps if he would have told someone about his situation, they could have helped.

Sarah and Katie both shared the sentiment that being homeless in college allowed them to be able to put themselves into other homeless people’s shoes. Because of their situation, they became passionate about homelessness as a greater social phenomenon. Katie said that, “it gave me something to care deeply about. It gave me something to be passionate about. And something that I could easily understand.”

Amy argued that, “*if there is a time, more than ever, it is now to raise the awareness that this isn’t going to go away.*” “*Turning a blind eye*” or “*creating a food pantry*” is not going to solve the problem of there being homeless students on college campuses. College is worthwhile, she expresses, and it is a “*valuable resource.*” Not having the programs or resources in place for these individuals to succeed with their peers “*is an injustice*,” she states, “*and it often strips individuals of their dignity, which is severely detrimental to mental stability as well as their overall well-being*.”

**What happens next?**

This paper lays out the experiences of hardship, inadequate support, blame, invisibility, stigma, motivation and resilience of nine homeless college students living in different regions of the United States. However, what would be the purpose of expanding our knowledge of this problem if no further actions were taken to improve the lives of those who find themselves homeless and in college? What we hoped to awaken through this research was a desire to help. Having awakened such a desire, we would like to close by outlining a range of actions that might be of benefit to students who find themselves homeless in one of America’s college or universities.

**Professors**

Professors have the advantage of interacting with students on issues related to their academics. While not always the case, our research revealed that students who experience recurring difficulties with grades, hygiene, and sleep may be struggling with issues related to poverty and academic difficulty. A professor may also encounter a student who speaks directly of his or her problem with homelessness. In such cases a professor may act as an advocate to the administration on the student’s behalf. Of course, when such actions are taken, respect for the student’s trust and confidentiality will be important. In the role of a mentor, professors can provide guidance about how the student might best negotiate building a life and a career that will provide a way out of their situation. Professors can help to ensure that the student stays on track by providing the kind of flexibility that reflects the special circumstances that are associated with homelessness. These conditions often center around having access to textbooks, laboratory materials, and the special support that is commonly needed by homeless students as exams approach and the time for school breaks draws near.

**Peers**

Before communities in which homeless college students feel safe and welcomed can be established, it is important to recognize first the painful shame and negative stigma that is often attached to homelessness. The desire of homeless college students to remain invisible is often due to the fear of being judged by their peers. It is necessary to recognize that homelessness is not linked to a specific personality trait or population; indeed, anyone can be vulnerable to homelessness should the right combination of circumstances obtain. It is also important to realize that homeless college students want to be treated as their peers are treated, and generally do not want their identities confined to the narrow sphere of homelessness. Peers may be especially powerful as advocates who encourage greater administration support, donate meals from their meal plans, or offer homeless college students a place to stay – perhaps in their own college apartments – during breaks.

**Administration**

Administrators can often make the most impactful changes regarding the experience of homeless college students. A great way to start changing how homelessness exists on college campuses is to identify and keep track of the number of homeless college students enrolled at your institution. By keeping data on the problem, college officials can trace of the prominence of homelessness on the campus. Administrators can then craft a plan that can assist homeless college students. Such a plan might include connecting homeless college students together so that they can provide social support for each other, provide homeless college students with the kind of counseling support that may be especially helpful given the range of stressors with which they must contend. Administrators are also in a position to familiarize homeless students with the range of financial aid options that may be available; may be able to solicit support for homeless college students from wealthy alumni; may be able to start a pantry program that will provide food during break periods or in other situations of acute need; may create special funds that enable homeless college students to travel to places where they might be able to stay during breaks; may be able to insure that housing options remain affordable and perhaps even open during breaks; may host workshops that teach students about the different skills they need to succeed without family support in college.

**Researchers**

We hope that researchers will consider further study in this important area. Any contribution that scholars can make to what is known about the problem of homelessness among college students would be valuable. Of particular value would be prospective studies that examine dropout rates or mental health concerns among homeless college students. Qualitative and quantitative studies involving larger samples of homeless college students would also be of great benefit.

**Homeless college students**

We hope that homeless college students will consider sharing their experience with peers, researchers and with the wider community through vehicles such as blogs. We also hope that homeless college students will consider reaching out to trustworthy advisors or professors in order to tell them about their situation. We feel that one of the keys to change is heightened awareness. The stories of homeless college students are powerful; continuing to share them, we believe, can lead to the effect of great change.

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Apendix 1: **Script for Student Interview**

Hello/ Hi (name of participant). I’m (name of researcher). How are you today? (Small talk if appropriate to make interviewee comfortable)

I’m really glad that you agreed to participate in our study. As you know, our study is about homelessness on college campuses. Just to tell you a little bit about myself, I am currently a senior psychology student at Franklin and Marshall College in Pennsylvania. (Insert appropriate details about yourself and your studies. This is used to establish a relationship with interviewee.)

The main reason why I want to do this study is because I am very interested in the stories and experiences that homeless college students like you have to tell. It’s really surprising that homeless college students are essentially an invisible population on campus that many people don’t know about, and there is minimal studies being done on this subject. Thank you for agreeing to participate because you are really important to our study. Our findings will be based off of your experience and what you choose to tell us. That being said, all of your information will remain private and confidential. Nothing you say will linked to you in any way. You will remain anonymous and be referred to as a pseudonym. Through this study, I hope to raise awareness about homeless college students and encourage policies and support systems that may help them in the future.

This will be a recorded interview, but please don’t feel any pressure and just treat it like an informal conversation. Do you have any questions or concerns? Great.

(Interviewers will make the interview as natural and conversation-like as possible.)

1. Basic demographic information
2. Why don’t you tell me about yourself and what your homeless situation is/was like?
3. How did you become homeless?
4. Is/was there anything about being homeless/knowing that you would become homeless that led you to apply to college?
   1. *(Or if participant became homeless during college)* How was homelessness affected by your college choice or your decision to attend college?
5. How did homelessness impact your college application process?
   1. *(Or if participant became homeless during college)* How did becoming homeless affect your decision to stay in college?
6. How has being homeless impacted your experience at college?
   * 1. Academics
     2. Relationship with peers, professors, and administrators
     3. Everyday life
     4. Balancing priorities
7. Are/were there any stressors in your life unique to you being homeless while in college?
8. What are your plans for after you graduate and how have they been impacted by homelessness?
   1. *(Or if participant has already graduated)* How is what you are doing now/where you are today impacted by your experience of homelessness? Can you talk more about your present situation and future goals?
9. In what light do you view your homelessness and it being a part of your college experience?
10. How does/did being homeless in college affect expectations and hopes for a normal college experience? How does/did being homeless in affected your perceived value of college?
11. Is there anything you want to share from your experience of homelessness that I haven’t asked about? Is there anything about homelessness you feel passionate about that you wish to discuss further?
12. How could the administration make it easier for you as a homeless college student?
13. Specific instance of difficult time? Specific instance of when you felt prideful/proud about being homeless bc of something you accomplished?