Beyond a Bed: Supportive Connections Forged Between Youth Who Are Couch Hopping and Adult Hosts

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Abstract
"Couch hopping" is generally considered a form of housing instability. Prior research has highlighted the discomfort and, sometimes, dangers associated with couch hopping in late adolescence or young adulthood. However, we postulated that in some cases youth may develop positive longer-term housing arrangements with adults drawn from their existing network. Through in-depth interviews with a diverse group of nine youth (17–23 years) dealing with housing instability and ten adult hosts in rural, suburban and urban areas of a Midwestern state, we sought to explore how youth found adults to stay with, what kind of support they received, as well as the character of the hosting relationships. To our knowledge, this is the first study to interview hosts. Findings suggest that informal hosting arrangements can include support beyond provision of basic housing needs, that hosts sometimes play a social service role, and that youth and hosts often develop family-like ties. Also, youth do not typically initiate: more often peers or other third parties facilitate the arrangement, or the host issues an invitation. These findings challenge the existing narrative of couch hopping as uniformly negative, and suggest that expanding services for youth facing homelessness to support informal hosting arrangements may be warranted.

Keywords Couch hopping · Couch surfing · Host homes · Youth homelessness · Natural supports · Family strengthening

Housing instability and homelessness among youth has become a population-level crisis. Recent estimates hold that approximately 1 in 10 young adults (ages 18–25) and 1 in 30 adolescents (ages 13–17) in the United States experience some form of homelessness within a 12-month period (Morton, Dworsky, & Samuels, 2017). Gaps in services for youth coping with housing instability make the experience of homelessness even more challenging (McLoughlin, 2013; Washington State Department of Commerce, 2017), especially in rural areas (Curry, Samuels, Cerven, & Dworsky, 2019).

"Couch hopping," also referred to as "couch surfing," has been defined as "moving from one temporary living arrangement to another, without a secure 'place to be'" (McLouglin, 2013, p. 521) and is generally considered to be a form of housing instability. Population prevalence estimates available for young adults ages 18–25 in the US indicate that 5.2% had experienced couch hopping within the prior year (Morton et al., 2018). Until recently, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), did not consider people who were couch hopping or doubled up as "homeless," limiting eligibility for services (Graham, 2008). However, since 2009 youth who are couch hopping are considered homeless if they lack a lease or occupancy agreement, are likely to continue being unstably housed, and would be

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considered homeless under other federal definitions (see Curry et al., 2017).

The existing literature tends to take a "social services centric" approach to understanding the needs and experiences of youth facing homelessness. For example, studies have explored why youth may not even consider formal services when they first face housing instability, finding that they may not identify as homeless (Winetrobe, Rhoades, Rice, Milburn, & Petering, 2017; Hickler & Auerswald, 2009). Additionally, youth may see formal housing options such as shelters or transitional housing programs as too restrictive, unsafe, or inadequate in meeting their need for connectedness and social support (Ryan & Thompson, 2013; Samuels, Cerven, Curry, & Robinson, 2018).

There is a very small body of literature that uses a strengths-based frame and takes the youth's perspective when asking why youth facing homelessness choose to stay where they do. Some work does suggest that at times, youth stay with supportive individuals with whom they are comfortable and find some level of stability (Curry et al., 2019). Based on research in Australia, McLoughlin found that while couch hopping can exemplify youth flexibility and resourcefulness, youth have also expressed challenges feeling comfortable or "at home" in couch hopping arrangements. Some youth, however, were able to develop positive relationships and receive support from the people hosting them (McLoughlin, 2013; Perez & Romo, 2011). To our knowledge, no research has yet sought the perspective of the "couch owners" or "informal hosts" in these arrangements.

One increasingly popular approach to addressing youth homelessness involves formalizing a relationship between a youth and a host through the host home model. While programs vary significantly across contexts, a host home generally involves a youth staying in the home of a supportive adult, with external support for the arrangement provided by a social service agency. Support can include drafting housing agreements, stipends for the host and/or youth, case management and other services (Washington State Department of Commerce, 2017). In most cases, programs recruit and train volunteers from the community who are "matched" with youth whom they don't know beforehand (Point Source Youth, 2019). Given the difficulty in recruiting adults willing to invite a traumatized youth into their home, along with the understandable hesitation of some youth to live with complete strangers, some host home programs have pivoted to also or exclusively supporting youth to stay with an adult who is already part of their existing support network (Julianelle, 2009; White, 2017). While research on host home models is not yet available (Morton, Kugley, Epstein, & Farrell, 2019), White (2017) has proposed best practices for host homes that apply to both stranger-match or informal hosting arrangements: upholding youth agency (such as allowing youth to choose among prospective hosts);

recognizing the importance of shared identity; upholding a supportive community; external support for youth and hosts; and developing shared expectations for the hosting arrangement.

Research on youth-initiated mentoring programs has established that many youth can identify positive adults in their natural social networks. For example, the National Guard ChalleNGe program, the second largest mentoring program in the country which serves 16- to 18-year-olds who have dropped out of school and are unemployed, asks participants to nominate mentors from their own networks. Research has shown that most of the youth were quickly able to identify a supportive adult for the program: As noted by Spencer et al. (2016), "The ease with which the participants in this study identified and enlisted the support of supportive adults suggests that the availability of positive role models in their communities may pose less of a barrier for high-risk youth than the potential lack of knowledge, skills, internal motivation, or confidence to seek out such adults" (p. 16). In other words, existing research supports approaching disconnected youth with the assumption that they do indeed have caring adults in their sphere.

Despite common perceptions that youth facing homelessness have an especially limited community safety net, many—even a majority—of such youth do have important and supportive non-parental adults in their lives, also referred to as "natural mentors" (Dang & Miller, 2013). In a survey of youth at a drop-in center for youth facing homelessness in California, 73% identified a natural mentoring relationship, a rate similar to reports of natural mentoring in general youth populations (Dang, Conger, Breslau, & Miller, 2014; DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). Among the youth at the drop-in center, 80% considered their mentor to be "like a parent," and 88% considered their mentor a role model (Dang et al., 2014). Dang and colleagues (2014) also found that after controlling for measures of peer and parental connectedness, youth at the drop-in center who had a natural mentoring relationship described higher levels of satisfaction with social support and fewer risky sexual behaviors. This is consistent with the large body of literature which has found that having a natural mentoring relationship is tied to favorable outcomes for youth (Van Dam et al., 2018). Studies involving African American adolescents, in particular, have also suggested that natural mentoring relationships can have positive effects on youth resiliency and mental health (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010).

Additionally, positive adult connections in themselves can be an important source of support. Many youth facing homelessness have experienced family-based discrimination, stigma, and loss, which may shape their desire and need for natural mentors or other non-related adult connections. Nearly half of youth facing homelessness in a recent study reported suffering stigma or discrimination from family

members (Samuels, Cerven, Curry, Robinson, & Patel, 2019). This experience was particularly common among youth who identified as transgender, lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer or asexual, or multiracial. Further, many youth facing homelessness come from home experiences characterized by significant loss. More than one third of the 215 youth in the same study reported the death of at least one caregiver or parent, most commonly due to murder or drug overdose (Samuels et al., 2019). Youth coping with housing instability, therefore, are often in need of support from caring adults, and often find these adults through their natural networks.

Research Questions

The goal of the current study is to explore whether and how using informal social connections for housing may involve deep and supportive relationships that support well-being beyond a place to stay. Our analysis explored the research question "How do youth and hosts describe their experience in these arrangements?" We also posed two sub-questions: "To what extent are hosts providing support to youth beyond a place to stay?" And "How do youth and hosts describe the quality of their relationship?"

Methodology

This study utilized exploratory phenomenological methodology, which seeks to explore the "essence or essences to shared experience" (Patton, 2015, pp. 116–117). We conducted in-depth interviews and surveys in a Midwestern state with nine youth staying in informal hosting arrangements and ten adults who were hosting a young person informally. The Institutional Review Board of (university name redacted for review) approved procedures for original data collection; transcripts were de-identified. Participants received $20 cash to compensate them for their time.

Sampling and Recruitment

Youth were recruited at four drop-in centers for youth dealing with housing instability in urban, suburban, and rural areas of the state. One was contacted at a food bank in the same region. Flyers were posted at these locations, and staff also referred potential participants. Youth were eligible to participate if they had stayed in an informal hosting arrangement/couch hopping situation for at least 3 weeks for which there was no external support (e.g., from a formal host home program). They were only eligible if the adult host was at least 10 years older than them and did not have a romantic or sexual relationship with the youth. The criteria were designed to screen for potentially more stable arrangements.

Ultimately, ten youth participated in the study; one was excluded from analysis because he had only been staying with his host for a week.

Inclusion criteria for hosts were parallel. While the original host-recruitment strategy was to ask the youth we recruited to introduce us to their hosts, we found the youth were reluctant to do so. While we were able to recruit three hosts from our drop-in center connections (two had sought help from a drop-in and one was a volunteer), all three were White middle-class women. To recruit a more diverse set of hosts, we posted flyers and asked for staff referrals from two food banks, a GED program, and an African-American community outreach group. We also reached out through a personal connection to an employee of a tribal nation. Ultimately, we interviewed 11 hosts but did not analyze data from one interview as the host was less than ten years older than the youth. We were able to interview two youth/host pairs. Even if a couple was hosting or there were other members in the household, we only interviewed one host. And in one case where a host was providing support for four youth (two young couples), we only interviewed one youth.

Data Collection and Analysis

Surveys and Interviews

Written assent (for youth under 18) and written consent (for all participants 18 and over) was obtained before data collection began. First, all participants completed a survey regarding their demographic characteristics, parenting status, educational attainment, and questions about their family's educational background, reason the youth left home (participants could select all that applied from a list), and demographic characteristics of either their host or the young person they were hosting. Participants also engaged in a semi-structured interview. Guiding questions in the interview protocol were developed by three researchers, including one who had participated in a formal host home program as a youth facing homelessness and one who had participated as a host. Topics included: the beginning of the hosting arrangement, commonalities and daily routine, supports received by youth from the host and external sources, supports received by the host, expectations of the arrangement and agreements about the arrangement (i.e., do they have a shared agreement about house rules?), and expectations for the stability and length of the arrangement and relationship with their host in the future. These questions were based on formative research regarding best practices in formal and informal host homes developed by (organization redacted for review).

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The analysis process was informed by Moustakas' process of phenomenological inquiry (Patton, 2002). Three

researchers, including two people with experience as hosts of youth facing homelessness, worked collaboratively to develop an initial codebook using inductive line-by-line open coding, based on four transcripts from both youth and hosts. This same team discussed in-depth and refined the list of open codes, and then finalized the codebook using two additional transcripts. After the final codebook was developed, three researchers coded the 19 transcripts with the assistance of NVivo 11 Pro qualitative software for data management. To ensure qualitative rigor and trust-worthiness, each of these stages involved audit trails and team phone calls approximately once every two weeks to ensure consistency and agreement in coding. The lead researcher also reviewed all coding. After coding was complete, a team of five researchers met weekly by phone to develop descriptive themes, and ultimately analytical themes that reflected the essence of participants' experiences in informal hosting arrangements. For the present study, we primarily analyzed codes related to youth and hosts' descriptions of the quality of their relationship, how the arrangement began, and the supports provided within the arrangement. An extensive audit trail and investigator triangulation were used to increase rigor (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Study Sample

Table 1, below, includes the demographic characteristics of youth and hosts who participated in the study. The average age of youth was 19.7 (range 17–23). One-third of youth identified their race/ethnicity as White (n=3), as Black/African American (n=3), or noted multiple racial/ethnic identities (n=3). Five youth identified as female, three as male, and one identified as gender non-conforming. Six youth identified as heterosexual, two identified as bisexual and one identified as pansexual. While most youth (n=6) were not parents themselves, two young men had a child; neither currently lived with their child, though one saw his daughter often and the other was moving to a different state to reunite with the mother and their newborn. A third youth, who had placed a child in an open adoption and still maintained contact, was also currently pregnant. Among hosts, the average age was 48.4 (range 34–62), with an average of 27.2 years older than the youth who was currently or recently stayed in their home. Half of the hosts identified as White (n=5), three identified as Black/African American, one identified as American Indian, and one indicated multiple racial/ethnic identities. Most hosts were female (n=8) and two were male. Nine identified as heterosexual and one as bisexual.

Table 1 Sample characteristics of youth and hosts

	Youth (n=9)		Hosts (n=10)	
	n	Mean (%)	n	Mean (%)
Age (in years)	9	19.7	10	48.4
Race/ethnicity				
White	3	33%	5	50%
Black/African American	3	33%	3	30%
Latinx	0	0%	0	0%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0	0%	1	10%
Asian	0	0%	0	0%
Multiracial	3	33%	1	10%
Gender identity				
Female	5	55%	8	80%
Male	3	33%	2	20%
Transgender/Genderqueer/Nonconforming	1	11%	0	0%
Sexual orientation				
Heterosexual	6	66%	9	90%
Bisexual	2	22%	1	10%
Gay/lesbian	0	0%	0	0%
Other sexual orientation	1	11%	0	0%
Parent/pregnancy status				
Not a parent	6	66%	0	0%
Parent, and child(ren) in their care/in home	0	0%	8	80%
Parent, and child(ren) not in their care/in home	3	33%	2	20%
Currently pregnant	1	11%	0	0%

Findings

Overview

Below, we discuss our findings regarding what kinds of support the hosts provide, and the quality of relationships between youth and hosts. We discuss an emerging understanding of the ways in which (1) These arrangements can include support beyond basic needs, including playing a social service role and meeting deeper relational needs, and (2) Youth and hosts can develop family-like ties. All names used are pseudonyms.

Hosting Can Include Support Beyond Basic Needs

Although these housing arrangements by definition consist of shared space, the supports that hosts and youth described went far beyond lending a couch, bed or room. Hosts also provided practical resources such as food and transportation, as well as supports that might conventionally be part of the formal social services system, such as assistance finding a job or chemical dependency treatment. How these resources were shared became a vehicle for meeting some of the youths' more intangible needs, like the need for privacy, safety, and dignity. Support expressed through words or gestures, communicating care and encouragement, also emerged as central to the hosting relationship. Below, we describe some examples and explore how young people and hosts make meaning of their relationships.

"Basic Needs" in the Context of Informal Hosting

Barb, a host in her 40s, described how over time, it became clear that the young person staying with her, Renee, aged 18, was going to be living with them for longer than originally anticipated. In response, she and her husband made the decision to put up an extra wall in their large laundry room so that Renee could have some privacy. Barb commented,

> "You know, like everybody kinda needs their own room at that age and that we had room to make it. … And my friend was moving at the time so she had a futon for a bed and we got a dresser out of our storage in back and bought her some fun lights and kinda made her own little area that she loves."

Barb recognized that more than just needing shelter, Renee needed some space over which she felt ownership. Creating that separate room was both an expression of Barb's investment in Renee—literally building her into their home—and a recognition of the real need for comfort and safety as part of one's housing. The efforts she made to make Renee "her own little area that she loves" with fun lights symbolizes stability and belonging, which extends well beyond the basic need for shelter.

Other hosts and youth talked about food as an important form of support, with both practical and symbolic meanings. Helen, a host in her 50s, described cooking and serving food as more than just feeding a hungry mouth. Helen's cousin asked her to take in a young man who had been homeless—and eating out of a dumpster. Her cousin, who met the youth when he was hospitalized, brought him to Helen's house. Helen initially agreed to a short-term situation, and explained that on the first night,

> "The way he was eating…shoveling [the food] into his mouth…I was like, 'Baby, it's OK. Take your time… it's going to be there. We got more and you're welcome to it.' So the second night I did steak, rice, and corn. I'll never forget it, and he doesn't eat steak. I said, 'You know, I thought I was gonna cook my way into your heart because the first thing you do for a man, a young man, is cook him steak, salad, baked potato…stuff like that, that straight to their heart.'"

Even though the young man was a stranger to Helen, within two nights she was already making efforts to make him feel welcome in her home by cooking something she hoped he would enjoy. She also expresses here that the youth had needs that were different from what she had expected, requiring time for her to get to know.

This resonates with the experience of Misty, an 18-year-old woman who was staying in the home of her boyfriend's mom. Misty said,

> "She fed me. …She [host] would bring food back after work…and she'd say like 'Hey, do you want some food?' And I'd say like, 'yes.' I'd be shy to say yes but she offered me food. …She'd even cook food like that I've never tried, and I'd eat it."

Misty's three-word sentence, "She fed me," succinctly summarizes the experience of receiving food within the context of a relationship. Misty's quote goes on to show her shifting from a place of uncertainty to a place of exploration and confidence. She was "shy to say yes" but by the time of the interview she was actively moving out of her comfort zone. Her decision to try new foods may also have been an expression of trust in the host.

Helen described eating as a communal household activity, to which the youth was able to contribute by bringing Helen a favorite treat:

> "We all eat together on Sunday. We basically eat together all the time. But if he's at work, you know, he brings me home fish sandwiches, you know. I love fish from McDonald's."

Here, Helen highlights mutuality in her relationship with the young man she is hosting. When he isn't able to sit down for dinner with the family, he brings her food as a way that he can reciprocate and show care.

Hosts Can Play a Social Service Role

Hosts also sometimes served in roles similar to that of staff at a social service agency. Some hosts helped youth get connected to healthcare, fill out needed paperwork, get a bus card, or make referrals to formal service providers. In some cases, hosts had some familiarity with social services through their own training or personal experiences, which helped them fill that role.

Denice, a White woman in her 40s, had been hosting her best friend's son, who was Native American. At a certain point in their arrangement, she realized he needed help for his substance use. She described connecting him to a nearby tribal center:

> Denice: "That's where he's going through for his Rule 25 [an assessment needed to access public funding for chemical dependency treatment] and to get into treatment and for his healthcare."
> Interviewer: "Did he…and when did he first connect with them? Do you know? Was that when he was staying with you?"
> Denice: "Yes, when he was staying with me…I know about it because I've worked in the field. And one of my majors was Native American resources and community…So I knew it was there. His mom knew it was there but since she wasn't stable at the time, I kind of got him…I got him the phone number and got him the information about how to get hooked up with them."

In this situation, Denice's training and work experience enabled her to support the youth she was hosting in the ways he needed, even though she didn't share his cultural background. Denice not only knew about Rule 25 assessments, she knew where the youth could access culturally specific services.

Another host helped a youth navigate a complex set of bureaucratic obstacles. An international adoptee, Renee had been brought to the United States when she was 2 years old. Unfortunately, her adoptive parents had not filed the appropriate paperwork for her to receive US citizenship. Barb, her host, not only provided Renee "her own little area that she loves," but also helped Renee navigate the difficult issues surrounding her immigration status. Renee, who we also interviewed, commented,

> "She [host] helps a lot with immigration stuff, like she contacted every school I've ever been to and gotten proof that I've been here since I was two. And, so,

she knows like everything, and she's helped a lot. She probably knows more about the legal stuff than I do."

Another host, Jason, a man in his 60s, also described helping the young people who were staying with him. He said,

> "I've taken all three of them to Social Security, sat with them, helped them fill out the paperwork, helped them get all that squared away. I've… helped them get a primary care doctor."

All three of these hosts were able to help the youth in ways that resembled staff at a social service agency, from advocacy to service navigation.

Meeting Deeper Relational Needs

Shelter in these hosting arrangements meant more to hosts and youth than just meeting basic needs or helping navigate services—it became a way for hosts to demonstrate care. For some a sense of comfort developed almost immediately; more often, hosts described a process of recognizing the needs of youth and giving them space when necessary. As Beverly, a woman in her 40s who was hosting her daughter's best friend, pointed out, the developmental phase of life that the youth are in poses its own challenges:

> "[It's] such a tender time in their life where they need so much, and they're, um, trying to fit in, and they're trying to be unique, and they're trying to figure out the rest of their life, and they're trying to survive, and they need so much love."

But supporting a youth who had been grappling with housing instability through this tender developmental time was further complicated by the attendant trauma of homelessness. Hosts recognized that some youth who had experienced trauma needed time to feel comfortable, which could involve some extra handholding. For example, Barb was able to sit in on meetings with the homeless liaison at Renee's high school. Barb described her role as another pair of eyes and ears as necessary given the functional effects of trauma that Renee was clearly suffering:

> "Just so that I could help her 'cause she was just glazed eyed…she was so lost for a while…you know, she couldn't comprehend anything."

From a youth's perspective, 23-year-old Henry described his hosting experience as an immediate reprieve from trauma. He contrasted his first night with his host with his prior experience of homelessness:

> "We [he and his host] just hung out, you know. We had real fun. It was the first time that I was having fun, you know, not being on the street being

depressed, feeling like my life was over with, felt like the streets was going to sweep me up under, you know what I'm saying. It, it felt good though. It was fun, I had fun, and it still is."

For a youth who had not known where he would sleep from one night to the next, hanging out with his host offered refuge from feelings of isolation and despair. Something as seemingly simple as having fun took on a deeper meaning.

For some youth, the sense of safety, stability, and comfort they felt while with their hosts was a new experience. Annie, aged 22, said about her arrangement, "[If] I wanted to cry, I'd cry or if I was hungry, I'd eat. You know, it just felt safe, and it was something I never really had before." Monica, a 17-year-old youth who had been hosted by her friend's father for the previous two years, described the emotional needs that her host fills:

"I can talk about anything all day with him [host]. And I don't know why…he's always willing to listen and give some really good advice, but we'll talk, we'll all talk."

Shared religious or ethnic identities, and activities that strengthen or affirm them, were another common cornerstone of the relationships between hosts and youth. For example, Geralyn, a disabled African-American woman in her mid-30s who had been hosting her biological nephew for the previous nine months, discussed the support she provided her nephew in exploring African spiritual beliefs. She said,

"It's definitely an important connection because we have to learn…first un-learn what we were taught, learn our true religions and cultures and things like that and then be able to pass it down to the youth. So he is that next generation, you know what I'm saying?"

Julia, a Native American woman in her 50s who had been informally hosting young people on her reservation for years, described providing identity-based and spiritual support to an acquaintance of her son who had recently stayed with her. This young man was struggling with substance abuse, and Julia helped him reconnect with his Native identity and find belonging in cultural activities. She said,

"Well we actually attend the powwows and…it's very important because that's learning to do things. …And one time I said, 'Let's go up by the river and pick shells'…We got lost together. And um, it was just really healing. I mean, they [youth and his friend] must have picked two bags of shells that they thought were like diamonds to them."

Though they were not from the same tribe, their shared Native identity created the opportunity for this moment of learning, healing, and doing.

Regardless of their background, youth and hosts both described the youth's sense of feeling welcomed, cared for, and included as critical to the quality of the hosting relationship. As Beverly summarized,

"to me a home is a place where you've got…you are loved and where you've got guidance and where you've got rules and where there are consequences and where you learn things and where you laugh…meeting the basic needs is one thing, but getting the emotional, mental, spiritual and just life guidance that you need… the support that you need is to me a different level of stuff that to me happens best in a home."

Here, Beverly makes the case for a deeper understanding of what "home" needs to encompass for a youth facing homelessness, which extends beyond a "basic needs" conception of housing.

Familial Ties in Hosting Arrangements

Prior to the hosting arrangement, the relationships between youth and hosts ranged from biological family members (Geralyn and her nephew), to pre-existing chosen family (e.g., Wade, who hosted his best friend's son and already saw him as a nephew), to strangers or acquaintances prior to hosting (e.g., Jason, who met the youth he hosted at a sobriety church). Tables 2 and 3 below describe the initial relationship between hosts and youth, and how the relationship evolved.

As shown in Table 2, the most common way that youth met their hosts was through a third party (such as the host's own child) (n = 6). Further, the most common person to initiate the hosting arrangement was not the youth or the host, but the third party (n = 5). In Table 3, we see that the same proportion of hosts met the youth staying with them through a third party (n = 5) as had either known the youth for a long time prior to the arrangement (n = 4) or were family (n = 1). We also see that hosts most commonly named a third party as initiating the arrangement (n = 5), followed by themselves (n = 2) or a combination of themselves with the youth (n = 2). Just one host identified the youth as having made the ask.

Most relationships before the informal hosting arrangement began were neither biological family nor characterized as "chosen kin"/ "chosen family" (i.e., "persons perceived to be family, but who are not related by blood or law"; Braithwaite et al., 2010, p. 390). Given that, it is notable that for most hosts (n = 8) and youth (n = 7) the relationship developed over time into "chosen family," employing familial language (as shown in the last column of Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2 Youths' perspectives on their relationship with their host

Pseudonym	How youth met host	Who initiated arrangement	Relationship during hosting arrangement
Annie	Third-party connection: Met host through former boyfriend	Youth: "I was kinda serious, like, 'I'm actually trying to hint to you that I do need a place to go, I do want to move in.' And so I think it took her a while to see that."	Annie described "a home away from home," saying, "I think the big thing was, like—I get goose bumps just thinking about it—including me in family, like, I had a family."
Andre	Long-term connection: "She's like a best friend of my mom. And we grew up with her, I grew up with her my whole life basically."	Youth: Andre asked if there was any room at the house, and host stated, "I won't lock the doors on you."	Andre used familial language, referring to host as "Auntie K."
Chika	Long-term connection: Host is best friend's aunt	Host: According to Chika, her host said, "I have two extra bedrooms in my house and you're very, very welcome to come at any time." Chika didn't move in right away, then asked if it was still ok	Chika referred to host as "Auntie."
Kalisha	Third-party connection: Kalisha is friends with host's son	Third party: Host's son	Kalisha said, "Um, I would say roommate."
Henry	Social-service connection: Host interned at drop-in center	Host: According to Henry, his host said, "You know, bro, you ain't got to stay out here, bro. You come to my crib."	Henry described host as a "good friend."
Misty	Third-party connection: Host is boyfriend's mother	Third-party connection: Boyfriend asked his mom	Misty used familial language, saying, "I had a sister and a boyfriend who's like a best friend, a dog, a mom—you know."
Monica	Third-party connection: Host is friend's father	Host and Third-party connection: "I don't know if it's because [friend] asked them or because of what he'd [the host] seen…"	Monica said, "The relationship I have with him is one I've always wanted with my parents but I still don't have with them."
Renee	Third-party connection: Host is mother of a classmate	Third-party connection: Classmate asked mom if Renee could stay	Renee said that the relationship is like family, saying, "It's not where you come from. It's where you belong. That's kind of like what I feel."
Robin	Third-party connection: Other youth who lived in the home	Third-party connection: Robin asked other youth in the home if they could talk to the host, which they did	Robin called host "Papa" throughout the interview
Winston	Family: Host is cousin's grandma	Third-party connection: Cousin talked to his grandma	Winston described his relationship with the host as "more like roommates."

Table 3 Hosts' perspectives on their relationship with the youth they hosted

Pseudonym	How host met youth	Who initiated arrangement	Relationship during hosting arrangement
Barb	Third-party connection: Youth is daughter's classmate	Third-party connection: Host's daughter	Barb referred to the youth as her "bonus daughter."
Beverly	Long-term connection: Youth has been the best friend of the host's daughter since kindergarten	Host and Youth: "A sleepover turned into a longer sleepover…."	Beverly referred to the youth as her "bonus daughter."
Caryn	Third-party connection: Youth is in a romantic relationship with the host's daughter	Third-party connection: Host's daughter	Caryn introduced the youth as her daughter's "partner," but Caryn also sometimes felt like "a stranger in my own house" because of the distance between them
Denice	Long-term connection: Youth is the son of Denice's best friend	Host: "I found out he didn't have a stable place to live. I told him, 'You can come and stay with me.'"	Denice said the youth is "like a son to me."
Geralyn	Family: Youth is Geralyn's nephew, who she helped raise	Host and Youth: "I think I talked him into coming back to [Midwestern state]…and I believe I offer it but then there's been times where…he'll call me and say, 'Is it cool if I come stay with you? Can, uh, you know, sleep on your couch?'"	Geralyn said about her nephew, "He's still like my responsibility…. That's like one of my kids, you know what I'm saying?"
Helen	Third-party connection: Helen's cousin met the youth when he was hospitalized	Third-party connection: Cousin brought the youth to Helen's house and asked if she would put him up	Helen said the youth "calls me 'mom.'"
Kyla	Long-term connection: Kyla met the youth while they were in addiction treatment together	Youth: "She had got into a big blow out with her parents and so she asked me if she could stay just for a couple of weeks 'til she got on her feet."	Kyla said that she and the youth were friends, until conflict led to a falling out and the arrangement ended. Kyla took out a restraining order on the youth
Jason	Third party connection: Jason was helping four youth (two couples), who he met through his recovery church. He met Robin, the youth we interviewed, through the other youth	Third-party connection: Other youth staying with Jason asked Jason if Robin could stay	Jason said about the youth in his home, "They call me 'Papa.'"
Julia	Third party connection: The host's son met the youth at the skate park	Third-party connection: Julia's son brought the youth home	Julia described the youth by saying, "[We] still have very good relationship. I think we're the only real family he has ever had."
Wade	Long-term connection: The youth grew up calling Wade "uncle" as the youth's dad, who was now in prison, was Wade's close friend	Host: Wade ran into youth at the mall, found out he was "drifting," and invited youth to stay. Youth did not immediately come, but later called and took Wade up on the offer	Wade described the youth as his "nephew."

Two hosts, for example, described their youth as "bonus" daughters. For some youth, that meant being treated like family and included in the kinds of activities they associate with family life. For example, Annie said she felt welcomed early on:

"I guess one of the things was that they took me into family activities really fast. I started to meet their cousins and sisters and brothers and aunts, and everything, and it was just like, I was barely there for, I don't know, like a couple months, and all of a sudden I'm like in the family, and they're like, asking me if I wanted to do things, and they were like including me right away. And so I think the big thing was, like—I get goose bumps just thinking about it—including me in family, like, I had a family. I felt they just welcomed me with open arms."

Some hosts and youth even outwardly named their relationship as family. Even hosts and youth who did not know each other well before the arrangement talked about using familial language or descriptors. Helen met the young person staying with her through her cousin, but they were strangers when he first stayed with her. She said that their relationship had evolved over the six months she had been hosting him,

"So I think he told me the other day. He was like…he calls me 'Mom'… strange, isn't it?… 'Excuse me if you're not…you know, I can call you mom…' 'Ooh, I'm comfortable with it if you are and I see you do it.'"

Barb recognized the weight of taking on the title of "mom," and what that might mean for Renee in the context of her relationship with her adoptive family:

"[She] wanted to call me Mom right away…and I said, 'You need to graduate first'… It's a little weird…um, it's getting so much easier…'cause at first it was kinda like 'What?'…you know…but she's been there for a while now, and it is more of a mom role."

Here Barb is describing the changing dynamic of her relationship to Renee, which eventually shifted into "more of a mom role." Use of familial language by youth and hosts can signal relationships evolving past an urgent need to obtain shelter toward relational connection and comfort.

When talking about emotional supports in the hosting relationship, whether in response to stress or trauma or transitions, family and chosen family often came up as well. For some, families of origin were a source of stress. Wade, a man in his 40s who was hosting his best friend's son (who he saw as a nephew), had hoped that the young man might be able to move into his own place soon. But because of the approaching holiday season, he knew that being in a new housing situation and spending time without family would have been difficult. He said about this,

"I'm thinking, I'm trying to prepare him to maybe try and have his place or some kind of motivation to move on at least by the holidays for Christmas and stuff like that. But at the same time, hopefully by the beginning of the New Year. Because he won't have family around so I think I'll keep him around until after Christmas and then it's time for you to move on."

Here we see Wade compromising on his timeline, so the young person would be able to stay with him through the holiday. As a self-identified chosen family member, he saw it as his responsibility to fill that need for belonging and companionship during a time of year when it can be challenging to be alone. This passage alludes to a pattern found across other interviews where hosts and youth compare the relationship to a surrogate parental relationship, sometimes also referring to the unavailability or unreliable support the youth experienced in their family of origin. For example, Julia described that she was likely filling a role that had been absent in the young person's life:

Julia: "I think we're the only real family he has ever had."
Interview: "Uh-huh. Okay. And when you say 'real family,' what, what does that look like? What does that mean to you when you say that?"
Julia: "He got to have holidays…to know that he had somewhere to go."

Some youth made the distinction that they still had their parents or original caregivers in their lives, but that the relationship that they had with their host felt more safe, reliable or comfortable. For example, Annie said,

"I guess I never had stability... I felt like I had to love my parents. I mean, there was always that feeling that they're your mom and dad, that you have to. But I felt a different way [about my host]: I felt safe and comfortable."

Monica described her connection to her host in similar terms: "I mean, the relationship I have with him is one I've always wanted with my parents but I still don't have with them." Renee also described her relationship with her host in parental terms that were more favorable than her parents:

"She likes to spend time with her kids. And she, um, wants them to have a life. I don't know…she, um… she seems way more like a mom than my adoptive mom ever was. She's not oppressive. She just, um… she enforces like a mom. She's not mean or…but she's firm."

These excerpts suggest that some youth developed a relationship with their host in which they received support they had not received from prior caregivers, including providing

stability, safety, belonging, and structure. Also important was that these relationships were not transactional; rather, for most hosts, supporting youth was conducted out of genuine concern for their well-being. Even when hosts asked that youth provide some compensation such as rent or groceries, hosts gave thought to what the youth could afford based on the youth's current income and other resources.

While familial language and support were major themes across interviews, it is also important to note not all the youth and hosts we talked to framed their relationship in these terms. Several youth thought about their hosts as roommates or friends, and some hosts described feeling emotional distance from the young people staying with them, and one arrangement ended badly. For example, when asked to describe his relationship with his host, Winston said,

"[We are] probably more like roommates, honestly, I didn't really see her all that much. I didn't really talk to her because when I'd be getting home off work, she was already at work or going to work and then when I'd be going to work, she'd be getting off work."

While we see above a few examples of arrangements in which youth and host do not consider themselves close, these are the exception. In fact, as demonstrated in the last column in Tables 2 and 3, eight out of nine of the youth and eight out of ten of the hosts describe their relationship during the arrangement as very close, either by using familial language, or in the case of one youth, calling their host "a good friend."

Discussion

Every year, approximately 5.2% of young adults ages 18–25 find shelter with families of friends, extended family, neighbors, acquaintances, and other adults in their community through informal housing arrangements (Morton et al., 2017). These arrangements are typically characterized as transient at best and dangerous at worst (Curry et al., 2019; Morton et al., 2017). Prior studies have discussed the challenges youth have feeling comfortable or at home in these arrangements (Curry et al., 2019; McLoughlin, 2013) as well as the instability they associated with living in another person's home (Perez & Romo, 2011). While it is certainly true that some couch hopping arrangements are risky and unhealthy, we demonstrate that couch hopping can defy conventional stereotypes. Our finding, that youth coping with housing instability do indeed have caring adults already within their network with whom they can stay, builds on existing literature that shows the majority of youth facing homelessness have supportive non-parental adults in their lives (Dang & Miller, 2013; Dang et al., 2014). For the youth and hosts we talked to, these informal hosting arrangements

often turned out to be a supportive and safe form of housing, even if they initially were intended to be temporary.

While most prior research has discussed couch hopping as a survival strategy that youth use to stay housed (Curry et al., 2019; McLoughlin, 2013), we found that informal intergenerational hosting arrangements can provide much more than shelter. Beyond shared housing, hosts and youth talked about sharing food, buying clothes, providing access to laundry, and many other material forms of support. Basic needs are often a prominent focus of social services. But for the youth and hosts we talked to, these exchanges gained meaning beyond immediate needs. Meals were discussed in terms of connection, love, trust, and comfort. A hot shower also meant a sense of self-respect. A room of one's own felt safe and welcoming. These affective, interpersonal qualities were central to how youth and hosts described meeting basic needs. The prominence of this theme is both an affirmation of the value of these housing arrangements and a challenge to reimagine what "basic" needs really mean to people in need.

The social-emotional impact of the relationships themselves is also significant. Hosts and youth spent time together. This included vacations, holidays, spiritual events, or even just sitting at home and playing a game. Some of the hosts talked about the importance of *not* spending time together, of leaving space for the youth to get comfortable. This, too, represents attention to the youths' emotional needs, particularly in the context of homelessness and its attendant trauma. The thoughtful nature of the hosts' involvement is promising given prior literature establishing the positive impact a caring adult can have on a young person's mental health and economic attainment (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005).

But even more significantly, the youth and hosts we interviewed characterized their relationships in strikingly intimate terms. Consistent with a prior study that found many youth facing homelessness describe a non-parental adult in their lives as "like a parent" (Dang et al., 2014), our interviewees described relationships that often took on a deeper meaning related to family. While most of the arrangements explored in this study were not based in nuclear family relationships, most hosts and youth described their relationships using familial language such as "bonus daughter," "like a mother to me," or "like family." While more needs to be explored to fully understand informal hosting arrangements, many of the relationships in our study offered the kind of support, identity, and belonging that defines our understanding of family (Callan, 2014). For Julia, family meant things like holidays and a sense of consistency. Annie felt a sense of familial connection in the safety and comfort of the home. Although each youth and host may have a different picture of what family means to them, their stories begin to map

out how informal hosting arrangements, even those that begin between strangers or acquaintances, can in some cases forge chosen kinship bonds. Given that the average age difference between hosts and youth was close to 30 years, these relationships appear to offer the kind of intergenerational support that a young person may long for, especially if they, as is common among youth facing homelessness, have lost or lack a positive connection with a parent or caregiver. Through sharing space, resources, time, and care, hosts and youth can potentially build permanent connections that could last long after the youth move on to other housing.

Shared identity, like religious beliefs or cultural practices, can also be an important element of these arrangements. While we cannot imply causality, when shared practices and beliefs were mentioned, they seemed important to relationship building. This aligns with the proposed "best practices" in informal and formal host homes (White, 2017). When we think of couch hopping only as one step away from the streets, a shelter, or other unhoused experiences, we miss opportunities to invest in positive connections with supportive adults who may be a source not only of housing stability but also caring connection for youth.

Limitations

Some limitations to this study warrant discussion. Because we recruited most of the youth we interviewed through drop-in centers, we can assume most were receiving at least some formal social services support. But this also means we did not gather the perspective of youth who were totally "outside the system" and most likely earlier in their "homelessness journey." And while we originally expected youth to refer us to their hosts, we found youth were uncomfortable doing so. While we did not ask why, we hypothesize they may have been concerned about confidentiality and/or that the host would perceive the interview as an additional burden related to their stay. Thus, because we recruited most hosts outside of formal youth-serving agencies, they were more likely hosting youth who were not connected to formal services. We may have missed hosts who would have provided differing insights from the ones we present here. We also only interviewed one host in each household—the host who appeared to be primary. Other adults in the household may well have had different perspectives. Likewise, we only interviewed one youth in any particular household. In one case, a host was providing support for four youth (two couples); however, we only spoke to one youth. Again, the experience may have been different for different youth within one household. We recognize that further research with varying samples

of youth and hosts would deepen our understanding of these experiences.

Implications

Findings from this study suggest ways in which positive informal arrangements might fit into the ecology of supports for youth facing homelessness upheld in the federal outcomes developed by the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness. Drawn from a landmark national strategic plan to prevent and end homelessness, the four core outcomes—stable housing, permanent connections, education/employment, and social emotional well-being—extend the frame of homelessness beyond the physical safety of housing, to also include economic, social, and educational needs (USICH, 2013). In so doing, they push the field of social intervention to think more broadly about what matters in addressing youth homelessness. To aid this more expansive approach, tools to measure all four outcomes have recently been proposed (Morton et al., 2019).

Our findings primarily speak to three areas of the USICH framework: stable housing, permanent connections, and social emotional well-being. Looking at each of these outcomes, we can see how some informal hosting arrangements already align with this federal guidance on addressing youth homelessness. For example, youth and hosts in the present study discussed ways in which the arrangement provided stable housing, but also a sense of belonging, dignity, structure, and care that contributes to social-emotional well-being. Interviewees were selected in part based on the length of time they had been involved in a hosting arrangement. We talked with youth and hosts who had been staying together for at least three weeks, which is the cutoff for emergency housing for minor youth under 18 funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Family and Youth Services Bureau, n.d.). By that metric, all of these arrangements were more than temporary emergency arrangements. In addition, research on youth-initiated mentoring indicates that mentors drawn from a youth's natural supports often have staying power (Schwartz et al., 2013), suggesting that informal hosts may be promising prospects for permanent connections for youth facing homelessness. Further research is needed to determine to what extent youth and hosts think of these arrangements as long term, and whether youth exit these arrangements to other stable housing.

In light of our findings regarding the support provided in these hosting arrangements and the familial language used, we suggest that homeless prevention services could broaden their reach to include youth in positive couch hopping situations. If these housing arrangements offer healthy support, then social services can play a role in scaffolding and strengthening them. Expanding our working definition

of family to encompass "chosen kin" would aid these efforts and honor the meaningful connections youth and hosts often build. Family strengthening research and practice, which has conventionally focused on preventing the rupture of nuclear families of origin, has already begun to explore chosen kin in the context of youth homelessness (Pergamit, Gelatt, Stratford, & Martin, 2016). Our findings support this natural extension of the family strengthening conversation.

Beyond their relationship with hosts, youth in this study were connected to a network of people. As illustrated in Tables 2 and 3, in many cases youth and hosts not only met through a third party, such as the host's own child or a friend, but the third party also initiated the arrangement. Recognizing that a "supportive community"—one of the proposed host home best practices—plays a crucial role in facilitating meaningful informal hosting arrangements can shift homeless youth prevention efforts (White, 2017). Given that youth, as a rule, do not initiate these arrangements on their own, direct service staff can help youth brainstorm who might play a go-between role. Youth have agency but they are also part of a community that is often willing to help.

Given that many hosts reported playing a social service role, by helping youth in applications for financial aid, government benefits or navigating other challenging tasks, social service staff could themselves see a benefit in facilitating and reinforcing connections with supportive adults. In some cases, those adults could help with tasks the staff member would otherwise do. On the other hand, some hosts may not have that capacity and might themselves benefit from external support to stabilize their income or housing.

Although the housing arrangements in this study were at least stable enough to last three weeks and many had lasted longer, further research should investigate challenges in informal hosting. In particular, future research can explore, in keeping with White's (2017) proposed best practices, whether and how external support for youth and hosts, as well as coming to an agreement about shared expectations, could help further stabilize these arrangements. Further research should also explore the benefits and drawbacks of different host home models, from the more common "stranger-match" model to the model we investigate here, in which youth stay with individuals from their existing social networks.

Conclusions

The informal hosting arrangements we explored, most often described by youth and hosts in familial terms, went beyond what we typically imagine "couch hopping" to be. Based on these findings, youth homelessness services should consider looking more closely at couch hopping arrangements, to see where safe and supportive relationships may already exist.

In addition to providing shelter and practical support, our research indicates these arrangements can also address the deeper needs youth have for care, connection, and belonging. Host Beverly articulated the importance of recognizing that what youth facing homelessness need extends beyond housing: "they're trying to figure out the rest of their life, and they're trying to survive, and they need so much love." Our findings suggest that at least some youth facing homelessness are able to find nurturing within their own networks, and that supporting their relationships with caring hosts could strengthen connections vital to their successful transition to adulthood.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

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