



# Social networks as the context for understanding employment services utilization among homeless youth



Anamika Barman-Adhikari <sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Eric Rice <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Social Work, California State University, Fresno, CA, United States

<sup>b</sup> School of Social Work, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA, United States

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## ABSTRACT

Little is known about the factors associated with use of employment services among homeless youth. Social network characteristics have been known to be influential in motivating people's decision to seek services. Traditional theoretical frameworks applied to studies of service use emphasize individual factors over social contexts and interactions. Using key social network, social capital, and social influence theories, this paper developed an integrated theoretical framework that capture the social network processes that act as barriers or facilitators of use of employment services by homeless youth, and understand empirically, the salience of each of these constructs in influencing the use of employment services among homeless youth. We used the "Event based-approach" strategy to recruit a sample of 136 homeless youth at one drop-in agency serving homeless youth in Los Angeles, California in 2008. The participants were queried regarding their individual and network characteristics. Data were entered into NetDraw 2.090 and the spring embedder routine was used to generate the network visualizations. Logistic regression was used to assess the influence of the network characteristics on use of employment services. The study findings suggest that social capital is more significant in understanding why homeless youth use employment services, relative to network structure and network influence. In particular, bonding and bridging social capital were found to have differential effects on use of employment services among this population. The results from this study provide specific directions for interventions aimed to increase use of employment services among homeless youth.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Homelessness among youth and the perilous course to stability

Approximately 1.6 million youth experience homelessness in a given year in the United States, and homelessness among youth and young adults remains a major social concern (Toro, Dworsky, & Fowler, 2007). Annual estimates of these unaccompanied youth in Los Angeles County have ranged between 4800 and 10,000 (Kipke, Montgomery, Simon, & Iverson, 1997; L.A. Homeless Services Authority, 2001), making it one of the largest populations of unaccompanied youth in the country. It is believed that youth and young adults are less likely to stay homeless if they are self-sufficient and stably employed (Toro et al., 2007). Unemployment rates among homeless youth however continue to be high ranging from 66 to 71% (Ferguson, Xie, & Glynn, 2012). Therefore, an

increased emphasis has been placed on training homeless youth to live and function independently in society (Lenz-Rashid, 2006). For example, the Youth services and Job Corp programs funded through the Workforce Investment Act both include homeless youth as a target population (Hook & Courtney, 2011). Accordingly, a number of agencies serving homeless youth offer employment services training and support to homeless youth. In spite of this policy and practice focus on supporting homeless youth in obtaining employment, studies show that homeless youth are less likely to be employed and even less likely to utilize employment services compared to housed youth (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, Raap, & Hall, 2010; Hook & Courtney, 2011).

### 1.2. A social network approach to understanding the use of employment services

Studies that have examined homelessness among adolescents and young adults, have often cast the problem as one of individual vulnerabilities rather than as a social phenomenon involving transactions between individuals and their environments

\* Corresponding author at: School of Social Work, California State University, Fresno, CA, United States.

E-mail address: [abarmanadhikari@csufresno.edu](mailto:abarmanadhikari@csufresno.edu) (A. Barman-Adhikari).

(Haber & Toro, 2004). In a similar vein, conventional models applied to studies of service use propose conceptual models based on individual factors such as motivation, attitudinal perception, and rational evaluation (Carpentier & White, 2002). This theoretical perspective is increasingly being called into question, because it neglects social contexts and interactions linked to the process of help seeking (Carpentier & White, 2002). A network approach to understanding human behavior is able to mitigate the limitations of these narrow theorizations because it operates on the understanding that a person's social structure is composed of an array of relationships and these relationships influence the way in which people act (Scott & Hofmeyer, 2007). Using key social network, social capital, and social influence theories, this study developed an integrated theoretical framework capturing the social network processes that can act as barriers or facilitators of use of employment services by homeless youth. Rather than testing the predictive power of this model, the purpose in constructing this model was to identify conceptually driven social-network correlates of employment services utilization among homeless youth. This allowed us to assess the relative importance of each of these network dimensions and provide direction for future network based interventions that aim to develop or tailor employment services for homeless youth.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Characteristics of homeless youth and transitions to employment

Homeless youth are by nature a transient population. There are various ways in which homeless youth have been defined and classified. For the purposes of this study, we used the definition put forth by Tsemberis, McHugo, Williams, Hanrahan, and Stefancic as our criteria for delineating whether youth were homeless. This definition includes categories of literally homeless, temporary homeless, institutional residence, stable residence, and functional homeless. This definition is considered more comprehensive in its criteria and representativeness of homelessness than most other definitions. Moreover, unlike the federal definition of homelessness, which has been characterized as obscuring the intensity of the problem, this definition acknowledges that homelessness encompasses a broad spectrum of people. This range of homeless includes not only those living on the streets and in shelters but also those living in motels or with family and friends because of economic hardship.

Homeless youth, however, face a number of barriers in finding employment such as lack of experience, poor academic preparation, disruptive behavior, and poor communication skills (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004). Not surprisingly, a recent study conducted to assess income generation sources among homeless youth found that a majority of these youth relied on illicit activities to generate income. In this study, only 28% of these youth relied on formal employment for income, while 53% of the respondents indicated that they engaged in survival behaviors (such as panhandling, stealing, dealing drugs, and prostitution) to generate income (Ferguson, Xie, et al., 2012; Ferguson, Bender, Thompson, Maccio, & Pollio, 2012). Becoming gainfully employed might be able to contribute to these youth's identity formation, connect them to conventional institutions, provide income that facilitates economic self-sufficiency, and reduce the chances of engaging in risky subsistence strategies (such as panhandling, dealing drugs, and exchange sex) (Ferguson, Xie, et al., 2012). Therefore, it is important that homeless youth be given the support and skills that they need in securing stable and secure employment.

Employment services generally offer homeless youth employment skills including professional behavior, work ethics, job search and retention, internships, tutoring, GED tutoring and classes,

secondary and post-secondary school enrollment and support writing, and customer service. Unfortunately, little is known about the factors associated with the use of employment services among this population, leaving policymakers and providers with little evidence to tailor their programs to fit the needs and profiles of these youth.

### 2.2. Use of employment services among homeless youth

A vast majority of the literature on homeless youth's service participation has been limited to the utilization of health, mental health, and substance abuse treatment services. Despite the lack of focus on employment services among homeless youth, these studies investigating associations with other kinds of services can be helpful in identifying correlates of use of employment services in this population.

It is important to acknowledge that homeless youth are a complex, diverse, and heterogeneous population; and this heterogeneity has implications for service use among homeless youth (Pergamit, Ernst, & Hall, 2010). Gender has been especially found to be an important correlate of service use among this population; with females being more likely than males to access mental health treatment (Berdahl, Hoyt, & Whitbeck, 2005), medical services (De Rosa et al., 1999; Klein et al., 2000) and HIV testing services (Solorio, Trifskin, & Rodríguez, 2006; Tyler, Akinyemi, & Kort-Butler, 2012). Race has been associated with both utilization and underutilization of services. Geber (1997) found that minority youth reported barriers to service utilization on grounds of racial/ethnic discrimination. On the other hand, De Rosa et al. (1999) found that racial minority youth were more likely to use shelters relative to White youth. Another significant aspect of homeless youth's likelihood of accessing services depends on their life cycle of homelessness (Carlson, Sugano, Millstein, & Auerswald, 2006). Studies have found that the longer youth are homeless, the less likely they are to engage in services. Similarly, significant differences have been found between sheltered and unstably housed youth in their reports of utilization of services (Berdahl et al., 2005; Sweat, Nyamathi, Christiani, & Mutere, 2008). However, most of these studies were only able to account for a minor proportion of the variance in explaining the use or non-use of services; it is likely that social-contextual factors will be able to explain what these individual factors do not account for.

### 2.3. The potential contribution of social network factors to use of employment services

The role of social-network factors in predicting service use in general and employment services in particular has received little empirical attention (Garland et al., 2005). However, a few studies (Kipke, Montgomery, et al., 1997; Kipke, Unger, O'Connor, Palmer, & Lafrance, 1997; Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999; Reid & Klee, 1999; van Wormer, 2003; Chew Ng, Muth, & Auerswald, 2013) have uncovered promising findings on the role that social networks can play in influencing the choice of services among homeless youth; however the evidence is sparse and is not as consistent as one would hope.

In general, these studies found that homeless youth maintain both street and non-street relationships and the instrumental or emotional resources that they receive from these people influence the use of services among homeless youth. It is however important to note that social networks do not always provide positive resources; some types of resource or support offered by a social network's members may increase distress or engagement in unhealthy behaviors (Lincoln, 2000). For example, receiving instrumental help from other street youth is often associated with participation in the street economy and negates the

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