YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN CROATIA: PATHWAYS, CHALLENGES, AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Marijana Kletečki Radović and Ela Rukavina Lapov

Abstract: Youth homelessness is a complex issue. The experience of living in alternative care, combined with a lack of support, is a key risk factor that increases the likelihood of youth becoming homeless. This study aimed to explore the lives of homeless youth through their personal experiences, focusing on their pathways to homelessness and the support they would have required to avoid it. Qualitative research was conducted with six young people aged 15 to 29 who were homeless and residing in a shelter in Zagreb. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. The results showed that the participants all had a background in alternative care, often with multiple placements while in care. Key factors contributing to homelessness included aging out of the care system, broken family relationships, mental health issues, and unemployment. The findings showed that these young homeless individuals primarily relied on formal support systems. They emphasized the need for practical assistance, access to social welfare assistance, professional support and empowerment, and emotional support from trusted individuals. This research underscores the importance of providing targeted, systematic, support to help young homeless people overcome the challenges they face on their path to a stable and independent life.

Keywords: youth homelessness, alternative care, pathways to homelessness, support, Croatia

Marijana Kletečki Radović PhD (corresponding author) is an associate professor in the Social Work Study Centre, Faculty of Law at the University of Zagreb, TRH 3, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia. Email: marijana.kletecki.radovic@pravo.hr

Ela Rukavina Lapov MA is a social worker in URIHO – Institute for Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities, Avenija Marina Držića 1, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia. Email: erukavina@gmail.com

Homelessness is a social phenomenon that is well known in today's society, one that manifests in different forms around the world. It would be an understatement to say that homelessness only refers to the lack of a roof overhead, which is the first thought most people have. Homelessness implies deprivation on multiple levels — psychological, emotional, territorial, ontological, and spiritual (Somerville, 2013). Many countries have developed policies aimed at combating homelessness and social exclusion; however, it remains a complex issue that is challenging to address. Homelessness comes about in various ways and is influenced by different structural and individual factors. Šikić Mićanović (2012) identified several structural causes of vulnerability that contribute to the risk of homelessness. These include the absence of an explicit constitutional guarantee of the right to housing, despite its recognition as a fundamental human right. Additional contributing factors may involve limited social benefits for the unemployed and those living in poverty, the lack of a comprehensive national social housing policy addressing vulnerable groups such as people experiencing homelessness, and the absence of preventive programs for children and young people in alternative care. Without adequate support, care leavers may face an elevated risk of homelessness upon leaving care homes. Anderson (2001) concluded that there are discrete pathways to homelessness, and that which one is followed depends partly on age: the path in youth is linked to growing up in alternative care, exposure to violence and abuse, disrupted family relationships, frequent running away from home during childhood, school problems, and exclusion. This paper focuses specifically on the pathways into homelessness for young people aged between 15 and 29, who, due to their characteristics and additional vulnerabilities, constitute a special group of homeless individuals.

To understand how and why young people find themselves to be homeless, we must first examine their past experiences (Tyler, 2006). A qualitative study on the early family history of young homeless individuals, conducted in the United States with 40 participants aged 19 to 21, revealed a consistent pattern of parental addiction to alcohol and drugs, family violence, various forms of child abuse, and other criminal activities (Tyler, 2006). Youth homelessness has often been found to be the result of disrupted family relationships, typically involving violence and the separation of the child from the family (Quilgars et al., 2008; Shelton et al., 2009). The most vulnerable group of young people leaving the care system are those who have experienced extremely difficult family situations prior to being placed in alternative care, and who have not received the needed support within the care system to help them overcome those difficulties (Stein, 2006). A study conducted in Australia among young homeless individuals aged 14 to 25 revealed that trauma had been a common experience for them before they became homeless (Martijn & Sharpe, 2006). In the absence of support, and without the knowledge or ability to cope with their problems, such experiences may lead young people to substance abuse, other addictions, depression, health issues, and ultimately homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2013). Young people aging out of care quickly experience numerous changes: leaving their former place in a residential care institution or foster family, seeking entirely new housing, completing their education, seeking

further training, or facing unemployment (Stein, 2006). In short, their journey is rapid and complex. Young individuals preparing to leave care, as well as those who have already been living independently for some time, have reported facing many issues for which they were unprepared, of which the most common were: (a) feelings of loneliness as they began living alone after being surrounded by people for years; (b) being employed mainly in the "grey economy", with poorly paid jobs that did not provide regular employment; (c) lack of knowledge of their rights, potentially preventing them from accessing the benefits to which they were entitled; and (d) lack of money to meet basic needs (Kusturin et al., 2014). Perhaps the greatest challenge young people in these circumstances face is finding adequate and safe housing after literally losing the roof over their head upon leaving care (Curry & Abrams, 2015).

Research by Reilly (2003) on a sample of 100 young people leaving care in the United States showed that a significant proportion of them faced serious difficulties in transitioning to independent living; many ended up on the streets due to a lack of housing and then became involved in criminal activities. Research in Australia by Crane et al. (2013) showed that of 27 young people, only eight had a plan for leaving care, and 24 reported experiencing homelessness at least once after leaving care, including living on the streets, in homeless shelters, in inappropriate housing, or staying with friends, acquaintances, or relatives. Additionally, Fowler et al. (2009) conducted research in the United States on the psychosocial and housing conditions of a population of 265 adolescents aged 19 to 23 who had left care. The results showed that 20% of participants had lived continuously in homelessness for two years after leaving care, while an additional 30% had spent at least one night homeless during this period. Natalier and Johnson (2012) conducted research in London, England involving 77 young people from alternative care who had left care an average of 4 years previously. They found that those who had stable housing after leaving care had generally had positive experiences during their time in care, and had developed a secure, reliable, and lasting connection with at least one person; most had planned for leaving care. Their social networks were broader, and they knew they could always turn to someone for help with housing. Young people who had unstable housing after leaving alternative care, on the other hand, had frequent moves between different forms of care and thus failed to develop a more permanent and positive connection with anyone. Furthermore, most of them did not have a plan for leaving care. Natalier and Johnson's data clearly indicate the importance of stable and consistent housing within alternative care, which prevents later unstable housing and homelessness, as other research also indicates (e.g., Crane et al., 2013; Fowler et al., 2009; Reilly, 2003). Such research emphasizes the importance of social networks in terms of providing material and emotional support to help young people leaving care find stable and secure housing. Many young people from care lack such a safety net, leading to feelings of loneliness and social isolation, and to poverty. They need formal support in the form of emotional assistance, such as someone to listen to them and a trusted individual to turn to, as well as instrumental help, such as stable housing, financial assistance, and informational support regarding available social services and their rights (Stewart et al., 2010).

Youth Homelessness in Croatia

Youths experiencing homelessness in Croatia are a group that has so far received little attention from researchers. A total of 50 young people aged 15 to 29 were staying in Croatian shelters in 2015 (Vucica, 2016). During the first 7 months of 2020, there were 46 young people in shelters out of 441 users, meaning that nearly 10% of the total homeless population were in this age group (Rukavina, 2020). According to earlier data from the Red Cross shelter in Zagreb, in 2012, 17 of 121 users (14%) were under the age of 30, including three minors and six individuals under 25 (Mlinar & Kozar, 2012).

The most common causes of youth homelessness, according to the Croatian Homeless Network, are financial issues and family conflicts, including violence in the family, lack of emotional and financial support from parents, substance abuse, young women with unwanted pregnancies, and LGBT individuals (Vucica, 2016). The results also show that many young homeless individuals in Croatia are from residential care. Despite these findings, it is clear that there is a lack of comprehensive and sufficient information regarding this group: the available data do not provide enough relevant information on youth homelessness, leaving a knowledge gap that demands to be filled. A better understanding of the issue, knowledge of the specific pathways into homelessness for young people, and systematic monitoring of youth homelessness indicators would present opportunities for planning and creating interventions to address and ultimately prevent youth homelessness. A significant contribution to understanding pathways into homelessness and the possibility of planning meaningful interventions with a person-centered approach can come from individuals with experience — young homeless people themselves. The purpose of this research was to focus on young people who have experienced homelessness and explore, from their perspective, the pathways into homelessness and the types of support and empowerment needed to escape this difficult situation.

The Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study was to gain insight into the lives of young people experiencing homelessness through their personal experiences of the causes of homelessness and their ideas of the support they would need to exit homelessness. The three research questions are:

- What are the causes of young people becoming homeless?
- What kind of support do young homeless individuals have?
- What do young homeless individuals need to exit homelessness?

Method

Research Setting and Sampling Strategy

The target population of this study consisted of young individuals aged 15 to 29 who were homeless. A purposive sampling strategy was used, meaning that interviews were conducted with a specific group of individuals who met the defined criteria. The sample comprised six participants

who, at the time of the study, were staying at a homeless shelter in Zagreb. Three participants were female, and three were male. They ranged in age from 18 to 24, with an average age of 22 years. All participants had been placed in alternative care at some point in their lives. One participant had only experienced kinship care, but most had moved through more than one form of alternative care, including residential care, foster families, and, in some cases, correctional facilities and organized housing[1]. Two participants had experienced placement in correctional facilities. The amount of time participants spent in care varied. Two female participants had been placed in care during their first three years of life, while the rest were placed at an average age of 12.5 years after having lived with their parents. For three participants, this was their second stay in the shelter: two had previously spent one year there, while the other had been there for a short period followed by treatment for addiction. At the time of the interviews, most participants had been in the shelter for an average of three months, while one participant had been there for two years. Five of the six participants had completed secondary education. Most had finished a 3-year vocational secondary school program, one female participant had completed a 4-year program, and one had completed only primary education.

Ethical Aspects of the Research

The research plan was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Social Work Study Centre, University of Zagreb. All procedures were conducted in accordance with relevant ethical standards. The purpose and goal of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the details of the interview process were explained to the participants. Participants' confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed: we ensured that no one except the research leader would have access to the interview transcripts. The interviews, with the knowledge and consent of participants, were recorded using a mobile phone voice recorder to facilitate data processing. The audio recordings were transcribed and destroyed after transcription. The interviews ranged in length from 22 to 55 minutes, with an average duration of 40 minutes.

Measurement Instrument

Given the research goal, a qualitative approach was used to collect data through semi-structured interviews. This method was specifically chosen because it allows the conversation to flow freely while providing the opportunity for participants to offer additional, detailed explanations, experiences, and reflections. The ability to adjust questions to the participant's responses contributed to a deeper understanding of the subject being explored.

Each semi-structured interview consisted of questions to collect sociodemographic data followed by 15 main open-ended questions aligned with the research topic. In addition to the 15 main questions, participants were asked follow-up questions as needed to gather richer responses.

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[1] Organized housing is a social service that provides individuals, whether child or adult, with accommodation in a housing unit. Children up to the age of majority who are without adequate parental care, or who have behavioral issues or developmental disabilities, may be placed in organized housing. There they receive continuous professional assistance and other forms of support to ensure that their needs are met.

The main questions were organized into three sections. The first focused on the participants' lives before homelessness and the causes that led to their homelessness. This was explored with questions such as: "When did you become homeless?", "How did this happen?", and "What led to this?" The second section dealt with the support that participants currently have, with questions like: "Where do you see your biggest source of support?" and "How do you help yourself?" The third section concerned the resources needed for exiting homelessness, explored through questions such as: "What do you think is most important in order to leave homelessness?" and "What would help you in this process?" This section also addressed the participants' future plans, with questions such as: "What are your plans for the future?" and "Where do you see yourself in two years?"

Data Analysis

The qualitative data obtained through the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). The analysis followed an inductive–deductive approach and consisted of six steps: The first step involved familiarizing we with the data by transcribing the interviews and noting initial statements. This was followed by identifying key statements related to experiences of and pathways into homelessness, the support received, and the support needed to exit homelessness. These generated an initial set of codes. In the third step, the initial codes were grouped into narrower themes, which were further categorized into broader themes within predefined analytical sections based on the research questions. The fourth step involved analyzing the congruence of codes within the generated themes and their relationships to the research questions. After finalizing this systematization, the themes were defined and named, taking care that the title of each theme accurately reflected its meaning within the data. Finally, an interpretation of the results was formulated based on the analysis.

Results and Discussion

The presentation of the results follows a predefined analytical framework, divided into four main sections:

1. Youth experiences during childhood
2. Causes of youth homelessness
3. Sources of social support
4. Youth needs for exiting homelessness

Youth Experiences During Childhood

To understand how and why young people find themselves in homelessness, it is important to gain insight into their childhood experiences. A feature common to all participants is that, at some point in their lives, they had been placed in alternative care. These children were either without appropriate parental care because their parents were unable to care for them or had passed away, or they had behavioral problems leading to their placement in suitable care arrangements. The young people in this study had been placed in various forms of alternative care available in Croatia,

such as residential care, foster families, organized housing, kinship care, and correctional facilities. Many of them had been moved between multiple care placements: "I was then placed in a foster family, then in residential care, and after that, I ended up in an organized housing at 18" (S3); "… then I ended up in a correctional facility … after that, they transferred me to residential care, then I went to an organized housing" (S6). Research shows that children placed outside the family system, especially those in alternative care, represent the most vulnerable group at risk of homelessness (Shelton et al., 2009). Reilly's (2003) study of 100 young people who had left care found that most of them experienced homelessness or living on the street after transitioning out of care. Similarly, Fowler et al. (2009) showed that young people who frequently changed care placements lived in unstable conditions after leaving the system. This is due to the difficulty of forming close relationships with caregivers or foster families, making it hard to transition to adulthood and establish a sense of community (Crane et al., 2013), leading to instability and homelessness after leaving care.

Conversations with participants revealed that most had experienced some form of violence in the family during childhood, including physical abuse by fathers and foster parents, sexual abuse by stepfathers, and psychological abuse by mothers: "I was with my mom for a while, but my stepfather kept touching me … she knew but didn't care" (S4). These findings align with other research showing that young homeless individuals often have a history of family violence, including physical and sexual abuse (Tyler, 2006). Such violence is a significant risk factor for youth homelessness.

Some participants faced issues with addiction during their childhood, such as marijuana use and gambling: "The thing that troubles me is gambling … I spent almost 1,325 € on gambling" (S5). Some also had conflicts with the law, involving theft and incarceration: "I've had quite a few criminal offences … theft, that sort of thing … it's embarrassing" (S2). Crane et al. (2013) also identified addictions and legal problems as risk factors for homelessness among youth from alternative care.

Pathways to Homelessness

To understand how young people who have been in care become homeless, it is essential to consider their transition from care. Leaving care means losing the rights and services they previously received. Three participants in this study, who had been placed in organized housing, were left without a secure place to live: "I didn't want to go back to the organized housing, I was always with my boyfriend, and after a few days of not being there, they kicked me out … then I was out on the street" (S4). One participant had to leave a foster family at 21 due to mental health issues and afterwards had no stable housing. Similarly, after one participant turned 18, his brother stopped taking care of him, leading to difficulties with independent living and employment: "He went to work, and I stayed here and worked somewhere … then the landlord kicked me out because I couldn't pay rent when my salary was delayed" (S1).

Participants cited disrupted family relationships as a cause of homelessness. Due to sexual abuse, physical abuse, and conflicts with foster parents, home was not a safe place, forcing them to seek alternative living arrangements: "I ended up at my father's place, but he kept abusing me, so I attacked him to get away … and then I ended up in a shelter" (S6). Mental health problems were also identified as a cause of homelessness, including issues stemming from addiction, depression, and personality disorders: "I wanted to throw myself under a car … and I used to cut myself" (S5).

Unemployment was another significant factor leading to homelessness. Losing a job often meant losing housing, as participants had no other financial means to secure accommodation: "I spent all my money looking for apartments and trying to find a job, but due to COVID-19, everything became harder, so I went to the shelter" (S3). These findings illustrate a cumulative effect, where one life event triggers or compounds with other circumstances that lead to homelessness (Družić Ljubotina et al., 2016). After leaving care, many young people, like those in this study, have no home to return to and no support system, which often results in homelessness (Gaetz, 2014).

Sources of Social Support

Participants in this study reported that they relied mostly on formal support providers, with shelters being the most frequently mentioned source of assistance. They also appreciated the help provided by social workers: "I have support here … from the shelter workers who helped me with accommodation, food, and paperwork" (S2). Additionally, they highlighted the support from a specific non-governmental organization providing programs for at-risk youth: "I also go to this other place, where I can talk about anything. Whatever I need, I can ask for help" (S4). These formal networks are crucial for young homeless individuals, as they often provide essential services such as housing, food, and emotional support (Družić Ljubotina et al., 2016).

When it comes to informal support, family members were rarely mentioned. Participants more often turned to fellow shelter residents who were in similar situations. When family was mentioned, it most often referred to siblings rather than parents. Tyler and Melander (2011) pointed out that most young people with experiences of homelessness had suffered some form of parental neglect or abuse during childhood, which helps explain the results obtained. All participants in this study reported having experienced some form of family violence. This included physical abuse by fathers and foster parents, sexual abuse by stepfathers, and psychological abuse by mothers. Lack of family support is often a significant factor in youth homelessness, particularly after leaving care (Mlinar & Kozar, 2012).

Youth Needs for Exiting Homelessness

Young homeless people in this study expressed a strong desire to leave the shelter and start an independent life. To exit homelessness, they identified multiple needs, including practical assistance, employment opportunities, and financial support from social services. They also felt

they required professional support such as counselling and psychosocial assistance. Additionally, they emphasized the need for emotional support from significant others, including family or partners: "First, I would need psychological treatment to strengthen my mindset … to understand that I will have to live independently despite my past" (S5). Other studies, like Stewart et al. (2010), have found similar needs among homeless youth: information on employment, education, and financial matters; financial assistance; access to services; and increased emotional support from someone who would listen to and understand them. These findings are consistent with the needs identified by youth in this study, who also mentioned the importance of individual empowerment programs and job search skills. Ultimately, these young people expressed hopes for the future, including finding a job, living in their own apartment, and starting a family.

Overall, the results of this study highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of youth homelessness, illustrating how early childhood experiences, instability in care placements, and a lack of social support contribute to the challenges faced by these young individuals. Addressing their needs through comprehensive support programs is critical for helping young people exit homelessness and build stable, fulfilling lives.

Conclusion

Only a limited amount of research, and few available indicators, precisely address the issue of youth homelessness in Croatia. The purpose of this study was to focus specifically on the perspectives of those with personal experience, examining from their viewpoint the key areas that represent risks and pathways into youth homelessness. We also focused on the key areas for support and types of effective interventions for the prevention and mitigation of this social issue. It is clear that there is no single path to homelessness; rather, it occurs in multiple ways and is influenced by multiple factors (Crane et al., 2013; Fowler et al., 2009; Martijn & Sharpe, 2006; Natalier & Johnson, 2012; Reilly, 2003; Tyler, 2006).

However, the results of this study, as well as other studies on young homeless individuals, indicate that one of the most prevalent risks and pathways into homelessness is the experience of residing in alternative care during childhood, along with the experience of multiple placements within the care system. Furthermore, young homeless individuals often experienced some form of violence within the family during their upbringing, and a significant number had had conflicts with the law and had experience with addiction. It was found that young homeless individuals tend to have lower educational status. Most of them had already experienced homelessness and life on the streets. Causes of homelessness among young people identified in this research include disagreement with foster parents, mental health issues such as psychological problems caused by addiction and depressive disorders, as well as unemployment. The findings of this research are consistent with previous knowledge on the causes and pathways leading to youth homelessness (Crane et al., 2013; Fowler et al., 2009; Martijn & Sharpe, 2006; Natalier & Johnson, 2012; Reilly, 2003; Tyler, 2006).

Given that the experience of living in alternative care entails a significant risk of future homelessness, especially for children and young people with disrupted family relationships, it is essential to ensure that mechanisms are in place for monitoring and supporting young people transitioning out of alternative care. Establishing such monitoring mechanisms could help determine the size of the population of young people at increased risk for homelessness, thereby enabling more effective planning and managing of interventions to prevent homelessness. This is especially important in the Croatian context, which does not currently allow for an accurate understanding of the scope of youth homelessness due to the lack of a mechanism for tracking the number of homeless individuals and those who are at risk of homelessness.

Regarding the issue of social support, the young homeless individuals in this study indicated that they mainly rely on formal types of support received from professionals in shelters, while they are generally unable to rely on informal support such as family and often view themselves as their own greatest source of support. These findings are not surprising, as homelessness is a social issue that primarily reflects the loss of social connections with family, friends, and the community (Družić Ljubotina et al., 2016, 2022). In this sense, policymakers and program designers have a responsibility to invest in formal sources of support, ensuring the availability of social services that, in addition to providing decent housing and meeting basic life needs, include a range of services focused on individual empowerment and promoting social inclusion. This research has highlighted that all participants expressed a desire to exit homelessness, gain independence, and find employment and housing. They emphasized the need for practical assistance and access to rights, with particular attention to help with job seeking and to financial support from the social welfare system. Additionally, they underscored the importance of psychosocial support and counselling services as forms of professional assistance to empower them to exit homelessness. Emotional support from family and partners was also identified as a key factor for leaving homelessness. In this regard, policies and programs aimed at alleviating and mitigating homelessness, especially for young homeless individuals, should certainly be complemented by comprehensive psychosocial support programs. Along with mechanisms to ensure "a roof over their heads" through organized housing or social housing, young people, as well as other homeless individuals, need comprehensive support aimed at labor activation and social inclusion.

The unemployment rate among young homeless individuals is extremely high. Young people need help with labor activation, particularly support for developing personal and professional skills. Paid employment enables them to secure the means to meet their basic life needs and provides the prospects for stable housing conditions. Policies should therefore focus on developing employment programs as well as ensuring a social housing mechanism for young homeless individuals.

Given the risks young homeless individuals face in their upbringing, and their limited opportunities for obtaining higher education and vocational qualifications, it is crucial to provide support for their integration and empowerment for further education to enhance their chances of entering the labor market. It is essential to strengthen their self-confidence and motivation to

escape homelessness and to develop the skills needed for labor market participation through counselling and psychosocial support.

For young people who were in alternative care until they reached adulthood, it is important to provide housing after the completion of regular education and the cessation of their entitlement to accommodation within the care system. One model of such support is the provision of organized housing, where young people are given the opportunity to prepare for independent living and are provided with initial security as they navigate life outside the institutional framework. This approach offers support and empowerment during the transition period, increasing the chances for a safer life after leaving care and creating conditions for social inclusion. For young people leaving alternative care and at risk of homelessness, it is also important to have an individual plan for transitioning out of care, ensuring concrete support in the process of gaining independence, including stable and secure housing, employment, money management skills, and more. Young people need continuous support after leaving alternative care to feel secure and have a chance to establish conditions for stable, independent lives. This research, which investigated pathways into homelessness and necessary support mechanisms from the perspective of young homeless individuals, has revealed a need to invest in mechanisms to monitor children in alternative care who are at increased risk of homelessness, and in the development of social services aimed at supporting young people after they leave care. It is especially important to build a support and assistance mechanism to help young people leaving alternative care find safer housing. In this context, the issue of housing for young homeless individuals and those exiting alternative care must be incorporated into a broader social housing policy and measures that increase the likelihood of effective social integration.

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