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## Homelessness Experiences, Sexual Orientation, and Sexual Risk Taking among High School Students in Los Angeles

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### Abstract

**Purpose**—Prior studies reported homeless adolescents engage in more sexual risk than their housed peers. However, these comparisons are typically made post hoc by comparing homeless adolescent community-based samples with high school probability samples. This study utilizes a random sample of high school students to examine homelessness experiences and sexual risk behaviors.

**Methods**—A supplemental survey to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey containing questions regarding homelessness and sexual health was administered to Los Angeles high school students (N=1,839). Multivariate logistic regressions assessed the associations between demographics, past year homelessness experiences (i.e., place of nighttime residence), and being sexually active and condom use at last intercourse.

**Results**—Homelessness experiences consisted of staying in a shelter (10.4%), a public place (10.1%), and with a stranger (5.6%). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning (LGBTQ), younger, and male adolescents were more likely to experience homelessness. LGBTQ adolescents were also more likely to report staying with a stranger and less likely to report staying in a shelter. Compared to adolescents who stayed in shelters, adolescents who stayed with strangers and in public places were more likely to engage in unprotected sex at last intercourse.

**Conclusions**—Adolescents who report sexual activity and sexual risk taking are more likely to report homelessness experiences. With regard to sexual health, staying with strangers could be a particularly risky form of homelessness; LGBTQ and Black adolescents are more likely to

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**Implications and Contribution:** Claims that homeless adolescents experience greater sex risk are typically based on ad hoc comparisons. Using a random sample of Los Angeles public high school students, we found that homelessness, in the form of staying with strangers, was particularly risky and a more common homelessness experience for LGBTQ adolescents.

experience this form of homelessness. Efforts to reduce homelessness and sexual risk-taking need to recognize the specific vulnerabilities faced by these populations.

### Keywords

homeless; sexuality; sex risk; sexually transmitted infections; adolescents

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### Introduction

There are an estimated 1.6 million runaway and homeless youth in the United States each year, but adolescent homelessness has been relatively understudied compared to adult homelessness [1]. Homeless youth are disproportionately lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) [2,3], and the risk of adolescent homelessness tends to increase with age [1]. Prior research has found that male adolescents are more likely to experience homelessness, but have not identified racial/ethnic disparities among this population [4]. Much research has assessed the potential determinants of homelessness (e.g., experiencing child abuse, substance abuse, sexual abuse, etc.) [5], however, aside from Ringwalt and colleagues [4], little literature assesses the correlates and period prevalence of homelessness within a population of homeless and non-homeless adolescents.

Despite heterogeneity in the types of homelessness experienced by this population, there is also very little research assessing which adolescents report what kinds of homelessness experiences. Homeless youth spend the night not only in shelters, but in public places (e.g., on the streets, in abandoned buildings, outdoors, and underground), and/or with strangers [1,4,6,7]. It is important to understand which adolescents experience different types of homelessness, as the risk environment may vary greatly by type. Shelters tend to be relatively protective, whereas spending the night in a public place or with a stranger may expose youth to sexual violence, and/or situations that could be potentially exploitative, including pressures to participate in exchange sex (i.e., trading sex for money, food, drugs, or a place to stay) [4–6,8–11].

Since the 1980s, a large body of work has demonstrated that homeless youth are more likely than housed youth to engage in risky sexual behaviors, such as unprotected and exchange sex [7, 12–17]. However, comparisons of sexual risk behaviors between homeless adolescents and their non-homeless peers are largely made implicitly. When explicit, they are often done with community-based samples [16,18], or accomplished post hoc by contrasting community-based samples of homeless adolescents to probability samples of adolescents in school-based settings, from data sources such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) [7,12].

Aside from recent findings linking sexual orientation to homelessness, little research exists that provides insight into the demographic characteristics associated with adolescent homelessness. Further, we are aware of no prior research that uses a probability sample among a single population of homeless and non-homeless adolescents to examine the association between sexual risk behavior and homelessness experiences, including the specific type of homelessness experiences (i.e., street, stranger, or shelter stays). Homelessness in this study is defined by one or more nights in the prior year in at least one

of several circumstances which constitute homelessness. As such, so-called “runaway” youth who spend shorter periods of time away from home and chronic homeless youth who have extended street stays cannot be disentangled. It is important to understand the extent to which adolescents experience any kind of homelessness in Los Angeles, as the city is one of the epicenters of homelessness in the United States. In the current study, we use a random sample of adolescents in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) to assess socio-demographic differences between adolescents who do and do not report homelessness in the past year, and the correlates of experiencing different types of homelessness. We also examine how any experience of homelessness, and the type of homelessness experience, may be associated with sexual risk taking.

## Methods

### Sample and Procedures

A supplemental survey to the YRBS containing questions regarding past-year homelessness experiences and sex risk behaviors was administered to LAUSD students in grades 9–12. Each state and local school-based YRBS employs a two-stage, cluster sample design to produce representative samples of students in grades 9–12 in their jurisdiction. All students are eligible, including those in special education classes, or those who have low English-language proficiency. In the first sampling stage of the LAUSD survey, all public high schools were included in the sampling frame. Systematic sampling of schools with probability proportional to school enrollment size was done with a random start; in total, 25 schools were sampled. In the second stage, all classes in a required subject or required period of the day were sampled using systematic equal probability sampling with a random start. With this sampling procedure, 100% of the 25 schools sampled responded, and 87% of the 2,425 students who were given questionnaires participated in the survey. Based on these two response rates, the overall response rate was 87%. Of those students, 1,853 completed the supplemental questionnaire (88%), with a completion rate of 76% of the overall sample (1,853 of the 2,425). Students over the age of 18 were removed from our analyses, yielding a final sample of 1,839 students. A weight is applied to each participant to adjust for the distribution of students by race/ethnicity in LAUSD [19,20].

The supplemental survey on which this study was based was administered in conjunction with the LAUSD YRBS, approved by the LAUSD Health Education Programs, as required by the Cooperative Agreement with the CDC, Division of Adolescent School Health. The institutional review board approval for the analysis was obtained from the University of Southern California.

### Measures

**Demographic Variables**—Demographic characteristics included gender, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity. Sexual orientation was dichotomized as LGBTQ versus heterosexual, based on: “What do you consider your sexual orientation?: (1) homosexual (gay or lesbian), (2) bisexual, (3) heterosexual (straight), (4) transgender, (5) questioning/unsure.” Race/ethnicity was collapsed into four categories: Hispanic/Latino, White, Black/

African American, and “other race.” “Other race” includes those who identified as mixed race, American Indian, Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian, Asian, and other Pacific Islander.

**Types of Homelessness**—Five types of homelessness experienced by these youth were assessed based on responses to the item: “During the past 12 months, have you spent the night in any of the following places? (1) in a youth or adult shelter, (2) in a public place, such as a train or bus station, a restaurant, or an office building, (3) in an abandoned building, (4) outside in a park, on the street, under a bridge or overhang, or on a rooftop, (5) in a subway or other public place underground, and (6) with someone you did not know because you needed a place to stay.” This item was adopted from Ringwalt and colleagues [4], who developed it as a means of assessing the prevalence of runaway and homelessness experiences for adolescents. For these analyses, we aggregated categories 2 through 5 to indicate having stayed in a “public place.” Since youth could select more than one homelessness experience, we used a two-pronged strategy to rule out multicollinearity. First, we assessed for youth who reported they had spent nights in multiple places. The results indicate that only 35 youth reported experiencing multiple types of homelessness. Second, Variance Inflation Factor was assessed to rule out potential multicollinearity between these categories. A threshold of  $VIF < 5$  and  $Tolerance > 0.10$  was adopted to rule out multicollinearity.

**Sexual Behaviors**—History of sexual activity was assessed by asking: “Have you ever had sexual intercourse (vaginal, anal, or oral sex)?” Condom use during last sexual intercourse was assessed among those who reported being sexually active with the question: “The last time you had sexual intercourse, did you or your partner use a condom?”

## Statistical Analyses

Data was analyzed using the statistical software SAS 9.1 (SAS Institute Inc., Cary, NC). Multivariate logistic regressions assessed the correlates of having any homelessness experience, specific types of homelessness experiences, sexual activity, and unprotected sex. The models in Table 2 assess demographic associations with any homelessness and types of homelessness experiences among those who have experienced homelessness. It is important to note that for the models assessing homelessness type in Table 2, homelessness categories are not mutually exclusive. The models in Table 3 assess the correlates of being sexually active and having had unprotected sex at last intercourse in the entire sample, and among the sub-sample of those who reported any kind of homelessness. For the final multivariate analysis (i.e., an outcome of unprotected sex), we limited the sample to participants who reported a history of sexual activity.

## Results

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. A majority of participants were Hispanic/Latino (71.5 %). Males and females were approximately evenly distributed in the sample, and 13% of the youth reported their sexual orientation as LGBTQ. Slightly less than one-quarter (23.8%) had experienced some type of homelessness in the past year. More than 10% of the respondents indicated they spent the night in a shelter or in a public place,

respectively, and nearly 6% indicated they spent the night with a stranger. About 40% indicated a history of sexual activity and, of these, 61% reported using a condom at last sexual intercourse.

Table 2 presents the multivariate logistic regression models assessing associations with any homeless experience and types of homelessness. Younger age (OR=0.90; 95% CI: 0.81–0.99), male gender (OR=1.94; 95% CI: 1.54–2.46), identifying as LGBTQ (OR=2.18; 95% CI: 1.59–2.99), and identifying as “other race” (OR=2.48; 95% CI: 1.67–3.70) were statistically significantly associated with any experience of homelessness in the past year. Among those who experienced any homelessness, staying with a stranger was more likely among LGBTQ (OR=2.38; 95% CI: 1.32–4.29) and Black/African American youth (OR=3.40; 95% CI: 1.67–6.91). Staying in a shelter was less likely among older students (OR=0.80; 95% CI: 0.67–0.96) and those who identified as LGBTQ (OR=0.44; 95% CI: 0.25–0.78). We found no statistically significant correlates of staying in a public place.

Table 3 presents the multivariate logistic regression models assessing correlates of being sexually active and having had unprotected sex at the last sexual encounter. Among the full sample, older age (OR=1.65; 95% CI: 1.50–1.81), being male (OR=1.62; 95% CI: 1.32–2.00), identifying as LGBTQ (OR=1.73; 95% CI: 1.27–2.36), Black/African American race (OR=1.42; 95% CI: 1.03–1.96), and having had a homelessness experience in the past year (OR=1.57; 95% CI: 1.23–2.01) were all significantly associated with an increased likelihood of being sexually active. Youth of “other races” were less likely (OR=0.59; 95% CI: 0.39–0.99) to have been sexually active compared to Hispanic/Latino youth. Among those who had experienced homelessness in the past year, older age (OR=1.50; 95% CI: 1.24–1.81) and having spent the night with a stranger (OR=3.36; 95% CI: 1.90–5.93) were significant predictors of being sexually active.

Among the full sample, unprotected sex at last sexual encounter was less likely among males (OR=0.57; 95% CI: 0.41–0.80) and more likely among LGBTQ youth (OR=1.87; 95% CI: 1.20–2.89). Among those who experienced homelessness, males were still less likely to have had unprotected sex at last sexual encounter (OR=0.48; 95% CI: 0.24–0.94), while those who stayed with a stranger (OR=3.10; 95% CI: 1.44–6.67) or in a public place (OR=2.61; 95% CI: 1.29–5.27) were more likely to have had unprotected sex at their last sexual encounter when compared to those whose homelessness experience had been in a shelter only.

## Discussion

There are several important findings to emerge from these results. As Ringwalt et al.’s [4] nationally representative study found with data collected 20 years ago, males continue to be more likely to experience homelessness. The racial and ethnic correlates of adolescent homelessness deserve further exploration, potentially in a larger sample of youth, as the current findings that “other races” are associated with increased odds of experiencing homelessness are relatively vague (we cannot parse out which of the “other” categories might be associated with homelessness due to small sample sizes).

As has been demonstrated in recent findings, LGBTQ youth also bear a disproportionate burden of homelessness relative to heterosexual youth [2,3]. Furthermore, it appears that sexual orientation is associated with risky kinds of homelessness experiences, as is Black/African American race. Staying with a stranger was more likely among Black/African American youth and those who identified as LGBTQ, while LGBTQ and older youth were less likely to have stayed in a shelter. Other research has suggested that LGBTQ youth may not feel welcome in shelters that primarily focus their services on heterosexual youth [5, 13]. Staying with a stranger exposes adolescents to greater threats of violence and victimization than shelter stays [4–6,9,11], and staying with a stranger may put young people at particular risk for sexual exploitation. This makes the over-representation of Black/African American and LGBTQ adolescents among those who stay with strangers especially troubling; these groups already experience social marginalization, and the risks associated with stranger-based homelessness experiences may be associated with increased victimization in these already vulnerable populations.

This study adds to prior literature by comparing adolescents' sexual risk behaviors between those who have experienced homelessness in the past year, versus those who have not, within the same population. In accordance with post hoc comparisons of homeless and housed adolescents [7,12], and community-based samples [16], adolescents in this sample with past-year homelessness experiences are more likely to report lifetime sexual activity. Not using condoms, however, was not associated with reporting homelessness experiences in the prior year, but rather with specific types of homeless experiences. It must be noted that our data did not allow us to assess if this last sexual encounter was during a homelessness episode. These results show a clustering of risk behaviors among Los Angeles adolescents, encompassing certain types of homelessness experiences in the past year and their sex behaviors.

The examination of adolescents who experienced homelessness provides insights into which adolescents experienced what type(s) of homelessness and whether they also reported condom use at their last sexual encounter. As has been seen in community-based samples of homeless youth, adolescents who stayed in a public place were more likely to have reported unprotected sex, relative to those youth who stayed in a shelter [9,10]. Strikingly, staying the night with a stranger was significantly associated with an increase in reports of both lifetime sexual activity and not using a condom at last intercourse, relative to adolescents whose homelessness experience in the past year was in a shelter. Again, we must stress that we do not know if this sexual encounter occurred while staying with a stranger, nor do we know if it involved exchange sex. Despite these limits of the data, what is clear is that the same adolescents who reported staying with a stranger in the past year also disproportionately reported being sexually active and not using a condom during their last sexual encounter.

The potential for associations between stranger stays and sexual exploitation is an area where further research is needed. As a supplemental study, this research was limited to a small number of sex risk questions, and did not assess for exchange sex. Future research should examine the specifics of sexual risk behavior in the context of specific homeless experiences, particularly stranger stays, to better understand whether sex risk occurred during homelessness experiences, and if homelessness is causally linked with sexual risk

behavior. A timeline follow back approach may assist in determining correlations between sex risk behaviors and homelessness experiences by identifying specific dates/periods of time when the adolescent was homeless and his/her sexual behaviors.

Other limitations exist in this study. As with any cross-sectional data, these data provide only associations and not causality. Response biases are minimized because this was an anonymous survey, however, social desirability bias among adolescents may also have led to under- or over-reporting of sex behaviors and homelessness experiences. For example, respondents may over-report condom use, as this is a socially desirable behavior, or over-report engagement in sex due to perceived adolescent social norms. There are a few limitations to our sexual risk behavior items. First, we know nothing about the last sexual encounter except for whether or not a condom was used. We do not know if this sex was during a homeless episode or not and we do not know if the partner was a casual partner or a boyfriend/girlfriend. Moreover, our sexual activity variable combines oral, vaginal, and anal intercourse, which limits the results as these sexual activities have varying levels of risk for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. Homelessness experiences may be under-reported because of social undesirability (though the question specifically did not include the word “homeless” in order to mitigate potential stigma), or because those students who are currently experiencing homelessness are less likely to be in school, and thus were not sampled for the survey. Homelessness experience responses may be over-reported if respondents did not understand the question. For instance, Ringwalt and colleagues [4] found in focus groups after conducting their survey that adolescents had difficulty with the public place, shelter, and stranger response options; for example, “spending a night” in a public place may simply be hanging out with friends late at night and then returning home, while a “shelter” was misconceived by some as squats where their friends met up, and staying with a stranger may truly be a friend of a friend which may not imply exchange sex or the opportunity for sexual coercion[4]. Moreover, these items do not address whether the youth was accompanied by a parent or not during the homelessness episode in question. Many of these items capture “runaway” experiences as well as chronic homelessness [4]. With these items alone, no distinction between the two states can be made and research has shown that most newly homeless youth return home after relatively short stays on the street [21]. These items, however limited, remain the best items used to estimate the prevalence of youth homelessness to date.

These results have important policy and programmatic implications. LGBTQ youth are more likely to spend the night in a public place or with a stranger, perhaps because of perceived and actual stigma associated with their sexual orientation. Because both of these experiences increase risks for violence and victimization (and both of these types of homelessness experiences are associated with unprotected sex in this study), schools should work to address the unique needs of LGBTQ youth who may be experiencing homelessness. Moreover, school-based sexual health programs should recognize the prevalence of sexual risk taking among adolescents who experience homelessness. Addressing the needs of homeless adolescents, especially LGBTQ adolescents, while in school is critical. Discussions of exchange sex should also be included in sexual health education programs. This can be addressed within the context of promoting healthy relationships and power dynamics/balances within relationships.

## Acknowledgements

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## Abbreviations

<b>YRBS</b>	Youth Risk Behavior Survey
<b>LGBTQ</b>	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning/unsure
<b>LAUSD</b>	Los Angeles Unified School District

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**Table 1**

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of LAUSD High School Students (N=1,839)

	<u>Mean</u>	<u>S.D.</u>
Age	15.3	1.2
Gender	<u>N</u>	<u>Weighted %</u>
Male	925	51.8
Female	901	48.1
Frequency missing	13	
Sexual Orientation		
Heterosexual	1,578	86.9
Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender/Questioning	211	13.0
Frequency missing	50	
Race		
White	103	8.7
Hispanic/Latino	1,315	71.5
Asian	96	3.8
Black/African American	80	11.8
Mixed Race	126	1.2
Pacific Islander	35	2.6
Native American	18	0.2
Frequency missing	66	
Any Homeless Experience	435	23.8
Type of Homeless Experience		
Shelter	192	10.4
Public Place	199	10.1
Stranger	89	5.6
Sexually Active		
Yes	717	40.5
No	1,079	58.6
Frequency missing	43	
Condom Use		
Yes	452	61.0
No	290	38.9
Frequency missing	45	

**Table 2**

Multivariate Logistic Regression of Any Homeless Experience and Homelessness Type among LAUSD Adolescents (weighted)

	Any Homeless Experience OR (95% CI)	Type of Homeless Experience (Of those who experienced past year homelessness)		
		Stranger OR (95% CI)	Shelter OR (95% CI)	Public Place OR (95% CI)
Age	0.90 (0.81–0.99)*	0.96 (0.78–1.18)	0.80 (0.67–0.96)*	1.11 (0.94–1.32)
Gender (Male=1)	1.94 (1.54–2.46)**	1.67 (0.99–2.81)	0.86 (0.56–1.30)	0.89 (0.59–1.34)
Sexual Orientation (LGBTQ=1)	2.18 (1.59–2.99)**	2.38 (1.32–4.29)**	0.44 (0.25–0.78)**	1.30 (0.76–2.22)
Race (Hispanic/Latino=1)				
White	0.88 (0.58–1.33)	1.37 (0.59–3.18)	1.27 (0.61–2.67)	0.75 (0.35–1.59)
Black/African American	0.86 (0.60–1.24)	3.40 (1.67–6.91)**	0.49 (0.23–1.05)	0.50 (0.24–1.03)
Other Race	2.48 (1.67–3.70)**	0.70 (0.31–1.59)	1.37 (0.74–2.53)	1.22 (0.67–2.23)
N in Final Model	1,736	406	406	406
–2 log likelihood	1826.70	411.69	540.24	552.09
R Square	0.04	0.07	0.05	0.02

\* p < 0.05,

\*\* p < 0.01

**Table 3**

Multivariate Logistic Regression of being Sexually Active and Engaging in Unprotected Sex at Last Sexual Encounter among LAUSD Adolescents (weighted)

	Sexually Active		Unprotected Sex	
	Full Sample OR (95% CI)	Homeless Sample OR (95% CI)	Full Sample OR (95% CI)	Homeless Sample OR (95% CI)
Age	1.65 (1.50–1.81)**	1.50 (1.24–1.81)**	1.13 (0.98–1.31)	1.21 (0.92–1.59)
Gender (Male=1)	1.62 (1.32–2.00)**	1.26 (0.81–1.96)	0.57 (0.41–0.80)**	0.48 (0.24–0.94)*
Sexual Orientation (LGBTQ=1)	1.73 (1.27–2.36)**	0.74 (0.41–1.34)	1.87 (1.20–2.89)**	1.54 (0.69–3.43)
Race (Hispanic/Latino=1)				
White	0.98 (0.68–1.42)	0.56 (0.25–1.23)	1.20 (0.68–2.13)	1.65 (0.45–6.09)
Black/African American	1.42 (1.03–1.96)*	1.93 (0.88–4.23)	1.10 (0.69–1.75)	1.01 (0.38–2.66)
Other Race	0.59 (0.39–0.99)**	0.60 (0.32–1.12)	1.02 (0.52–2.01)	1.21 (0.42–3.47)
Any Homeless Experience	1.57 (1.23–2.01)**	---	1.03 (0.72–1.49)	---
Type of Homeless Experience (Shelter as Referent)				
Stranger	---	3.36 (1.90–5.93)**	---	3.10 (1.44–6.67)**
Public Place	---	1.18 (0.76–1.83)	---	2.61 (1.29–5.27)**
N in Final Model	1,680	392	662	183
–2 log likelihood	2273.58	548.825	888.488	248.435
R Square	0.1017	0.1246	0.0376	0.1211

\* p < 0.05,

\*\* p < 0.01