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Alicyn Romprey
University of Southern Maine, alicyn.romprey@maine.edu

Johanna Baker
University of Southern Maine

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Examining the Challenges and Protective Factors of Women Experiencing Homelessness

Alicyn Romprey & Johanna Baker
Advisor: Jennifer First, PhD
Department of Social Work

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE
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Abstract

The homeless population is a diverse community with many unique complexities. Prior research has identified that while there are homeless services that exist for general needs, women experiencing homelessness have unique needs that require specialized care due to the complexity of their experiences. The intention of this study was to gather insight into the challenges and protective factors among women experiencing homelessness. Researchers conducted a thematic analysis of eight in-person, semi-structured qualitative interviews in an urban community in the northeast with women who have been experiencing homelessness for at least 30 days. Common themes of challenges included: negative childhood experiences; isolation from peers; and family, sex work and trafficking and substance use. Common themes of protective factors included: relationships with case management providers; isolation from unwanted behaviors, support groups; and employment. This research is intended to benefit and improve the delivery of social services supporting women experiencing homelessness and to inform future practice for service providers.

Background

The gap in literature in regards to women experiencing homelessness, and the fact that many studies are more than a decade old, draws attention to the fact that there is more work to be done involving this specific population. The female homeless population requires special attention and uniquely designed intervention services as their experiences and causes of homelessness differ from the general population (Beijer, U., et. al., 2015). This specific population of the homeless community would benefit greatly from focused research into the unique challenges women experiencing homelessness face on a daily basis. This specific study had the intention of examining the self-identified challenges and subsequent protective factors of women currently experiencing homelessness in order to further contribute valuable information to future practice and improve existing services.

Research Questions

Due to the unique needs of women experiencing homelessness, like increased risks of violence, victimization and co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders, the intention of this study is to gather insight into the challenges and protective factors among women experiencing homelessness.

Q1: What are the challenges of women experiencing homelessness

Q2: What factors help protect women experiencing homelessness?

Methods

- Eight participants were selected based on the inclusion criteria for the study - i.e. are over the age of 18, are currently homeless and have been for 30 consecutive days, and identify as female.

- Eight in-person, semi-structured interviews took place in secluded settings chosen by each participant.

- Interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed

- Data was/were coded and analyzed using a thematic analysis to uncover underlying themes of commonality
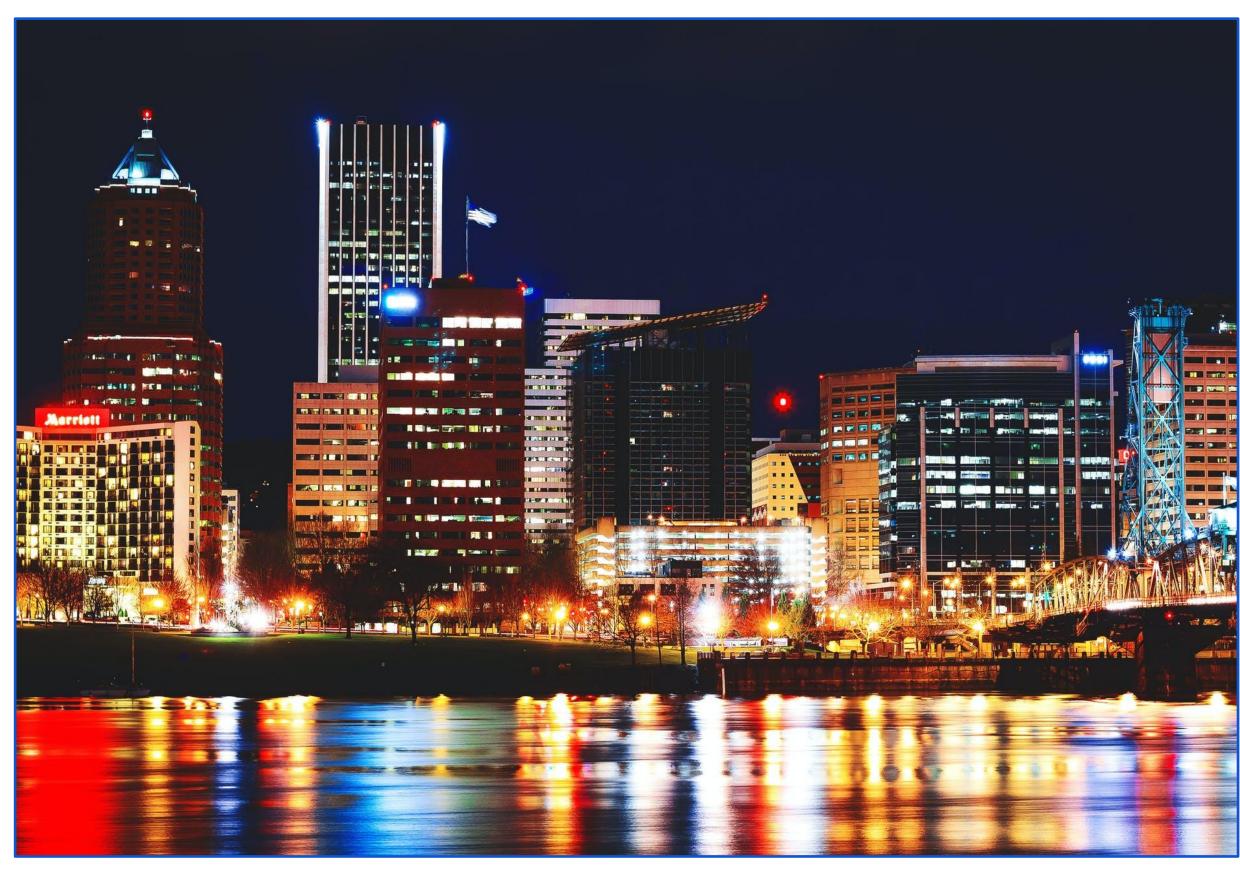

Figure 1. Word Map of Transcribed Interviews
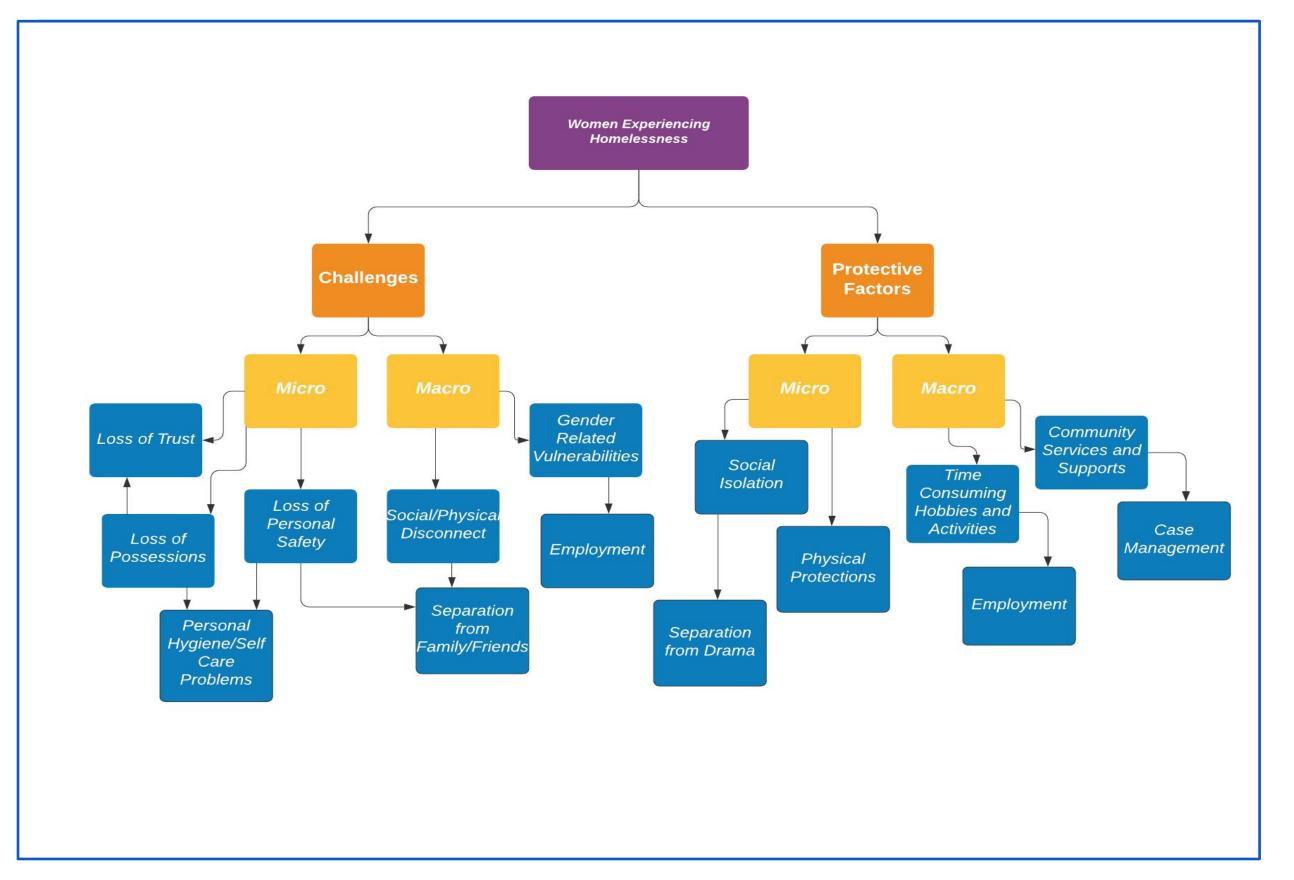

Figure 2. Downtown Portland, ME

Figure 3. Thematic Analysis - Concept Map

Results

Challenges

- **Trust Issues, Loss of Possessions, and Loss of Personal Safety:** Six participants discussed trust issues between other clients, as well as staff members at various agencies, and all eight participants discussed the common theme of stealing among clients.
- **Family Disconnect:** A significant commonality between all eight participants of this study was the report of family disconnect. Each participant reported little to no connection with family members since becoming homeless.
- **Gender-Related Vulnerabilities:** A common theme identified by six participants in this study were various vulnerabilities related to gender and status. One participant in this study discussed her challenges with isolation, both intentional and accidental, and how that isolation translates to challenges with personal safety. Participants of this study reported that gender is often viewed as a vulnerability and a threat to personal safety. Additionally, two participants reported difficulties securing employment due to perceived gender discrepancies. Within the homeless community studied, clients frequently engage with local day labor agencies in an effort to earn money and build resumes.

Protective Factors

- **Social Isolation:** Five out of the eight participants stated they tend to stay away from other individuals in the community for a variety of reasons. One participant shared she keeps to herself to avoid the distribution and consumption of drugs and alcohol, while others isolate to avoid drama and to protect themselves physically.
- **Physical Protections:** Three participants mentioned they would utilize physical harm if a confrontational situation were to transpire to protect themselves.
- **Time Consuming Activities:** Three participants shared they participate in specific activities as a way to "consume their time"; offer a distraction from their current environment, and an escape from possible drama. These activities include reading and finding employment/working.
- **Satisfaction with Community Supports:** All participants were able to identify support in the homeless community, including case managers, peer support workers, suboxone counselors, peers, and facilities at surrounding services.
- **Maintaining Positive Attitudes:** The researchers had also identified humor as a protective factor. All participants utilized humor as they explored their personal experiences.

Conclusions

Many past research studies have carefully examined the challenges and protective factors related to the homeless population as a whole and what characterizes their unique needs. However, a noticeable gap in the literature was found in regards to the specific subpopulation of women in the homeless community. Through various studies, results have demonstrated many co-occurring factors of homelessness, in addition to a variety of limitations that women in the homeless population experience. These factors contribute to the unique characteristics of the female homeless population (Beijer, U., et. al., 2015). After a thematic analysis of the data with a specific focus of examining the challenges and protective factors of women in the homeless community, a commonality of similar themes and life experiences were described by each participant. Analysis of the data found that multiple similar challenges exist among women currently experiencing homelessness. These challenges include broken social connections, family disconnect, loss of possessions, difficulties with employment and other gender-related vulnerabilities that contribute increased amounts of stress and add to the barriers they are already facing. While there were many challenges discussed, participants also identified several similar protective factors that helped them manage stress and take care of their own well-being. These factors include social and physical isolation, physical protection, engaging with community support and other available resources, finding daily activities and hobbies available to them, engaging with community support and other available resources, and finding ways to maintain positive attitudes while experiencing daily trauma.

This study demonstrates that women in the homeless community are resilient and possess a unique array of traits and coping strategies given the daily challenges they face. Future research would contribute to identifying additional needs of this minority population and address vital solutions. In addition to future research, an increase of state and federal funding for community resources would employ more staff and fund more services to meet the needs of this population. It is important for social workers, providers and clinical practitioners to be introduced to these unique complexities through education and learning opportunities. These findings support the established social services currently being utilized as well as the need to continue and expand such services as the homeless population grows.

References: Available Upon Request