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## The lived experience of being a homeless college student: a qualitative interpretive meta-synthesis (QIMS)

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### ABSTRACT

Heightened awareness that college students are facing homelessness points to the need for more research on this vulnerable subpopulation of emerging adults. The study, which draws on the social inequalities framework, uses qualitative interpretive meta-synthesis (QIMS) to develop a comprehensive understanding of the lived experience of college students who are homeless. The sample consisted of 60 college students among seven studies. The QIMS revealed four themes, including Trauma, Priority Hierarchy, Homeless (situational) Identity, and Resilience. Definition recommendations are proposed and policy and practice implications discussed.

### KEYWORDS

Homeless students; homelessness policy; qualitative methods; college students; qualitative interpretive meta synthesis (QIMS)

## Introduction

Historically, the college years have been a transition time from adolescence to adulthood. “Emerging adulthood” is a new term being used to describe young adults through their twenties who have struggled to attain full adult responsibilities and stability (Arnett 2000). A changing economic landscape has been blamed for this new life phase. Emerging adults without family support and resources are often left struggling for survival in an already unstable phase of life — circumstances that can result in homelessness (Arnett 2006). The purpose of this study was to use qualitative interpretive meta-synthesis (QIMS) to develop a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of college students who are homeless, as no such synthesis previously existed. Results may expose gaps for future researchers to bridge and could point to implications for policy and practice.

A spotlight is now being shined on food and housing insecurity among college students, though these hardships may very well have been present — but out of view — for quite some time. Rising tuition has outpaced financial aid, leaving less money for living expenses (Baum et al. 2013). Recent studies have found rates of food insecurity in college students ranging from 14% to as high as 59% (Crutchfield and Maguire 2018; Freudenberg et al. 2011; Gaines et al. 2014; Hughes et al. 2011; Patton-Lopez et al. 2014) — much higher than the national average of 12.3% (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2017).

The literature on college student homelessness is emerging. Few articles explore the lived experiences of this population, however. For example, the qualitative research in this area has mostly been conducted through dissertations and theses (e.g., Adame-

Smith 2016; Ambrose 2016; Crutchfield 2012; Geis 2015; Maurer 2017.). Most of what has been published in the quantitative literature is purely descriptive, lacking causes and consequences. A few studies have highlighted housing difficulties among college students. For example, in a study of community college students, Goldrick-Rab, Broton, and Eisenberg (2015) reported that 13% had been homeless in the last year. A 2011 study of undergraduate students at the City University of New York (CUNY) found that 42% of students experienced at least one form of housing insecurity, such as inability to pay rent, eviction, or inability to gain admittance to a shelter (Tsui et al. 2011). A national study by Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, and Hernandez (2017) of more than 33,000 students from 70 community colleges found that half of the students were housing insecure and 13% had experienced homelessness. Additionally, there is some literature that focuses on analyzing the impact of higher education policies on college students who experience homelessness (see, for example, Crutchfield, Chambers, and Duffield 2016; Ringer 2015).

Measuring homelessness in college students is difficult because there is no standard definition. The U.S. Housing and Urban Development (HUD) definition of homelessness includes staying in shelters, institutions, or places not designed for sleeping (US Code, Title 42, Chapter 119,310 Subchapter I). The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act applies to Kindergarten (K) through 12th grade and expands on the HUD definition, including people who share housing due to a lack of their own, couch-surf, resort to camping, stay in motels, live in cars, or make do with substandard housing. To further complicate matters, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) collects information on unaccompanied homeless youth, but it is designed to determine dependency, and it therefore does not include students who are over 24 years old, married, on active military duty, foster youth, or veterans (National Center for Homeless Education, n.d.). Given the difficulty in measuring the population, it is highly likely that the number of homeless college students is underreported.

Our study was guided by the lens of social inequality, taking into account that resources are distributed unequally across our society. Those students whose families can afford college have the luxury of participating in clubs and focusing on their studies rather than working. Students with fewer family resources rely on financial aid, working long hours (Bozick 2007), and making hard choices, such as not buying books, food, or housing in order to pay tuition (Broton and Goldrick-Rab 2016); they may end up withdrawing from school altogether (Oseguera and Rhee 2009; Terriquez and Gurantz 2014). Given the lack of qualitative research on homelessness in college students, this QIMS aimed to develop a synergistic understanding of the central phenomenon: lived experiences of college students who are homeless.

## Materials and methods

A qualitative interpretive meta-synthesis (QIMS) was completed to synthesize a group of studies on the related topic of homeless college students and to enhance understanding of these students' lived experiences. Synthesis of quantitative research is a well-established practice in social work and related fields, however, only recently have researchers begun synthesizing qualitative research studies (see, for example, Barnett, Bowers, and Bowers 2016; Frank and Aguirre 2013; Smith and Aguirre 2012). Utilizing QIMS results in greater understanding, from the narrower findings of one study to a web of knowledge gleaned from multiple studies (Aguirre and Bolton 2014). The web of knowledge

creates a synergy among the included studies and provides a broader, deeper understanding of the local phenomenon, yielding practice, research, and policy implications. It is typical in a QIMS to include an exhaustive sample of the literature including gray (i.e., dissertations and theses) and scholarly research (Aguirre and Bolton 2014). QIMS involves four central components, including: Role of Authors (instrumentation), Sampling the Literature, Data Extraction, and Translation of Themes.

### *Role of authors (instrumentation)*

Instrumentation in a QIMS involves acknowledging the credibility of the authors as a form of triangulation that will confirm the rigor of the research, particularly as the author(s) are the main instruments in a qualitative study. Documenting credibility is an important first step for researchers to set aside their previous experiences through the use of epoch (bracketing) (Moustakas 1994) in order to uncover and examine a new phenomenon.

#### *First author*

I originally discovered a passion for addressing the social injustice experienced by the many youth who found themselves homeless due to homophobia and transphobia on the part of their families. Since then, I have continued to collaborate and partner with homeless youth and young adults through research and advocacy projects. I acknowledge my place of privilege, particularly as I have never experienced homelessness. I choose to bracket my previous experiences so as to not overly influence my interpretation and analysis of the data in the current research on college students experiencing homelessness. I acknowledge this QIMS as an opportunity to expand on the limited knowledge base related to the lived experiences of homeless college students.

#### *Second author*

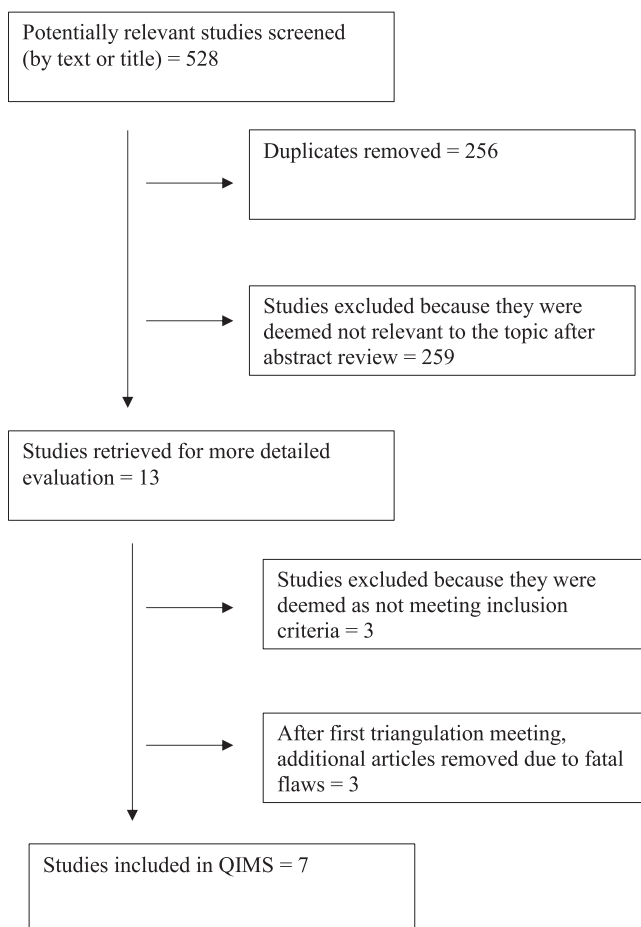
As a former tribal child welfare social worker, I have observed poverty and homelessness, especially among foster children as they transition out of care. This has impacted me deeply, even now as an academic observing college age students who lack the resources to maintain housing and continue their education. My previous research has explored food insecurity in students and the use of food pantries on college campuses. While I am aware of my experiences working with food and housing insecurity, I bracket my previous work with the goal of ensuring that I do not make the same conclusions by overgeneralizing. Together, my related field and academic experiences allow me a unique perspective from which to further this research.

### *Sampling the literature*

We utilized purposive sampling to identify, select, and include qualitative research relevant to our topic of interest for this QIMS. For the sampling process we conducted a title search using the following databases (Google Scholar and EBSCO Host, including Academic Search Premier, Anthropology Plus, Communication and Mass Media Complete, Education full text, ERIC, General Science full text, Humanities full text, Library info and technology abstracts, OmniFile full text, Philosophers Index, Primary search, Readers guide full text, Social Sciences full text, American Doctoral Dissertations, and

Child Development and Adolescent studies). The keywords used in the searches included “homeless,” “college student,” and “qualitative.” These were expanded using words and terms such as “housing insecure,” “post-secondary,” “phenomenology,” “grounded theory,” “case study,” “ethnography,” and “narrative.” The quorum chart depicted in [Figure 1](#) documents a summary of the retrieval and elimination process. To be included, studies had to be one of the following: a peer-reviewed journal article, book, or thesis or dissertation published before or during May 2018. For inclusion, the population under exploration had to consist specifically of college students, and the study focus had to relate to those who had experienced being homeless at some point since attending college.

The initial search yielded approximately 528 articles with any of the terms noted above either in the text or title; 256 duplicates were removed, and we then scanned each article’s title and abstract for inclusion criteria. A total of 259 studies were removed for not meeting inclusion criteria. For example, the removed studies included youth (not attending college), young adults (not attending college), foster youth, former youth who were homeless before attending college, policy papers that did not include data, and papers describing homeless programs. After fully reviewing the 13 potentially relevant articles, only 10 fully



**Figure 1.** Quorum chart.

met the inclusion criteria. Finally, after the first triangulation meeting with authors and a closer look at the sample, three additional articles were removed because they did not fully include the specific criteria or contained fatal flaws. As described by Dixon-Woods et al. (2006), fatal flaws include lack of triangulation, questionable trustworthiness, or lack of theoretical tradition in either data collection or analysis.

The final sample of studies consisted of seven articles that fit the following parameters: (1) currently enrolled college students who experienced homelessness while attending college (2) rigorous qualitative methodology, and (3) representative quotes from key informants. While seven studies may appear to comprise too small a sampling, other published studies using the same method (see for example, Aguirre and Bolton 2014; Barnett, Bowers, and Bowers 2016; Smith and Aguirre 2012) found between four and nine articles that met their inclusion criteria. The final number of participants expanded from the four to 20 participants in individual studies to a total of 60 homeless college students represented in this QIMS. Table 1 lists the included articles, type of manuscript (article, dissertation, thesis etc.), type of qualitative methodology, sample size, and descriptive data included by original authors.

## Results

### Definitions

Definitions of homelessness varied across the seven articles. The McKinney-Vento Act definition was used by four studies (Adame-Smith 2016; Crutchfield 2012; Hallett and Freas 2017; Maurer 2017). Ambrose (2016) allowed each participant to self-identify as homeless and fit them into categories including: couch surfer, living in a car, or sleeping outside. Gupton (2017) considered participants homeless if they had lived on the streets or in a shelter for at least a one-month period over the past two years or said they were currently homeless. Finally, Geis (2015) used a definition by Henry, Cortes, and Morris (2013, 2): “a homeless person is defined as an individual without permanent housing who may live on the streets; stay in a shelter, mission, single room occupancy facilities, abandoned building or vehicle; or in any other unstable or non-permanent situation.” While the latter three studies did not specifically identify the McKinney-Vento Act as the source of their definition, authors and participants used similar circumstances to identify homelessness among study participants.

### Data extraction

Themes identified in the studies were documented using the language presented by the original authors, in order to maintain the integrity of each study. Table 2 lists the original themes from the included studies.

## Synthesis and translation of themes

### Theme analysis

Following theme extraction, original themes and quotes from the studies were analyzed using a synthesis approach described by Noblit and Hare (1998). All researchers

**Table 1.** Studies included in the sample.

Authors, publication year, and discipline	Type of manuscript	Tradition/data collection method as described by original authors	N	Age, race/ethnicity and gender demographics as indicated by original authors	2 year or 4 year students	Region of US	Rural or urban
Adame-Smith (2016) Psychology	Dissertation	Standardized interviews, phenomenological approach, journals	8	18–24 4 female, 4 male	4	South	Not identified
Ambrose (2016) Educational Psychology and Research	Dissertation	Unstructured interviews, reflective writings	9	18–47 3 female, 6 male 2 African American, 6 Caucasian, 1 multiple ethnicities	2	Northwest	Urban
Crutchfield (2012) Education and Leadership	Dissertation	Semi-structured interviews	20	18–24 14 female, 6 male 2 Filipina, 3 unknown, 6 Black, 1 multi-racial, 2 Latina/o, 4 White, 1 Iranian, 1 Korean	2	West	Urban
Geis (2015) Educational administration	Dissertation	2 semi-structured interviews	7	3 female, 4 male	2 and 4	Central Plains/ Midwest	Urban
Gupton (2017) Not identified	Peer- reviewed article	Interviews	4	17–21 2 female, 2 male 4 African American	2	South West	Urban
Hallett and Freas (2017) Education	Peer- reviewed article	Semi-structured interviews, narrative data analysis	8	18–33 4 female, 4 male 2 white, 2 African American, 4 Latino/a	2	West	Urban
Maurer (2017) Student affairs	Master's thesis	Structured interviews, phenomenological approach	4	21–22 3 female, 1 male 3 White 1 African American	4	Midwest	Not identified

analyzed articles individually and then met several times to triangulate during the theme extraction phase. Data synthesis (synergistic understanding) followed theme extraction throughout multiple meetings with all researchers until we reached saturation across themes. The synergistic analysis process revealed four themes including: Trauma, Priority Hierarchy, Homeless (situational) Identity, and Resilience. Table 3 reveals the synergized themes and indicates what article and original themes contributed to the new theme.

**Table 2.** Themes extracted from original studies.

Article	Themes
Adame-Smith (2016)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Struggles</li> <li>2. Determination</li> <li>3. Choosing education, pivotal point</li> </ol>
Ambrose (2016)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Meeting basic needs</li> <li>2. Emotional stress</li> <li>3. Isolation</li> </ol>
Crutchfield (2012)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I'm a different type of homeless person</li> <li>2. The cliff</li> <li>3. The safety harness</li> </ol>
Geis (2015)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Students hide homeless identity</li> <li>2. Small support groups, mainly outside of college</li> <li>3. Living situations varied dramatically</li> <li>4. Determination to continue education gave them hope</li> </ol>
Gupton (2017)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Largely invisible population</li> <li>2. Seek support, but not from institution</li> <li>3. Using post-secondary education to provide stability</li> </ol>
Hallett and Freas (2017)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. College student experiences while homeless</li> <li>2. Navigating college while homeless</li> <li>3. Opportunities to support students</li> </ol>
Maurer (2017)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Caring people at the university</li> <li>2. Challenging academic programs that made them happy</li> <li>3. Strong friendships</li> <li>4. Barriers</li> <li>5. Factors influencing completion</li> <li>6. Resiliency</li> </ol>

### Theme 1: Trauma

The first theme, Trauma, related to how students experienced trauma due to being homeless, as well as to past traumas that led to being homeless. Thus, this theme had two sub-themes: Stress from Current Situation and Past Traumas.

Exploring the sub-theme Stress from Current Situation revealed that for many students, relying on temporary residences was a source of further trauma for them, with safety/trusting strangers arising as an issue. For example, Hallett and Freas (2017) identified two participants who described finding parties on social media as a way to obtain a place to sleep overnight, in addition to registering for dating websites to get free meals from dates. Another participant in Crutchfield (2012, 137) noted feeling overwhelmed by balancing typical college expectations with basic needs:

I never knew that going to college would be so difficult. I just thought that if I ended up at a university, I would have less to worry about. I don't have to worry about housing so much, I don't have to worry about food so much. I especially don't have to worry about a place to study; I can find a place to study. But here [in shelter] I've got to worry about all three things at the same time including my future including all the other things you worry about as a college student. It's not easy because along with the things you have to do in college and the way that college is evolving, you have to deal with your own personal situation.



**Table 3.** Translation of themes.

New theme	Subthemes	Extracted theme with authors
Trauma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stress from current situation</li> <li>• Past traumas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• College student experiences while homeless; Navigating college while homeless (Hallett and Freas 2017)</li> <li>• Emotional stress (Ambrose 2016)</li> <li>• Struggles (Adame-Smith 2016)</li> <li>• Barriers (Maurer 2017)</li> <li>• The cliff (Crutchfield 2012)</li> </ul>
Priority Hierarchy		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Navigating college while homeless (Hallett and Freas 2017)</li> <li>• Meeting basic needs (Ambrose 2016)</li> <li>• Living situations varied dramatically (Geis 2015)</li> <li>• Barriers (Maurer 2017)</li> <li>• The cliff (Crutchfield 2012)</li> </ul>
Homeless (Situational) Identity		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Isolation (Ambrose 2016)</li> <li>• I'm a different type of homeless person (Crutchfield 2012)</li> <li>• College student experiences while homeless (Hallett and Freas 2017)</li> <li>• Largely invisible population (Gupton 2017)</li> <li>• Students hide homeless identity (Geis 2015)</li> <li>• Barriers (Maurer 2017)</li> </ul>
Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determination</li> <li>• Supports</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meeting basic needs; Isolation (Ambrose 2016)</li> <li>• Determination; Choosing education, pivotal point (Adame-Smith 2016)</li> <li>• The safety harness; The cliff (Crutchfield 2012)</li> <li>• Resiliency; Factors influencing completion; Caring people at the university; Strong friendships; Challenging academic programs that made them happy (Maurer 2017)</li> <li>• College student experiences while homeless; College student experiences while homeless; Opportunities to support students (Hallett and Freas 2017)</li> <li>• Using post-secondary education to provide stability; Seek support, but not from institution (Gupton 2017)</li> <li>• Small support groups, mainly outside of college; Determination to continue education gave them hope (Geis 2015)</li> </ul>

Emotional stress was also described by participants in Ambrose (2016), Adame-Smith (2016), and Hallett and Freas (2017), including feelings of being overwhelmed, depression, anxiety, parental abandonment, being homeless because of choosing education, and the toll taken by the lack of coordinated services at the university. This stress led participants across studies to contemplate unhealthy coping skills that could lead to negative consequences. For example, one participant said, “I was ready to just you know pop as many sleeping pills and just, you know, forget about it” (Ambrose 2016, 81). Participants in Hallett and Freas (2017, 9) noted their fear that if they left school other issues would occur, such as incarceration: “If I don’t go through this, then, I’ll end up being in prison or in jail. I don’t want to be that type of statistic.”

Experiences prior to attending college led to the second sub-theme, Past Traumas. Participants in Crutchfield (2012), Maurer (2017), and Hallett and Freas (2017) studies described past traumatic life events including death, loss, separation, teen pregnancy, abuse, and other mental health challenges. These often overlapped and contributed to eventual homelessness. One participant said, “cuz in the past I wasn’t really kicked out, I was thrown out” (Crutchfield 2012, 121), while another described a

pregnancy as a significant life event that set them back: “That really took a drain on me. ... I didn’t do it, get pregnant on purpose ... obviously I wanted to have kids eventually.” (Maurer 2017, 31). Finally, the trauma experienced by a former foster youth in the Hallett and Freas (2017, 8) study led to a new epiphany: “When I got kicked out at one o’clock in the morning, that’s when I realized this is not going to be my life, I’ve got to do something.” Trauma and stress experienced previously and currently by the participants in the seven studies were motivating factors to continue in school for a better life.

### *Theme 2: Priority hierarchy*

The theme Priority Hierarchy relates to the constant need for homeless students to make basic choices such as where to sleep, how to eat, and how to manage working multiple jobs. The focus devoted to meeting such basic needs made it difficult to focus on school; in these situations, participants felt they could have done better academically had their attention not been on simply surviving from day to day. Residential uncertainty required significant time and attention that detracted from focusing on school, self-care, and other activities. One participant described the difficulties as “finding time to get work done between trying to keep myself alive” (Hallett and Freas 2017, 8), while another stated, “I would not be able to focus on class, my grades went down, I wasn’t able to pass English Writing 101 because of the distraction.” Another student noted, “It’s kind of hard to study when you’re like starving” (Ambrose 2016, 76).

Maurer (2017) discussed housing during school breaks as another pressing issue faced by homeless students. One student in that study said: “Over breaks I would live in my car. Nobody knew, which was awesome. I went to truck stops for showers” (30). Beyond breaks, students in the Geis (2015) study noted that they varied their living situations in order to meet their most basic needs. One student, for example, said: “Yeah. I use it (local shelter) to eat, to sleep, to change clothes” (46). Another noted:

I’ve got a friend who will let me sleep on the couch on the weekends. He doesn’t care because he’s not really home. So, he’ll let me stay over and that way I get rest and can power through my notes and get ready for the week. Then like I said for the week I’m just kind of wandering about and when school opens up, I usually go in early, and I’ll sleep in the student center for a few hours before class. That’s where I can get to catch up. My sleep is erratic. I kind of bounced around doing the same thing I’m doing now, just going in early to school and stay late. Get sleep when I can and usually just find a place where I can stay all night. Sometimes it’s a gas station. (48–49)

Another dynamic faced in the priority hierarchy was balancing school with the requirements of shelter programs (e.g., support groups and job searching), which students felt could be a hindrance. One participant in a shelter program said,

Like sometimes I’ll be upstairs, like on a certain night, and if I’m not at the library, I’m using the computer upstairs or something. They’ll be like, oh life skills, you need to come to life skills tonight. So that’s one of the things I haven’t been going to. And they’re kind of like starting to get on my case about it. (Crutchfield 2012, 136)

For homeless college students in these studies, staying focused on school work was naturally challenging due to the need to balance multiple priorities and the dichotomy between basic needs and academic work.

### *Theme 3: Homeless (situational) identity*

The theme of Homeless (situational) Identity pertained to students who either embraced their homeless situation as a temporary identity laying context for their daily process or something different. Given that being homeless was a situation faced by all the students in the studies, some were comfortable connecting with others and services, while others were not. Similarly, some students chose to be more visible in their situation while others were not.

Participants in the studies found themselves in a paradoxical situation: they felt different from other college students because of their living situations and, in many cases, different from other homeless individuals because they were attending college. This led to participants finding themselves in a balancing act of choosing to connect with or disconnect from other people in similar situations (college or homeless), as well as with services in the community and on campus. Hallett and Freas (2017), Ambrose (2016), and Crutchfield (2012) all included students who described a life defined by instability and who hid their homelessness from college friends and campus employees. One student said: “You can’t really tell people [that you’re homeless]. Who wants to be with somebody that’s homeless?” (Ambrose 2016, 87). Another described their sense of identity in this situation:

I look at the next homeless man and they’re not like me. I see the next homeless man, he’s walking, he’s broke, he’s on the streets and I’m not like him. I’m a different type of homeless person. When I say different type, not just in where I’m living but also in mindset. I haven’t given up. I haven’t decided that it’s too late for me. (Crutchfield 2012, 113)

Another student mentioned:

I’m 20, it’s sad, and I don’t have friends or anything. In school, I wasn’t able to be a social butterfly because I was embarrassed of my situation. That’s another thing. I mean I can’t really go out. Or, ‘Where do you live? Can we pick you up?’ Like, I was really antisocial and it really took a toll or whatever. I’m 20 now and I’m going to try to do it this semester. Like I’m going to try to build relationships because it’s sad. (Crutchfield 2012, 114)

A lack of connection to others and to university services often led to invisibility for some of the participants. Homeless participants in Gupton (2017), Geis (2015), and Maurer (2017) found that they could blend in with other students at college. Becoming invisible became a coping skill to relieve the stress of homelessness. Participants avoided services, such as food pantries, because of the need to blend in. One student described hiding his homeless identity because of a fear that people would treat him differently:

Because it’s a thing where people sort of back away, the guy’s homeless. Don’t want to associate with that guy, you might be homeless. Like it’s a disease or something. What it is, is a social disease. The social disease that ruins you. (Geis 2015, 41)

### *Theme 4: Resilience*

The theme of Resilience was a major one, incorporating all seven studies. It involved how students survived and thrived in spite of the many challenges and traumas they faced during and even following their homelessness. The theme of resilience included internal and external factors and revealed two sub-themes: Determination and Supports.

The sub-theme Determination involved internal factors related to the participants as they experienced being a student without housing. This sub-theme comprised two categories: Independence and School as a Way Out.

### *Independence*

Many participants felt that although they should be able to be independent, because they were homeless, they had somehow failed. One student said:

We kind of have this broader cultural idea of, you know, when you're 18 you're an adult. So when I felt uncomfortable, it was not ... it was my realization that I can't do this on my own, but thinking I'm supposed to be able to without people like offering me support. So, it, just felt uncomfortable like I was putting it a lot on me like I was failing. (Ambrose 2016, 93)

Another stated that it was important to stay in school despite being homeless in order to prove themselves: "A lot of people gave up on me. So, in a way I almost felt like I had something to prove, not only to people who gave up on me, but me as well. I was getting my education one way or another" (Adame-Smith 2016, 148). Students described a tension between needing help but believing they shouldn't get help, or not wanting to disclose homelessness to get help:

Well, you can't really ask much of any of that ... You have to work with it. So, you have to make it so that you're distant and detached. You've got to detach and distance yourself to make it work. So, don't ask others. It's all on me. (Crutchfield 2012, 160)

Some believed colleges simply didn't have services or supports that could help them.

### *School as a way out*

In most of the studies, college was seen as a way out of poverty and homelessness, which contributed significantly to participants' determination to earn a degree and gave them hope for the future:

Just the fact that I know I'm going to go somewhere with it if I keep to it. Since I'm in the place that I'm in, it's just more motivation when I know I got to do this for this reason. "Cause I'm tired of being stuck in this place." (Geis 2015, 50)

College was seen by participants as a guarantee of future financial stability: "I wanna be able to like have a salary for my kids and like you know be able to provide for my family and be able to have a house of my own" (Ambrose 2016, 64). Another said: "How am I going to be successful or how am I going to even have stability [without a degree]" (Ambrose 2016, 65). Participants knew that if they failed in college, life would be worse and this drove their determination to stay enrolled.

The sub-theme Supports comprised two categories: Resources and Social Support. Obtaining resources located within the campus and surrounding communities was a challenge for many homeless students (Hallett and Freas 2017). If, however, they knew about or were able to access available resources, they found opportunities to improve their situations. Participants described services as fragmented, with a lack of coordination across campus; they were often forced to disclose homelessness to multiple people to obtain services. In the Geis (2015) study, some found that even when they did disclose homelessness and expected help, they did not receive any:

Now that I think about it, it is kind of funny that I put homeless on my transcript—my FAFSA and they haven't said or done anything. I think that's odd now that I think about it. That's kind of rude. (42)

Participants in the Gupton (2017) study did not seek support, or did not know what resources existed. One person in the Crutchfield (2012) study said:

Actually, I actually didn't find out about a lot of programs until I was filling out my UC application, and then the UC application asked, "Did you participate in this program, did you participate in this program, did you participate in A, B, C, D, E, F, or G," and then I found out about the program. Oh, that program was available? Okay, so UC's telling me what my own school [college] is not telling me. (139)

While resources were challenging to access, they also offered opportunities.

School offered immediate relief to some: "School was a relief because it was a place where I could forget about my problems for a moment," one asserted (Hallett and Freas 2017, 7). College provided access to basic needs such as bathrooms, showers, and lockers. It also gave students structure, purpose, and a place to "be." One person said:

[College] was actually really helpful. One of the main challenges of not having [a home] is just finding places to be, and I had places to be. I mean, I always had a place to be until the building closed at 10:00, so I could be here working on homework. Had Wi-Fi, and things to do. It was like weirdly expensive being homeless because if you wanna sit somewhere, you'd pay for coffee, pay for beer. Just like to be somewhere you have to generally pay, but I had like a purpose and stuff. (Ambrose 2016, 67)

Gupton (2017) also suggested that participants in the study used community college to provide structure and stability. A participant in Maurer (2017) described how financial aid was a resource: "That (the FAFSA) has helped tremendously. I couldn't have made it on my own. I'm an independent student but gosh that's a lot of fees to pay" (p. 38). Another reported community resources as helpful: "I would like to give a shout out to the Goodwill because they help. A lot! Especially if you have a job interview and you don't have slacks" (38).

Social support in the form of family, friends, and faculty was also a help. For many participants, family was their only form of social support. One person said:

I don't feel the need to get super close to anybody here. I suppose it's from growing up, family is always going to be there. Or most the time. I always know my sisters and grandma's gonna be there so that's who I usually trust the most. (Geis 2015, 43)

Another participant found support from friends and faculty at the University: "The people. Hands down. There are some great people on this campus. Students, professors, BSWs. I don't think I would've made it through these years without the [University]" (Maurer 2017, 27).

Another said:

I have awesome friends who push me every single day. They are badassess in their own way, like, in their program and at work. They don't let me slack off or give up. They have had and do have my back on a daily basis. I seriously don't know what I would do without them. (Maurer 2017, 35)

Caring people at the university and strong friendships pushed participants to complete their programs. Crutchfield (2012) noted that positive faculty interactions made a difference for homeless students.

Not all participants had social support to assist them, however. One said, “No one really. Just myself. I’m always trying to keep myself not to fall completely off the ladder,” and another similarly stated: “I don’t have very many important people. I haven’t been that fortunate” (Crutchfield 2012, 122). A third said: “I came here by myself, I’ll leave by myself, I don’t need them they don’t need me” (Geis 2015, 45). Likewise, Adame-Smith (2016) found that struggles with family precipitated homelessness for several participants, who thus felt isolated from their families and lacked their support. The internal and external factors relating to supportive relationships (or the lack thereof) and determination for a better future and adult independence were all thought to be foundations of resilience in the students across the studies.

## Discussion

This QIMS was conducted because a comprehensive understanding of the lived experience of post-secondary students who are homeless was lacking in the literature. As a result, only seven studies met our criteria for inclusion. Most of the research included was conducted with community college students and in urban settings. Specifically, three studies included four-year university students, and four studies included two-year students; one study used both. Furthermore, five studies took place in urban settings, and two did not specify their setting as urban or rural. None of the studies incorporated graduate students, and most of the students included in the data were considered “traditional” college-aged students (younger than age 25). The demographic findings in our study are similar to existing quantitative research that has also primarily used community college students in urban settings (Goldrick-Rab, Broton, and Eisenberg 2015). Based on our findings through search and analysis, more research is needed that includes four-year and graduate university student, as well as those located in rural settings, and nontraditional students.

## Theme analysis

The synergistic understanding of the central phenomenon of homeless college students revealed four themes, including Trauma, Priority Hierarchy, Homeless (situational) Identity, and Resilience. These broad themes bridge more than 20 themes identified in the seven studies included in this QIMS. Trauma involves previous experiences that led to homelessness while in college, as well as current traumas being experienced by homeless college students. The Priority Hierarchy was related to student focus on meeting basic needs, which often interfered with school. The Homeless (situational) Identity encompassed the varying degrees of visibility and the consequences of disclosing being homeless while attending college. Finally, the theme of Resilience revealed the internal and external factors related to thriving in spite of the many challenges faced by the homeless students. These themes inform implications for future policy, research, and practice.

## Implications

The variety of definitions of the term “homeless” used in this QIMS posed a challenge to the authors and further accentuates the need for a standardized definition of homelessness among the college student population. For example, studies used HUD, the McKinney-

Vento Homeless Assistance Act, or their own definitions. To better compare results, future studies exploring homelessness among college students should consider using a common definition. While this could impose a limitation, in that it may not fully encompass all students who consider themselves unhoused, it may also aid policy development and interventions. Based on this QIMS, we recommend use of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act definition, as it is broader than HUD's and includes scenarios that are common among college students, such as couch-surfing. Although the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act applies only to K through 12th grade, using that definition is consistent because many college students are transitioning from adolescence.

Drawing on the social inequalities' framework utilized to synergize the data across the studies, a major contribution of our study is our finding that homeless college students, over multiple studies from various parts of the country, demonstrate resilience. While little is known about this sub-population of homeless adults, more research is needed to understand how resiliency impacts homeless college students' ability to succeed in their post-secondary endeavors. A recent number of studies on homeless adults in general have identified resiliency factors similar to those in this QIMS, but not necessarily in the sub-population of homeless college students (see for example, Paul et al. 2018; Thompson et al. 2016). Social support, hope, and determination were among the similar factors of resiliency in our study.

Another key finding relates to the theme of Homeless (situational) Identity. Specifically, in their own words, students did not see themselves as "hopeless" or as the stereotypical homeless person. They were resilient and, with few additional resources, continued to pursue their educational goals.

The US Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) is a federal agency created in 1987 and was reauthorized in the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition Housing (HEARTH) Act of 2009. It is the only federal agency solely devoted to ending homelessness and coordinates funding among the various federal homeless assistance programs, such as those run by HUD, Health and Human Services/Family and Youth Services Bureau, and the Veterans Administration (VA) (USICH.gov). In 2017 Congresswoman Maxine Waters introduced the Ending Homelessness Act, which would provide \$13.27 billion in funding and reauthorize the USICH (U.S. House Committee on Financial Services Democrats 2018). Given that students had to spend many hours prioritizing their basic needs rather than studying (i.e., Priority Hierarchy theme), we argue that the HEARTH Act should also apply to college students. Such policies may help to relieve basic needs issues for this sub-population by offering resources and support through dedicated funding. Furthermore, with recent awareness that college students are experiencing homelessness, it is even more important that scholars, practitioners, and community advocates support policies and funding that can impact college students. Future study should focus on finding solutions and building resources.

Considering the theme of Trauma, implications for future research include utilizing appreciative inquiry approaches to support solution-focused, rather than deficit-based, models to exploring homelessness among college students. Additionally, practice implications for universities include training faculty and staff in trauma-informed practices for post-secondary education so they may offer trauma-informed support services as a regular part of campus health, mental health, and student support services (Davidson 2017). Finally, longitudinal studies may provide a long-term perspective on resilience



among homeless or previously homeless college students, offering insight into future programming, areas of research study, and policy. Further attention to this homeless sub-population may ameliorate the adversity and challenges they face during college.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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