"DO WHATEVER YOU CAN TO TRY TO SUPPORT THAT KID"

SCHOOL COUNSELORS' EXPERIENCES ADDRESSING STUDENT HOMELESSNESS

This qualitative study explored the experiences of 23 school counselors in addressing the needs of students experiencing homelessness. Phenomenological analysis revealed two overarching themes: (a) school counselors as the first line of support and (b) the desire to help while feeling helpless. Findings suggest that participants feel underprepared to support the needs of students experiencing homelessness. They face challenges identifying students and addressing their needs and rely on collaborations with other professionals.

Approximately one quarter of individuals experiencing homelessness are under the age of 18 (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2015). Nationwide, the total number of students experiencing homelessness who were enrolled in local educational agencies (LEAs) during the 2013-2014 school year was more than 1.3 million (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Students experiencing homelessness may face health concerns (Cutuli et al., 2016), emotional and behavioral challenges (Herbers, Cutuli, Narayan, Monn, & Masten, 2014), and academic needs (Cutuli et al., 2013) that can impact their education. Homelessness can also prompt internalizing and externalizing problems, difficulty forming relationships with peers, and withdrawing behaviors (Chow, Mistry, & Melchor, 2015; Tobin & Murphy, 2013). Furthermore, homelessness is commonly linked to school mobility (i.e., the frequent transitioning among various schools), which may create greater problems in the classroom and with academic achievement (Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, Chen, Rouse, & Culhane, 2012). These challenges and others require school counselors to find ways to meet the unique needs of students experiencing homelessness.

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To address students' basic needs, school counselors can build systemic interventions that draw upon the strengths of the school, family, and community to coordinate resources (Bryan & Henry, 2008) and increase knowledge and awareness of resources and available support systems (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2010; Gaenzle, 2012). To address the emotional needs of students experiencing homelessness, school counselors can provide socioemotional services such as counseling interventions (Strawser, Markos, Yamaguchi, & Higgins, 2000). They can also support students' academic needs by developing school-based programs such as tutoring (Grothaus, Lorelle, Anderson, & Knight, 2011). These diverse functions pose an unexamined set of challenges for school counselors working to meet the needs of students experiencing homelessness. Because school counselors' roles may be particularly beneficial to such students, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the perspectives of school counselors serving students who have had a loss of housing.

HOMELESSNESS AND THE McKINNEY-VENTO ACT

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act addresses the barriers faced in schools by students experiencing homelessness (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The act defines children and adolescents under the age of 18 experiencing homelessness as those:

Sharing housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason

(sometimes referred to as doubled-up); living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to lack of alternative adequate accommodations; living in emergency or transitional shelters; or abandoned in hospitals (p. 5).

This definition also includes those children who reside in unsuitable accommodations, cars, or substandard housing. Migratory children may also be characterized as homeless if they fall under any of the descriptions above (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Under the McKinney-Vento Act (42 U.S.C. 11431 et seq), states are required to address barriers regarding the enrollment and/or attendance of students who fall within the definitions above and to ensure that they have access to services and a high-quality education to meet their state's standards for achievement. This includes allowing students experiencing homelessness to enroll quickly in school without the required paperwork. Moreover, under this law, schools are required to provide transportation for students to their school of origin and assign a local liaison, an individual who assists in the identification of students experiencing homelessness and provides supportive services (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCE OF HOMELESSNESS

Due to the range of experiences that qualify families as homeless, children and adolescents experiencing homelessness may have unique reactions to their lack of stable housing. For

instance, those living in shelters may face privacy concerns and poor shelter conditions (Altena, Beijersbergen, & Wolf, 2014). Vast numbers of students experiencing homelessness reside with other families due to a loss of housing, a concept known as being "doubled-up" (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). As a result, they face overcrowded homes and have limited access to and knowledge of services available (Miller, 2015). Across housing circumstances, children and adolescents often lack basic needs such as health care, healthy food options, and clean clothing (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2008).

Children and adolescents experiencing homelessness can also face significant emotional, social, and behavioral challenges as a result of their unstable housing (Coker et al., 2009; Gewirtz, Hart-Shegos, & Medhanie, 2008; Miller, 2008). For instance, they are more likely to face victimization directly or indirectly, which may be linked to depressive episodes or posttraumatic stress disorder (Bender, Ferguson, Thompson, & Langenderfer, 2014). Homelessness may also exacerbate past difficulties or incite challenges from the straining experience of inconsistent housing (Hodgson, Shelton, van den Bree, & Los, 2013). Moreover, Buckner, Bassuk, Weinrub, and Brooks (1999) found a link between children and adolescents' experience of homelessness and increased withdrawn behavior or anxiety. Coker et al. (2009) further suggest that children and adolescents experiencing homelessness may be more likely to have behavioral or developmental issues compared to their consistently housed peers.

Due to increased school mobility (Buckner, Bassuk, Weinrub, & Brooks, 1999; Murphy & Tobin, 2012), homelessness may hinder children's academic achievement by affecting their attendance, which can cause them to repeat grades (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2014). In turn, students may have a higher risk of failure compared to their consistently housed peers (Obradovic et al., 2009).

THE McKINNEY-VENTO HOMELESS ASSISTANCE ACT ADDRESSES THE BARRIERS FACED IN SCHOOLS BY STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS.

Students experiencing homelessness may also struggle to pass state proficiency tests, with only about half of those in grades 3-8 (52%) and half in high school (49%) having met or exceeded proficiency rates in reading on their state assessments (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). The U.S. Department of Education (2012) reported similar results in mathematics. Given the basic, emotional, and academic needs faced by students experiencing homelessness, schools are uniquely positioned to offer the services and systems necessary to support student success.

THE ROLE OF SCHOOL COUNSELORS

School counselors may be particularly well equipped to support the needs of students experiencing homelessness. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA; 2010) suggests that school counselors advocate to support children and adolescents experiencing homelessness to reduce barriers, develop programs that address the needs of parents and children, collaborate with staff and related personnel, and increase awareness of the policies and rights related to the specific needs of students experiencing a loss of housing. Furthermore, the ASCA Ethical Standards call for school counselors to help create a safe and supportive environment for underserved and at-risk populations and advocate to ensure that students are not discriminated against based on their housing status (ASCA, 2016). These roles not only include working within the school setting to meet children and adolescents' basic, academic, and social/emotional needs, but also involve reaching out to the community to promote partnership practices to engage in a system of support (Gaenzle, 2012).

School-level services include facilitating interventions such as individual and group counseling and parental consultation and education (Baggerly & Borkowski, 2004). School counsel-

ors may assist with student enrollment and facilitate transitions by gathering records from students' prior institutions (Grothaus et al., 2011). They also play a key role in identifying students who are experiencing homelessness (Walsh & Buckley, 1994) and supporting their basic needs. School counselors can assist students experiencing homelessness in securing school supplies, shelter, snacks, and clothing (Daniels, 1992; Strawser et al., 2000; Yamaguchi, Strawser, & Higgins, 1997) and help them to enroll in free and reduced lunch programs (Havlik & Bryan, 2015). Despite the valuable roles for school counselors in supporting the needs of students experiencing homelessness, little is known about the realities of fulfilling these expectations. Therefore, the authors of this study sought to advance the understanding of school counselors' experiences supporting this high need population.

School counseling interventions can be effective in addressing the needs of students experiencing homelessness (Baggerly & Borkowski, 2004; Grothaus et al., 2011). However, survey research has indicated that school counselors report low levels of engagement in interventions specifically recommended to support students affected by a loss of housing (i.e. parent consultations, mentorship and tutoring programs, small group and individual counseling, teacher workshops, etc.) and limited knowledge on homelessness and the McKinney-Vento Act (Gaenzle, 2012; Havlik, Brady, & Gavin, 2014; Havlik & Bryan, 2015). Given that school counselors can provide and coordinate meaningful services for students experiencing homelessness, this study explores school counselors' experiences and helps explain their limited knowledge and engagement in recommended interventions. Investigating school

counselors' interactions with students experiencing homelessness highlights challenges that may hinder effective interventions and identifies helpful practices for serving the particular needs of students experiencing homelessness. This knowledge can guide school districts and counselor educators to better prepare school counselors to work with students experiencing homelessness, and that will ultimately enhance supportive services for students. The research questions addressed in this study included (a) What are the central experiences of school counselors who work with students experiencing homelessness? and (b) What are school counselors' perceptions of their roles and challenges in working with students experiencing homelessness?

METHOD

Using Creswell's (2009) sequential explanatory mixed methods approach, where the collection and analysis of qualitative data follows a quantitative study, the present study stems from quantitative research conducted by the first author on the topic of homelessness and school counseling (Gaenzle, 2012; Havlik & Bryan, 2015). The results of the quantitative research, which was based on self-report survey data, indicated that school counselors had limited preparation working with students experiencing homelessness and were more involved in providing school-based services, with limited involvement in collaborative partnerships (Gaenzle, 2012; Havlik & Bryan, 2015). To further explain these findings and gain more insight into the phenomenon of school counselors' experiences working with students experiencing homelessness, the researchers explored the data through phenomenological inquiry. This explicated a

> ## VAST NUMBERS OF STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS RESIDE WITH OTHER FAMILIES DUE TO A LOSS OF HOUSING, A CONCEPT KNOWN AS BEING "DOUBLED-UP."

deeper understanding of participants' common experiences and the essence of such experiences (Groenewald, 2004; Lester, 1999; Morrissette, 1999; Moustakas, 1994).

Researchers

The team of researchers consisted of a female assistant professor and four graduate students (two male and two female) in a school counseling graduate program. The assistant professor was a former school counselor in a middle school, where she worked with students experiencing homelessness. She previously engaged in extensive quantitative research on school counselors' work with students experiencing homelessness. The findings of that research inspired her to seek a richer explanation of the experiences of school counselors, beyond the results of a survey. She had previous training in qualitative research methods and experience engaging in phenomenological inquiry.

All four graduate students volunteered to assist with the research based on their interest in the topic. At the time of the study, they had completed the majority of their school counseling degree coursework and were school counseling interns in urban elementary, middle, and high school settings. Only one of the female students had prior experience working with

> ## "THE BOTTOM LINE IS THAT IF A KID COMES INTO MY OFFICE AND THEY ARE LOOKING FOR HELP, YOU HELP THEM." (PARTICIPANT 9)

students experiencing homelessness while at her internship. One of the male students had previously worked with students from low-income backgrounds as a full-time teacher in an urban setting. The second male student was in school part-time and worked full-time at a nonprofit community organization serving children and families to support their behavioral and developmental needs, including students experiencing homelessness.

All of the graduate students had taken one or more research methods courses that included training on qualitative research. Prior to engaging in the study, the first author provided them all with further training and reading materials on conducting phenomenological inquiry, including how to conduct interviews and collect and analyze data.

Procedures and Participants

Researchers targeted a particularly large metropolitan area and surrounding suburbs. According to a report from the U.S. Conference of Mayors (2014), the city that was central to the study showed a marked increase in the number of individuals and families experiencing homelessness and anticipated a continued increase. This served as an optimal environment to recruit participants who had worked with students experiencing homelessness. All of the researchers were knowledgeable about the local school systems in the metropolitan area and had existing relationships with some of the targeted school counselors. Researchers began recruiting by contacting, though email and phone, school counselors with whom they had previous relationships, and then used snowball sampling by asking participants to provide recommendations for others who might be interested.

Purposeful selection of participants was necessary to gain different viewpoints while representing the desired experience (Maxwell, 2005). For selection, the researchers used the following criteria: (a) current employment as a full-time school counselor in an elementary, middle, or high school in or around the specific city; (b) at least 2 years of experience as a school counselor; and (c) at least two students experiencing homeless-

ness presently or within the last 2 years on the participant's caseload. Researchers attempted to recruit a heterogeneous sample by targeting both male and female participants and school counselors who worked across different settings. A total of 23 school counselors participated in this study. Participants included nearly equal representation across elementary ($n = 8$), high ($n = 8$), and middle ($n = 7$) schools, with more females ($n = 19$) than males ($n = 4$). Participants worked in public schools ($n = 19$), public charter schools ($n = 2$), or private schools ($n = 2$), and represented both suburban ($n = 8$) and urban ($n = 15$) settings. Participant years of experience ranged from 2-28 years, with a mean of 6.7 years. Because multiple perspectives were required to answer the research questions, the researchers determined the number of participants by continuing to collect data until they observed redundancy in participant responses and felt that they had reached data saturation (Wertz, 2005).

Thirteen of the participants' schools were located directly in the targeted city. Although the majority of the schools in the study were public, the sample also included private Catholic and public charter schools that served low-income students in the city. In an effort to identify participants with experience working with students experiencing homelessness in the surrounding areas outside of the city, researchers directly emailed school counselors working in districts with high rates of free and reduced lunch, with the assumption that they might have higher numbers of students experiencing poverty or homelessness. For the schools that neighbored the large target city ($n = 10$), two were also considered urban and situated in smaller city settings. The free and reduced lunch status for these schools ranged from 47.5-78% of the student population.

Interviews

The researchers used interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the lived ex-

periences of the participants (Seidman, 2013) in their work with students experiencing homelessness. All participants (*N* = 23) engaged in an in-person or phone interview. Although the researchers encouraged in-person interviews, several participants requested phone interviews due to difficulty in scheduling. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed by the research team. All five researchers participated in interviewing the participants. They used a standardized, open-ended interview (see Table 1) with 10 questions to ensure consistent structure across the interviews (Turner, 2010). The questions were developed based on current literature and the results of the two quantitative studies conducted by the first author (Gaenzle, 2012; Havlik & Bryan, 2015). The open-ended questions were designed to uncover a deeper understanding of the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2007) in their work with students experiencing homelessness. Although all 10 questions were asked of participants, the central question in the interview protocol, which explicitly aligned with phenomenological inquiry, was, "In general, what has your experience been like working with students who are homeless?" The rest of the questions were used to encourage further dialogue and to learn more about participants' experiences. Interview length ranged from 20 to 80 minutes.

Exploration of the Data

The researchers explored the data using Morrissette's (1999) seven suggested steps of phenomenological data analysis. This method was selected to uncover the essence of the experience of participants and to identify phenomenological themes (Morrissette, 1999). Members of the research team first reviewed the audio recordings shortly after each of the interviews (step 1). The interviewers submitted field notes that were included in the initial review. Further, after interviews, each interviewer reflected on the interview and shared their insights with the first author. All five members of the research team transcribed assigned

| TABLE 1 | INTERVIEW PROTOCOL |

1. What are the biggest challenges faced by students who are homeless at your school?
2. What is the role of school counselors working with students who are homeless?
3. In your position, what is *your* role in addressing the needs of students who are homeless at your school?
4. In general, what has your experience been like working with students who are homeless?
5. What are the biggest challenges you've faced?
6. Describe any training that you have had to work with students who are homeless (in graduate school and/or in the field).
7. How prepared do you feel teachers, administrators, and staff in your school are to support the needs of students who are homeless?
8. How comfortable are you with your understanding of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act?
9. If you suspect a family is homeless, how comfortable are you broaching the topic of homelessness with families? With students?
10. How could school counselors, teachers, administrators, etc., improve their work with students who are homeless?

PARTICIPANTS FELT THE BASIC NEEDS OF STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS TOOK PRECEDENCE OVER ALL OTHER NEEDS.

interviews to gain a stronger insight into participants' experiences (step 2). The first author reviewed the transcripts for errors. After transcriptions were completed, three members of the research team (the first author, a male graduate student, and a female graduate student) independently reviewed each of the transcripts and identified significant statements. The researchers selected these team members to engage in the data analysis because they had the most extensive background and competence in qualitative research methods. Each of the three researchers individually highlighted the significant statements in the document, and then met as a team to discuss.

In the next step, the three researchers reviewed the transcripts and significant statements for first order themes (step 3). After agreeing on these themes, the team developed a table that listed significant statements and first order themes (step 4). The researchers then individually reflected upon and summarized the clusters and identified common elements (step 5). Afterward, they reflected on the themes and on the individual and commonly shared experiences of participants (step 6). During these steps, they communicated via email and in person. Last, the three researchers met and compared their individual analyses of the clusters and themes (step 7). During this discussion, the research team identified the final themes, which they later reviewed and refined. When disagreement arose between research team members during the analysis, the group had an open discussion and reflected back on the codes, statements, and themes. If they did not reach consensus, the team members reflected individually and came back as a group later to discuss and adjust the themes. They also reviewed public documents (Creswell, 2007), including McKinney-Vento training documents,

and online resources to better understand programs and resources that school counselors described during the interviews. These documents provided background information for the researchers (Yanow, 2007) by describing the details of programs that were discussed, and/or further explaining a protocol discussed by the participants.

Trustworthiness

The research team took steps to minimize bias through the data collection and analysis process. Through bracketing, researchers attempted to put aside their preconceived notions while engaging in the interviews (Morrow, 2005; Moustakas, 1994). For example, the first author recognized that her personal experience as a school counselor impacted her perceptions of the data set. During steps 3 and 6 of the data exploration (see previous page), the researchers attempted to increase the trustworthiness of the analysis by engaging in individual exploration of the transcripts and then meeting collaboratively to explore and review their interpretations as a group (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2011; Heppner, Kivlighan, & Wampold 1999). They also looked for disconfirming evidence (Morrow, 2005) while they explored the themes and engaged in reflective

involved with the research and with those on the team in order to uncover biases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After completing the data analysis, the team elicited informal feedback from an external auditor to review the transcripts and the final themes to evaluate the accuracy of the findings (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This individual was selected because she had prior experience with qualitative data analysis and had previously worked on homelessness research with the first author. She was familiar with the methodology and could provide an outside perspective.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

During the interviews, participants shared their personal experiences working with students experiencing homelessness. Through data exploration, the researchers identified two general themes across participants: (a) school counselors as the first line of support and (b) the desire to help while feeling helpless. The two themes and subsequent subthemes are summarized below with quotations from the interview transcripts.

recognized that they had to initially ensure these needs were met before others could be addressed. These needs were often extensive, requiring partnerships within and outside of the school to help. As an example of how this process may play out in a school, Participant 14 shared:

> We have a charter school, so the kids all wear a uniform. So, if they are missing a piece of their uniform, it's my job to make sure we can provide it for that child. If they're needing food outside of the home, 'cause we provide breakfast and lunch for the kids, but if there's not enough food where they are staying, we provide them with food or the resources to go to a food bank so that they can get food."

In this sense, participants seemed to be the first line of support in the school, determining how to best serve students, and then directing support to others when necessary.

Addressing basic needs. Participants felt the basic needs of students experiencing homelessness took precedence over all other needs (i.e., emotional and educational). Basic needs described by participants included those areas considered necessary for students to attend and to be successful in school. Participants mentioned providing transportation, clean clothes (e.g., uniforms), school supplies, free and reduced lunch, and school dues. Participant 13 said she kept a closet of supplies available for students: "If we see there is a need for it ... clothing, such as uniforms, sneakers, and cap and gown cost for graduating seniors. We have a stock. Like, we have a closet full of binders, folders, school bags, pens, notebooks." Title I funds were frequently cited as an important source for providing basic needs for students. Participant 6 mentioned that her school got funding to provide for basic needs such as "socks, shoes, and stuff like that." She stated that her school was able to provide each student who qualified with $100 to meet specific basic needs.

"YOU CAN BUILD THEM UP, YOU CAN WORK WITH THEM, AND THEN AS SOON AS THEY GO BACK INTO THAT UNIQUE SITUATION, IT JUST COMES TUMBLING DOWN." (PARTICIPANT 7)

journaling to create transparency in the research process (Ortlipp, 2008), and to document analysis (e.g. reviewing brochures and posters describing the McKinney-Vento policies that are provided to families and training materials for homeless liaisons) to learn more and corroborate the details of the interviews (Creswell, 2007; Yanow, 2007). Further, through peer debriefing and group meetings, the researchers discussed their findings and reflections on the data with individuals not

School Counselors as the First Line of Support

The participants explained that their roles in working with students experiencing homelessness primarily included addressing students' basic needs and then referring them to other resources, such as school social workers or homeless liaisons to provide more comprehensive support. Because basic needs, such as food, clothing, and shelter, overshadowed educational and emotional needs, participants

Among the basic needs described, participants said they struggled with getting students consistent transportation to and from the school. Due to the McKinney-Vento requirements, they had a role in coordinating transportation for students experiencing homelessness to their schools of origin. For instance, Participant 6 stated, "The main role I've been playing is helping out with transportation—making sure that they … have [funding for public transportation] or get a bus; assistance with the bus to pick them up from the shelter." In this important role, participants shared that although getting students transportation was a challenge, they were committed to helping them get to school safely and regularly.

Although addressing basic needs seemed to be the primary focus for most of the participants, Participants 5 and 14 both mentioned specifically providing counseling services as their main role in addressing the needs of students experiencing homelessness. Participant 14 said:

> I'm very fortunate in my school that I am able to do a lot of counseling, individual and group both. So I would say when I become aware of a situation where a kid, you know, their living environment is not what I would call a consistent home, that they're homeless or they're doubled-up, I'm able to counsel them.

Few participants reported a focus on these types of counseling services due to basic needs overshadowing other needs.

Providing referrals and directing services. The participants described working with other stakeholders to address the needs of students experiencing homelessness. Specifically, school social workers and homeless liaisons were cited as providing more comprehensive services. For instance, Participant 2 stated:

> Primarily social workers will meet any of their needs, like clothing,

food, those types of things. My role in school counseling would definitely be, if I observed or hear anything from teachers, because I'm usually the first line of defense, or if we hear anything from the student that would pose an obstacle or concern, then giving the social worker a heads up.

Participants tended to rely on social workers to do the hands-on work in the community: "We work closely with the social worker. When we become aware of a student or a situation, we will typically collaborate with them. And they will actually go out and do a home visit or something at a shelter" (Participant 11). Participant 3 referred students to the homeless liaison: "[The homeless office] handles the homeless children. They also can get them coats, school supplies, things like that." School social workers and homeless liaisons emerged as the go-to staff members for school counselors to refer students experiencing homelessness.

Within the school, participants also expressed the value of collaborating with teachers, but identified challenges in these relationships. For example, "It's difficult to get teachers on board with these kids because they have so many other kids. Sometimes they provide extra work when they [students] aren't here, which can be difficult—so trying to get them on board" (Participant 5). Conversely, Participant 12 shared the value of working with teachers: "In the building, it is helpful to collaborate with the teachers because sometimes kids will disclose stuff to or build a bond with a student and they will find out stuff that they won't necessarily tell me, or I might not know the kid." Participant 20 felt

that relationships with teachers might be improved if they had more information regarding children experiencing homelessness. Overall, participants reported that relationships with teachers were most valuable when communication was clear and the teachers had knowledge about homelessness.

Desire to Help While Feeling Helpless

Although the participants indicated a desire to support students experiencing homelessness, they faced barriers that created frustration and hindered their ability to help. Participants expressed that their hands were often tied due to the barriers they faced. This desire to help was described by Participant 9:

> The bottom line is that if a kid comes into my office and they are looking for help, you help them. So you are going to do whatever you can to try to support that kid and find out what their needs are.

However, as Participant 7 indicated, despite the strong desire to help, there was also a clear sense of feeling "frustrated—frustrated, because you can build them up, you can work with them, and then as soon as they go back into that unique situation, it just comes tumbling down." Two subthemes highlighted this sense of helplessness and frustration: (a) challenges related to the identification of students experiencing homelessness and (b) a lack of preparation.

Identification. The participants addressed barriers related to the challenge of identifying students experiencing homelessness. They suggested that identifying families experiencing homelessness was complicated due to

THE DIFFICULTY OF IDENTIFYING FAMILIES AND CHILDREN EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS MADE IT HARD FOR THE PARTICIPANTS TO PROVIDE FAMILIES AND STUDENTS WITH SUPPORTIVE SERVICES.

the perceived stigma of homelessness and a lack of knowledge about the various definitions of homelessness. Participant 14 reflected:

[Families] don't see themselves as homeless, they just see themselves as staying with such and such, this is my cousin's whatever. They just see themselves as staying with other people. So, I think the word *homeless* might put up a barrier.

Other participants shared that family pride hindered families from accepting services offered by the school:

I've run into families where you try and provide support and they want to keep what's going on in the home, in their home. And they don't want handouts—so things like that. That's frustrating because you know the family needs help, but they refuse to take it, and then ends up hurting the students. (Participant 8)

The challenge of identification due to the stigma of homelessness and fear of being identified was pervasive throughout the interviews. For example, Participant 5 reflected that many parents were not receptive because they feared being discovered: "I found it difficult because the parents are very guarded. They are aware of our contact with the district, so they don't want us to know really what's going on because of the consequences." Participant 10 said:

It seems like it takes us to the middle of the year before we can identify these are the students who are not living with the traditional parents. So we'll get information

from the families and the information we get from the families will just be enough so that you won't know the details, because there's a stigma attached or because parents are afraid of rejection.

The difficulty of identifying families and children experiencing homelessness made it hard for the participants to provide them with supportive services.

Need for increased preparation and knowledge. With all of the needs faced by students experiencing homelessness, participants felt underprepared to help. Many reported having no training during graduate school in working with students experiencing homelessness and limited training after graduation. A basic understanding of the general tenets of McKinney-Vento was evident, but few participants had strong knowledge of the requirements: "I don't really know much about it besides [the definition]. And I do know, when I asked the district about it, it's basically, the kids are entitled to free lunch, transportation" (Participant 16). Some participants were unaware that they were already addressing the major tenets of the Act: "I never learned what the Act was. When you read it, I'm like, yeah, it makes sense but I didn't know there was a name attached" (Participant 15). An apparent lack of training in graduate school was evident across the majority of the interviews. For instance, Participant 18 stated, "Trying to think back to my graduate years. I don't think I even had any talk about it." Participant 3 shared, "At graduate school, I can't recall anything that was specifically geared towards homeless students."

In general, participants reported that they would have liked increased

preparation to work with students experiencing homelessness: "I guess just more training would help me feel more prepared about the situation" (Participant 5). Although the majority of participants did not have formal training, one district provided specific optional training related to homelessness. Only Participant 4 stated that she had extensive training working with students experiencing homelessness because she regularly attended those trainings. She shared, "If I didn't have the training, I wouldn't be able to help those that are identified to be homeless students and how to work with them."

DISCUSSION

The results of this study provide insight into school counselors' common experiences working with students experiencing homelessness. The themes highlight participants' focus on addressing students' basic needs and their reliance on other school personnel to provide more comprehensive support. The results suggest that school counselors face challenges in working with students experiencing homelessness and emphasize their difficulties identifying students and feelings of being underprepared to help. These themes highlight school counselors' challenges and roles working with students experiencing homelessness and offer clarity on the ways their roles can be improved. Through this increased understanding, school counselors can advocate more intentionally for students experiencing homelessness and better comprehend the blind spots in current support systems.

The findings of this study explain, in part, the results of Gaenzle's (2012) research, which suggested that school counselors are not engaging in many of the interventions recommended by the literature to support students experiencing homelessness. Instead, they are more focused on addressing students' basic needs. Maslow (1943, 1954) provides a theoretical framework that further helps to explain school counselors' focus on

MANY [PARTICIPANTS] REPORTED HAVING NO TRAINING DURING GRADUATE SCHOOL IN WORKING WITH STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS AND LIMITED TRAINING AFTER GRADUATION.

basic needs. His theory postulates that human needs are interrelated and that individuals must have their basic needs met first, such as physiological and safety needs, before they can meet higher level needs like social and esteem needs. For youths experiencing homelessness, their heightened basic needs tend to overshadow other needs (Murphy & Tobin, 2012). These needs include food, clothing, shelter, transportation, and other areas required to achieve academic success (Havlik et al., 2014). School counselors can continue supporting the basic needs of students experiencing homelessness by understanding the major components of McKinney-Vento (e.g., definitions, transportation requirements, and enrollment requirements), community resources, free and reduced lunch requirements, and Title I funding to support uniforms or other school needs. However, they must also determine how to provide support for students' emotional and behavioral needs (Edidin, Ganim, Hunter, & Karnik, 2012).

Students experiencing homelessness may struggle with their emotional and mental health and engage in risky behaviors (Edidin et al., 2012; MacDonald, 2014; Thompson, Bender, Winsor, Cook, & Williams, 2010). Further, links exist between housing status and internalizing behaviors (Buckner et al., 1999), depression and anxiety (Edidin et al., 2012; Quimby et al., 2012), and social troubles (Perron, Cleverley, & Kidd, 2014; Wenzel et al., 2012). School counselors are positioned to support the emotional and behavioral needs of students experiencing homelessness. However, despite the importance of this role, only two participants in the present study highlighted this as their primary role. This finding suggests that school counselors see providing counseling and emotional support as a secondary role or, perhaps, a role to be referred to other mental health professionals. To support students' social/emotional needs, school counselors can include students experiencing homelessness in individual and group counseling interventions and utilize creative approaches such as play therapy (Baggerly & Jenkins, 2009), art therapy, or bibliotherapy during sessions. Topics may include goal setting, communication, and anxiety or stress management (Havlik et al., 2014). Further, school-wide interventions that focus on topics such as friendship, academic skills, multicultural appreciation, and conflict resolution may benefit students experiencing homelessness. When students' emotional needs require more extensive support, school counselors can identify mental health professionals in the community to provide accessible, long-term therapy for little or no cost.

SCHOOL COUNSELORS MUST CONTINUE TO FIND WAYS TO SUPPORT THE BASIC NEEDS OF STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS, WHILE ALSO ATTENDING TO THEIR ACADEMIC, SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL, AND COLLEGE AND CAREER PLANNING NEEDS.

One of the significant contributions of this study is highlighting the importance of building collaborative relationships with stakeholders who are invested in the success of students experiencing homelessness. The ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors (2016) also echo the importance of collaborating with students and parents/guardians and identifying specific resources to ensure that the needs of underserved and at-risk populations are met (A.10.b, A.10.d). Having support systems available for students experiencing homelessness can have a positive impact on their school success (Huntington, Buckner, & Bassuk, 2008). This may require partnering with the school social worker or homeless liaison and visiting resources in the community to see what is available for families. Identifying and building relationships with resources such as community organizations, businesses, and mental health teams can be particularly helpful in providing comprehensive support for children and their families (Bryan & Griffin, 2010). In the present study, participants suggested a lack of clarity on specific roles of each stakeholder. By clarifying these roles, students will have a clearer system of support. For example, the school counselor may engage in any or all of the following: coordinating services; connecting with parents; and providing brief supportive social/emotional counseling, academic support, and career and college planning (Grothaus et al., 2011). At the same time, school social workers can assist with identifying and tracking of students, engaging in community outreach and grant writing, and linking parents and students to community services and agencies (Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Isreal, 2006). The local liaison's role may be to assist in the identification and tracking of students experiencing homelessness while ensuring that McKinney-Vento requirements are met, such as transportation and enrollment (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Beyond their teaching responsibilities, teachers can provide tutoring, mentoring, or other supportive academic programs. School counselors should be responsible for coordinating this system of support and knowing the avenues and parties to appropriately refer students. This may include facilitating quarterly meetings with a team of stakeholders to determine what services are being provided and how they can be improved.

Since participants in this study reported that the stigma of homelessness often hinders families and students from identifying themselves to educational agencies, school counselors need to find ways to connect with families and build trust. One

way to help families build trust with the school is by providing programs for parents where relationships are nurtured with both their children and school staff (Swick, 2008). This may include coordinating mentorship programs for students, or general meetings where families are invited to learn more about school programming. Finding ways to get parents into the school or connect them with members of the community may involve advertising parent nights at shelters and providing transportation to evening programs. Availability of school counselors to meet with parents who may not have transportation to the school or cannot meet during school hours may also foster greater collaboration. For example, school counselors can hold parent meetings in local community centers that are accessible from shelters or subsidized housing complexes. They can also occasionally hold walk-in office hours before or after school so they are more available for parents who cannot take off work during school hours. One study that examined shelters showed that strong relationships between students experiencing homelessness and shelter workers were correlated with better outcomes related to the services provided (Altena et al., 2014). The same may be true for relationships built with school counselors and other school personnel. Further, families living doubled-up may not have knowledge of services available or McKinney-Vento (Miller, 2015) and by reaching out to such families, school counselors can bridge the gap between families and resources.

Despite evidence that students experiencing homelessness face challenges academically (National Center for Homeless Education, 2014), few participants directly mentioned addressing academic needs. In this important role, school counselors can meet students' academic needs by monitoring the enrollment process at their schools, confirming appropriate course placement, and advocating for students to remain at their schools of origin or coordinating transpor-

tation to a location that is a better fit (ASCA, 2010). Further, because research indicates that the academic achievement of students experiencing homelessness is closely related to their attendance (Tobin, 2016), school counselors can monitor student absences and explore ways to encourage students to come to school. This may include advocating for removal of punitive consequences for excessive absences for students experiencing homelessness (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). School counselors can consult with teachers to ensure their policies and practices are not hindering the success of students and to coordinate academic services (Grothaus et al., 2011). They should also support students experiencing homelessness in their career and college planning, a topic that was nearly nonexistent in the participant interviews. In fact, the most recent amendment of the McKinney-Vento Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), states that school counselors must provide college support for students experiencing homelessness. School counselors may be able to help students experiencing homelessness, particularly those who are first-generation college goers, to better understand topics and processes for applications, testing, financial aid, and housing, in an effort to obtain funding in these areas.

The findings of this study support the first author's prior quantitative research that found that school counselors feel underprepared to work with students experiencing homelessness (Gaenzle, 2012), but further add that counselors want more preparation and find that when they have it, it can be particularly helpful. To become more prepared, school counselors should regularly review the McKinney-Vento policy documents (U.S. Department of Education, 2016) and seek further education or web resources. The following websites provide extensive information and resources related to children and homelessness:

- The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth: http://www.naehcy.org/
- The National Center for Homeless Education: http://center.serve.org/nche/
- National Center on Family Homelessness: http://www.naehcy.org/
- National Alliance to End Homelessness: http://www.endhomelessness.org/
- National Coalition for the Homeless: http://nationalhomeless.org/

School counselors can visit these sites regularly or subscribe to an email list to stay up-to-date on the latest policies and practices regarding the education of students experiencing homelessness.

Findings of this study also support the need for increased graduate education on homelessness. Through course work and engagement during internship and practicum, programs can encourage students to learn more about the unique needs of students experiencing homelessness. To prompt increased training, ASCA could expand the ASCA National Model and School Counselor Competencies to include issues related to housing status, such as ensuring that school counselors have knowledge on policies related to homelessness and education (i.e., McKinney-Vento) and have the abilities and skills to deliver the services necessary to support students with a loss of housing.

LIMITATIONS

This study had several limitations. First, the phenomenological tradition calls for in-depth interviews, which allow the participants to feel more comfortable sharing and opening up to the researchers (Groenewald, 2004). However, due to participants working in schools and, therefore, having limited availability, setting up times to engage in lengthier interviews was difficult. A second limitation was the inclusion of several questions that were potentially leading for participants (e.g., asking

them specifically about challenges they had experienced and inquiring about their training related to homelessness). A third limitation was that the participants in this study were from one general urban area, with suburbs that included similar populations, so the findings were perhaps not generalizable to rural or suburban settings. Last, member checking was limited due to the difficulty of scheduling for the participants who were in the midst of the school year.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings of this study suggest that school counselors tend to focus on meeting the basic needs of students experiencing homelessness because they often overshadow their educational and emotional needs. Participants reported that they collaborate with other stakeholders to provide referrals to meet students' more complex needs and face challenges in identifying students experiencing homelessness. They also expressed a need for increased preparation. These findings suggest that school counselors must continue to find ways to support the basic needs of students experiencing homelessness, while also attending to their academic, social/emotional, and college and career planning needs. Identifying collaborative partnerships with stakeholders in and out of the school helps to meet the range of needs faced by students experiencing homelessness. In building such partnerships, school counselors must clearly define their roles versus that of other educational professionals to clarify a system of support. School counselors also can seek training on homelessness through their state coordinator and local liaisons for homeless education. With increased knowledge and preparation and the development of more concrete and collaborative partnerships, school counselors can better support the development of students experiencing homelessness.

Future research should include investigating specific school counselor roles in providing academic, social/emotional, and career development support for students experiencing homelessness, and the efficacy of such interventions. Research needs to integrate the voices of the students experiencing homelessness to learn more about their relationships with school counselors. Including student voices is imperative to uncover if they feel that school counselors are meeting their needs and how supportive services can be improved. Further, in-depth interviews with local liaisons and other support personnel would help provide a clearer description of the services provided and needed for students experiencing homelessness. Research should also include gathering data on the roles of school counselors across varying settings—rural, suburban, and urban. The role of school counselors in working with students experiencing homelessness is clearly important; therefore, increased knowledge of the various services provided could potentially enhance the support available. ■

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