“I SPENT MOST OF MY LIFE JUST WALKING AROUND, TRYING TO FIND A PLACE TO SLEEP”:
DESCRIBING THE EXPERIENCE OF YOUTH HIDDEN HOMELESSNESS

by

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Abstract

Hidden homelessness is insecurity of tenure or temporary habitation. This can include couch surfing, living in transitional housing, sub-letting, sleeping in vehicles, staying in motels, or staying in places not fit for human habitation. Hidden homelessness is not well understood as it is by nature hidden from researchers, policy-makers, service providers, and the general public. Youth in particular are vulnerable to this type of homelessness. Homelessness puts people at risk for increased health concerns, both physical and mental. It is well known that homelessness costs the social welfare system in terms of emergency, mental health, and correctional service use. While this knowledge is used in addressing street homelessness, less is known about the connection between hidden homelessness and its impacts on these services. To address this knowledge gap, this study sought to answer the question: How do young people who are currently or have previously experienced hidden homelessness describe that experience? This paper reports findings from interviews with six participants who were or are experiencing hidden homelessness. Participants reported experiences of stress, difficulty in school/work, and the need to remain hidden. Implications for social work practice are discussed.
Preface

This thesis is the original product of the author, Carol Alynn Gausvik. The findings reported in this document are covered by the UBC Behavioral Research Ethics Board (certificate number - H14-02130).
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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all the passionate people who have inspired me to fight for something more than myself.

Specifically, I dedicate this work to my parents. Ann and Sherman Gausvik. I have witnessed their unimaginable generosity - not only towards myself, but to anyone who may need it. I can never thank them enough for being who they are.
1. Introduction

Homelessness is a growing concern in Canada. Conservative estimates suggest that on any given night, 30,000 Canadians access emergency shelters. It is estimated that for every one individual in Canada who accesses formal shelters, three more are experiencing hidden homelessness (Gaetz, Donaldson, Richter, & Gulliver, 2013). Lack of affordable housing has led to an increased number of Canadians at risk. This study looks specifically at hidden homelessness. Hidden homelessness is a broadly defined experience of insecurity of housing which is separate from the accessing of formal shelters.

Homelessness is a concern for all Canadians. Housing and health are closely related. The use of health care related services, as well as the associated disease-related concerns, impacts all people. Homelessness exacerbates health problems (Holton, Evie, & Hwang, 2010). Public spending on homelessness is well documented. Homelessness costs the Canadian economy over seven billion dollars a year. These costs are estimated from the use of emergency shelters, social services, health care, and correctional institutions. Expensive public systems and uncoordinated emergency response lead to inefficient spending on resources. (Gaetz, et al., 2013; SPARC BC, 2011).

There has been success in the implementation of “housing first” strategies. Housing first is a solution which addresses homelessness by giving individuals safe, affordable housing without conditions or expectations (Waegemakers Schiff & Rook, 2012). Housing first focuses on people who have a history of chronic or episodic homelessness. Chronic homelessness refers to the experience of homelessness of a long period of time. Episodic homelessness refers to the frequent experience of homelessness over a short period of time. Housing first focuses first on
safe and affordable housing, and then providing any support necessary to allow that person to maintain housing. Housing as a human right assumes that, with housing, an individual may begin to address the underlying causes that led to the initial experience of homelessness (Waegemakers Schiff & Rook, 2012).

Canadians who experience homelessness are a heterogeneous group. Single adult males between the age of 25 and 55 make up forty seven percent of the homeless population. Youth aged 16 to 24 make up twenty percent of the homeless population. Aboriginal people are overrepresented in the homeless population. They comprise six percent of the Canadian population, but represent anywhere from fifteen to twenty percent of urban homeless population (Belanger, Head, & Awosoga, 2012). Women, aboriginal people, and young people are at greater risk of experiencing homelessness due to restricted income and systemic oppression.

It is important to note that the data gathered in this view of homelessness in Canada are from homeless counts and emergency shelter statistics. Families, young people, and individuals who do not access services are not included in these numbers. Hidden homelessness is therefore a difficult statistic to capture. Those who experience hidden homelessness may not come into contact with emergency shelters or services directed towards homelessness. They also face similar problems to those who access emergency shelters. The statistics for the cost of homelessness do not account for those who do not access such services. Similarly, solutions such as housing first, which have shown success, are less accessible to those who do not access emergency shelters or identify as homeless. Gaetz and colleagues (2013) estimate that three times as many people experience hidden homelessness. Therefore any solution put forward needs to incorporate a broad definition (Eberle, Kraus, & Serge, 2009; SPARC BC, 2011).
1.1 Reflexivity

I was inspired to research this topic by the vast amount of work that is being done in the area of homelessness. I have dedicated my career and my education to learning about and finding solutions to homelessness. There have been countless amazing people who have pushed me both personally and professionally to continue on in this work. I have been working in social services in the housing and homelessness sector for 5 years. Both my academic and working career have been focused on this topic. I am extremely invested in ending homelessness, which is the reason I am completing a study on hidden homelessness.

I have never experienced hidden homelessness, which is important to the direction of the study. My own experience of stable housing, both as a child and as an adult, creates assumptions and biases for this study. Throughout my career hidden homelessness has been a difficult issue. It is difficult to assist people due to funding concerns. The logistics of case managing and the assisting of families and individuals who experience this type of homelessness are complex. From both a front-line and policy perspective, hidden homelessness presents challenges. Reporting, day-to-day assistance, funding, and inclusive policy are all challenges that I have encountered. This pushes me to ask questions and seek answers through this study. I believe that homelessness is a problem with a solution, which makes it extremely important to have in-depth research and evidence on which to base practice.
2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Within the literature review, homelessness in Canada is explored to establish the importance of this topic. The literature review focuses on the effect housing has on health, education, and personal well-being. Hidden homelessness is reviewed within a typology of homelessness. Youth homelessness is specifically reviewed. Youth homelessness is distinct from adult homelessness, in that it has different causes and solutions.

Most Canadians agree that the accessing of emergency shelters or living on the street is homelessness. Moving beyond that definition can result in disagreement. People who are temporarily housed, staying with friends or family (couch-surfing), staying in transitional housing, or in other temporary accommodations can complicate the definition of homelessness. Having an unclear definition of homelessness can prevent the development of effective permanent solutions (SPARC BC, 2011). Throughout the methodology, and because this an exploratory study, I used the lack of definition to guide my research design. In the recruitment process I used loosely defined criteria for what constitutes hidden homelessness. This allowed me to talk with people who self-identified as hidden homeless. This concept is discussed further in the findings and discussion section of this paper.

2.2 The Canadian Context of Homelessness

There are many ways an individual can experience homelessness. Lack of affordable housing combined with personal crisis is one. It is a systemic issue when individuals and families remain homeless for long periods of time with little assistance to break the cycle (Gaetz et al., 2013). Emergency homeless shelters are the conventional way of thinking about solutions to
homelessness. The other ways that people experience unstable housing are less understood, as there is a paucity of research in this area.

Canadian literature on homelessness focuses on historical policy shifts that created systemic housing problems. In the 1990s the Canadian government shifted investment from affordable housing to incentivized home ownership. Reduction in benefits for low income Canadians added to this housing crisis. From 1993 to 2008 federal benefits went from 6.3% of Canada's GDP to 3.8%, resulting in an inadequate security net. Old Age Security, Family Allowance, and Employment Insurance were all reduced as the Canadian government moved away from affordable housing investments (Gaetz et al., 2013).

Housing affordability is defined by the relationship between housing costs and income levels (Chisholm, 2003). Affordable housing is housing that does not exceed 30% of an individual’s income (Luffman, 2006). Canadian data indicate that over 1.5 million Canadians are exceeding that threshold. The cost of housing, overcrowding, and housing adequacy are all determining risk factors for homelessness (Chisholm, 2003).

2.3 Health and Housing

The type of housing to which an individual or family has access has direct impacts on health, well-being, education, and employment. Many individuals facing loss of housing find it more desirable to stay with family or friends instead of in formal shelters. Both environments come with a loss of privacy and personal autonomy (Hallet, 2012; Skobba et al., 2013). Feelings of pride; loss of comfort; fear of illness; and fear of bed bugs are all reasons people avoid formal shelters (Crawley, Kane, Atkinson-Plato, Hamilton, Dobson, & Watson, 2013). The environment in which one lives has a direct impact on mental and physical health. Chisholm (2003) states that living in inadequate housing is a powerful stressor. Poor living conditions are
associated with higher rates of asthma, cancer, infant mortality, diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Pesticides, lead paint, and run down infrastructure all contribute to poorer health outcomes for low-income families.

Whether provisionally accommodated, or in precarious housing, low-income families face many challenges associated with poor quality housing. Healthy relationships and housing security can contribute to alleviating some of these challenges, but not for every family and/or individual (Chisholm, 2003). Good health is associated with social and economic characteristics. Physical material; affordability; security; and proximity to services all contribute to housing-related health outcomes.

The spread of disease is an important quality of life concern - especially in metropolitan areas. Evidence connects health concerns and homelessness directly. This connection is due to crowding issues in shelters, chronic stress, exposure to the elements, poor quality of building materials, dilapidated housing, food insecurity, poor food quality, and so on. Within Gaetz et al. (2013) typology of homelessness, those at risk or precariously housed face similar issues as those experiencing homelessness in an emergency shelter. It is reasonable to expect that families, young people, and individuals would experience similar health concerns.

2.4 Youth Homelessness

Statistics show that one in five shelter users in Canada are youth. This does not account for youth who do not access emergency homeless shelters. This number also does not reflect youth who sleep outdoors, stay with family or friends, or sleep in places not fit for human habitation (Gaetz, 2014). In their Vancouver Youth Housing Options study by Kraus and Woodward (2007) caution that data from the report may not reflect youth who are at highest risk, as they may not be attached to services (2007). Duval and Vincent (2008) state that exact
statistics of youth experiencing homelessness are difficult to obtain. This is due to the transient nature of the population.

The causes and consequences of youth homelessness are distinct from adult homelessness. For young people, becoming homeless is more than loss of housing. It also encompasses the loss of relationships (Gaetz, 2014). Conflict often underlies youth pathways into homelessness (Duval & Vincent, 2008). Family abuse, addictions, mental illness, and neglect can result in young people leaving home. Leaving foster care is another risk factor for experiencing homelessness (Duval & Vincent, 2008; Gaetz, 2014). Institutions play a role in the experience of homelessness for youth. Health and mental health facilities play a role in youth homelessness when they fail to ensure safe and caring environments for young people leaving the institutions. Many youth experiencing homelessness have greater concerns in the area of mental health (Duval & Vincent, 2008). Incarceration is also a concern; more than half the youth experiencing homelessness have been in jail (Gaetz, 2014). These structural factors, combined with personal conflict or trauma, can lead to youth homelessness.

Youth homelessness needs different solutions than adult homelessness. Youth are typically defined by age. Age is a key factor in accessing services. Typically, those considered youth are between the age of 13 and 24 (Gaetz, 2014; Kraus & Woodward, 2007; Noble, 2012; Duval & Vincent, 2008). Youth homelessness is further defined as young people between that age group who are living independently of parents and/or caregivers. These young people typically lack support for transitioning to adulthood. Youth homelessness is also characterized by not having stable income. Importantly, youth homelessness is not simply the absence of housing. It is characterized by instability, limited choices, and extreme poverty.
Youth often encounter discrimination in housing, employment, and service use (Gaetz, 2014; Noble, 2012). For youth to maintain housing, they must be able to support themselves. This requires the skills to maintain meaningful employment; however, youth rates of unemployment are double that of the Canadian public (Noble, 2012). Youth face barriers to employment, such as stereotypes perpetuated in the media. Potential employers may be reluctant to work with young people because of myths about youth being disrespectful and lacking work ethic. Youth often have not acquired the skills or education for higher paying employment. Low wages can be a contributing factor to youth homelessness (Noble, 2012).

2.5 Child and Family Services

There is a connection between Child Protection Services (CPS) involvement and youth homelessness. Studies estimate that anywhere between 30% and 70% of youth experiencing homelessness have had contact with CPS (Gaetz, 2014; Nichols, 2013; Robert, Pauze, & Fournier, 2005). British Columbia Ministry of Child and Family Development (MCFD) defines a child as anyone under the age of 19. Youth is a specific sub category referring to individuals over the age of 16 but under the age of 19. Youth who can get assistance from MCFD are limited to an agreement that does not exceed two months, or continue past the young person’s 24th birthday (British Columbia, Ministry of Child and Family Development, 1996). Agreements with young adults over the age of 19 may occur with young people who were receiving MCFD care up until the age of 19. Young adults may receive care only if they are enrolled in an education or rehabilitation program. Beyond the age of 19, youth do not receive supports from MCFD unless under the young adults agreement section (British Columbia, Ministry of Child and Family Development, 1996).
A qualitative study done with youth regarding their experiences with Child Protection Services indicate that many youth are not selected for continued supports due to behavioral issues. This particular study by Nichols (2013) was conducted in Ontario, and may, therefore, not reflect practice in British Columbia. Nichols (2013) does point out that each province has different policies and practice. The point still remains: CPS involvement and youth homelessness are often interrelated.

Abuse and neglect often precede CPS involvement (Duval & Vincent, 2008). Families of youth who experience homelessness are more likely to be affected by familial conflict than non-homeless youth (Robert, Pauze, & Fournier, 2005). The conditions that lead to a youth being in care are often repeated due to placement instability and maltreatment while in care. This can often result in behavioral issues and further emotional trauma for young people. Foster care, and other types of placements for young people, has an impact on risk factors that can lead to homelessness (Duval & Vincent, 2008). Leaving care, even through permanency plans, is not necessarily a protective factor from further issues. Leaving care is often associated with feelings of isolation, mental health problems, loss of social connections, incarceration, and homelessness.

2.6 Diversity of Youth

Youth who experience homelessness are a diverse group who require diverse solutions. Males typically make up a greater percentage of youth shelter users. Certain groups of people are overrepresented in homeless shelters, including aboriginal youth and LGBTQ youth. It is estimated that 25-40% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ (Cunningham, Pergamit, & Nan Astone, 2014).

2.7 Youth Hidden Homelessness

Youth are an at-risk group which is often hidden (Kraus & Woodward, 2007). This makes young people more likely to be left out of discussion, research, planning, and statistics.
This also makes youth more difficult to serve. Youth tend to avoid services due to past experience and apprehension of child welfare or criminal justice services (Duval & Vincent, 2008; Nichols, 2013). Youth are more likely to avoid emergency shelters by relying on informal support networks such as family or friends (Kraus & Woodward, 2007). Kraus and Woodward (2007) estimate that on any given day there are between 300 and 700 youth experiencing homelessness in Vancouver. This includes street living, emergency shelters, temporary accommodations, and unstable home situations.

2.8 Hidden Homelessness

The experience of homelessness is not always linear. Individuals may experience different types of homelessness. Gaetz and colleagues’ (2013) describe a typology of homelessness which includes: unsheltered, emergency shelter, provisional accommodations, and at risk. Human Resources and Skills Development Canada identifies five types of homelessness. These are at risk, street homeless, sheltered homeless, supportively housed, and hidden homeless (SPARC BC, 2011). Unsheltered or street homeless refers to sleeping outdoors or in places not fit for human habitations. Emergency shelter or sheltered homeless refers to overnight accommodations for people in emergencies. Provisional accommodations are accommodations that are temporary or lack security (Crawley et al., 2013). At risk refers to individuals whose economic or housing situation is precarious, and for whom the possibility of homelessness is higher than normal (SPARC BC, 2011). Experiencing unsheltered homelessness can include staying in a vehicle, staying outdoors, or squatting. Being provisionally accommodated refers to the situation in which an individual or family lacks permanent security of tenure (Gaetz et al., 2013). This can mean individuals or families who are “couch surfing,” staying in short-term transitional housing, using temporary lodging such as motels, or living in an institutional setting.
with no fixed permanent address. SPARC BC (2011) looks at couch surfing as hidden rather than provisionally accommodated. One study completed in Vancouver defines hidden homelessness as staying temporarily with another household without a permanent regular address with security of tenure (Eberle, Kraus, & Surge, 2009).

Individuals who experience homelessness often move from one type of homelessness into another and then back to being housed. Being provisionally accommodated can lead an individual or family to higher risk of being unsheltered or needing to access emergency shelters. It is this fluidity of experience that makes accessing services difficult.

A 2009 study from Metro Vancouver estimate that there were 9196 persons experiencing hidden homelessness at the time of the study (Eberle et al., 2009). Further estimates suggest that in the year prior to the study, there were a total of 23 543 persons who experienced hidden homelessness in Metro Vancouver. Gaetz et al. (2013) use this data to estimate that on any given day there are approximately 50 000 persons experiencing hidden homelessness in Canada. It is noted that there are no reliable data on the number of individuals experiencing hidden homelessness in Canada and that the data from the study done by Eberle et al. (2009) are limited to Metro Vancouver. This study does not account for the variations in Canadian cities. This does suggest, however, that hidden homelessness is a considerable concern for Metro Vancouver and is worthy of further research.

Studies conducted in smaller communities in BC found similar results. SPARC BC (2011) conducted a study to understand the issue of hidden homelessness in five British Columbian communities. The study found that many cities have strategies in place to understand and respond to visible homelessness. Hidden homelessness was not accounted for in the provision of services and resources. The study found that in the specific communities, 80% of
participants who identified as experiencing hidden homelessness stayed with friends or acquaintances. The average length of stay was 1-3 months and 26% stayed less than 1 week. The average ratio of people to bedrooms was 3.3 people to 2.2 bedrooms. Most individuals or families experiencing hidden homelessness contributed to rent, food, and maintenance costs. Assisting with child care, cooking, and/or cleaning was also common among participants. Many participants identified having used emergency shelter in the year prior to the study. Eighty two percent of participants stated that they had used government or community services to try to get their own housing.

The researchers in the SPARC BC study interviewed service providers who identified major barriers to assisting people experiencing hidden homelessness. One difficulty identified was the unclear definitions of homelessness, which determined who could access services. Strict criteria to access housing, financial, and/or mental health services was another barrier to providing services to those experiencing hidden homelessness (SPARC BC, 2011).

There are variables in living arrangements which are important to the definition of hidden homelessness (Eberle et al., 2009). The relationship to the head of household, sleeping arrangements, owner/leaseholder satisfactions, and contribution (financial or in-kind) all affect the stability of a doubled-up living arrangement. The satisfaction of the host household is a considerable factor when identifying an individual or family as experiencing precarious housing or hidden homelessness (Eberle et al., 2009). It was noted in the study done by SPARC BC (2011) that it becomes difficult to provide adequate services when one institution considers someone homeless and another does not.

2.9 Conclusion
Understanding the context of hidden homelessness is vital to providing appropriate services. As stated previously, the experience of hidden homelessness is often fluid. In a study done on the needs of people experiencing hidden homelessness, 82% of participants reported using emergency shelters at some point in the past (Crawley, Kane, Atkinson-Plato, Hamilton, Dobson, & Watson, 2013). A significant number of participants also reported mental health concerns, as well as dental and respiratory problems. A full 100% of participants reported experiencing addictions. Addictions were listed as a barrier to accessing health, housing, and social services (Crawley et al., 2013). Lack of transportation and perceived stigma were also reported as barriers to services.

Barriers to accessing services are important to the understanding of hidden homelessness. Many housing services are located within emergency shelters, leaving people who are provisionally accommodated without access. People experiencing hidden homelessness face similar problems as people who are staying in emergency shelters. Health, relationships, transportation, food, and income are all concerns which have a direct impact on an individual’s well-being.

Youth have a distinct experience of homelessness. Young people make up a significant portion of those experiencing homelessness. Certain youth are more vulnerable to homelessness. This includes aboriginal youth, LGBTQ youth, youth leaving care, and youth with mental health and/or addiction concerns. Youth leaving care often lack the skills and resources necessary to maintain housing. Transition to adulthood is made difficult by barriers such as affordable housing, and employment (Gaetz, 2014). Youth homelessness is likely to be hidden (Kraus & Woodward, 2007). Understanding of youth hidden homelessness is important to understanding the cycles of homelessness that people experience.
Eberle et al. (2009) suggest that there is a substantial lack of data connecting hidden homelessness to shelter use. Other research suggests that the experience of homelessness is fluid and that people will experience different types of homelessness throughout their life. Understanding this experience is essential to effectively address hidden homelessness. Existing research focuses on risk factors and homeless counts. Understanding of experience is a component of these studies that has been difficult to acquire. Eberle et al. (2009) discuss the challenges of acquiring sufficient qualitative data. One challenge is being able to reach participants for follow-up qualitative inquiry. In some instances, the qualitative interview was completed with the host family, rather than with the person experiencing hidden homelessness. Eberle et al. (2009) were only able to complete two interviews for the qualitative component of their study. Many of the studies cited in this literature review had a qualitative component to complement the quantitative data. There are few studies which focus only on the human aspect of experiencing precarious and inadequate housing.

Thus the purpose of this study was to describe the experience of hidden homelessness for youth. The intent was to add rich data with depth of experience to the existing literature on hidden homelessness. Exploring this topic serves to give voice to participants who have experienced hidden homelessness.
3. Methods

3.1 Research Question and Theoretical Framework

The research question was: How do youth who currently experience or who have previously experienced hidden homelessness describe that experience? This study describes the experience of hidden homelessness for youth participants. The goal was to contribute to existing research on hidden homelessness by exploring the stories of participants who have directly experienced it.

The purpose of the study was to collect data which give an insight into the experience of hidden homelessness. The study does not verify or prove any one position but rather describes the experience for the participants. The goal was to examine participants’ experiences with very little interpretation. This approach is consistent with naturalistic inquiry, as it privileges the account of the research participant as a knowledgeable actor (Creswell, 2013). Open-ended questions were used to allow participants to describe their experience. This study is more about problem setting than problem solving. I sought to ask the right questions rather than solve the problem of hidden homelessness (Ryan, 2006).

3.2 Methodological Approach

This study utilized an approach to data analysis known as qualitative description (Sandelowski, 2000). Qualitative description re-represents data in the terms used by participants and is low interference and low inference with regard to interpretation of data. Framing this study as qualitative description allowed for a comprehensive summary of hidden homelessness in the everyday terms of people who have experienced it. Rather than produce overarching statements about hidden homelessness, I sought to ensure validity by providing accurate descriptions of the experiences of participants.
Sandelowski (2000) states that qualitative research is often designated under a specific approach such as grounded theory or phenomenology; however, she goes on to point out that much of what is described under these approaches is qualitative description with undertones of other methodological approaches. With regards to methodological undertones, this study has undertones of phenomenology in that it focused specifically on the *experiences* of study participants. In-depth interviews with multiple individuals who have experienced hidden homelessness took place (Creswell, 2013). The participants were asked broad questions. The main concern was their experience. Data analysis also followed a phenomenological approach. Significant statements were organized based on the participants’ descriptions and clustered into groups of themes.

### 3.3 Sampling

The study contributes to existing knowledge rather than standing alone and is based on exploration rather than verification of facts, which made a small sample size ideal (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). An exploratory approach to inquiry often benefits from a smaller sample with in-depth data (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). This study used non-probabilistic sampling methods. Purposive and convenience sampling were employed. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that certain individuals were represented (Robinson, 2014). Participation criteria were designed around an understanding of hidden homelessness, which led to recruitment from specific contexts.

There is significant disagreement about the optimal size of a sample in qualitative research (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Sample size is thus determined by theoretical and practical considerations (Robinson, 2014). Guest et al. (2006) reinforce the idea that data saturation is the indicator of a large enough sample. Saturation refers to the point when new data
no longer contribute new information to the research (Mason, 2010). However, saturation is defined variously in the literature. Saturation can be inappropriate for qualitative studies with multiple dimensions, as the data and information are potentially limitless (Mason, 2010). Hidden homelessness is associated with multiple areas of interest such as health, addictions, and employment. Data saturation would therefore be a poor indicator of a sufficient sample size. Therefore, saturation was not used to determine the sample size. Rather, participants who were selected for the study were the first six people to express interest and fit purposive sampling criteria. Six in-depth interviews were conducted, as the researcher was primarily interested in exploring thick descriptions of each person’s experience rather than generalizing across interviews or reaching theoretical saturation.

3.4 Recruitment

This study followed a recruitment strategy that involved different ways of connecting with youth. The strategy was laid out to ensure that there was representation from different communities. Youth or young people referred to participants under the age of 24 who have experienced hidden homelessness. The study looked at experience within the last 5 years, which allowed for participants up to the age of 29.

Recruitment posters (Appendix A) were distributed to agencies that provide youth services. Recruiting also occurred in places that youth frequent. Individuals were given contact information and allowed to contact the researcher at a later point to ensure confidentiality.

3.5 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria for participants were as follows:

- Is currently experiencing hidden homelessness AND/OR has experienced hidden homelessness in the last five years
• Is over the age of 16

• Experienced hidden homelessness between the ages of 16-24

• Lives in Metro Vancouver

• Is able to speak and understand English

• Is willing to provide one-two hours of their time to be interviewed

Inclusion criteria were adapted in the process of the study. Potential participants who contacted the researcher were screened, and an overview of their experience was gathered. Older youth were more likely to express interest in participation. They were also found to have experience relevant to the research aims. For this reason the eligibility criteria were adapted as such:

• Is currently experiencing hidden homelessness AND/OR has previously experienced hidden homelessness in the last five years

• Is over the age of 16

• Experienced hidden homelessness between the ages of 13-30

• Lives in Metro Vancouver

• Is able to speak and understand English

• Is willing to provide one-two hours of their time to be interviewed

The change occurred in the age range of participants, as well as the age at which a young person experienced hidden homelessness. This was due to relevant experience of individuals interested in participating. The researcher considered that limiting the age of participants would limit the understanding of the experience.

Participants were excluded from the study if their experience of hidden homelessness occurred more than five years prior to the study. The study was conducted only in English and therefore excluded anyone who could not speak and understand the language.
Young people were defined as age 16-24 in the beginning of the study. Part way through the recruitment, the definition of young people changed to include the age range of 13-30. Any young person 16 and under was to be excluded due to issues of consent. This exclusion category remained, as all participants were above the age of 16 at the time of the interview. Since the study includes individuals who have experienced hidden homelessness in the last five years, individuals up to the age of 29 were included. I chose to broaden the inclusion criteria to accommodate one participant that was 30 years of age. This decision was made based on self-identifying as a young person. The participant self-identified with hidden homelessness as well as being a youth. This was important to the discussion of service provision and the reliance on definitions.

Young people who are currently or have previously stayed in shelters, but who identify as having experienced hidden homelessness, were included. As mentioned earlier, the cycle of homelessness is fluid, and oftentimes individuals who experience hidden homelessness also access shelters at some point. Hidden homelessness is defined as lacking security of tenure without accessing formal shelters; however, it possible to have experienced both. Based on this knowledge, accessing shelters was not an exclusion criteria, providing that the participant identified as having experienced hidden homelessness before or after their stay in an emergency shelter.

At first contact, through phone or email, potential participants were asked a series of questions (Appendix B) to determine eligibility. At this stage of contact, potential participants were given further information on the purpose and process of the study and asked if they were still interested in participating. If the participant was interested in participating and fit all eligibility criteria, an interview was arranged. Participants were given the choice as to where and
when interviews took place. This ensured that participants felt safe participating in the study. Participants were made aware of their right to leave the study at any time with no consequences.

According to Peisah, Vollmer-Conna, and Kim (2012) researchers should use a risk sensitive model of capacity determination. A higher degree of risk in a study requires a higher degree of capacity. This study is low risk with simple procedures. Capacity was assumed unless potential participants struggle to understand the study procedures and risks. Individual consideration is important in determining capacity to give informed consent. Individuals with mental illnesses such as mood disorders or schizophrenia should not be automatically excluded from research (Peisah et al., 2012). Individuals who expressed interest in participating in this study were not asked to disclose any diagnoses. The information was presented around procedures and risks, and the researcher determined eligibility based on the individual’s continued interest in participating. Information was provided to potential participants in easily understandable forms. Language was simple, and the procedures were laid out step-by-step. Participants were made aware of their role and rights throughout the screening. Any clarification needed about the study was resolved through dialogue between the potential participant and the researcher. If clarification through dialogue was insufficient in informing the participant of procedures, they were to be screened out due to concerns around capacity to give informed consent. This did not occur at any point in the recruitment process.

3.6 Data Collection

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews with participants. The interviews were semi-structured, using open-ended starting questions and dialogue, but with some main categories of questions asked to all participants. The structure of the interview was flexible. The main goal was to allow the participant to speak openly about their housing and hidden
homelessness experiences. The interview guide changed in the process of data collection. The initial interview guide (Appendix D) was modified after the second interview. The second interview guide (Appendix E) included questions on common themes already occurring throughout data collection.

Participants were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix C) to participate in the interviews. They were given this consent form at least 48 hours in advance to review. At the start of the interview, the consent form was reviewed and the participant was given an opportunity to ask any questions. It was made clear to the participant that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences. An honorarium of a $20.00 gift card was given to the participant prior to the start of the interview. The decision to provide an honorarium was made with awareness that financial incentives are controversial (Groth, 2010). Vulnerable populations may be more willing to accept the risk of the study for financial gain. This concern is weighed against the benefit of having enough participants speak to their different and complex experiences. When used in a reasonable manner, financial incentives to participate acknowledge participants for their time and effort (Groth, 2000). This can affirm participant value and allow for studies rich in information. It was also reasonable to compensate participants for their time in this study, given what is known about the experience of hidden homelessness.

The interview began with inviting the participant to discuss their experience with housing and homelessness. This is a sensitive topic and a vulnerable population, so the interview only proceeded if the participant was comfortable talking about the subject. Topics included experiences of homelessness, places that individuals have stayed, challenges they have faced, and solutions they have come up with. To assist with trauma that might result from discussing potentially distressing topics, I distributed to respondents a list of counseling resources available
to them. The study risks involved emotional discomfort at remembering past events related to homelessness. If at any point the participant became visibly upset, he or she was reminded that they did not have to continue. Debriefing resources were offered after the interview.

The shortest interview was 45 minutes and the longest one hour and 45 minutes. Whenever possible, the participants spoke freely about their experience with as little interference as possible from the interviewer.

3.7 Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed as they were completed. Transcriptions were nearly verbatim. Analysis continuously took place as interviews were completed. Coding began, but was not finalized until all interviews were complete. The development of the code began in the collection of data. The interview transcriptions were reviewed in detail until a code became clear (Bradley, Curry, & Devers, 2007). As interviews were completed, the codes were refined using constant comparison of text from different interviews. The codes were not used to prove certain theories or outcomes. The coding was used to link different experiences and establish themes and consistent descriptions. Bradley et al. (2007) describe an integrated approach to developing codes which fits with this research design. Using a predetermined list of suspected codes as well as creating codes as the data were reviewed ensured that important themes were covered. Predetermined suspected codes included themes of homelessness, housing instability, evictions, and conflict. These were based on the literature review. Discovering themes in the experience of participants was an important part of data analysis.

Coding was done to create themes which the participants found meaningful to share. Coding was done by first finding consistencies in experiences. Each transcript was reviewed and the consistencies highlighted by color. Once these consistencies were noted, they were grouped
together to create larger themes that each participant’s experience shared. Some themes developed in the first two interviews and were then incorporated into Version 2 of the interview guide.

Member checking added a measure of validity to the study. Study participants were given the opportunity to review the findings and to give feedback. Only one participant responded with a change in age reported. Other measures of rigor included consultation with the thesis committee.

3.8 Participants

The sample consisted of six young people who had experience with hidden homelessness. Four of the participants were female and two were male. Participants were asked about their gender identity, so all genders indicated are self-identified. Participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 30, with their experiences of hidden homelessness occurring from the ages of 13 to 30. Participants’ experiences varied greatly. The two youngest participants experienced hidden homelessness with parents as well as separately. Participants reported a variety of situations, which they identified as hidden homelessness. This study did not strictly define hidden homelessness, so that it could capture experiences which may fall outside of traditional couch surfing. Identities of the participants were protected and each was given a pseudonym. All participants were from Vancouver. The participants came from two different youth service centres. One program is a youth employment center, and the other is a youth drop-in centre that also offers housing programs. The names of these programs are not identified in order to protect participant confidentiality.
3.8.1 Maria

Maria is a 27-year old female who was connected to the study through a youth employment centre. At the time of the interview she was staying in a temporary sub-let that she had been in for three weeks. She is originally from Central America. She moved to the United States at the age of 15, and to Vancouver at the age of 17. Maria was in foster care in Vancouver until the age of nineteen. Over the last eight years she has moved more times than she can count. She has stayed temporarily with friends (couch surfing), stayed in short term sublet apartments, and rented multiple apartments on a short term basis. She is a passionate musician. Her preferred instrument is the saxophone, but she also plays the piano and guitar. She is a private person but wanted to share her experience. She is passionate about helping other young people and is in school working towards that goal. She currently works at a social service agency part time, and she is hoping to get more hours in order to sustain herself financially.

3.8.2 Danielle

Danielle is a 19 year old female who was connected to the study through a youth drop-in centre. At the time of the interview she was living in transitional housing and is at the end of her two year term. She experienced hidden homelessness with her family and for a brief period was in foster care. She and her family have couch surfed, camped, and been in shelters. Danielle is passionate about volunteering and raising public awareness about youth issues pertaining to foster care. She sits on multiple youth councils in the city of Vancouver. At the time of the interview, Danielle was making decisions about her next housing situation.

3.8.3 Hannah

Hannah is a 30 year old female who was connected to the study through a youth employment centre. She is originally from Vancouver, but has lived in a smaller community in
the interior of British Columbia for the past 13 years. At the time of the interview Hannah felt the pull to move to the city, where she had many friends and family. She was surprised at the difficulty in grounding herself in Vancouver. She has found herself staying at the houses of friends and family, sometimes rotating between five different places. Hannah is currently looking for full time work, and has a place to live for January of next year. At the time of the interview, she had been couch surfing for seven weeks.

3.8.4 Michael

Michael is a 24 year old male who was connected to the study through a youth housing program. He is originally from Alberta and moved to Vancouver when he was nineteen. Michael experienced homelessness from the age of thirteen to twenty two. His experiences range from camping, staying in youth shelters, staying in adult shelters, couch surfing, and transitional housing. He came to Vancouver for a skate competition and never left. He feels Vancouver has more opportunities to offer than other cities. At the time of the interview Michael was at the end of his term in the transitional housing program. He was moving into subsidized housing soon, and has many plans as to how he is going to move forward from his experiences.

3.8.5 Ryan

Ryan is a 24 year old male who was connected to the study through a youth employment centre. He is originally from the lower mainland and came to Vancouver as a teenager. He is a musician by trade, and is currently working his way into a skilled job with an arts union. Ryan has been experiencing hidden homelessness for over a year and is currently looking for a permanent place to live. His experiences include couch surfing, flop houses, jam spaces, sleeping outdoors, and sleeping in places not fit for human habitation. Ryan wanted to share his experience of hidden homelessness so that others might understand and have more compassion
towards the experience. At the time of the interview Ryan had a potential place available for February and was determined to make it a reality.

3.8.6 Lisa.

Lisa is an 18 year old female who was connected to the study through a youth drop-in centre. She experienced hidden homelessness with her mom at the age of thirteen years. She and her mom have stayed with family, friends, and in their car. Lisa had a brief period where she and her mom were staying in separate places. However, they worked very hard to stay together. Lisa and her mom eventually went to a family shelter as she was starting grade nine. From there, Lisa and her mom moved into subsidized housing. At the time of the interview Lisa was living in a housing program for young people. She could live there until she is 24, providing she follows the house rules. Lisa is very involved in her community, including the drop in centre from which she was connected to the study. She sings, and is in cadets.

The participants were all very interested in the topic of hidden homelessness. Many of the participants expressed the desire to be a voice for change in their community. This was a driving factor for many of the young people to talk about their experiences. Many of the participants felt that sharing their experience was a positive way to impact change.
4. Findings

4.1 The Stress of Moving Frequently

Participants shared some of the logistical implications of experiencing hidden homelessness. The experience is often identified as stressful due to the many practicalities involved. Simply finding a place to stay, either for the night or permanently, is a major source of stress for participants. At the time of the interviews, none of the participants were in permanent housing. On the day of the interview, Ryan was looking for a place to sleep for the night. Both Danielle and Michael were facing the end of their terms in transitional housing. Hannah was waiting on an arrangement for the following month. Maria was sub-letting a room in an apartment which was only guaranteed for two months. Lisa was also in transitional housing. However, she has until she is 24 to continue living there. Each participant experienced stress about having to move so frequently. Ryan was facing an especially hard situation, not knowing where he was going to sleep that night.

Some people allow me to stay a few nights. One person stays the other night, and so I am always having to. It’s always a stressor in my brain because it’s endless. Especially in this particular case because if you don’t have any place lined up for the night you have to stress. You have within a day a certain amount of time to find a place before you are totally up shit creek. (Ryan)

Other participants were facing stress in the instability of their current situation. Maria, having moved more times than she could recount in the last seven years, was unsure whether her current housing would last. Maria was sub-letting a room from someone on a short-term basis. The original agreement was that she could sub-let for two months. When asked what she planned to do after the sub-let was up, she expressed the desire to stay and be stable.

My plan is to stay here, see if I can stay. Because I need to find, I want a stable place. It’s a lot of roommates, 3 roommates, but at the same time it’s okay. As long as I have my own room. But I am new; I am not sure how it will go. I have been there for about three weeks. It takes time for me to get comfortable with everybody, especially for what I have
been through. It takes time for me to know. The roommates they seem alright and I try my best not to bring all my stuff. Just bring some things and put them in the room. It’s not too comfortable, there is a lot of things everywhere (Maria)

Some participants were in more stable housing at the time of the interview but discussed their experiences of stress when their housing situation was unstable. Michael spent more than 6 years going between shelters, tenting, and couch surfing.

... The stress, fuck the stress, it takes it off you. That’s really... you just want to rip your skin off. Like I am at the skate park all day, and if an option runs out I am walking around, thinking, am I fucked? No maybe I will pop in on a buddy. Like I have a lot of friends. And so it’s like I start walking around, and time goes by, and you start realizing, this is going to be an all-nighter. And so the stress is huge. (Michael)

4.1.2 Stress on Work and School

The stress of hidden homelessness is multifaceted. Moving frequently was its own stressor for the participants. Moving frequently also put stress on other parts of the participants’ lives. Keeping up with school or work is especially challenging when you don’t have a stable place to rest your head at night. Hannah was currently looking for work, and not having a consistent place to stay was getting in the way of her job search. When asked about how this experience is effecting her search for employment she laughed lightly.

Yeah, that has definitely affected my search for employment. If I was grounded I would be able to do this work search at this time, go home, have lunch, and come back later. My dad lives [in a different city.] If I am lucky, it’s a 2 hour ride, if I am not lucky it can be 2.5-3 hours depending on where in Vancouver I am coming from and how many busses I have to catch. It’s ridiculous; it’s really been affecting my job search. I can’t just come and go. (Hannah)

Hannah expressed that if she was more grounded and in housing then she could really focus on her job search. The stress of hidden homelessness took a toll on her job search in practical ways, such as getting from place to place. It also took a toll on her physical and mental energy.

Both Lisa and Danielle were in school at the time they experienced hidden homelessness with their family. The practicalities of simply getting to school were the first of many barriers for
them. Lisa had just moved across the border but was living close to her former school. At first she attempted to maintain her education there.

For about a half a month my mom was driving me [there], which was ridiculous. But luckily we were [close] at the time. But that just became too much. So we applied for, after that time, we moved to Vancouver, where I started school there. And I stayed there until last year. It was stressful though. (Lisa)

Danielle faced similar stress.Attempting to maintain her education at the school she had been in for years, she was facing a long commute from the campground where her family was staying.

Her education was suffering, and she attributed this to stress.

I barely passed grade 12 because I never did any homework, because I was so stressed out. My teachers could sense that something was wrong. Like a couple of teachers tried to talk to me about it, but I just shrugged them off. . . Prior to being homeless I lived right across the street from the high school, so I would show up on time always. And then when we were homeless, school was so far away and I couldn't just say that I am staying in a whole other city right now. (Danielle)

Lisa had very similar experiences to share about her grade 8 year. I asked Lisa about her experience going to school while not having a place to stay.

There were just a couple times that we stayed in the car, I didn't want to go. I need to shower, I need to get ready, I didn't have a place to do that. Those were the days that I started to skip school a lot. Probably about a month. And the usual, lower grades, not really knowing what’s up. It was really hard. My mom wanted me to go to homework club, but I wasn't ready to. So homework wasn't getting done, and she didn't have the time to support me. I had really hard time they would ask if I understand and I would say yeah totally, but not really. I didn't let any teachers or friends know. (Lisa)

Employment was an important factor in being able to maintain stable housing. Maria described the difficulty in maintaining a job while experiencing hidden homelessness. Maria was facing challenging decisions around a practicum. At the time of the interview, she needed 300 more hours of a practicum to finish her education. Completing her program would be extremely helpful in her quest for stable housing. Maria explained that the difficulty lies in being able to afford rent while doing this.
Now that I finished [first year of school] I say okay, I need to focus on getting a job. But because economically I am not great, I decided to postpone a few hours on my practicum to start working to be able to pay the rent. . . I cannot do my practicum for 300 hours when I have to pay for my rent and food. It’s not fair, because not everybody is in the same situation. So in my case, I either work or I focus on my practicum, but at the same time I need a place to live. Because even a couple months ago, I didn't have a stable place to stay. (Maria)

Maria is currently working a casual position at a social service agency. She works on call, but does not get enough hours. Maria hopes that this casual job will build up to something more sustainable.

4.1.3 Remaining Hidden

One major stressor that all of the participants mentioned was the act of keeping up appearances. This was especially important to the participants in order to maintain their current standing with friends, teachers, and employers (current or potential). It was also mentioned that the act of keeping up their personal appearance was a form of self-care and self-esteem. Each participant had their own reason for keeping their experience of hidden homelessness hidden.

Yeah I don’t usually talk about it. I try to keep it confidential, even with my friends I don't talk about it that much. . . I would rather people not know, especially my friends. Well I don't have many friends, but people that I mix with. I feel quite judged, or I don't want anybody to. I feel negative thoughts from them sometimes. . . Because if they have never been in that situation, they can’t understand. (Maria)

Maria mentioned multiple times that she did not talk about her situation, because it seemed when people found out, they took advantage of her.

I don’t want them to know my situation, because I don’t know them. And from my experience for what I have been through, I would rather not tell anyone, because I feel that some people take advantage. (Maria)

For Lisa, keeping up the facade impacted her education.

It felt like everybody knew, but they didn’t. But I felt like I had to hide it. People would probably not have thought I was because I still had all my clothes. So I tried to keep my personal appearance very well-intact. And my mom always put me first, so any money we did have, she made sure I got what I needed. So self-image I guess. (Lisa)
Danielle was also concerned with keeping up her appearance at school. Danielle also mentioned that it was important to keep the knowledge of her experience private from the school. Her family was concerned that if their situation was known they would be investigated by the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

It was really interesting, because I went to a prestigious school, so I kind of had to put on a front that nothing was wrong. You aren’t homeless, because otherwise it would be weird, you would be the outcast. So camping it was, I don't know, it was weird. I wouldn't keep my clothes at the campsite, I would keep them in my locker, so I would have clean clothes. I went to a really rich school, and it was difficult to put on a front. (Danielle)

Putting on a front for others was a common theme for many of the participants. For Danielle and Lisa it was about keeping up their appearance at school. For Michael it was about keeping up his appearance in front of peers. Michael discussed this facade as being not only about his appearance but also about helping him move forward.

You start becoming known. I tried to keep it a secret. I tried really really hard. Too proud to admit it to a lot of people. None of my friends know what ever happened to me. They think I came from, well nobody ever asked. I am sure when people look at me their first opinion is not that I came from a rough place…During the day I had to put on a facade that you weren't homeless. You didn't want your buddies thinking you were homeless. I went a long time. Actually I’m sure that to this day no one knew…5 years. Clean clothes, new boards [skateboards]. It wasn't easy. But yeah, I think, doing that saved my life. It got me in this mentality that no, I am not street level, I am not homeless. (Michael).

This stress of keeping up appearances was not without its own challenges. Many participants struggled with the practical reality of not having their belongings with them. Participants had a range of experience—from living out of a backpack, to keeping their things in storage, to keeping their things at multiple locations. Each experience had unique challenges.

Danielle was keeping her clothes in her locker at school, while the rest of her belongings were in storage. Lisa had two suitcases which she lived out of for 8 months. Hannah had reduced her belongings to fit in a backpack. Michael had belongings at several different locations. Ryan lived
out of his guitar case and kept other belongings at multiple different friends’ houses. Maria talked about the challenges of keeping her belongings in different places.

Not having everything with me is difficult. I am trying to learn how to cope with that. Because I have done it for so long with my stuff in different places. So I have just learned to work with what I have with me. Just two months ago I had to go to an interview and I didn't have clothes for an interview. It wasn't good at all, just the feeling. Knowing that I don't have my stuff. Because when I work and have money, I buy what I need, but at the same time I don't have it. And when I call and ask to pick it up, they say okay sure, but sometimes they aren't available. (Maria)

One factor that contributed to stress was the necessity to travel to get her belongings. 

Hannah also discussed the difficulty of not having her belongings with her. This impacted her feelings of cleanliness, as well as impacting her job search.

Living out of a backpack is interesting for me. I remember one time I was like “I’m not staying in Vancouver tonight, I am only going to hand out a resume or two and then I am going home. I am so ridiculously tired.” And then I have like one of my lovers pick me up and he is like “let’s watch movies, and stay here.” And I am like no toothbrush. Oh I hate it when that happens…Luckily I can fit everything I need in a backpack. So luckily I can just pick up and you know. I don't have a sprawl of taking 8 different bags with me every time I go somewhere, which is nice. But there is definitely the laundry. I have to do laundry at least once a week or more, because I run out of clothes really quickly. Especially if you only have two pairs of pants and a t-shirt and underwear and socks. You are doing laundry every other day. I am just one of those people that can’t handle wearing the same pair of pants for three days straight. I feel like I look dirty, and I won’t get a job if I look dirty. (Hannah)

Ryan had a system worked out so that all of his work necessities travelled with him. He was extremely organized and dedicated to gaining the hours necessary to become a part of the arts union. He was still impacted by the stress of having the rest of his belongings in different places with people he could trust.

I have a few collections of belongings. They are kind of sprawled out in a few different places. Because my buddy lives in a place and I have a few suitcases in there. Mostly all my guitar gear is at a jam space. I just have a few different things sprawled out until I get my own place. My situation right now is I have places of storage where I know I can fully trust that they lock the places when they aren't around. Friends’ houses. I wouldn’t leave it with anyone I didn't know or trust. That’s pretty much my golden rule. I travel with just what I need. In my guitar case I have all my work documents. (Ryan)
Hidden homelessness was described as stressful for many different reasons. Michael felt that having to downsize his belongings to be able to carry them with him was extremely stressful.

Not being able to shower, having to lug your shit around literally everywhere you fucking go. We could be hanging out in a neighborhood, and if you feel like changing, I have stuff at one buddy’s house, a [skate] board at another buddy’s house, and that’s fucked up. And then you try to downsize so you don’t have as much stuff. Fuck. It’s the most stressful thing, I think. (Michael)

4.2 Negotiating an Exchange

While talking with study participants, one thing became very clear: When participants were experiencing hidden homelessness there was some form of negotiation involved. For those who were couch surfing, the negotiation could be an exchange of money or goods in return for a place to sleep for a night. Negotiating involved not only the exchange of goods, but also understanding and working within social expectations. There was social pressure involved in some of the participant’s situations, as well as subtle cues that were important to be able to read. Participants relied on social exchange as a means to finding a decent place to sleep for the night.

4.2.1 Exchanging money or goods for a place to stay

A common occurrence for some study participants was offering a tangible exchange of money or goods for a place to sleep.

I have paid, and also of course everybody in Vancouver loves marijuana. So I would sometimes give them cash, or if I didn't have any I would give them another incentive. Maybe some beers, or pot or something. Anything that will make it worth their while. Because a lot of times they have been really gracious in letting me stay, because I am their buddy and they know me. (Ryan)

Later in his experience Michael was staying at a youth housing program. It was similar to a group home, run by a youth service centre in Vancouver. He discussed the implications of the rules there, which led him to alternate between that home and couch surfing. This program
required that young people staying there to hand over 90% of their income assistance cheque. The money was then put in a savings account for them. Michael recounted that often when people were kicked out, it was because they did not hand over the money from the cheque. Michael had a system of staying in the program for the first three weeks prior to cheque day. On cheque day he would get kicked out, and would use some of his income to pay friends to couch surf.

I would usually have something set up and it was pretty good. Paid them a little bit because it was cheque day. Every day you get kicked out on cheque day, and so I had a couple bucks to give them each time… I had 3 weeks of a solid place to stay. And then I could come up with an “I’m locked out can I stay with you? I’ll grab some beers.” And they were usually cool with that. So it got a little easier. Especially with a little bit of money in your pocket. Still not fun though. And unless you pay them first and sometimes even when you pay them first, it’s not good enough. It’s almost like you gotta pay sporadically, you gotta pay every single time. If I give someone 100 bucks, he uses it up in two days, realizes my worth just went out the window now, I got no more money from him, what good am I to him, unless I bring in more money. (Michael)

The exchange is not always monetary. Many participants discussed participating in household chores. This sort of exchange seemed to help alleviate the burden of having someone couch surf. It also showed appreciation for having a place to stay.

That’s why I feel so welcome everywhere I go, because people kind of see me as a joy. I do dishes everywhere I go. I make food, and I do dishes everywhere I go. I make sure there is a clean kitchen, and every time I am there, there is food and a clean kitchen. (Hannah)

When you are staying at a place there is always ethics, or etiquette. Also you have to be very subtle. If you are staying with somebody, I have struggled with this a bit, because it you are going to be in someone’s house, you have to respect their rules. So if they ask you to do something, you just have to do it. You don't want to burn any bridges of anyone you are with, because they are helping you out. You pretty much have to put in what you are getting. (Ryan)
4.2.2 The Social Performance

Participants had to negotiate the social expectations of the situations they were in. Each situation had its own set of rules and expectations, and it was up to participants to understand and follow them. In many situations participants were performing a role in order to maintain a roof over their head. There was a lot of social pressure on participants in the couch surfing situations.

They really enjoy my presence which is awesome and I like that, but yeah there is a lot of social pressure, like you know, you are here. There is no room for me to crawl off to and snuggle. I have that obligation to be social. And because I am a smoker, I get those minutes to go off by myself. And it’s funny when I do sneak off two minutes and sit there with my smoke, and people are like where is she. I have had my friends come out looking for me. I don't mind, I enjoy it. But I really do long to have my own space where I can relax. (Hannah)

Participants often discussed the feeling of being on someone else’s time. When they are couch surfing or staying in someone’s home, they have to follow the host’s schedule. Maria found herself accommodating her host’s schedule despite her own needs.

At first the person was really nice letting me stay, but at the same time I didn't sleep well. They like to go out and have drinks and party, and at the same time my situation, I am not ready, I cannot do that. Because I am already struggling with my living situation. So at the same time sometimes I stay up with them, just to, kind of like act like I am okay. But honestly I only sleep for hours, 3 hours, and if it continues then I feel bad, I feel really bad. (Maria)

Hannah echoed this experience. When a person is relying on a friend for a place to sleep, they are a guest in their house. They have to act like a guest, even though this is technically where they are living, even if it’s for a very short term.

Like if they are staying up late, you are staying up late. If they are waking up early, you are waking up early. You are on their time. You know I mean? Unless they are like, ‘You can sleep as late as you want,’ which does happen at times, but like yeah I don't know, I found that I would be entertaining other people for a good four or five days, and I would just go home and sleep for a day, and that is not me. (Hannah)

Michael discussed the feeling of having someone couch surf at his own home, and what it was like to be on someone else’s time.
I got a little pissed off, because he worked at a restaurant, he would come in at 3 am. I would have to stay up, because I couldn't give him a key. So I would have to stay up and let him in. I would have to get up to do my thing he would be sleeping and I would have to wake him. (Michael)

The participants described this experience of being on someone else’s time as a social obligation.

It was an unwritten rule of couch surfing.

Being in transitional housing also came with obligations. For example, Danielle had the obligation of a housing worker. This expectation weights on her decision about where she is going to move once her transitional housing term ends.

So the pros to supported housing is I know it will be affordable. But then I have to deal with my housing worker all the time. Just gets kind of annoying after a while. Like it’s nice you are coming to visit but I am tired. And you have to have goals all the time. You have to be doing something, and I don't know, when you have your own house, it’s yourself and you can do whatever you want. (Danielle)

Being in transitional housing meant exchanging time and energy for affordable housing and stability. The tradeoff for Danielle was worth it, although she is now considering other options.

4.2.3 Where To Go, and When to Leave?

Participants often balanced where to go and when to leave. As mentioned previously, participants experienced a lot of stress in finding a place to go. This often required considerable time and energy. Participants had to negotiate their own time with what time the hosts had available. Participants identified hosts, and rotated as to not overstay their welcome. Michael planned for his week when he was kicked out of the house on cheque day.

I would have almost a plan set up. I would say okay guys, I am going to get kicked out on this day. Can I have three days here, and then I am going to go here, and stay there for another three days, and figure something out for the day. I would usually have something set up and it was pretty good. You would start thinking okay, who did I stay with last night, okay which friend am I going to stay with tonight. Ask what they are up to, and go there. And even that starts becoming too much, you start becoming known. (Michael)
Hannah relied on her social relationships to figure out where to go. She discussed the different places she was staying and the relationships she had with those different hosts.

There’s been about those two [places] and then another three that I have been bouncing between. I am a bit of an open relationship person, so I have got another two lovers, that I have been kind of hanging out with that I stay with them sometimes. And then my best friend’s mom from when I was growing up, she is kind of like my mom.

Hannah stayed with her father on and off but was constantly going back and forth because of lack of space. This was essential for her, so as not to inconvenience her dad.

I just don't like putting my father out, he is such a sweetheart, he is such a blessing, but at the same time it’s not like we have the big family home where I can just go be in a room, so it makes me want to move on rather promptly. (Hannah)

Hannah was constantly in the process of understanding when to leave her current situation and where to go next.

I will usually stay a night or two, and it’s been pretty much everywhere I have been. I stay a night or two and then I go. So yeah I jump one spot a night or two, another spot a night or two. I stay three nights at my dad’s place, but that’s kind of the max. I actually stayed three nights at my friend’s mom’s place too. She broke her foot and couldn't get up and down the stairs, so I went and stayed three or four days and helped her. But yeah typically everywhere I am I stay a day. (Hannah)

For many participants, knowing when to leave was essential in maintaining that relationship with the host.

Like I said about subtly. That’s always a rule you have to know when you are doing that sort of thing. Because just don’t stay there for too long. What I mean by subtly is you leave their house, and go do your own thing and then ask if you can stay again overnight. (Ryan)

Burning bridges was something many participants were aware of. It seemed to be a risk of couch surfing, especially if the participant was overstaying their welcome.

I had a buddy, his roommate, was like, ‘Yeah you gotta stop staying here, bro.’ It takes a toll on friendships, on friendships. That’s fucked up. That sucks. Lose a friend just because you slept on the couch too long. And as small as that sounds, or as crazy as it sounded to me then, I understand. Some people honest to god need their space. (Michael)
Lisa also found this while staying with family. Her experience was different because she was staying with relatives and was younger than some of the other participants. She still described the experience of staying with others as a balancing act. “Living with someone for a long time, them being family, it just got a little tense.” (Lisa)

Michael was especially concerned with this phenomenon. He had negotiated many social relationships and found places to stay. He always understood that this was not his house, and this knowledge had an impact on him:

I think it’s very uncomfortable. Nothing is yours. In my mind, I wanted to make sure I didn't blow any of my chances. . . But the experiences were always alright. It was cool But you always feel like you just don’t belong. And I wasn't even trying for anything different. Maybe mix it up by staying at someone else’s house. But you know when you aren't wanted sometimes. And it’s a horrible feeling because you have to play dumb to it. Just because you really need a place to stay. (Michael)

It was clear that all of these performances had an important role to play in the participant’s experience of hidden homelessness. Negotiating a physical exchange ensured a place to stay for the night for many. For others socializing was a performance that ensured their place to stay. In the end, all participants had to navigate social expectations around when to leave.

4.3 The Use of Time, and the Role of Identities

The participants had varying experiences and spanned a large age range. One theme that emerged in interviews was the theme of forging meaningful identities. This was difficult to code. I relied on description around the use of time, how participants made sense of their identities, and the meaning they drew from these identities regardless of where they were staying. The first categorized experiences described were hobbies. Hobbies played an interesting role in the experience of participants. The second experience was volunteering. Whether it was for a hobby,
volunteering, or work, the participants expressed the helpfulness of occupying their time with something that mattered to them.

4.3.1 Employment

When discussing the use of time, respondents indicated that employment/school is an essential topic. Employment/school was brought up by all participants in some form. Participants were asked directly how hidden homelessness has impacted employment/school. Many participants brought up the challenges in other ways as well. For the participants in this study, the stress of hidden homelessness impacted employment/school, and the stress of employment/school impacted hidden homelessness.

At the time of data collection, none of the participants were working full time. Maria was working casual hours at a social service organization. Danielle was working part time at a fast food restaurant. She was in grade twelve at the time of her hidden homelessness. Hannah was looking for full time work. Michael was not working at the time of the interview. At the time of his hidden homelessness, he was also not working. Ryan was gaining hours in the arts union to be able to work more permanently. Lisa was still in her final year of high school. At the time of her hidden homelessness, she was in grade eight.

Michael had an especially long experience of hidden homelessness. When asked how it impacted going to school this was his response:

It fucked my whole life. It gave me no direction... I don't even own a bank account. I don't have ID. I have no bills in my name. If I didn't have this suite [house] you wouldn't be able to find me on the grid. I am finally able to become what society calls a human being. It ruined my entire life. You can't go to school when you have to worry about other shit. Not really thinking about bank cards and ID. You have to worry about where the fuck you are going to stay. Because at the shelter you can't just show up every night and guarantee that your bed is going to be there. Once you leave the shelter, you gotta pray that nobody takes your bed. It is very fucked. So I spent all my time, my whole life, great deal of my life, just walking around trying to find somewhere to stay. (Michael)
Michael was planning on using the time in his next housing situation to work on some of these things. Michael would like to go back to school. He shared that his time in this transitional housing program has helped him to change his mind set to be ready for that.

It did seem through the interviews that employment and school were often put second when the participants were without a place to stay. Employment was mentioned many times. However, what was more prominent in the conversations was the desire for a stable place to stay. Many participants felt that once they had achieved that, they could focus on other areas of their life. In addition, volunteering was a common way for participants to stay involved in their community. Before Hannah came to Vancouver she volunteered at a women’s shelter to keep her day busy. Danielle used her experience of hidden homelessness and foster care to become involved in her local community. She sat on a youth advisory council for one Vancouver organization. She was also on the leadership council. She worked with the organizations to raise the profile of youth in foster care from a positive perspective.

4.3.2 The Meaning of Identity

Finding meaning in identity was important for participants. Identity was not attached to space such as a home, as it is for many people. Their identities helped them to feel at home when they were experiencing hidden homelessness. For some participants, hobbies were meaningful ways to use their time. Their hobby was not only something to occupy their time, but was also instrumental in helping to find places to stay. For Michael, skateboarding was a huge part of his experience. He identified skating as an essential way to find new people in a new city.

If I go to a skate park, I will always end up talking to someone. I can hold a conversation I guess. Just over time I met this guy; me and him were just synced up. We were side by side for a while, and I stayed with him at his mom’s sometimes. Or at his friend’s. (Michael).

Michael also credited skateboarding with keeping him out of the wrong crowds.
I am probably pretty easily influenced. I mean I could have fallen into crime. You know I dabbled in all of it, but I didn't. I was always out skating. It was something that was number one. I think as long as you have something. (Michael)

Participants described their use of time, but also their need for having something important to them. For Maria it was music that was important in her life. Maria indicated that playing music was essential for her mental health. Maria struggled with depression and was put on medication. She shared that experience.

I wasn't me, it wasn't me anymore, I feel like they put me in a sleep. So I took the medication temporarily, and then I quit by myself without telling, and I play music. I play the alto saxophone and a little bit of piano. So what I do is I used to play a lot, I quit the medication I start playing. Pretty much every day I played the alto saxophone, just in my place by myself. (Maria)

Maria also explained that music helped her to meet new people with whom she eventually stayed.

I noticed that playing an instrument has helped me a lot. And it has helped me to stay with people. We connect; we have the same interests. And time goes fast. I enjoyed staying with them, and playing with them. This place too they let me stay just because we play together a couple times, and they let me stay for that reason… So they were neighbours from the previous place that I stayed. So we became friends just because we found out we played the same instrument. (Maria)

Maria was able to use her passion for music to help her to survive when her housing was unstable. It was something that gave her hope. She was extremely interested in taking her passion and talent and turning it into a career.

I met with an instructor from a university. They have music therapy and I might go back for music therapy. I don't want to give up my music. It is a part of me, it makes me happy. It helped me a lot. Like emotionally, it helped me. You see, I don't talk to people about what I go through, but at the same time I play. And when I play I put all my emotion into the instrument. I don't know I just play. So time passes, I am thinking about what I am going to do with that. (Maria)
Ryan was also a musician whose craft was essential to his identity. He carried a guitar case with him everywhere, including to the interview. He was working his way into an arts union. This was his goal for the future and for solving his hidden homelessness.

I am in three other bands right now. I am a musician through and through. I play a lot of heavy stuff, in particular, because there is so much so relevant to my particular situation, my way of expressing particular emotions. I am really serious about my craft. So I felt that’s the only real thing I have going for me, especially in dark and despondent situations. In these particular times anyways…I am working my way into the union. I am in the theatre union. I am just about done earning my hours. So now I am actually starting to work. So I am finally seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. … I am a musician trying to make a living doing what I want to do, and things are finally starting to look up for me. (Ryan)

For Ryan, his craft was becoming his profession. Being a musician was also helpful to him in the practicalities of experiencing hidden homelessness. He was sometimes able to sleep in a jam space that his friends used to practice. He was also able to leave some of his equipment there, where he trusted people.

For the participants, having these outlets, such as music or skateboarding, seemed extremely important to their identities and their well-being. Having something that they felt passionate about kept participants busy and involved. These different aspects of their lives helped them to keep feeling like themselves. For many of us our home and how we spend our time is essential to our identity. Without the luxury of this time and space, these aspects of participants’ lives, such as skateboarding, or music, were essential to maintaining a meaningful identity. It seemed especially important to the participants who experienced prolonged hidden homelessness. For Ryan, Michael, and Maria, their passion not only gave them a way to channel emotions, but it also helped them in finding places to stay. It seemed not only about a positive way to spend time, but a way to thrive in a challenging situation.
This theme of identity relates closely to the other theme of what a home is. Participants discussed the meaning of a home for them, and what is important in making somewhere feel like home. Identity was instrumental in helping participants define home.

4.4 Housing or a Home?

4.4.1 Shelters and Support Services

Shelters were discussed at some length in the interviews. For some participants, the shelters were a welcome change to the chaos of hidden homelessness. Danielle especially was grateful to get into a family shelter and no longer be camping.

The rainy season was still happening. It was kind of weird and relieved when my parents were like oh we got into a family shelter. I was like yay, we get to go indoors. And I was also like why couldn't you come back and say we found a house. . . I feel like things got a little easier. They had laundry, there was a place to put my clothes. And it was indoors and there wasn't dirt and mud everywhere. And the shelter cooks food for you, so my mom wasn't all stressed out, and my dad wasn't all stressed out buying food, storing food. That’s the other thing, is when you are camping it’s really hard to store food. (Danielle)

After a month of camping in April, Danielle and her family were relieved to get into a shelter. The problem was that there was no space to accommodate them when they first became homeless.

There are only 4 family shelters between Vancouver, Surrey, and New Westminster. And they all usually have, they only usually accommodate 4 families each. (Danielle)

Like Danielle, Lisa and her mother were also happy to get into a family shelter. It offered a reprieve from staying with family, where things felt tense much of the time.

After going to a shelter, with three other women and my mom. It’s like the people that I met at the shelter. We met two Taiwanese grandmas. They didn't speak a word of English. They thought it was hilarious when I talked back to my mom, so I really liked them. It was in a good area. It was safe there. My mom met a good friend. There was a man and his son. They were really great people. It was a good time, it was the summer months, they had clothes and other needs so that was always met. . . It was more structured. You would have to be up at a certain time, and you would be eating at a certain time. There was more structure to it. At least there was a place where people were going through similar situations. So I could be open with it. Instead of at school where I
couldn’t. I could be surrounded by people who were going through the exact same thing. (Lisa)

Danielle and Lisa found the shelters to be a welcome change that helped their families gain stability. The other participants did not feel the same way. Michael had mixed experiences with shelters. He went back and forth between shelters and couch surfing for years. He had experiences in youth shelters as well as adult shelters.

In [different city], it went through the roof when I turned 18. I am talking standing in like at the [drop in shelter] with crack heads, pipe in hand. [They] leave that alone when you are down at the drop in. You know whatever, if they die they die. Safety was an issue for sure. Especially when you are that young. You just stick out like a sore thumb. I say it’s like an outdoor prison. Prison rules too. There is a code. But when I got here (Vancouver), in the shelter, the safety…you can get people flying off the handle for sure. Crazy comes and crazy goes. (Michael)

The previous city that Michael had lived in had youth services that only went up until age 18. Vancouver youth services often extend to the age of twenty four. Once in Vancouver, Michael accessed youth services rather than adult shelter services.

Ryan and Maria all considered shelters to not be an option. They each had their reasons.

I was talking to one of my classmates, and I told her I need a place. At the same time, it’s easy for her to say just go to the women shelter. I said I cannot do it. I personally cannot do it. Maybe it’s the way I am, I don't think I am able to do it, because I will not be able to sleep well. If I can’t sleep well, I am a bit sensitive for these things. So I like to stay in a quiet place. So I decided not to do that. That’s the last thing. But I have the number just in case I don't have a place. But at the same time it kind of scares me. Because I have never done it, and I am not sure how it will work. I don't feel as safe… If I got to a shelter it is not a guarantee that I will be okay. (Maria)

Ryan stated this about going to shelters:

I’ve always been leery of going to a shelter. I’ve always had a fear of going there. Because obviously the people who go there are quite sketchy. I don't want to end up in a situation where I might get hurt or attacked by a crazy person who might have a tendency to hurt someone else. So I always think in that particular sort of way whenever I think of shelter. Safety is my only concern with that. Because you don't know the tendency of people in those situations. There are a lot of desperate people. And I don't want to be involved in that. Pretty much I feel safe being helped out by my friends. Because I would be putting myself in a risky situation. That is my personal view on that subject. I feel I
can do a lot better than going to a shelter. There is obviously options and I use those options quite profoundly as I can. (Ryan)

The family and youth shelters were regarded differently than adult shelters. The participants who encountered the family shelters all had positive experiences. Those shelters were key in alleviating the participants’ hidden homelessness. For Michael, the youth shelter was an entry point to the rest of the services that eventually helped him to get into transitional housing. For the older participants, the adult shelters were regarded with safety concerns. For this reason they said they avoided them.

The topic of shelters brings an important question to mind. What is the difference between having a roof over your head, and feeling like you are at home? Shelters are there to help people who are struggling with housing. In some instances, shelters are positive for the participants. Other participants prefer to use their own social network in order to put a roof over their head. For all participants though, the meaning of having a home was distinct.

4.4.2 Somewhere That Is All Mine

The participants were asked what having a home meant to them. Each had unique responses. This was the final question of the interview, after each participant had shared what the experience of hidden homelessness was like. For some participants it was the idea of having space that was only theirs.

After all this moving, I don't think of home as a physical space. I think home is somewhere where you feel safe, and are connected to your community. You are not scared to be who you are, and you can do whatever you want, like make toast at 3am. (Danielle)

Having a safe space was also important to feeling at home.

A safe place. A place I feel comfortable in you know? I think, it doesn't have to be a fancy place. I have been through a lot, and who I am, where I live, doesn't make me who I am. Whether it’s the west side, or the east side, doesn't matter as long as I have a decent place to live. (Maria)
Lisa echoed this sentiment when asked what home meant for her.

It’s just like, knowing. It’s like being able to stay in one place, it being your own place. It’s more about, not belonging, but just comfort. Your own space to put your stuff. Being able to just be, not really having to worry about other people. (Lisa)

The participants had a simple meaning of home. It was not about grand houses, material goods, or just having a roof over their head. Security, safety, and comfort, were all mentioned when describing what home meant to them.

It’s not just drop-ins, it’s not just shelters. I mean a roof over your head for sure. But it’s everything else. (Michael)

I think for the most part, and I can’t speak for everyone, but I know that most people enjoy the security of know where they are going to put their head at night. I think that is important for people. (Hannah)

For Ryan, home meant even more than a safe space to call his own. He described home as a sense of self-worth.

I’ll have much more responsibility and more self-pride, and more self-worth. My self-esteem, it’s just the betterment of my own self. And I will feel a lot better about my situation. I feel that people will respect me a lot more, because I will have my shit together. If I have my own place, I wouldn't worry as much. It would be less stress. I would be able to deal with more. Because each problem you solve over time, the easier life gets for you. I can have my friends over, I can have my own serenity. I can have my own place to chill and play guitar in. Everyone needs their own place.
5. Discussion

5.1 The Findings and the Literature

The purpose of this study was to answer the research question “How do young people who are currently or who have previously experienced hidden homelessness describe that experience?” As I worked through interviews with the participants, I consistently re-evaluated definitions within this question. Every person has different ideas of what constitutes hidden homelessness. Likewise, literature, policy, and services have varying definitions of youth. Throughout the study it was a conscious decision not to narrowly define hidden homelessness or youth. This allowed for a depth of experience to be described.

5.1.1 Defining Hidden

Defining hidden homelessness was a concern in the literature, and it was reflected in this study. Current understandings of homelessness do acknowledge hidden homelessness. The most basic definition is lacking security of tenure. This is a very broad definition and can include many different situations. Recruitment for this study was impacted by this broad definition. It was difficult to create inclusion and exclusion criteria based on the type of experience. This has implications for the provision of services.

Many of the young people who expressed interest in the study did not fit the formal definition of hidden homelessness. Questions arose as to who gets to define homelessness. This is reflected in the study by SPARC BC (2011). In the study conducted with service providers, many questioned the definition of hidden homelessness as it has a direct impact on who can receive services. If an individual is identifying as homeless, regardless of formal definition, should they be excluded from studies and/or services? This broad definition included staying
with family members, where the individual is welcome to stay for as long as necessary. This is not typically defined as homelessness. However, it was not uncommon for young people to identify as homeless while in this situation. They still lacked a space to call their own. Crowding, cleanliness, and safety were still noted as concerns in these situations. This is reflected in the literature. Eberle et al. (2009) defined hidden homelessness with regard to the host’s willingness to allow the individual to stay. Host and guest satisfaction with the arrangement was key to defining the situation as homelessness. Many participants were able to stay with family or friends but were not satisfied with the arrangement. Hannah was able to stay with her father but was not comfortable putting him in the position of hosting her.

Many services exist in the city of Vancouver. These services range from food distribution, employment assistance, housing provision (subsidy, or direct housing), and providing support through case management and service referrals. If people are identifying as homeless but are not formally defined by these services, they are often denied assistance. Subsidy and direct housing provision is often reserved for those experiencing chronic or episodic street homelessness. If the concerns of those experiencing hidden homelessness are similar to those experiencing street homelessness, how is the system to distribute services dependent on exclusionary definitions?

5.1.2 Stress on Employment and Education – Where it Confirmed the Literature

Some themes arose in this study that suggested problems in terms of the participants’ ability to thrive in the long term. The stress of hidden homelessness resulted in inability to fully participate in employment or education. The stress of moving, including stress on work and school, is confirmed in the literature. Two participants were in high school at the time of their experience. Both participants discussed the difficulty in continuing with their education. These
feelings of stress are typical as noted by Hallet (2012). The mobility of homeless youth impacts their ability to participate in their education.

The difficulty with employment as related to transient housing is a common theme in the research on youth homelessness. The research shows that homeless youth face multiple barriers when it comes to obtaining employment (Noble, 2012). Major barriers to employment include discrimination, low wages, and lack of adequate education. Ryan and Hannah were facing these barriers in their quest for sustainable employment. Ryan expressed past problems with maintaining employment due to low wages. Hannah faced barriers due to her unstable schedule and inability to manage her time due to frequently moving.

5.1.3 Stress on Employment and Education – Novel Findings

Stress is referenced in the literature in relation to school and employment. However, the emotional stress of moving is not prevalent in prior research. A novel contribution of this study is the emphasis on the emotional toll that hidden homelessness takes on an individual. Participants were frequently negotiating social situations and many discussed the idea of performing their social responsibilities in order to maintain a roof over their head.

5.1.4 Negotiation – Where it Confirmed the Literature

This is perhaps another contribution of the study: Negotiation in this regard is not directly referenced in any literature. Eberle et al. (2009) look at the financial arrangement between the host and guest as meaningful to the definition of hidden homelessness. Guests who are contributing to rent in an on-going and structured basis are not considered hidden homeless. The literature is less clear in regards to informal arrangements. Exchange and negotiation is looked at in regards to household chores and participation in bills. Eberle et al. (2009), as well as SPARC BC (2011) look at guest participation in chores, bills, and childcare. All of these factors were
important in the definition of hidden homelessness as well as the qualitative experience. SPARC BC (2011) interviewed service providers about the importance of guest participation in host households.

5.1.5 Negotiation – Novel Findings

Another novel finding to emerge from this study was the social performance involved in staying with others. Often, participating in the household felt like a performance that participants were forced to follow through with. Hannah mentioned the draining effect of always being socially available to her hosts. Michael felt like he had to act in order to maintain where he was staying. Ryan had mastered the subtly of meeting his hosts’ expectations. This is an emerging theme that was not mentioned in any of the literature on hidden homelessness.

5.1.6 Meaningful Identity - Novel Findings

Another emerging theme which was not found in prior literature was the participants’ construction of meaningful identity. Much of the literature on hidden homelessness is focused on risk factors and statistics that may influence social policy. The participants all discussed their identity and the meaning attached to it. For Maria, music was key to her identity. Music helped her to cope and gave her the means to meet new people and find new places to stay. For Michael skate boarding was very similar. He used his passion to meet new people, and he felt that skate boarding kept him grounded. Ryan crafted his identity around being a musician, and he was using this to work his way out of homelessness. Danielle felt that volunteering was imperative to giving back after all she had experienced. This gave her purpose and drive, and she used that to build her vision of her future. Lisa had many hobbies throughout her experience which she reflected on as important. She volunteered, she sang, and she was in cadets. She felt that having this meaningful use of her time reflected her identity and kept her moving forward.
5.1.7 Meaningful Identity – Where it Confirmed the Literature

There is some literature on the loss of identity as discussed in Gaetz (2014). Youth homelessness is often associated with a loss of relationships and identity. This, however, was not reflected by the participants in this study. Identity and their home had to be separate due to the participants’ circumstances. Many participants used their passions to craft an identity which transcended space.

5.1.8 Meaning of Home – Where it Confirmed the Literature

Additionally, for many participants housing was just space, but a home was much more than that. Maria, Lisa, and Danielle discussed this. They all looked at home as somewhere they felt safe and could be totally themselves, regardless of where that was. This is corroborated by Gaetz (2014) who found that youth homelessness is associated with a loss of home, not just housing. All of the participants differentiated these two things. The literature reviewed for this study did not have qualitative descriptions of how individuals define housing and home. This is an emerging topic in the area of homelessness. This study contributes the view of its six participants with regard to the ways in which they construct the meaning of home and the definition of housing.

5.1.9 Meaning of Home – Novel Findings

The meaning of home was simple for the participants. Safety, comfort, and freedom were dominating themes of home. Participants’ discussed home as less about where they were, and more about how they felt. Often in the literature youth homelessness and hidden homelessness is viewed through a quantitative lens. Many key points are focused on risk factors, cost of homelessness, and risks associated with homelessness. This is prevalent in the literature
reviewed within this study. Youth hidden homelessness is associated with an increased risk of abuse, drug use, health concerns, and mental health problems.

In this study I did not directly ask youth of their experience with these categories. For this reason this study cannot confirm what is in the literature in this regard. This study brought to light how participants constructed meaning of their experience. It dealt with the daily considerations of hidden homelessness, rather than the long term implications and associated risks. This is less understood in qualitative research on youth hidden homelessness.

5.1.10 Framing a Positive Outlook on Experience – A Novel Finding

One defining aspect of this study, which is unconfirmed by the literature, is the positive outlook that youth participants had. Youth seemed to look on their experience, both during and after experiencing hidden homelessness, with gratitude. The participants in this study used their experience to keep moving forward. They had positive factors throughout their experience which they all seemed to focus on. The drive to move forward, the meaning they took from their experience, and their self-identity were key to their experience. This is new to research on youth hidden homelessness.

5.2 Limitations

Sampling and recruitment were limited to youth service centres that could assist in finding participants. This type of recruitment excludes young people who are experiencing hidden homelessness and are not connected to any services. The voices of young people who are isolated from formal supports are thus missing.
5.3 Implications

The findings of this study have several implications for social work practice. Service provision and broad social policy are impacted by the definition of homelessness. This limits who receives the limited resources. Hidden homelessness is by definition hidden. Participants made great effort in keeping their situation hidden from friends, family, and authorities such as teachers or the Ministry of Children and Family Development. This was acknowledged by Eberle et al. (2009), who stated that the qualitative data were difficult to obtain. Eberle et al. (2009) hypothesized that this was due to the transient nature of individuals experiencing hidden homelessness. Without knowledge that this is occurring, or what the experience is like, it is difficult to allocate resources to address the problem. The implication of this study is that by broadening the definition of hidden homelessness we invite contact with people who are currently unattached to services.

Vancouver is experiencing long term problems in affordable housing. It is no longer the case that those experiencing homelessness are doing so by choice, as was perhaps the case in previous decades. Affordability is affecting people of higher income levels, and employment is no longer a guarantee that an individual will be able to find appropriate permanent housing. This has resulted in many individuals experiencing instability in their housing. This instability is leading many people to find short-term solutions. Couch surfing, sub-letting, flop houses, camping, and other temporary situations are common. However, these situations have their own consequences. The participants in this study described many of these situations. Their experiences highlight the necessity of addressing affordable housing in Vancouver in order to eliminate the need for these temporary solutions. One implication of this study is a better understanding of the experience of hidden homelessness. Understanding the daily challenges can
assist service providers and policy makers in designing programs and policies to address the unique challenges of hidden homelessness.

A finding around the meaning of home for participants has implications for service providers. The participants described home as much more than a house. This is essential to service providers who are working directly in housing. Assisting someone to get into housing is focused on immediate needs. The provision of basic needs does not account for assisting the person to feel at home where they are living. This could be an important aspect for both service providers, and policy makers, to consider in program design.

**5.4 Recommendations for further research**

The participants in this study described negotiating uncertain situations. Hidden homelessness is linked to a continuum of homeless experiences. The use of formal resources is well documented in regards to the experience of chronic and episodic homelessness. Street homelessness is connected to an increase in use of emergency services, mental health services, correctional institutions, and the court system. Further research is needed to identify the connection between hidden homelessness and service use.

**5.5 Conclusion**

The experience of youth hidden homelessness is complicated. The impact of this phenomenon on the participants’ lives is far reaching. Finding solutions to youth hidden homelessness is beyond the scope of this study. The aim of this research study was to learn about hidden homelessness. The stories shared, and the experiences described, have added to the understanding of hidden homelessness. This is a multi-faceted problem. The answer to hidden homelessness will be no less complicated than the answer to chronic or episodic homelessness.
It would have been easy throughout this study to take the findings and draw broad conclusions about youth hidden homelessness. Much of what was revealed in the interviews mirrored the literature review. However, with such a small sample size, and with the point of the study being individual experience, I do not draw these conclusions. Gaining understanding in the experience of a few gave rise to more questions than answers. The conclusion of this study is therefore not a sweeping statement of what is to be done next, or what the answer to this problem is, but that this is a complex and multi-faceted concern. Each person interviewed in the course of this study had vastly different experiences to share.

Housing is a concern that every individual faces. Shelter is a basic human need. My interest in this topic has been met with a variety of reactions. Many people regard my decision to pursue this topic as noble. I do not see it this way. I think every person has a role to play in the system we live in. Housing is a piece of the puzzle. This problem has solutions, and there is work to be done to find those answers.

In the course of my research I met with an advocate for housing and homelessness in the city of Vancouver. She expressed concern that this generation is the first to have always seen homelessness. Prior to now, homelessness was an emerging issue. For people living in Vancouver at this time, homelessness is just the way ‘it has always been.’ This creates problems for finding solutions. Vancouver has the potential to end homelessness, just as all cities do. It is now a matter of political and public will. My hope is that reading these accounts of participants experience can shed light on the many different aspects to hidden homelessness.
References


http://www.homelesshub.ca/resource/housing-first-where-evidence
Appendices

Appendix A - Recruitment Poster

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Research Participants Needed

Have you experienced hidden homelessness?

I am a Master of Social Work student at the University of British Columbia. For my graduate thesis, I am conducting a study titled Describing the Experience of Hidden Homelessness. I am interested in understanding the experience faced by people who have couch surfed, doubled up in housing, lived in temporary housing, and/or experienced hidden homelessness.

You are eligible to participate in this study if:

- You are currently or have previously experienced hidden homeless in the last 5 years
- You are between the ages of 16-29
- You speak and understand English
- You are willing to provide 1-2 hours of your time to be interviewed

You will be given opportunity to review and comment on a written analysis of the study’s findings. Total maximum time commitment (including review of the analysis) will not exceed 4 hours.

$20 Gift card will be offered in appreciation of your time and participation.

This study is being supervised by Stephanie Bryson

Interested? Please Contact
Alynn Gausvik
Phone:
Appendix B - Screening Questions
THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Screening Questions

Are you currently experiencing hidden homelessness?

When was the last time you experienced hidden homelessness?

Are you over the age of 16?

Do you speak and understand English?

Do you live in Metro Vancouver?

Participation requires 1-2 hours of your time, are you able to provide that?

Consent to participate includes:
You will also be invited to review the written analysis of the interview. This will be an opportunity to ensure the information gathered by the co-investigator is correct. This review is optional. Including the review, maximum total time commitment would not exceed 4 hours.

Confidentiality
Your identity will be kept confidential. Any identifying information will be removed from interview transcripts. Audiotapes and written transcripts of the interviews will be kept in a locked drawer. Any study documents stored on the computer will be password-protected. Participants will not be identified by name in any reports of the completed study.

Risks
Talking about your experience may be upsetting. While no risks are anticipated, I, Alynn Gausvik, will attempt to alleviate any potential risks to you by ensuring that you are aware of your right to stop the interview at any point if you become distressed or are unable to continue.

Are you still interested in participating? ___ yes ___ No

What is your contact information?
Appendix C - Consent Form
THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

School of Social Work

Consent Form

Describing the Experience of Hidden Homelessness

Principal Investigator: Stephanie Bryson

Co-Investigator: Alynn Gausvik, MSW Student, School of Social Work, University of British Columbia

This research is being conducted as a requirement for the Masters Thesis for the degree of Masters in Social Work. You will be informed regarding the use of and access to the information provided. All identifying information will be removed from information collected during interviews.

Purpose
The purpose of this study is to describe the experience of hidden homelessness for youth.

You have been asked to participate because you currently are/or have previously experienced hidden homelessness. You live in the Metro Vancouver area, and are able to speak the English language.

Study Procedures
You will be asked to participate in one interview not exceeding 2 hours. In the interview you will be asked to talk about your experience of hidden homelessness. The interview will be conducted by Alynn Gausvik, co-investigator. You will also be invited to review the written analysis of the interview. This will be an opportunity to ensure the information gathered by the co-investigator is correct. This review is optional. Including the review, maximum total time commitment would not exceed 4 hours.

Confidentiality
Your identity will be kept confidential. Any identifying information will be removed from interview transcripts. Audiotapes and written transcripts of the interviews will be kept in a locked drawer. Any study documents stored on the computer will be password-protected. Participants will not be identified by name in any reports of the completed study.
Risks
Talking about your experience may be upsetting. While no risks are anticipated, I, Alynn Gausvik, will attempt to alleviate any potential risks to you by ensuring that you are aware of your right to stop the interview at any point if you become distressed or are unable to continue. ¹

Remuneration/Compensation
You will receive a $20 gift card in appreciation of your time.

Contact for information about the study
For further information regarding this study, you may contact the investigators named above.

Contact for concerns about the rights of research participants
Any concerns about your rights or treatment as a participant may be directed to the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at the University of British Columbia at 604-822-8598.

Consent
Your participation in the study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

Information gathered in the study may be used in future, including research discussion, future publications, and presentations.

   I am fully aware of the nature and extent of my participation in this research project as stated above and the possible risks from it. I hereby agree to participate in the above study and to allow the researcher to audiotape the interview and use my information for publications that are related to this study. No personal information will be disclosed. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent statement.

Signature: __________________________________________________________

Printed Name: ______________________________________________________

Date: __________________________________________________________________

I am interested in obtaining a summary of the findings from this research project:

No ( )

__________________________________________

¹
Yes ( )

If yes, please provide your email address: _________________________________

For further information or inquiries:

Stephanie A Bryson, PhD, MSW
Assistant Professor
University of British Columbia
School of Social Work

Primary Contact:
Alynn Gausvik

Phone: 604-822-6622
Fax: 604-822-8656

Phone: 778-994-2675
Interview Questions - Version 1

1. Personal information (what they are willing to share)

   How old are you?

   What is your gender?

   Can you tell me about your family history?

   Can you tell me about yourself? What is important for me to know?

2. Can you tell me about your current living situation?

   Where are you living?

   for how long?

   what is your experience like in this living situation?

3. Can you tell me about your previous living situations?

   Where were you living prior to this?

   How long were you there?

   When did you leave?

   Reasons for leaving?

   Can you tell me about other living situations?
4. What have your experiences of moving been?
   How did you move?
   What about belongings?
   Did you have transportation for moving?
5. Tell me about positive living situations you have had?
   What made them positive?
6. Can you describe any difficult living situations?
   What made them challenging/difficult?
7. Services
   What types of services have you accessed?
   Has there been any services you couldn't access?
   What types of services have helped?
   What types of services haven’t helped?
   What types of services do you identify as needing?
8. Can you tell me about your experience with school?
   Junior high, high school, and post-secondary
   What are the daily challenges?
9. Experiences with clinics/hospitals
10. Do you have any experience with criminal justice/police?
11. Tell me about your supports you identify?
    Friends?
    Family?
Professional?

12. What has helped? What hasn’t?

13. Can you describe the meaning of home?

   What is a house vs a home?

   What does having a place to stay for the night mean for you?

   What does having a stable place to live mean for you?
Appendix E - Interview Questions - Version 2
THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Interview Questions - Version 2
1. Personal information (what they are willing to share)

   How old are you?
   What is your gender?
   Can you tell me about your family history?
   Can you tell me about yourself? What is important for me to know?

2. Can you tell me about your current living situation?

   Where are you living?
   for how long?
   what is your experience like in this living situation?

3. Can you tell me about your previous living situations?

   Where were you living prior to this?
   How long were you there?
   When did you leave?
   Reasons for leaving?
   Can you tell me about other living situations?

4. What have your experiences of moving been?
How did you move?

What about belongings?

Did you have transportation for moving?

5. Tell me about positive living situations you have had?

What made them positive?

6. Can you describe any difficult living situations?

What made them challenging/difficult?

7. Services

What types of services have you accessed?

Has there been any services you couldn't access?

What types of services have helped?

What types of services haven’t helped?

What types of services do you identify as needing?

8. Can you tell me about your experience with school?

Junior high, high school, and post-secondary

What are the daily challenges?

9. Experiences with clinics/hospitals

10. Do you have any experience with criminal justice/police?

11. Tell me about your supports you identify?

Friends?

Family?

Professional?
12. Can you tell me about the meaning of feeling safe in your home?

13. Can you describe the meaning of home?
   
   What is a house vs a home?
   
   What does having a place to stay for the night mean for you?
   
   What does having a stable place to live mean for you?