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On Becoming and Being a Homeless Youth Activist

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ON BECOMING AND BEING A HOMELESS YOUTH ACTIVIST

by

Edward J. Ameen

A DISSERTATION

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ON BECOMING AND BEING A HOMELESS YOUTH ACTIVIST

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Despite decades of interventions to address the immediate needs of homeless youth, America still suffers with youth homelessness. This study suggests that real solutions have come, and will continue to come, from individuals using collective action to redistribute sociopolitical power and resources. The study aimed to understand (1) why people become activists on behalf of this population, and (2) what qualities and characteristics allow them to remain in this work despite its challenges. A review of the literature uncovered more than twenty situational and developmental factors for activists of numerous causes but none examined homeless youth activists and very few integrated factors from multiple disciplines. Some factors spoke to the essence of ‘being’ an activist whereas others spoke to developmental processes of ‘becoming’ one. I used a critical qualitative orientation (Carspecken, 1996) blending phenomenology and grounded theory to explore the development and prolonged engagement of collective action in 13 adult participants (six males, seven females, with a combined experience of over 175 years of collective action). Six participants held advocacy or policy positions and seven held administrative roles in organizations that served youth. Participants were recruited by snowball sampling methods and completed surveys of activism identity, commitment and behavior, as well as semi-structured individual interviews touching on themes identified in the literature. The data revealed that homeless youth activists tend to identify
themselves more as advocates and describe their work as advocacy instead of activism. Moreover, participants described five developmental categories containing 20 factors and two situational categories containing ten factors which supported and expanded the extant literature. On “becoming” advocates, participants (1) received foundations of community involvement, (2) experienced privilege or marginalization, (3) started careers foreshadowing homeless youth advocacy, (4) chose to advocate for homeless youth in their careers, and (5) possessed self and world-view promoting advocacy. On “being” advocates, participants (6) felt validated and supported in their roles, and (7) possessed or articulated necessary qualities of being an enduring advocate. This study provides an illustrated application of various factors at work on individuals sharing similar passion and commitment for homeless youth. It demonstrates a bidirectional relationship between individual actors and the micro, meso, and macro sites they inhabit. It is one of the first syntheses of a set of broad and diverse factors and one of only a few critical examinations of privilege and marginalization in participants who address privilege and marginalization in others. Implications for theory, research, training, and the researcher-participant are discussed.
Dedications

For those who inspire me most: Homeless youth, and individuals who are beckoned to end homelessness.
Acknowledgements

No work is ever simply one’s own.

I am indebted—in ways that I can and cannot account for—to the people who leave their imprints on me. My parents and family provide me safety and ethics. My friends provide me a mirror so that I may see myself more clearly. My partner provides me kindling for my dreams and relief from my worries. My mentors at the University of Miami (in particular, those who advised and conferred this research) provide me the depth of knowledge and breadth of skill to pursue feats like this. Fellow advocates and caregivers of homeless youth provide me a humbling path to travel. And young people whose real victories are yet unmet provide me a life’s work.

This dissertation is as much theirs as it is mine.
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Chapter I: Introduction and Rationale

At some point along in that journey, I came to the recognition that really what I was more concerned about was the mal-distribution of limited public resources for poverty populations... Really what I wanted to do was find a new way to invest resources into interventions that worked for kids...but we needed resources. And that was really a political argument. That was really about, how do we move the political spectrum towards recognizing this is a critical need that is responded to by the greater political body? – Rich, 44, a study participant.

I would not say that this is my life's mission, but I want to raise enough awareness that it can be the life's mission of others. I feel compelled to keep the torch of awareness and action lit. At this juncture, every lit torch is crucial to the movement. I have a strong sense of duty. The feeling of duty arises out of my personal relationships with so many youth. I can't walk away from them. – Liz, 32, a study participant.

The problem of youth homelessness has great magnitude, not simply for society as a whole, but for the unaccompanied homeless youth who are dying in wait for systems to change and immediate help to arrive. Kivel (2007) speaks in broad brushstrokes about how our efforts have provided a band-aid while the wound grows deeper:

When temporary shelter becomes a substitute for permanent housing, emergency food a substitute for a decent job, tutoring a substitute for adequate public schools, and free clinics a substitute for universal health care, we have shifted our attention from the redistribution of wealth to the temporary provision of social services to keep people alive (p. 135).

In light of rising numbers of homeless youth in America (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2010), these strategies have been marginally effective at best. My interest in one day seeing a broad based people’s movement for homeless youth led me to seek understanding about the actors through which transformational work is happening and how powerlessness is being confronted by citizen action and structural change. Instinct and experience tell me that this movement is in its very early stages, despite the existence of the problem for many decades.
The study that follows focuses on those individuals putting forth solutions to advance the human rights of some of this nation’s most disconnected youth and provides a stereoscopic vision to show who some of the activists are and how they grew into doing what they do. I used previous studies about social engagement to understand how homeless youth activists might have achieved their roles. As Loeb (2010) opined, “Most of us never get the chance to be inspired by the stories of those who acted for change—because we don’t encounter them” (Loeb, 2010). Collectively, I believe these individuals have an impressive, hopeful story to tell; they have the largest potential to end youth homelessness.

Chapter One sets the stage to understand the trajectory and narratives of homeless youth activists. I will first address who I am, and how my own experiences have shaped my interest in the study. I will then introduce a shared lexicon of terms related to homeless youth. Next, I describe the extent of homelessness amongst youth in this nation and discuss the sociopolitical context in which homeless youth exist by relating homelessness to social injustice and systemic policies. I will provide an overview of federal and activist responses to youth homelessness.

Next, I will review trends and historical coverage implicating psychological research for its problematic coverage and understanding of homeless populations. The chapter ends with a preview of the literature on activist properties and pathways by discussing the intended aims of this research and the specific questions guiding this study.

**What is my role in this study?**

With any critical investigation there is a back story. I have been involved in various parts of service provision to homeless youth and have routinely reflected on how
I might more efficiently spend my time, for bigger returns, by making the leap from service alone into advocacy. My personal and professional experiences with homeless youth do not allow me to assume a detached role in the research process. Moreover, the years of training to be a socially-minded research psychologist have helped me view as illusory the “positivist notion of an objective social science that produces value-free ethnographies” (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005, p. 237). All that I disclose here has particular bearing on data collection and analysis in later chapters. I am not a researcher simply driven by curiosity for the subject matter; instead I am an activist-researcher committed to improving the well-being of homeless youth and improving the social conditions producing homelessness. I am also a criticalist wishing to apply scientific methods and procedures to “critique society, raise consciousness, and change the balance of power in favor of those less powerful” (Patton, 2002, p. 548). The significance of speaking in the first person and using a hyphen to join my roles illustrates my claim as both researcher and study participant. I have remained loyal to empirical techniques and bring credibility to the analysis of data and creation of theory. I strived to accept truth on neutral terms, without desire to prove anything beyond testing a theory. As I describe later, I have employed reflexivity and other processes at each stage of this research, intending to emerge as a more informed advocate and researcher.

My introduction to the idea of youth homelessness occurred during an elective course in my senior year of college on community development. The professor threw out some statistics on homeless youth and I was dumfounded. I asked myself several questions: How could it be possible that this many youth are alone and trying to survive on the streets? Why haven’t I ever heard about this before? Have I ever seen a homeless
kid? And furthermore, what can I do about it? At this point, I joined the listserv for the national organization, StandUp For Kids, which has 45 programs around the country providing street outreach and related services to homeless and runaway youth. I kept myself informed, creating a mental bookmark to join this organization when I was settled in a place long enough to make a commitment. That didn’t happen for me until 2007, when I had a clean slate, apart from my academic responsibilities, in a new community in Miami.

From August 2007 through July 2010, I was involved as a volunteer with StandUp for Kids. After serving as a street outreach worker and then the director of street outreach, I became the local program’s executive director in May 2008. This trajectory was unexpected; I was willing to give 2-4 hours a week, never intending to give over 40 at its peak. I was a reluctant leader, taking over at a time when other leaders were transitioning out and accepting a plea from the national office asking me to carry this program for a few months. My peers laughed when I said I was just going to be the new Executive Director for the summer, while I was less busy in school. They knew I would be in it for the long haul. In a way, that has been my ethos with many community projects. I was active in my hometown’s zoo closure in elementary school. I was involved in numerous community-service clubs in middle and high school, ultimately serving on student government and editing the school newspaper. High school was a place where my values were honed; because it was a consensus-driven Quaker school, I was taught to be intentional and maintain deep commitments to my community. In college, I was in the first class of students who received certificates in Service Learning; a two-year ad-hoc program that had us doing projects in the community and reflections in group. My
capstone project was to tear down the walls in a dementia care unit of a nursing home, metaphorically speaking, by surveying residents and bringing in the community to engage with elders on interests they left behind. I also served on the student executive board of a large philanthropy, Dance Marathon, which raises over a half-million dollars annually for a selected charity. I used my position to elect the first youth-focused non-medical charity. I had a sense of coming full-circle when StandUp For Kids was the chosen charity in 2010, years after my graduation.

Back in Miami, I believed that street outreach was only one small way to assist this population in making strides to healthy futures. With a team of volunteers and an advisory board, I expanded the program to five other areas: Individual mentoring, life-skills training, prevention training, a drop-in program, and advocacy working groups. This latter component – one major example is the Miami Task Force for Homeless Youth, which I created and convened – was designed as a way to connect youth advocates and providers and concentrate on the shoring up of capital to reduce youth homelessness locally. In full disclosure, I was supported in the creation of the Task Force by many members of the University of Miami community and my dissertation committee. I routinely said that if I couldn’t serve as Executive Director, I would be delighted to serve as a Director of Advocacy. Miami was the first program to create that position and train other programs to use their human capital to change structures that sustain youth homelessness. Had I stayed in Miami, I would have liked to see this Task Force continue to grow. For me, it had a different scope that all the other initiatives we built; it had, I believe the potential to bring the community to the table and find more systemic solutions for a pressing issue.
Though I never did it for rewards, my deep engagement with the program and the homeless youth population was recognized in numerous ways, internally and externally: The StandUp For Kids Board of Directors awarded me as Executive Director of the Year (2009) and Guardian of the Kids (2010). In 2009, the Miami program also was awarded as Program of the Year. I have received recognition through the Huffington Post and have been interviewed by CNN, National Public Radio, and several Miami media outlets. I mention these not to boast, but to establish that my passion for homeless youth is longstanding and at least somewhat effective in a jury of my peers. Furthermore, it qualifies my personal assessment as a homeless youth advocate; a participant and researcher in one.

In my volunteer roles I experience multiple highs and lows, sometimes in the same day. I am elated when youth that I work with have good news—for example, entering into Job Corps, returning to school, finding housing, or simply calling to say they’re okay. I am deflated when these same youth succumb to the forces of the street and get arrested for months at a time, get beaten up, lose their jobs, or get let down by yet another adult. My highs and lows are not circumscribed to the welfare of the kids I know; for better or worse, they are also tied to my community’s willingness to deal with homeless youth appropriately. For example, I am inspired when a youth shelter moves toward a positive development model by forming a resident council—and I am upset when adult shelters fail to make developmental accommodations for their youngest residents and kick them back out on the streets. Through the good and the bad experiences, I feel continually enriched by the way that individual kids’ stories have blown to bits my virgin understanding of their lives on the streets. These stories live
within me, somehow forging their way out of my passive emotional circuitry and into the part of me that feels I must do something tangible, even transformative, about those conditions.

When I moved to Washington, D.C. to pursue my predoctoral internship with youth in the juvenile justice system, I sought continued involvement with StandUp For Kids because I did not believe that the work was done, nor were all solutions yet on the table. I have presented at two StandUp For Kids national conferences on the needs to advocate and develop theories of change for homeless youth. I attended a board retreat where we re-imagined our mission as “ending the cycle of youth homelessness” and I was a loud proponent of the need to understand this cycle beyond the individual. As such, I successfully pushed for the development of a national public policy committee, of which I served as its first co-chair. I also serve on other committees nationally and volunteer with the local D.C. program as a Director of Training for new counselors and mentors. I value my experiences and believe that continuing to give to the organization is one direct way that I can engage in collective action for homeless youth.

Professional experiences aside, I owe a good deal of my stakeholder status to the education I received over the past several years. I have been trained as a counseling psychologist in search of a community in which to apply my principles of ethics and justice. The University of Miami has largely met this desire by providing me with faculty and access to research that treats not just individuals but communities and organizations as clients. Following a teaser of this ideology at Boston College as a Master’s student, I was introduced to the idea more wholly at U.M. through Etiony Aldarondo whose text on social justice in clinical practice (2007) was released the year I matriculated. He wrote...
that “a large number of mental health professionals…know that something is wrong, feel like it is their responsibility to do something about it, but are not clear about what to do and are missing the encouragement, training, and support to risk” taking action (p. 5). I borrow from some of my former professors at Boston College to define social justice as “as scholarship and professional action designed to change societal values, structures, policies, and practices, such that disadvantaged or marginalized groups gain increased access to these tools of self-determination” (Goodman, Liang, Helms, et al., 2004, p. 795). In a recent article (Becker & Ameen, 2011), I spoke about the need for counseling psychology trainees to learn and apply a social justice stance in their work with individuals and community groups. Tracing the experiences that my peer and I engaged in through research and practice, we reasoned that our doctoral training prepared us well: “It is clear that we already have many of the tools within reach...What brought us to this point was not a search for the tools, but a widening of the aperture” (p. 17).

I believe that all counseling is political and understand that operating consciously under that political system leads me to practice either a form of counseling that inscribes one’s struggles intrapsychically or practice a justice-based form in which “personal, relational, and collective wellness are dependent on the presence of justice” and where my clients can explore the “personal, relational, and collective domains of wellness” (Prilleltensky, Dokecki, Frieden & Wang, 2007, p. 33). I have tried to consciously practice the latter. Crethar, Torres-Rivera and Nash (2008) describe that a great number of counseling professionals in this vein have sought not only to bring about positive changes in individual clients but also to do the same for the contexts in which their clients are living. They have accepted that the dominant practice of the “one-on-one remedial
model” (p. 276) is just one model in a specific time and place; in other times and places it may be more traditional to turn to consultation, prevention or advocacy. This more systemic form of practice is not new, but is frequently absent from our institutional memory (Aldarondo, 2007). Driven by my own commitment to improving conditions that my young clients endure, I aspire to be a counseling professional in this same vein. I have often conceptualized an individual’s case from a combination of these perspectives; furthermore, I try to understand the ways that I, my clients, their families, and their community members can make community improvements.

My interest in social justice led me to writings on the topic of liberation psychology, which has at its root the idea that oppression lies within structures, manifesting social outcomes such as homelessness; the ultimate remedy is transformation of the structures (Moane, 2003). Whereas some practices of liberation psychology focus on increasing the individual’s ability to make “actions in various contexts that accumulate to create currents of change in an oppressive system” (Moane, 2006, p. 76), others more directly focus on social, cultural, and community-level changes. I believe that as a psychologist-in-training, the option to confront this oppression by working with clients individually or in small groups as a healer of pathology is limited.

Although the American Psychological Association provides online training for advocacy and supports its student division (of which I currently serve as Assistant Director) in having campus, state, and regional advocacy coordinators, there is no membership-wide adoption of advocacy and social justice principles in the professional ethics code. For guidance regarding the skills and mandates that one would need to be an advocate and mental health professional, I personally have turned to the American
Counseling Association, which endorsed a set of core competencies in 2003 (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Taporek, 2002). This set describes that a counselor may (but is not required to) work to empower individuals, collaborate with communities, advocate within systems, provide public information, and influence public policy in large arenas. The competencies are written to reflect that one can grow from individual to policy-based advocacy, and develop specific attitudes, skills, and knowledge within each area. The competencies are not a mandated requirement for counselors, however they provide a pathway to develop—if not an interest—then at least an ability to engage in social justice.

Before setting the research stage, I will close with some final points about my worldview and its impact on the formulation of this study. I am inspired when ‘disadvantaged’ youth are given advantages. From my experience on the ground and in collaborative planning, these advantages are hard to come by. As an author and contributor to a body of knowledge about youth homelessness, I believe seriously in my own civic responsibility to address youth homelessness. Brantlinger (1999) writes that “blending research and activism are not only valid but mutually enhancing” (p. 415). Further, like Brantlinger, I “foreground the need for local activism when inequities exist in scholars’ own backyards. This means that scholars should have a continuing connection to their sites and to the circumstances in need of transformation” (p. 420).

My researcher-participant lens informs and is informed by the roles I hold and continue to grow into. This praxis, I believe, allows me to ask critical questions.

Journalist I.F. Stone once wrote, “If you expect to see the final results of your work, you

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1 In my experience, providers are oftentimes working in disconnected ways, passing the youth between them like interoffice mail. Referrals are abstract. Aftercare is someone else’s job. Local officials generally fail to recognize the existence of this population, making the provision of developmentally appropriate services bleak at the levels of policy and community organizing.
simply have not asked a big enough question” (Loeb, 2010, p. 123). The critical question for me at this stage is, *Why does youth homelessness exist in the first place?* This question led me on a search to find out *Who is ending youth homelessness?* And, *How did these people get there in the first place?*

As a participant-researcher, I tried to be reflexive and question myself along with other participants to manage my own subjectivity. I have sought to understand processes of activist development in terms of common themes, including my identification or lack thereof with particular concepts and ideas. I have committed to this research changing me and teaching me new things not only about the practice of collective action, but about myself as one who is trying to advance equality for homeless youth. I have even committed to the idea that this is not the path of least resistance as an academic researcher: I may, as Foley and Valenzuela (2005) already realized, “have to produce twice as much as my apolitical colleagues to survive professionally” (p. 222). If that is not the case, then I have to at least be comfortable to “work at the margins of the profession” (Aldarondo, 2007, p. 9).

I will make more personal reflections in later chapters. In the proceeding sections of Chapter One, I will define the terms of the study, provide context about homeless youth and the activist movement, and frame this phenomena as a sociopolitical problem requiring collective action to effectively address it.

**Defining homeless youth**

For the purposes of this study, homeless youth are defined as teens and young adults through the age of 25 who have experienced homelessness presently or in the past.
and are unaccompanied, meaning they are not under the direct care of their parents or guardians.

I use a broad definition of youth because the boundaries between child, teen, and young adult are not fixed, and our expectations for youth have shifted considerably in recent decades (Mallett, Rosenthal, Keys, & Averill, 2010). In essence, the demands on youth at age 18 are different in 2012 than they were in the Industrial Era. Youth in their early twenties still have developmental tasks that are different from those of adults who are connected solidly to the workforce (Arnett, 2000). In particular, poor youth (a group commonly overrepresented in the homeless population) are often denied access to the marketplace and benefits that come along with it – including political forces and market forces that have constrained possibilities and ultimately disadvantaged them (Tanner & Arnett, 2009). Thus, while an ethnography of homeless youth in a previous era may have sanctioned 18-year-olds as adults, the current convention amongst the youth-serving community is to extend the upper limit to account for a range of people whose needs are not identified or represented in other age cohorts (Mallett et al., 2010). This aligns with an international definition of youth, ratified by member states of the United Nations in 1985 (United Nations, 2011).

Not surprisingly, homelessness does not have a consistent definition across systems and communities. The definition itself is an historical cause for significant policy debate. Some theorists and policymakers have agreed that the term is culturally dependent; a concept that is socially constructed and will vary over time and place (Mallett, et al., 2010). The first definition of homelessness is the literal one, that homeless youth lack any type of shelter. This is considered rooflessness (Mallett, Rosenthal, Keys,
& Averill, 2010). The second definition is expanded rooflessness. Most agencies and government programs use a definition that includes unsuitable or unstable housing; in parlance, the lack of a “fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence” (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2011). Agencies delineate the specifics differently, but have typically included youth who have no alternatives but to sleep in campgrounds, cars, shelters, motels, abandoned buildings; those who are awaiting foster care placement; and those who live doubled-up or who “couch surf” with other people (National Center for Homeless Education, 2011). The third definition is person-centered, whereby being homeless is an individual’s subjective experience of feeling without home (Mallett, et al., 2010). When using the term homeless throughout this study, I have conceptually included all three different ways of understanding homelessness amongst youth, but prefer the third, most expansive definition of homeless when discussing the work of advocating on behalf of youth.

Defining collective action, activism, advocacy, and politics

Collective action, activism, and advocacy are used interchangeably in this dissertation. As I have learned, the terminology in this subsection emanates from different fields and time periods and has slightly different meanings across fields and time. Nevertheless, the central tenets of each term are conceptually identical. This reflects an unspoken consensus in the literature between operational definitions of the terms, the pragmatic necessity to include works from researchers who use slightly different terminology to describe efforts of their research participants, and to make space for participants who use an assortment of terms to describe themselves.
Collective action is “any action that aims to improve the status, power or influence of an entire group, rather than that of one or a few individuals…[C]ollective actions do not necessarily require actual collectives. What matters is the aim of the action—to change the status of a group—rather than the number of people who are participating…[It] includes mass political actions such as participation in demonstrations, but also individual-level actions such as signing a petition and voting” (van Zomeren & Iyer, 2009, p. 646). The components of collective action generally entail influencing policy, changing public attitudes, improving existing services, developing needed services, and creating community responsiveness to the issue at hand (Nowell, 2009). Collective action subsumes systems change, defined by Nowell (2009) as “actions that modify existing operating frameworks and challenge underlying beliefs and assumption embedded within the status quo” (p. 208).

Advocacy, another term used throughout this study, is considerably more ambiguous (Reid, 2000). It is defined here as “any attempt to influence the decisions of an institutional elite on behalf of a collective interest” (Jenkins, 1987, p. 297) by “address[ing] underlying structural and power inequities” (Donaldson, 2008, p. 26). Homeless youth advocacy, then, is a set of attempts made on behalf of homeless youth. Advocacy can be done by anyone: A homeless youth, a formerly homeless youth, a political insider or outsider, an organizational insider or outsider, a volunteer, or otherwise. Depending on the intended beneficiary and the scope of the efforts, advocacy can strengthen the constituent, organization, or the public at large (Reid, 2000). In the current study, I do not include advocacy serving the organization, better known as preserving one’s existence through the political process. Reid (2000) calls this “self-
defense advocacy” that ensures an organization’s viability in terms of visibility, contracts, appointments, funding, and the like. Instead, I use advocacy as an umbrella term to describe “progressive advocacy” (Donaldson, 2008). Here, advocacy is not only defined by the winning of battles over specific political issues, but also how it inspires public discussion about the issues, reframes them (for example, away from individual deficits towards structural inequalities), and sets an agenda for future political debate and battle-fighting (Eliasoph, 1998; Blackstone, 2005). My operational term for advocacy also excludes a very important type of advocacy which Reid (2000) refers to as “indirect advocacy;” that is, general efforts to help constituents access entitlements and services they cannot access themselves. An example of indirect advocacy might be in the form of a “know your rights” presentation to homeless youth, or a program to help specific youth enroll in housing or emergency assistance from the government. While this type of advocacy is incredibly meaningful, it is viewed in the current framework as more of a service or intervention at the individual or small-group level. Progressive advocacy, meanwhile, crystallizes issues and moves the political process in the direction of increased rights for the collective.

An activist is defined as someone who has a stable, developed “orientation to engage in various collective, social-political, problem-solving behaviors spanning a range from low-risk, passive, and institutionalized acts to high-risk, active, and unconventional behaviors” (Corning & Myers, 2002, p. 704). Whereas an activist is engaged in advocacy, I prefer the term activist over advocate for two reasons. First, as mentioned, there is a historical lack of specificity and clarity around advocacy and hence, the role of an advocate. Second, the activist term conjures vivid imagery of movements such as the
fights for civil rights and environmental protections and with those, a range of clear behaviors one can take on behalf of the collective.

This dissertation contains many instances of the term political. Although typically thought of as having to do with only the functioning of the state and its political branches (Martin-Baro, 1994, p. 43), that definition negates its Greek roots in the idea of polis, “the democratic sphere in which citizens, acting in concert, determine the character and direction of their society” (Loeb, 2010, p. 31). The popular definition is too narrow for the purposes of a study that is strongly rooted in understanding activist means to liberate the oppressed. Here, political is cast as behavior that confronts group differences in a number of different ways—such as speaking out, protesting, lobbying, voting, and refusing to act—in a number of different settings, whether they are neighborhoods, communities, civic institutions, or larger sites of government.

What do we know about homeless youth?2

CNN (2009) reports that one of every 50 children will be homeless before they turn eighteen. Many estimates suggest that 1 million to 1.6 million youth each year experience homelessness—or up to 7.7% of the youth population (U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness [USICH], 2010a). This is a conservative number compared to other sources suggesting incidence of up to 2.8 million American youth in a given year (National Network for Youth, n.d.). They occupy 2.2% of all shelter beds and transitional

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2 According to Toro (2006), youth are the cohort most at risk for experiencing homelessness but also the least researched. Putting a reliable estimate on the numbers of youth who are homeless is a complex process, in part because of the transient, episodic nature of homelessness in young people, as well as their relatively easy ability to blend in with non-homeless individuals; in fact they are historically undercounted or simply not counted at all by municipalities that receive and direct funding based on those counts (Ameen, 2011a). Additionally, homeless youth are undercounted and misrepresented in the empirical literature due to “contradictory definitions of homelessness...an absence of standard methodology...an over-reliance on data from shelters and agencies...the youths' inability to consent for participation in studies...and a lack of comparison groups” (Moore, 2005, p. 7).
housing rooms in the United States, though they don’t necessarily enter shelters away from their parents: Restrictive policies at some family shelters have placement restrictions for older adolescents (USICH, 2010a). At any given time, approximately 110,000 youth live on the streets or in squats, roughly evenly divided between youth under and over the age of eighteen (USICH, 2010a) while an estimated 186,000 live doubled-up or in otherwise unsuitable housing (Moore, 2005). In public schools across the country, there was a 69% increase in the number of registered homeless youth from 2006 to 2009; the later year recorded almost 53,000 youth on its student rolls (USICH, 2010a). Naturally, schooling is very difficult when students do not have a stable place to live. Nationally, less than 1 out of 4 homeless youth graduate high school (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2010). One in seven youth will run away before the age of 18 and 40% will never return home (Moore, 2005).

Several subgroups are statistically overrepresented among homeless youth, as depicted in Table 1. Additional data reveal that females make up 60% of the shelter population although males make up the overwhelming majority of youth on the streets (National Network for Youth, n.d.). Ethnicity and sexual orientation are similarly uneven, with homelessness disproportionately affecting Black, Latino, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT), and foster care youth. Specifically, 25% of former foster care youth experience homelessness within two point five to four years after “aging” out from the system (USICH, 2010a). This number matches data in Miami-Dade County on youth in their first year off state doles (Miami Coalition for the Homeless, 2009). No estimates of youth who left the juvenile justice system and became homeless are available, however it

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3 These subgroups will reappear later in discussions of sociopolitical oppression and homeless activism.
is believed that formerly adjudicated youth, too, are over-represented among (USICH, 2010b).

The strongest predictor of homelessness in young people is their family structure (USICH, 2010b); they leave home or are kicked out by families (National Network for Youth, n.d.). Abuse is prevalent, as shown in Table 1. So too is ongoing interpersonal conflict with parents and parental substance abuse (Moore, 2005). “These are not rambunctious brats looking for adventure. They run from severe abuse or conflict or get thrown out of their homes; they are forced into adulthood prematurely’’ (Rowshandel, 2010).

Once on the streets, outcomes are generally grim.

Research shows a high prevalence of depression, suicide initiations, and other mental health disorders among youth who are homeless. Chronic physical health conditions are also common including asthma and other respiratory problems, hypertension, tuberculosis, diabetes, and hepatitis. Homeless adolescents also have high rates of substance abuse disorders (USICH, 2010b, p. 17).

In fact, as Table 1 illustrates, the prevalence of mental health disorders, HIV, PTSD, and pregnancy seem to outpace the general population of youth.

There are very few ways to survive while young and homeless without becoming victimized. Often because employment and public benefits are unrealistic and impossible to obtain, youth resort to illicit activities as a means of survival, including panhandling, selling drugs, stealing, or selling their bodies (USICH, 2010b; see Table 1). LGBT homeless youth are “more likely to report being asked by someone on the streets to exchange sex for money, food, drugs, shelter, and clothing than heterosexual homeless youth” (National Alliance to End Homelessness [NAEH], 2009, p. 8).
Table 1: A picture of homeless youth in America

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Over-represented groups</th>
<th>Percent of all homeless youth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sheltered, non-sheltered Black(^a)</td>
<td>40.7%, 27.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheltered, non-sheltered Latino(^a)</td>
<td>19.7%, 17.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBT-identified(^a)</td>
<td>20-40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involved in foster care(^b)</td>
<td>up to 70%</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors of homelessness</th>
<th>Percent of all homeless youth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical abuse(^a,c)</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional abuse(^a,c)</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual abuse(^a,c)</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Told no longer wanted by family(^a)</td>
<td>62%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consequences of homelessness</th>
<th>Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mental health disorders(^a)</td>
<td>11:1 compared to housed youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIV(^a)</td>
<td>17:1 compared to housed youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting PTSD criteria(^d)</td>
<td>33% of straight homeless youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnancy(^a)</td>
<td>50% of all homeless females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14% of homeless females ages 13-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breaking into homes(^a)</td>
<td>14% of all homeless youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stealing(^a)</td>
<td>23% of all homeless youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing drugs(^a)</td>
<td>20% of all homeless youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercially sexually exploited(^e)</td>
<td>61% of sheltered females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>61% of non-sheltered males</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: \(^a\)National Network for Youth, n.d.; \(^b\)Moore, 2005; \(^c\)USICH, 2010b; \(^d\)Whitbeck, Chen, Hoyt & Tyler, et al., 2004; \(^e\)Green, Ennet, & Ringwalt, 1999.

As a result of the dangers of the street and lack of opportunity to move into permanent living situations, homelessness is a chronic problem for many of our nation’s youth. It is also largely a very different phenomena compared to adult homelessness.

According to a review by Moore (2005), the average length of homelessness in youth who can find a shelter is four months, whereas for those who are not sheltered, the length is three years. Tragically, only four out of 10 youth ever utilize a shelter and in some places, shelters are perpetually full (Karabanow & Clement, 2004). In 1999, only 14 youth drop-in centers and 22 outreach programs existed in the U.S., compared to 1,790
drop-ins and 3,310 outreach programs for adults (Slesnick, Dashoraa, Letchera, & Erdema, et al., 2009).

**Are homeless youth victims of sociopolitical injustice?**

Research and field experience makes it clear that youth homelessness has a strong link to its social and political contexts. Homeless youth generally bear the brunt of structures that limit their opportunities for educational, economic, social, and political well-being. As a result, youth are dying under the purview of failed policies and systems. Three related themes are necessary to bring into this discussion of sociopolitical context: social exclusion, politics, and poverty.

*Social exclusion:* It is not a linear end product but a net consequence of deplorable conditions. Gaetz (2004) explained that “the conditions that place street youth at risk are connected to their experiences of social exclusion in terms of restricted access to housing, employment, and public spaces” (p. 423). Loeb (2010) borrows from political scientist John Gaventa to describe power: It is “not only a question of who prevails when issues are contested, but it also hinges on the rules and institutional structures that allow access to debate, and the mechanisms that ‘prevent conflict from arising in the first place’” (p. 200).

*Politics:* The largely individualized approaches to addressing homelessness in youth inherently de-politicizes a political issue, much in the same vein that it does with other oppressed groups (see Strier & Benyamin, 2010; Moane, 2003). Prilleltensky (2003) writes that “the well-being of individuals depends on psychological health as much as on political structures” (p. 196). For example, by denying someone their rights as citizens, conflicts emerge at the relational level, and their personal well-being is also
compromised. Political well-being, therefore, is a construct that has the potential to elevate well-being in several dimensions.

*Poverty*: Writing theoretically about the mismatch between the *true* roots of poverty and the governments strategies to address *perceived* roots, Strier and Binyamin (2010) summarized that “a society in which the poor are largely constrained to accept degrading living conditions tolerates various forms of oppression that are closely related to violation of personal integrity…Poverty is simultaneously the expression and the consequence of political, economic, ethnic or gender oppression” (p. 1909-1910). An anti-oppressive approach in youth homelessness would seek to change the structure of service delivery and direction of government initiatives to end or significantly reduce homelessness by reforming those systems that contribute to homelessness in the first place. These changes are generally at the level of law and politics (Strier & Binyamin, 2010). With these three themes introduced, I will move into a discussion about specific contexts in which homeless youth exist.

The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty (NLCHP) and the National Network for Youth (2003) synthesized a comprehensive analysis of the rights afforded to youth who were on their own in each state and territory of America. They write, “unaccompanied youth and their advocates constantly struggle with legal questions regarding access to shelter, public education and medical and mental health care; legal rights to rent property and enter into contracts; and, issues of juvenile justice, parental rights, and availability of emancipation” (p. 9). More than questions, youth are experiencing dead-ends: “Young people may be unable legally to obtain housing, buy…other essential goods, or engage in other transactions necessary to live
independently. They may also be unable to make their own decisions about medical care, education and other personal matters” (p. 63). Their data are compelling; all states, given their own sovereignty or lack of federal mandate, have developed unique definitions and legal standards for youth who become homeless. Only six states define people as youth up to or inclusive of the age of 21, whereas the rest depart from accepted standards about “youth development, psychosocial functioning and cultural norms [which] indicate that youth are rarely ‘independent’ at age 18” (p. 12). Only 11 states assign responsibility to a specific agency charged with providing services and/or shelter to homeless youth. When youth run away, at least 47 states explicitly allow police to take them into custody and 20 states expressly permit family and juvenile courts to get involved, leading to the possibility that youth can be taken into state custody, detained, placed on probation, lose driving privileges, be required to participate in treatment services and drug screenings, as well as pay fines and restitution.

In other ways, homeless youth are politically disadvantaged. Only 30 states have established procedures for youth to become emancipated or legally afforded the same rights as adults, and in many of those states, a minimum age and/or parental consent is required (National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty and the National Network for Youth, 2003). Only 17 states allow homeless youth to enter into contracts for things they need to survive, such as housing and transportation. When attempting to get medical or mental health treatment, homeless youth regularly “encounter difficulties associated with their providing legally authorized consent for their own health care and assuring the confidentiality of that care” (National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty and the National Network for Youth, 2003, p. 83). In fact, in a nationally representative survey of
over 1200 homeless youth, 36% of sheltered and 50% of non-sheltered youth had no regular or reliable source of healthcare; 54% and 80%, respectively had to rely on emergency rooms as their source of primary care (Klein, Woods, Wilson, & Prospero, et al., 2000).

Youth have slightly better protections in the area of education. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, enacted by Congress in 1987, affords homeless youth equal access to education under the law. States that receive federal dollars for education must enforce the law or forgo funding. McKinney-Vento was devised to guarantee that homeless youth can attend the last school they were at or any school that is now convenient to them while they are homeless, even if busing is needed. Schools are also required to register students without immunization and residency documents. Each state is required to have a homeless coordinator and each district must have a liaison to inform its member schools of the policies and facilitate academic services for homeless youth. Funding is significantly limited, especially when homeless students are outpacing federal dollars. Allocations among 50 states to meet the complex needs of over 50,000 youth illustrates the challenge: In 2009, the government distributed only $69 million in McKinney-Vento funding (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2009). According to the National Center on Family Homelessness (2010), school districts spent an average of $64 per year per homeless child; the state of Louisiana only spent six dollars per year per homeless child.

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4 While I discuss a brief history of the federal response to homelessness in more detail in the next section, I am inclined to add here that McKinney-Vento vaulted forward only after the famous “Hands Across America” demonstration in 1986, the single largest collective action taken on homelessness to date, when approximately 6.5 million people held hands all the way across the continental United States in a symbolic gesture of solidarity with homeless individuals (see Donohoe, 2010).
What is America’s history of responding to youth homelessness?

The history of collective action on youth homelessness is scantly documented by activists or others (see Landriscina, 2007). Cress and Snow (2002) wrote that “while there is extensive published research on the homeless issue in the United States … there is comparatively little published research on homeless protest events or on the homeless movement in general” (p. 1072). If other homeless youth advocates are anything like me, the documentation of their actions is limited to alerts and other bulletins that they send out under the gun, urging constituents to call their elected officials about a particular positive or negative bill or threat to homeless funding. At the same time, the government’s response to youth homelessness in America is fairly well documented. While the government story leaves out many of the voices of homeless youth and those working inside and outside of the federal system to protect them, it illustrates macro-level trends about the allocation of financial resources. I am fairly certain that at every turn, when a hearing was held, an Act was authorized, or funding was allocated for new programs, homeless youth activists were speaking—even yelling—into the ears of our members of Congress.

Systemic responses to homeless youth have not existed for as long as youth have been homeless. Refuting the public’s tendency to be ahistorical, historian Jeff Olivet commented that “a lot of times the perception is that homelessness is a new phenomenon, that we essentially created it 30 years ago with cuts to housing” (Cook, 2010). Toro and colleagues (1991) described examples of homeless youth appearing in public media as far back as the late 1800s. At that time, some displaced youth living in urban areas were provided with housing, adoption support, relocation to rural areas, and jobs. Presumably,
housing and jobs addressed some structural shortcomings for an adolescent population. Adoption programs addressed another ecological program, the lack of families to provide safety and support to teenagers. Relocation to rural areas may have been another way to adjust the supply and demand equation for housing and employment by bringing youth to areas where possibly there is less competition for them.

In a report to Congress about runaway and homeless youth (RHY) programs, policy analyst Adrienne Fernandes-Alcantara (2011) prepared a timeline tracing the government’s response to youth homelessness. In 1913, the federal Children’s Bureau was established to investigate matters related to child welfare, although states were not given any money to implement programs. In 1933, the government established the Federal Transient Bureau to assist states in aiding increasing numbers of homeless families, and also the Civilian Conservation Corps which ran camps and shelters for “more than one million older youth” (p. 10). Also, President Franklin Roosevelt ordered the creation of the National Youth Administration to provide “cash assistance to poor college and high school students” (p. 8) in 1935. These new programs were considered effective at reducing the incidence of homelessness in youth: Whereas 400,000 to 1.5 million boys were thought to be homeless in 1933 (data on girls were unavailable), by 1935 the government reported that only 50,000 youth were suspected homeless or transient (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2011). Olivet noted the Transient Bureau was “a fantastic federal program…And it was remarkably effective. When you read the journal entries of the people it affected, you see shelters that treated people with dignity and were well run” (Cook, 2010). Roosevelt’s two programs were disbanded in 1936 to make room for Social Security, and with it, new money to address what was believed to be an increased
number of youth running away. The Social Security Act of 1935 began to pick up the tab for state child welfare programs, unfunded since 1913 but now receiving $1.5 million (or approximately $24 million in 2011 dollars) “for the protection and care of homeless, dependent, and neglected children in danger of becoming delinquent” (p. 8).

Other developments in federal responsiveness are worth mentioning. In the 1950s, states were formally allowed to return a runaway minor back to his or her home state, originally through the age of 16, and later through the age of 18—with additional funds available for youth’s room and board for up to two weeks when the youth’s parents or responsible agency could not afford the costs.\(^5\) In 1961, the Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Offenses Control Act began to account for “underlying sociological factors of deviant behavior among youth. Unaccompanied minors on the street fit the image of troubled, and potentially delinquent youth. This image was further entrenched as some runaway youth joined the Counterculture Movement of the 1960’s” (p. 8). In the years that followed, the relationship between homelessness and delinquency was codified.

In the early 1970’s, “few community services existed that provided [homeless youth] with shelter or helped to reunite them with their families” (Administration for Children and Families, n.d., p. 3). The U.S. had only a handful of youth shelters, almost entirely reliant on churches and other benefactors. Local communities continued building care networks for youth and appealed to governmental authorities to take more ownership. During this time, runaway youth were believed to number one million (Cooper, 2006), causing Congress to convene two days of hearings in 1972:

\(^5\) Interstate compact rules exist to this day, and the National Runaway Switchboard operates a Free Ride Home program through Greyhound Buslines for any displaced youth up to age 20 who is willing to reunite with a parent or other caregiver.
Experts testified about reasons that many youth ran away from home, which included significant family problems, such as physical or sexual abuse, or neglect; problems at school; or problems within the youth themselves. Experts believed that choosing to run away represented anguished cries for help. While away from home, such youth were exposed to exploitation and other dangers of living on the street with no public services available to meet their needs. Furthermore, in many states, running away from home violated the law [considered a “status offense”], and runaways were arrested and detained in a juvenile or penal institution with no other alternatives to address their problems and concerns (Cooper, 2006, p. 5).

The House of Representatives was ready to enact legislation to help such youth in 1972, but the Senate did not come on board until 1974. This was a tipping point in the history of federal responses to the youth homelessness problem. In 1974, the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act promised to defund states that detained youth for status offenses like running away, and it contained a special subsection on new runaway and homeless youth services. This created the financial means for states to support community-based interventions with youth, and each decade saw an expansion of fundable services (Cooper, 2006). At the time, grant recipients were originally restricted to youth shelters only. In 1988, longer term residences for youth 16-21 began receiving dedicated funding. In 1994, street outreach programs were entitled to funding as well.

In an examination of homelessness during the Reagan administration, Rubin, Wright, and Devine (1992) found that the annual budget for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (funder of adult and family shelters and affordable housing developments) barely increased over the course of his presidency. This is not surprising, given both a political ideology that was bent on allowing market forces to solve society’s woes, and on personal philosophies that were culturally inaccurate. The authors quoted President Reagan’s during a press conference affirming his belief that
many homeless people “are, well, we might say, homeless by choice” (p. 123) and the director of HUD, Philip Abrams stating that families who have to double up represent not a lack of housing which is affordable to them, but rather “characteristic of Hispanic communities, irrelevant to their social and economic conditions…It is a cultural preference, I am told” (p. 123, emphasis added). Toro (2006) demonstrated that funding began to increase from 1987 through the early 2000’s, when it reached a plateau that continues to the present time.

In the George W. Bush Administration, HUD began targeting chronically homeless single adults, while substantially cutting public housing, Section 8, and other programs. The Western Regional Advocacy Project (2010) argues that Bush traded homeless youth in for a small percentage of adults who had disproportionate medical and judicial expenses. “The chronic homeless initiative took attention away from families and children to focus on demands from mayors for a policy that would get people off the street and out of their downtown areas” (p. 29).

**How are we responding to youth homelessness today?**

In recent years, government funding for homeless youth has largely been relegated to the Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHY) Act. In 2009, the government allocated $128 million to fund RHY programs through the Department of Health and Human Services (2010). RHY programs are three-fold. The largest segment ($48.6 million in 2009) of funding goes towards grants for Basic Centers, which are comprehensive short-term shelters for homeless youth under the age of 18 with the explicit goal of family reunification. For financial viability, most shelters turn to serving other youth (e.g., foster care and adjudicated youth) and draw from several other funding
streams to support their Basic Centers. The second largest segment ($39.7 million) funds Transitional Living Programs, which are residential services meant to prepare youth through the age of 21 for independence in a variety of settings, usually with wraparound services (i.e., group homes, scattered-sited apartments, dorm-style housing, etc). From year to year, some of this funding is specifically allocated to parenting teen group homes. Youth can reside in a transitional living program for 18 months, with the possibility of one six-month extension. The smallest amount ($16.2 million) provides grants to street outreach programs across the country to engage with youth directly on the streets or other settings when they are not otherwise linked in with supportive services. These programs traditionally distribute food, hygiene items, and provide referrals. In the year 2009, 743 grantees were awarded and they reported making 856,450 contacts with homeless and at-risk youth. Many of the cited figures are duplicated, given the present ability to count a youth numerous times in a given contact when providing multiple services.

Counting all federal dollars spent to provide shelter, transitional living, outreach, education, and family reunification services to homeless youth, it amounts to less than 1% of the $4.175 billion the federal government spent in 2009 on all homeless programs (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2009). This is a disproportionate figure considering that youth 18-24 alone make up 14% of the U.S. homeless population (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, n.d.), and their cohort receives very few designated federal services. The programs may not only be underfunded, but lacking in capacity. For example, more than 3,800 youth were turned away from Basic Centers due to lack of bed space in FY2010 (Fernandes-Alcantara,
In 2005, the Bush administration determined that RHY programs were not performing as intended. Whereas their goal was to “increase the ratio of youth living in safe and appropriate settings after leaving the program,” the government found that although the program measures short-term effects, “it lacks sufficient measures to assess the program’s long-term impact on the youth it serves” (Cooper, 2006, p. 15). After six years, the Department of Health and Human Services began speaking about the need to accurately long term impacts of its services on youth (Porter, 2011): “Our goal is not to reinvent the wheel. We are trying to put some structure around the wheel, so that we can ultimately tell the RHY story in a most effective way… [Our tracking system] captures the demographics of youth and the services we provide, but it doesn’t provide the complete picture of how RHY programs affect the lives of young people they serve. We want [the tracking system] to be in a better position to tell that story.” The federal government is by no means lagging behind external researchers measuring impact. In fact, Karabanow and Clement (2004) concluded after surveying the literature on homeless youth interventions that, “What can be gleaned from this portrait is that we have much anecdotal evidence…What we are lacking are any long term outcome evaluations of … interventions” (p. 103).

Lack of documented effectiveness would leave a skeptic to conclude that responses to youth homelessness, as they are currently conceived, are simply ineffective. The Western Regional Advocacy Project (2010), a large homeless advocacy contingent, explained that this comes as no shock:
Rather than addressing the systemic need for truly affordable housing, the federal government locked itself into a path by which mass homelessness would become permanent and the need for shelters increase...[S]helters went from a temporary emergency response to an institutionalized fixture in local communities (p. 28).

If a bottom-line change in the number of homeless individuals is telling, the U.S. Conference of Mayors recently report that homelessness amongst unaccompanied youth increased 2.5% from 2009 to 2010 across cities that participated in its taskforce on hunger and homelessness. Some cities saw major increases (46% in Minneapolis, 20% in Providence), while a few cities saw decreases. Mayors in the task force noted that the top causes of homelessness for their constituent youth were lack of affordable housing, poverty, and lack of mental health and substance abuse services (2010). Their outlook for the following year—2011—was equally disconcerting: 77% of surveyed mayors expected the number of homeless youth in their cities to rise, with 62% expecting a moderate increase and 15% expected a substantial increase.

The short of this history is that homeless youth are not adequately protected by the federal government’s initiatives and policies. As a whole, they experience the sharp end of the policies that limit their liberties and access to services and housing, and they are economically stifled by lack of opportunity to earn a safe and viable living. The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, one of the most consistent critics of failed homeless policies in the United States, invite the state to “assume a significant role in providing services and support to runaway youth and their families” (2003, p. 36). At the same time, “if these services are provided within a framework that views the youth as blameworthy, they will be of limited efficacy” (2010, p. 36). Citing healthcare as one example among many, Moore (2005) reasons that “there is an inconsistency between the
priorities of agencies to serve homeless youth and what the youths’ perceive as important” (p. 17). When given the opportunity to record their own perspectives, homeless youth in one study routinely suggested that services become more targeted, longer-term, with more inclusive age-ranges, and able to train youth to work and live independently (De Rosa, Montgomery, Kipke, & Iverson, et al., 1999). Following a meta-review of services provided to homeless youth, Slesnick and colleagues (2009) concluded that “when youths' needs and goals do not match those of service providers, the likelihood of youth rejecting services increases” (p. 733). Overall, youth in the above studies reported needing care that is tailored to their individual and contextual needs and sought above all trust, understanding, and lack of prejudgment from providers.

The government is not alone in being the target of criticism. Landriscina (1997) noted that some researchers feel that activists are largely professionalized and not representative of homeless individuals themselves. Harper (2003), for example, stated that his activist colleagues “salvaged a necessary complexity at the cost of exhausting some allies, alarming others, and confirming our enemies in their worst red-baiting fears” (pp. 198-199). Some critics wonder whether homeless advocacy is actually driven to end homelessness, or “whether it simply works to further institutionalize the homeless service system” (Landriscina, 2007, p. 13), inferring permanent acceptance that we would always have a ‘homeless problem.’ One critic called non-profits a “shadow state” (Wolch, 1990) and another has accused non-profits of replacing the function of political parties, promising constituents certain things in exchange for candidate endorsements and electoral votes (Marwell, 2004). In fact, Marwell stated that some nonprofits only mobilize their bases for the purpose of securing organizational funding.
Whether heralded or vilified, activists and the government are both stakeholders in America’s response to youth homelessness. Moreover, the history of addressing youth homelessness systemically from both sides has significant implications for the direction that funding and services are currently headed. Next, I describe several emerging trends that expand our collective response from intervention toward redistribution of resources and additional increased rights and protections for youth who are, or might become, homeless.

In 2010, the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, consisting of heads of all federal agencies serving the homeless, unveiled a number of strategies to address homelessness amongst subpopulations, after many months consulting with experts and holding “listening tours” around the country for input. The plan was called “Opening Doors” and President Obama endorsed it. Specifically, the government intends to eliminate youth homelessness by 2020 and offered ten strategies that were “consistently referenced in reports and studies on youth homelessness that must be addressed in order to prevent and end homelessness for this population” (p. 16). These strategies, listed in Table 2, are broad and address the personal, relational, and collective domains (Prilleltensky et al, 2007) in which the homeless youths’ well-being and sense of justice are tied.

In its first year, the Council began working on three of these ten strategies: To improve discharge planning for youth leaving foster care and juvenile justice; to remove barriers to healthcare, housing, and housing supports; and to identify promising street outreach programs. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness (2011c), the only tangible gains in the first year of the plan have been in better coordination of
services and protections for LGBT homeless youth by requiring that all RHY grantees work with the LGBT population in ending discrimination. A new federal Working Group on Youth Programs, established in 2010, is expected to understand and address the housing and service needs of transition-age youth (2010a).

Table 2: Recommended federal strategies to prevent and end youth homelessness

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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>On-going support services connected to mainstream resources</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Focused attention by systems adapted to youth’s unique needs and more collaborative work across systems to align resources across a range of needs</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Assistance to help youth transition from systems like child welfare and juvenile courts to adult service systems that provide mental health services, housing, health care, and other basic needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Connections to supportive and trustworthy adults and support networks</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Individualized goal-based service planning</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Independent living skills training</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Employment and education</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Housing, shelter, transitional programs, and services that emphasize stabilization and reunification with families when appropriate</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>More research to examine patterns of youth homelessness and factors associated with extended or repeated episodes of homelessness</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Better tools for counting youth who are experiencing homelessness</td>
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Knowing just how many youth are homeless is crucial to funding and advancement of new policies. Routinely, cities receiving HUD funding count the
homeless in their communities once every January; continued funding is based on what is called “point in time counts” (Ameen, 2011a). Cities that do not look for or count homeless youth may have no reason to implement services or make housing available to them. For example, Miami only counted two youth under 18 living on the streets in 2009, the same year that the school district had more than 2,800 homeless youth registered in its system (Ameen, 2011a).

One of the major bills introduced in recent years on behalf of homeless youth is Senator John Kerry’s “Reconnecting Youth to Prevent Homelessness Act” (2011), or Senate Bill 961. Several parts of the bill were drafted by homeless service providers and advocates. Provisions of the bill would allow children to remain in foster care until at least their 21st birthday, fund more transitional living programs, expand young people’s access to Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF), and demonstrate the effectiveness of reuniting LGBT homeless youth with their families. As of this writing, the Bill has not moved out of the Senate Finance Committee. Given the financial impact of the Bill against a year of major budget cuts and debt limits, it would be a long shot for the Bill to survive. Nevertheless, individual pieces of the bill add unique contributions to an overall federal response and could still find life in add-ons to other Bills. A second Congressional funding request was made by several youth advocacy organizations to request an increase of $14 million in funding for RHY programs for FY2012, and although this was not approved, it would have allowed for programs to more comprehensively address the needs of sexually exploited youth, fund a comprehensive incidence and prevalence study of youth homelessness nationally, and expand the availability of transitional housing (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2011d).
Additional direction on collective action for homeless youth is routinely offered by the National Network for Youth, which is a D.C.-based coordinating body for advocates and activists and one of the leading policy architects of the original passage and continual reauthorization of the RHY Act. It is the sole national membership association dedicated specifically to the needs of runaway and homeless youth. Perhaps mirroring the challenges of homeless policies in the current fiscal and political climate to secure stable funding, the National Network lost most of its staff in early 2011, retaining only a public policy director on a part-time contract (Ameen, personal communication, 2011). With minimal infrastructure, the organization still promotes a broad-based message to address the sources producing youth homelessness: According to their website (www.nn4youth.org), they seek to ensure that youth “receive full and fair access to child welfare, juvenile justice, physical health, mental health, education, workforce investment, positive youth development, and housing opportunities and supports.” The website lists several requests from a recent legislative session for increased funding of various youth-related Bills.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness, which has partnered with the National Network for Youth on several occasions, maintains a wider focus on homelessness affecting all subpopulations. They retain two staff members who focus specifically on youth policy. A review of their website (endhomelessness.org) indicates in recent years they have pushed for more communities to adopt homeless youth incidence surveys, state-level RHY legislation, and housing trust funds, amongst other timely issues. Relative to housing, the Alliance (2009b) estimates that federal funding allows for only 3,700 youth per year across the United States to access housing, which is
less than one percent of the 399,000 residential units offered by HUD (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2009b). The organization advocates for a smart approach to housing solutions based on typologies of youth; for example, early-runners might need more intensive, mobile family case-management whereas older youth who have been homeless for several months might need rapid re-housing (in the form of rental vouchers) or permanent supportive housing (2009b).

From this review, one surmises that the menu of possibilities for collective action with homeless youth coalesces around many of the issues promoted in the Opening Doors plan, as well as by the larger youth advocacy groups with D.C.-based political mobilization. What is missing from this introduction is a more refined look at work that happens by activists who concentrate on community organizing and affect local, state, and national systems. Several of the strategies I reviewed are extremely new – within the last few months to few years – suggesting that the way activists are approaching youth homelessness is more refined and possibly more emphatic than in previous attempts. Many of the newer strategies move away from addressing perceived individual failures and ask systems to change the way they distribute resources.

**Homelessness: What is a Psychologist to do? (And not do)**

For all that we have learned from studies about youth homelessness, there are fundamental problems with the approach taken by researchers. Paul Toro and Marybeth Shinn are two critical researchers that have studied homelessness for several decades. Their efforts to frame where we’ve gone wrong inform the direction of my current study. For example, Toro wrote rather critically in 2006 that “the existing research literature on homelessness is largely atheoretical.” He went on to describe that “much of the literature
continues to focus on deficits of the homeless…despite the clear impact of broader social phenomena on homelessness … [T]he literature on all homeless subgroups, including adolescents … frequently fails to place the problems of the homeless in a broad social context” (p. 351).

Toro’s point is illustrated in the catch-up game that homelessness research has played in the past several decades. Lewin (1935) and Murray (1938) wrote about the bidirectional relationships between people and their environments. Sarason (1972) and Bronenbrenner (1979) conceptualized the connections between individuals and their systems and environments, forging a method of inquiry that was different from a focus on individuals isolated from their contexts. Despite these field-changing paradigms, ecological and structural heuristics failed to make their way into research and conceptualization of homelessness. It wasn’t until the early 1990’s that a few psychologists began to write about the need for more ecologically informed perspectives on homelessness (see Shinn, 1992; Toro, Trickett, Wall, & Salem, 1991; Blasi, 1990).

Years before Toro critiqued the atheoretical basis of homelessness research, Shinn (1992) described that it was already fraught with methodological and epistemological problems. In tracing the roots of various studies, she identified three distinct approaches—(i) Person-centered, (ii) ecological, and (iii) epistemological—and went on to discuss the challenges and opportunities found among them.

A person-centered analysis might examine what problems are faced by a cross-section of homeless individuals in a given location and period of time. There are a number of inherent problems or compromises in this approach. Namely, studies of this design type lack comparison to other groups, bias their samples, fail to separate the
causes and effects of being homeless, overestimate the individual factors that cause homelessness, and fix all the structural factors surrounding the sample such that “these studies, no matter how large and well controlled, are essentially case studies with an \( n \) of 1” (Shinn, 1992, p. 5). Further, Shinn writes: “We are accumulating a large and relentless negative literature on the rates of substance abuse and psychiatric impairment among homeless people, on their inadequate social networks or poor educational or employment histories” (p. 2). The problem is that researchers—and if not them, then consumers of their research—slip into misattributions. The net effect is an unfair picture of the homeless population.

Various inquiries that have taken a longitudinal approach have ended up flipping the directional arrow of causality on its axis. Shinn’s (1992) review of longitudinal and retrospective studies about homeless individuals found that most lost social support, developed depression, and turned to alcohol and drugs after becoming homelessness. O’Neill (1995) argued psychologists-as-researchers have the responsibility to question the assumptions they make when they form questions and choose to study social phenomena in certain ways but not others. According to O’Neill, a social problem presents an ethical issue for psychologists because their research “can provide a justification for either changing or maintaining the status quo” (p. 13). He went on to describe several examples in which we transformed political issues into individual-level ones, looking at examples from poverty, drugs, resilience, and homelessness. Regarding poverty and drugs, O’Neill spoke about how the United States “war” on the former was transformed to the war on the latter, the effect being a diversion of our attention from systemic issues toward the personalization of political issues. Regarding resiliency, he
articulated a fear that focusing on resilient qualities blinded the public from appreciating that no child, for example, should have to be denied a safe environment or have to live without shelter. How they cope in these situations is secondary to understanding and ameliorating the structural factors that create them. O’Neill (2005), like Shinn (1992) believes that research strategies comparing homeless individuals to those who have shelter end up highlighting differences that are later interpreted as the causes or risk factors of homelessness.

In an aptly titled book, *Blaming the Victim*, Ryan (1971) catalogued the many ways that researchers traditionally looked to find how one sufferer was different from another. This difference was often conceptualized as the cause of one’s suffering. The most problematic of conceptualizations of problems and solutions is the one in which both problem and solution is thought to reside in the morals of the individual. This is evident in the “just say no” campaign of the U.S. War on Drugs and the “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” message that some officials and service providers hold toward the poor and marginalized. O’Neill (2005) wrote, “To the extent that psychologists become trapped in the discipline’s conceptual traditions, they run the risk of advancing agendas antithetical to social change” (p. 13). It follows an argument made years earlier by Prilleltensky (1993): Failing to question dominant beliefs when researchers choose what and how to study a particular phenomenon ends up lending direct support for the status quo.

Having established that person-centered models of homelessness are problematic, Shinn (1992) described a second approach—one that looks at structural or ecological
determinants that predict or explain one’s vulnerability to homelessness given a number of limitations, such as affordable housing or lack of social services. Accordingly,

The ecological environment includes social norms, policies involving differential access to services, the availability of supportive social structure, neighborhood attitudes, broad economic trends, and cultural beliefs surrounding the definition of problems and their acceptable solutions (p. 1209).

Shinn (1992) cited numerous examples demonstrating that structural explanations are significant and potent. In one study, individuals who had paid more than 45% of their income on rent accounted for over two-thirds of the variance in per-capita homelessness rates in eight cities. Studies of this kind demonstrate that psychological factors play a very limited role in homelessness; they largely come to light because of research design.

Shinn’s (1992) third approach to psychological inquiry into homelessness, the epistemological one, departs from an analysis of specific or global causes to ask how homelessness came to be. An approach in this category might study how a community with affluence allows its youth to live on the streets, or how the attention of policymakers is frequently diverted from possible solutions, or how as able citizens we can walk past someone suffering and not offer assistance. This approach seeks to understand how we shape and influence public perceptions and attitudes on homelessness. This study, while not examining the homeless youth population directly, takes interest in the social factors that cause and sustain homelessness by describing the battles that people engage in on political fronts. It seeks to examine those who advocate not at the individual level for the amelioration of person-centered problems, but at a larger level to address policies and inequalities that have the potential to solve parts of the homelessness problem. This study considered Shinn’s epistemological model in the sense that it asked, How did homeless
youth activists and advocates come to be? I hope as a researcher and psychologist that I have heeded the call from Shinn and made an ethical contribution by answering her reflexive question—the title of her 1992 article: “Homelessness: What is a Psychologist to do?”

Researchers who do not heed the criticalists’ message about misattributions pass on the consequences of their work to others. Psychological research has direct bearing on public and policymaker understandings. Snow, Anderson, and Koegel (1994) argue that research about homeless individuals, like any marginalized group, has a “distorting tendency” that can tend to make the homeless appear as lepers and invalids to the public. Toro (2006) recounted the negatively held image by the nation’s most-read newspapers on homelessness. Comparing survey data from 1994 to 2001, individuals in 2001 held less stereotyped views of the homeless and were more supportive of services for them; at the same time, they moved away from seeing homelessness as an economic issue or as a major social problem (Tompsett, Toro, Guzicki, Manrique, & Zatakia, 2006)! Toro and colleagues (1991) warned that the public’s opinion about homelessness in turn “has broad cultural influence over the lives of homeless people through its implications for what programs and policies may receive support” (p. 1210). With little help from a large body of psychological research to see otherwise, policymakers have tended to frame problems and solutions in terms of individual behavior, despite an avid and almost disconnected interest in social disparities (Shinn, 2007). That is to say, officials are aware of inequities but view them in terms of individual failures needing individual rehabilitation.
Aims addressed by this study

This study aims to generate a theory about the processes of becoming an activist informed by the experiences and knowledge of those who have done it. In doing so, it expands knowledge about activists doing collective action, presenting activists as nuanced and enduring individuals, promoting advocacy as a viable intervention to the psychology field, and encouraging more science-informed activism on behalf of homeless youth. I believe that a theory of activist development is best positioned to be an actionable item—something that can translate my research into action. I would like to see both non-profit organizations and psychology training programs use the insights and theory refined from this research in ways to foster more activism and advocacy amongst their members and students.

While this theory elucidates several pathways gleaned from participants’ data, I specifically intend for the theory to be dense around pathways for people that move from direct service into more primary activist roles, which I believe to particularly relevant for student training and non-profit governance. Advocacy is often seen as a secondary, tertiary, or altogether optional process amongst service providers. By one study, only 31% of non-profit organizations did direct lobbying on relevant issues and bills and a clear majority of the time, only one person in an organization led advocacy efforts, often as one of many hats that person wore (Bass, 2007). Thus, this study is motivated in part by a desire to create more effective activists for homeless youth.

Chapter Two presents a synthesis of information about the factors that create great civic leadership and change agents. We know more about organizations that engage in advocacy than we do about individuals, and even that area is still murky. Kimberlin
(2010) reviewed nonprofit advocacy, concluding that more research was needed to “identify best practices and practice strategies for facilitating advocacy” (p. 179). The Strengthening Nonprofit Advocacy Project (Bass et al., 2007) surveyed over 2,700 nonprofit charities around the country to understand how factors catalyze or impede an organization’s participation in public policy. The authors discussed that an undertaking of this scale was needed because it was unclear (i) how to motivate more public policy participation, (ii) how to help organizations overcome barriers to advocacy, and (iii) how current conceptions of the role of advocacy in non-profits shapes the work being done. In a similar way, the field is lacking comparable knowledge about individual activists. It is my hope that identifying viable pathways for activism will in turn amplify a leader’s ability to transform their organization from an non-empowering setting into a more empowering one (Maton, 2008).

This study trades in myths of the perfect or easy-winning social change agent in exchange for real depictions of everyday activists who engage in collective action for a vulnerable population. Some researchers explain that activists are often understood in mythical terms, removing them from the realms of reality and possibility. People largely have “no sense of how any of that actually happened, what the participants experienced, or how the change occurred. If we did, it would help us with the issues we face now” (Loeb, 2010, p. 43). Citing two examples, Loeb describes how Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. were larger and more systematic activists than most history lessons teach us. Ms. Parks’s act of sitting at the front of the bus really came after a long, humbling, and frustrating series of actions that started when she first attended a local NAACP meeting. By the same token, Dr. King’s “I have to a dream” speech did not lead to the
immediate signing of a Civil Rights bill. Martin Luther King himself actually said, “A final victory is an accumulation of many short-term encounters. To lightly dismiss a success because it does not usher in a complete order of justice is to fail to comprehend the process of achieving full victory” (King, Jr., 2010, p. 13; published posthumously). This work aims to leave readers with a sense that more people are capable of engaging in such work, provided they develop some essential competencies and worldviews of social injustice.

Several researchers highlight the need to consider collective action as a response worthy of further inquiry. The literature currently lacks a thorough assessment of an individual’s development and motivations to engage in activism (van Zomeren & Iyer, 2009; Corning & Myers, 2002). Most studies and meta-analytic reviews cover one, two, or a small handful of individual factors in isolation. Further, many of these studies are criticized for lacking theoretical integration and conceptual clarity. Van Zomeren and Iyer (2009) explain that there is “very little collaboration between scientists and practitioners in developing models of collective action that are valid in both theoretical and practical terms” (p. 657). Maton (2000) writes that “articulat[ing] a guiding framework for social transformation would help broaden our collective identities, and contribute to a larger, multidisciplinary and multileveled effort to address social problems” and “inform the development of institutional models that support a mission of social justice” (p. 48). Simply put, no study to date tells the entire story of collective action and accounts for an extensive array of variants in the development of activists. This is especially true when speaking of activists for homeless youth, which have been entirely absent from the literature.
Based on my understanding of the problem, and the power that collective action has on long-term resolutions of the conditions that create youth who are homeless, it seems essential to explore how individuals become activists for this group. Specifically speaking about homeless youth, Moore (2005) writes, “The weight of the issues warrant a deeper examination of the factors leading to homelessness among adolescents and a more thorough understanding of the creation of relevant laws, the experiences of homeless adolescents, and the existing programs in place to address the needs of this vulnerable population” (p. 19). Heeding a call from these researchers and others, this study has field-related aims to improve what we currently know and do with regard to collective action in psychology. Psychology offers a useful framework to approach the issues, particularly when examining the individual-contextual factors that lead people to advocate for homeless youth. Prilleltensky (2003) speaks of “psychology’s political illiteracy” (p. 199) and introduces the idea of psychopolitical validity. By this, he refers to the need to address the psycho-political dynamics of oppression, and maintain explicit political aim in attempting to promote social change through our interventions. In macro terms, I view collective action as one of the most potent interventions that psychologists can both study and promote. The extant literature shows that such practice is in the nascent stages.

Finally, there is a timely thrust to the current study. The government’s investment in social services is decreasing. Within this context, it is important that advocacy be positioned as a cornerstone of any intervention or prevention program (Donaldson, 2008). Current budget shortfalls are leading to the reduction of funding for homeless youth programs, a divestment in public housing and freely available medical care, not to mention a countless array of other ends to programs that keep families together (National
Alliance to End Homelessness, 2011b). While this is not to say that collective action is failing, it does imply that activists must strengthen their political efforts to keep pace with opposition in the form of economic and social arguments. One way to do this is to engage more stakeholders, particularly those who already know and care for homeless youth or who advocate for related youth causes.

Research question

As implied through this chapter, direct service is not enough to address youth homelessness and eventually put an end to it; working with youth individually is also not sufficient. The democratic process is the essential mechanism to push for more transformational change. To change social inequities, structures, and cycles of oppression, one must understand “how such change can happen, what role individuals and groups can play in that, and how to be effective and prevent frustration and despair” (Moane, 2003, p. 100). Furthermore, “to fully understand the larger story of societal shifts and organizational change, we need the micro stories of people’s trials and trajectories” (Milligan et al., 2011, p. 15).

Along these lines, the core question guiding this research is: Why do people become and remain homeless youth activists? Asking this requires that attention be paid to understanding how individuals got their start, what facilitated their continued involvement, how they connected their formative experiences with actions, how they came to see youth homelessness not as a social fact but a call for social change, and what it took for them to remain engaged in collective action. The study looks at the internal and external factors that facilitated and even constrained activist involvement within a context of the sites and settings where that work is conducted. In bracketing a question
for analysis, I am leaving out some dimensions of activism that are interesting though outside of my scope. For example, the study does not attempt to speak to the effectiveness of advocacy efforts.

Qualitative methodology is a preferred method because it can adequately contextualize a multiply determined, multilayered web of factors that lead individuals into activism. Briefly, the study used a critical qualitative orientation in a phenomenological framework, allowing for a theory that accounts for the development and permanence of an activist to emerge from the ground up.
Chapter II: Review of the Literature

Because history is in essence *made* by social change and populated by people who have sought to change their circumstances, it would seem that collective action is predestined; that the conditions and structures of society somehow produce social change automatically (van Zomeren & Iyer, 2009). Interestingly enough, this is not the case. Every fight for distributive and social justice waged in history was carried out by individuals or groups who emerged from the gestalt of many. While their stories are routinely preserved (just peruse the expansive ‘biographies’ section at a library), there seem to be few works that weave the development of changemakers into a coherent tale. This is especially true on the matter of homelessness: There is a paucity of in-depth ethnographic studies documenting the homeless movement’s work and those doing it (Landriscina, 2007), despite collective action that has persisted for over four decades.

This study as a whole seeks to expand our knowledge in this area. This chapter achieves several tasks related to that goal. First, it describes trends in studying activists and activism efforts, with particular emphasis on separating action from well-meaning intentions to act. Next, the chapter describes what activists do, what typologies they often fall under, and what comes from their efforts. Next, it examines 22 situational and temporal factors that have been assigned to various people who have engaged in activism, advocacy and other helping capacities for a diverse number of causes, groups, and movements. I attempt to make sense of these myriad factors by integrating them where appropriate, and otherwise linking them conceptually. Next, I discuss factors that impede or preclude people from activism. Because a great deal of social change emanates from
non-profit organizations, I close out this chapter by discussing the qualities of organizations that engage in collective action.

**Studying activism and activists**

Studies of activists generally try to use one or more forms of measurement. When attitudes are examined, participants are assessed for being supportive of collective action. Intentions are an extension of attitudes; their assessment looks at action potentials (van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008) or willingness of people to engage in action. Behaviors, finally, are assessed by historical use of certain collective actions, observation of current actions, and even explicit plans for future action, corroborated by some precedent.

One of the earliest attempts to understand the characteristics of activism (Kerpelman, 1969) resulted in the development of the Activism Scale (ACT). Kerpelman made the decision to create a measure with two subscales, one for the “actual frequency of participation in political activity during the prior three years,” and the second for “the same activities during the same period had the respondent been free of all social, financial, and educational obligations” (p. 10). The author attempted to tease out self-identified activists who were doing activism from those who desired to do it but did not have the ability to. The study correlated these two sub-scales with political ideology (left, center, right) and learned that left-leaning student activists were both more active and more desirous to pursue activism than other students. The study did not find any differences between desire and behavior on measures of intelligence and ego defensiveness. Nevertheless, Kerpelman (1969) appears to have started a trend separating intentions from actual behavior.
Forty years later, the argument is strong for behavioral measures being the most valid and useful measure to predict future collective action (van Zomeren & Iyer, 2009). Even when youth are given tools to engage in collective action, their acute awareness of uneven power dynamics “is hard to translate into effective actions at the collective level” (Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007, p. 738). When researchers attempt to measure behaviors, intentions, and attitudes simultaneously or by collapsing the terms, the similarities and differences between them can become obscured (van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008).

Researchers are hesitant to allow behavior to overshadow the complex psychological and social processes that underlie collective action, noting that “constructs that are (at least) one step removed from actually behavior…may still influence behavior later in time” (van Zomeren & Iyer, 2009, p. 650). Klandermans’s (1997) examination of four pre-behavior stages is useful in that each stage describes intention to act. First, people have the potential to be mobilized when they sympathize with a movement’s goals. Next, they become targets of mobilization by others in the movement and later achieve real (as opposed to potential) motivation. The final step occurs when people get beyond pragmatic barriers to participation. Wilkinson and Sagarin (2010) found a pathway relationship suggesting that attitudes predicted intentions which in turn predicted behavior.

Corning & Myers (2002) developed the “Activism Orientation Scale” (AOS) that measures one’s propensity to become an activist using strictly future-bound attitudinal questions beginning with the phrase “How likely is it that you will engage in [this activity] in the future?” The authors have reconciled the problematic disconnect between
behavior and attitudes by reasoning that “although general attitudes may be poor predictors of any single behavior, the net valence of a set of related behaviors should be predicted by the valence of the attitude” (p. 706). They claim increased validity and reliability of their measure by offering 35 items that examine different types of activist activity. While the rater may have aspirations for a number of activities for a specific cause, the likelihood that they will actually perform collective action in the future is tied heavily to the number of activities they will engage in. I return to the AOS in this study’s methods section.

**What do activists do?**

As the previous section alluded, an activist’s activities can range from the conventional to the unconventional (Corning & Myers, 2002). While voting is seen as a rather common and safe thing to do, many social movements were sparked by more risky and attention-grabbing behaviors such as becoming confrontational with police officers. According to the Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest (CLPI), the public policy process is not reserved for the experts; rather they believe that advocacy can be done in just a few hours per week. They provide suggestions for individuals within organizations to build relationships with government and influence policies in a gradual progress, increasing impact and capacity over time. Their process is devised into three phases: (i) preparing an organization for public policy—by reviewing the connections between government and the mission of the organization, preparing the board, developing an agenda, collecting useful data, finding allies in similar organizations, assessing the capacity to act quickly, and identifying relationships with key policymakers; (ii) becoming vocal and communal—by attending policy meetings, speaking credibly with
officials, and developing relationships with policymakers; and (iii) increasing and sustaining advocacy efforts—by regular meetings with legislative staff members, calling and writing to officials regularly, initiating the support of the organization’s constituents, testifying at hearings, creating deep media support, and educating the public about the importance of specific issues.

While there are significant demands for an advocate’s attention, the break-down of duties illustrates that various activities can be conducted over time, and that the most significant ones by definition (building relationships with, and informing, your constituency, the policymakers and staffers, and the media) require a long-range commitment of months and years. Another important aspect of the CLPI model is in how they identify individuals, not organizations, as the nodal connections between various constituencies and as the vehicles for messages to be delivered and received. While individuals may represent an organization, they can act as individual advocates, and only as individuals can relationships be initiated and strengthened.

Andrews and Edwards (2004) offer five goals for activists, broken down into different components of the political process. First, activists work to set an agenda by defining the issues that are relevant to creating new or modifying existing policies. Second, activists can work to gain access into the gates of the policy-making process, generally in the government setting. Third, advocates work to get favorable policies passed through focused legislative efforts and campaigns. Though this is often the most commonly recognized outcome and activity of activists (Kimberlin, 2010), the important work for collective action does not stop there. The fourth goal is to guide the policy implementations in the institutions or executive offices where it will be monitored,
helping to ensure that the essence and criteria of the bill are carried out faithfully and expeditiously. The fifth goal, a summative effect of long-term investment in collective action, is to bring the vision and enduring priorities of government in line with those of the collective action movement.

Before examining specific factors, it is important to note that any two individual activists will hardly have the same story to tell. Some activists have personal experiences with the social problem, while others have none. Some will emerge from a helping profession, others will come from a volunteer pool, and some will come from the constituent bases being mobilized. Some will start young, and some will not take their first collective actions until other events that taken place. It would suffice to say there is great breadth of circumstances leading to activism. Despite this diversity, efforts have been made to create typologies of activists. Most recently, Milligan, Kearns, and Kyle (2011) performed a qualitative study with people who were described as mental health activists working to change social conditions for their clients. Types of activists included the “boundary crosser” (who moves between the volunteer and government sectors), a “service-user activist” (who receives services from the organization), a “vocational activist” (who works as an employee for several decades on the same set of causes, possibly with the same organization), a “traditional activist” (who remains an outsider to an organization), and an undefined activist who does not describe himself as such but whose activities mirror those of his activist peers. Four out of these five types are differentiated by the site where an activist works (i.e., member of an oppressed group, government worker, volunteer, outsider, or some combination of these). The current study sheds light on the relationships between sites, methods, and outcomes.
Regarding the fifth type—those who do not define—Blackstone (2004) called these individuals “border activists” following a tradition of border feminism. The author speculated that they rejected activist titles because they either do not understand what it means (but would otherwise self-identify), or do not see themselves as hell-raising, politically charged people; instead they depoliticize their actions by casting their work as social, fun, and inclusive. Blackstone (2004) stated that regardless of the reasons for embracing or shying away from the term, activism will still exist and one’s actions should be evaluated in terms of context, intent, and results.

**What arises from activists’ work?**

A few researchers have identified general categories of expectable outcomes of collective action. They range from *direct* changes in federal and state-level policies and expansion of services for a group or organization, to *indirect* changes in things like the visibility of individual members associated with the collective and the development of secondary services, policies, and funding mechanisms (Cress & Snow, 2000). Indirect changes might be easy to miss, considering how gradual or corollary they can be to the high-impact direct changes that most activists tend to pursue. According to Cress and Snow (2000), outcomes are best thought of as the four R’s: Constituents receive *representation* (e.g., having a voice in the decision making process, serving on an advisory council, etc.), *rights* (e.g., government support, voting, protections against harassment and discrimination), *relief* (e.g., shelter, housing, social services), and *resources* (e.g., office space, preferential funding for new projects). Reid (1998) listed additional benefits such as political accountability and citizen participation. Political accountability is a process whereby elected officials are held responsible for the demands
of their constituents, often expressed through activist intermediaries; the more often officials hear a message, they more likely they are to act on it. Citizen participation entails mobilizing a constituent base to become more skillful, vocal, and effective in the political processes for collective action. (See the section on “Social and Human Services” for a discussion of homeless youth serving as activists).

Pursuing collective action and building a movement is a long but worthwhile process: “By acting proactively and with tactical and strategic wisdom, social change activists can bring a degree of social and economic justice to the next century that has for too long been deferred” (Shaw, 2001, p. 279). Often, collective action grows larger than a circumscribed effort to change existing policies; it can grow into a social change movement. Such a movement produces knowledge (Eliasoph, 1998) and is engaged in a “struggle over the production of ideas and meanings” (Snow and Benford, 1992, p. 136). Cress and Snow (2000) articulate that the core task of the homeless movement is the need to frame issues. Framing is understood as creating meaning and significance around a phenomenon; homeless activism creates its own set of meanings around what it means to be homeless, and what it means to be a community or society in which homelessness exists. The movement can frame issues either diagnostically and prognostically. Diagnostic framing is the process by which members of the movement name the problem as well as those culpable in its generation, whereas prognostic framing is the naming of possible remedies and strategies to achieve them. As Noy (2009) learned of the homeless movement in San Francisco, political ideology strongly split stakeholders into different framing tendencies.
There are several requirements for collective action to be recast as a movement. One, it must have wide attention. According to Loeb (2010) “movements flourish…when discussions in thousands of ordinary communities bring issues to public attention.” At the same time, “they decline when activists talk to no one but themselves” (p. 235). Two, it must involve democratic participation: “Success depends not only on changing specific policies but also on broadening the stream of those who are involved in social change, developing new political relationships and creating new opportunities for citizens to take a stand” (p. 322). Three, the aims of the movement should be communicated well. By definition, an activist’s core skill is in his ability to communicate his message effectively and engage others in similar concern and compassion for a common cause. Creating the best message is a high-level skill where the teller understands the psychological forces acting on the listener. Four, a social change movement must have a human focus. Loeb (2010) explains, “The best way to promote compassion and solidarity is not by appealing to some general notion of goodness, but by encouraging people to respond to specific human lives. Responsibility in this view is not an abstract principle but a way of being. It exists only in the doing” (p. 128).

Were activists born this way?

Having broached the duties and proximal and distal outcomes of activists’ work, the remainder of this chapter provides a foundational set of factors to explain how homeless youth activists develop and what traits they might share in common. The short answer to the leading question of this section is no, activists were not born into their roles. Popular reading on activists whets the appetite for a more scientific approach to this subject. For example, Martin (2010) interviewed several young activists engaged in a
number of causes around the country and presented each in their own chapter. She did not spend much time weaving the stories together, but did remark in her preface that readers could:

… find a hidden wholeness, if you look closely, among the group at large. I was delighted by the ways in which these totally disparate human beings—none of them working directly together, most of them complete strangers—echoed each other across great distances and divides. They have sometimes traveled the same path, years apart. They have expressed parallel struggles, experienced the same places, asked the same questions…I encourage you to have fun spotting the moments when these perfect strangers appear exquisitely and unknowing intertwined (xxii).

In the scientific literature, meanwhile, a meta-analysis on collective political action was published in 2008 by van Zomeren and Iyer. The authors described the literature on the topic as broad, diverse, and stemming from many different disciplines. Various researchers have used different levels of analysis to study collective action: The microlevel (e.g., understanding the processes that lead people to become activists), the mesolevel (e.g., understanding the conditions of groups in society), and the macrolevel (e.g., understanding the relationship between collective action and the political landscape). Of those studies at the micro- and meso-levels, designs have been fairly diverse. Some researchers have used interview analyses of a defined sample of activists to understand the typologies, sites, individual differences, and other processes that define their work (e.g., Milligan et al., 2011; Jennings, 1996; Krejci, 2008). Other researchers have developed or used scales to understand levels and types of activism, relating these levels to different interpersonal qualities and other phenomena (e.g., Kerpelman, 1969; Corning & Myers, 2002; Klar & Kasser, 2009). Others still have used observation-based methods to understand how someone chooses to advocate and how that advocate is contextualized by place and time (e.g., Blackstone, 2004). In the review that follows, I
extracted factors from each of these studies, as well as dozens of others, and offer them as an organized menu of possibilities for being and becoming a homeless youth activist. In fact, this information was incorporated in the interview protocol used in this study.

First, a description about the process by which I arrived at these factors. I was intrigued by the lack of advocacy by many institutions serving marginalized populations, and was particularly struck by the theories offered to explain a non-profit’s likelihood or not to engage in this activity (e.g., Salamon, 2002). Therefore, I began to question whether any theories accounted for similar processes at the individual level. Initial searches in the psychological literature databases yielded a few well-cited studies of activist development that looked at small sets of factors with strong theoretical perspectives. Additionally, I perused progressive-leaning bookstore shelves, turned to social change websites and blogs, consulted with colleagues about possible factors, and read extensively about individuals engaged in fights for social justice. I repeated this process until I felt that I had a saturated and connected set of scientifically supported factors. Although I have likely not unearthed every explanation of collective action in individuals, I feel confident that my study supports the literature and yields new information in nuanced ways.

Table 3 shows 22 situational and developmental factors associated with the engagement of activism on behalf of homeless youth. I grouped the factors into five categories: (a) Skills and characteristics, (b) worldviews, (c) general temporal and developmental processes, (d) developmental processes of marginalized activists, and (e) developmental processes of high-status activists. Of these five overarching categories, the first two speak to the characteristics of activists that one might find by taking a cross-
section of participants at a given point in time; I call these ‘being’ characteristics, or situational characteristics that exist within activists without much review of how they came to be. The latter three categories describe aspects of ‘becoming’ activists, or factors that show development and maturation over time. Together, the 22 factors form an integrated picture of activism that is described thoroughly in the following sections.

Regarding skills and characteristics, many of the duties required of activists are also found in people with high leadership abilities and those who may direct organizations or advocacy campaigns. Additionally, the very affiliation one has with a non-profit constituent-serving organization increases the likelihood that one will be an activist. Regarding worldviews, many researchers described how activists were more likely than non-activists to have certain philosophies about life, adhere to certain practices and be prone to certain personal and professional attitudes. Regarding temporal and developmental processes, several factors emerged from the literature that attempted to account for movement towards an activism-inclined stance from a more neutral or apolitical position. Some researchers looked at linear acquisition of skills while others examined how one develops a dynamic sense of themselves as political beings. Regarding processes, it became apparent that they differed largely between activists who emerged from a marginalized group versus those who came from higher-status groups. I present these separately after describing processes that can be common to both types of activists.
## Table 3: Factors describing the characteristics and development of activists

| I. Situational Factors: On Being an Activist | A. Skills and characteristics | 1. General skills and traits  
2. Leadership-related qualities  
3. Place  
4. Time  
5. Pleasure principle  
6. Emotions of the outsider  
7. Prosocial behaviors |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | B. Worldviews | 8. Religion and spirituality  
9. Justice, care, and ethics  
10. Absolute morals  
11. Analyzing costs and benefits  
12. Seeing personal, professional as political |
| II. Developmental factors: On Becoming an Activist | C. General developmental/temporal processes | 13. Acquiring skills, resources, experiences  
14. Tipping points  
15. Socialization  
16. Joining a coalition  
17. Volunteerism |
|  | D. Developmental processes of marginalized activists | 18. Relative deprivation  
19. Social identity  
20. Politicized collective identity |
|  | E. Developmental processes of high-status activists | 21. Resolving self/world tensions  
22. Social and human services |

### I. Situational factors: On being an activist

Twelve factors emerged from the literature describing various core components of being an activist. They are sorted into two categories—skills and characteristics first, followed by worldviews.

**A. Skills and characteristics.** Within this category, I am interested in the qualities that are present in activists. Some explanations have to do with specific traits, especially for leaders of organizations. Other explanations credit the place and time
dimensions as highly relevant to the existence of activists. Researchers have also looked at emotions and behaviors that are routinely associated with activists.

1. General skills and traits. What does it take to be an activist? Several skills and traits have been identified. Schmid, Bar, and Nirel (2008) describe that advocacy demands “appropriate skills, patience, tolerance for ambiguity, and perseverance, where the results of such activity are not immediately visible (p. 597).” Duncan, Peterson, and Zurbriggen (2010) introduced a recent special issue in the Journal of Personality devoted to the relationship between personality characteristics and the political process. They found that collective action was related to authoritarianism, openness to experience, optimism, extraversion, other-focused motivation, and political self-efficacy. Several of these terms are commonly used in psychology. Here, political self-efficacy pertains to “the sense that the individual can successfully affect the political system relative to the ability of other individuals to do so” (Cole & Stewart, 1996, p. 134). Given these impressive characteristics, it is not surprising that many activists are also leaders.

2. Leadership-related qualities. My own experience working with homeless youth has led me to know several individuals who have advocated for youth in their position as the director of other principal of an organization that served homeless youth. It would be impossible to study activists without describing leaders of social movements and social service organizations. This high positionality within an organization is not true of all activists, as clearly some advocate from the sidelines, without holding any specific power within an organization. Further, “leaders” can lead without a title that indicates their superiority within an organization. What defines the leader, in short, may be their influence over a set of collective actions and actors. According to Blackstone (2005),
“activists are more likely to understand themselves as knowledge producers, volunteers as knowledge consumers.” With a large overlap between leaders and activists, it is fruitful to explore the qualities that both leaders and activists share when they perform their work.

Several researchers have highlighted attributes in leaders. Maton and Salem (1995) make specific claim that leaders “have a clear vision,” are “passionate individuals” who are “talented interpersonally and organizationally” with “a natural ability to motivate” their members by sharing “significant life experiences” and otherwise serving as strong role models (p. 650). Such a type of leadership can inspire members or influence other organizational characteristics that lead to stronger collective action (Maton, 2008). Leaders specifically working towards collective action were found to have several characteristics, as identified by Veltmeyer and Petras (2002):

- organic ties to the social base of the movement… have achieved a higher education than the norm … are directly involved in practical struggles that engage supporters and are independent of other political organizations. These leaders have a unified political vision of the future and have a positive view of the efficacy of their action and are highly motivated regarding future success (pp. 91-92).

Although these observations are based on a single case-study design, they raise several important considerations about leaders that have been successful at restoring the rights of particular groups. Additional qualities have been proposed to account for adaptive leaders who are able to be successful despite constantly shifting tides of policy, politicians, and problems (Donaldson, 2008). Further still, Kania and Kramer (2011) detail additional qualities such as

- “the ability to focus people’s attention and create a sense of urgency, the skill to apply pressure to stakeholders without overwhelming them, the competence to frame issues in a way that presents opportunities as well as
difficulties, and the strength to mediate conflict among stakeholders” (p. 40).

Berry (2001) explains that effective activists are leaders who have made a long-term commitment to work on chosen issues, gained expertise in policy development, and invested in the infrastructure of their organizations, particularly by strengthening the skills of others to advocate. Kimberlin (2010) echoed this, stating that effective leadership is necessary to attract the attention of policymakers and other gatekeepers. Given these competencies and demands, the role of a leader in setting a course for sustained collective action represents a highly skilled individual. Undoubtedly, it is a role that few can fill with ease.

Furthering the discussion about the leadership-advocacy connection, Donaldson (2007) surveyed 100 non-profit executive directors in Washington, D.C. Organizations that had sizeable budgets, significant staff sizes, local government funding, and leadership that was kind towards advocacy were most likely to be involved in activities related to social change or reform. In fact, over 40% of the variance in organization-level advocacy behavior rested on the leaders themselves. “Executive Directors often control and establish the core functions and reward structures within agencies” wrote Donaldson (p. 149). The majority of advocates from the social service sector are the executive directors and other high-visibility professionals within their organizations (Bass et al., 2007).

3. Situated in place. Activists are tied to geographic locales with their own history and responsiveness towards social change. Some cities are described as being progressive in their dealings with the disenfranchised (e.g., Nickel, 1995; Cuneo & Clavel, 2006). These cities may support the aims and activities of an advocate because
the archetype for that individual has been laid down time and again in various areas of
distributive justice. A locale that is receptive to advocacy implies that its elected officials
have historically responded to advocates’ demands for social change; that work by
advocates directs or at least informs their governance over that locale (Cuneo & Clavel,
2006). It also implies that individuals who embark on collective action are likely to be
buffeted by a critical number of peers, who may serve as mentors, role-models, or
historical markers in a particular fight for justice. A social map of activists could show
that density matters. This is a positive feedback loop, the end result being a greater
number of people doing more activism. Milligan, Kearns, and Kyle (2011) describe that
often activism emerges in geographic locations where it is able to. Mental-health
activists noted that particular places nurture activism, reinforce it, and become clusters
where other activists do their work. Place was significant because it offered “a domain of
familiarity within which people can assert their agency with confidence, knowing the
relevant structures and components of the material and institutional environments” (p.
14).

4. Situated in time. Just as advocates are situated in place, they are also a part of
history and time. One cannot extract the work that advocates are currently doing from the
work that came before and will come after it. Individual advocates, as representatives of
an entire class or profession, as varied as they may seem, largely share an agreed-upon
idea of the field—including what work advocacy entails and does not entail, and how
work is accomplished (citation). The business of advocacy has in many respects become
professionalized over the course of history. Advocates of previous decades and centuries
likely went about their work differently. Kivel (2007) speculates that what we see before
us now in society is a “narrowing of focus” amongst activists who once challenged oppressive institutions and who now work in service jobs “helping people cope” (p. 129).

5. The pleasure principle. Some activists report that they do good in their communities because of a “helper’s high” (Loeb, 2010, p. 30) characterized by greater physical pleasure, emotional well being, increased energy, and ease of chronic pain. Klar and Kasser (2009) found that activists had higher social well-being and subjective vitality compared to non-activist peers. Meier and Stutzer (2008, as reviewed in Klar & Klasser, 2009) found that losing the ability to volunteer related to diminished life satisfaction. It is unclear if pleasure is an associated feeling, or manifests activism. Given that some people enjoy activism and experience positive emotions and an increase in well-being, it is probable that activists develop out of the pursuit of pleasure as well as the avoidance of negative emotions.

6. Emotions of the outsider. Although we have been introduced to some positive and pro-social feelings that activists might experience, what other feelings might preclude an individual to enter this type of work when they have never been homeless themselves? For those high-status group members who perceive that inequality exists (not all people do!), two studies have shown that their emotions predict intentions to engage in collective action as well as real, measurable action itself (Leach, Iyer, and Pederson, 2006; Harth, Kessler, & Leach, 2008). Specifically, these studies have demonstrated several important considerations about high-status group members dealing with guilt, sympathy, and anger. Guilt is associated with a rather abstract notion of “systemic compensation” but not with specific intent to take any collective action (Leach & Iyer, et al., 2006, p. 1233). These members experience more guilt when they perceive inequality in a low-status group to be
both undeserved and the result of their own high status (Harth, et al., 2008). On the contrary, they experience sympathy when they only focus on the plight of the low-status group and their undeserved inequality (Harth, et al., 2008). Sympathy and anger increased the likelihood that participants would share—or intend to share—resources to the low-status group, and both of these feelings had high action potential (Leach, et al., 2006). While this literature has established pathways from emotion to intention to behavior, it has not explained how high-status group members actually wage their collective actions for the low-status group. The current research explores these concepts as they apply to homeless youth activists and advocates.

7. Prosocial behaviors. Prosocial behaviors, defined as the actions that benefit others such as helping and sharing, can in part explain why people advocate for the disenfranchised. Through helping one may find “direct connections between a sense of affiliation to the group and the tendency to adopt a prosocial orientation” (Over & Carpenter, 2009, p. 1189). Many researchers are curious about why prosocial behavior exists, given a generally Western view that helping another person entails some sacrifice to oneself and should not occur as regularly as it does (Darley & Latane, 1968). Nevertheless, even infants in America, when primed to see another individual as part of their group, are more likely to offer help to that individual (Over and Carpenter, 2009).

Recent research on prosocial behavior has organized helpfulness to others in terms of the micro, meso, and macro levels (Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder, 2005). A meso level analysis explains that one’s willingness to help another person in a given situation depends largely on mechanisms of learned behavior, social standards, and emotional arousal. In other words, someone may exhibit prosocial behavior when they
see others doing the same, view this behavior as essential to a social code by which they live, and experience emotional feelings such as sympathy, empathy, gratitude, and compassion. (Penner et al., 2005; Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006). The micro level sheds further light on the purposes of prosocial behavior, accounting for differences in one’s tendency to help others on the basis of evolution, neurobiology, and personality predispositions. The evolutionary explanation asserts that people are more likely to reproduce when they act prosocially, especially towards their kin. Flipping an old notion on its head, Keltner (2009) speaks of survival of the kindest, which may be more evolutionarily relevant than survival of the fittest. The neurobiological explanation is that tendencies to help have some biochemical substrate; humans are hard-wired to mimic affective states in others, giving rise to behavior that helps the other. Personality variables historically associated with prosocial behavior are agreeableness, helpfulness, and other-oriented empathy (Penner et al., 2005).

Altruism is one form of prosocial behavior defined as the selfless, non-ego-gratifying actions towards others. Research inconclusively connects altruism with activist behaviors. At best it offers some explanation for one’s helpfulness in very specific situations (see Penner, et al., 2005 for review). What we perceive as altruism may be better accounted for by other factors about individuals, such as their tendencies to be distracted from personal situations, as experiences of enhanced values, moods, views of self, and social connectedness (Midlarsky, 1991).

A variant of pro-social behavior could apply to employees of advocacy groups. Rioux and Penner (2001) describe “organizational citizenship behavior” (OCB) as behavior whereby employees are “willing to do more than the minimal formal and
specified technical aspects of their jobs” (p. 1306). They found that two factors—prosocial values (the need to be a helpful individual) and organizational concerns (the identity and belief one feels in their organization)—accounted for 63% and 22% of the variance, respectively, in OCB. Colleagues and supervisors tended to rate dedicated employees similarly to how the employees rated themselves, ruling out any self-promotion effects. The two factors were highly inter-correlated, demonstrating that both motivations tended to exist together in hardworking individuals and that the sum total may be an umbrella motivation to align one’s personal values with one’s work pursuits (Rioux & Penner, 2001).

**B. Worldviews.** Drawing upon works that have sought to connect one’s worldviews with the practice of engaging in collective action, this section explores several additional aspects of being an activist. Included in this section are discussions about the significance of (i) religion and spirituality, (ii) attitudes about justice, care, and ethics, (iii) holding absolute morals, (iv) analyzing costs and benefits, and (v) seeing the personal and professional as political.

**8. Religion and spirituality.** The connection between religion, spirituality, and activism has been established by several researchers (see Wilson & Janoski, 1995; Harris, 1994). Berger (1964, paraphrased in Billings & Scott, 1994) explained that religion is “both a ‘world maintaining’ and ‘world-shaking’ force capable of legitimating or challenging power and privilege” (p. 173). Religious individuals are generally found to volunteer more than their non-religious counterparts (Penner 2005), although the connection depends on the “theological interpretation of volunteering and the significance attached to frequent church attendance” (Wilson & Janoski, 1995, p. 137).
Two common faiths in the United States—Catholicism and Judaism—offer specific teachings about social justice. From Catholicism comes the *preferential option for the poor*. This is a worldview implying that a moral test of society is way that it treats its most vulnerable constituents:

> “The obligation to evaluate social and economic activity from the viewpoint of the poor and the powerless arises from the radical command to love one's neighbor as one's self. Those who are marginalized and whose rights are denied have privileged claims if society is to provide justice for all…In addition to the clear responsibility of private institutions, government has an essential responsibility in this area. This does not mean that government has the primary or exclusive role, but it does have a positive moral responsibility in safeguarding human rights and ensuring that the minimum conditions of human dignity are met for all” (U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1986, n.p.).

Catholic religious leaders make clear connections between faith, social responsibility, and affecting change within governmental institutions. Similarly, Judaism preaches *tikkun olam*, a Hebrew phrase meaning “repairing the world.” The Jewish idea of social justice stems from the commandment to remember the Exodus from Egypt and slavery. It infers that

> we are all harmed by oppression directed to any group or individual. This is a message which is common to most of the religious and spiritual traditions of the human race for the past several thousand years, and is part of the tradition also of many secular and even ‘orthodox atheist’ groups that came into existence in the past few hundred years… [W]e hope to play a role in deepening…social change movements to integrate into their core the kind of spiritual awareness that can make it possible for them to reach a much wider audience and thus be able to actually achieve their social justice goals. (Tikkun, 2011, n.p.)

In Jewish tradition, there is a recognition that inner-change and social-change happen simultaneously.

9. **Justice, Care, and Ethics.** One does not have to be religious or even spiritual to engage in collective action. Perhaps what cultivates and sustains some activists is an
understanding of one’s own value systems and the subsequent development of care, compassion, and justice. This section examines these concepts, highlighting their historical roots and their implications for homeless youth activists.

A prominent theme in the literature on helping is having commitment to others within a framework of ethics. Ethics is understood in the current study as the “conscious reflection on our moral beliefs” (Hinman, 2003, p. 5). Activists who claim an ethical underpinning to their work are those who could reasonably support the position that their roles in collective action “are as much moral or ethical practices as they are knowledgeable and skillful in a technical or scientific sense” (Hugman, 2005, p. 2). Those whose value systems mandate a responsibility for the oppressed are able to maintain “moral integrity by voicing one’s indignation.” (van Stekelenburg, Klandermans, & van Dijk, 2009).

Reitz-Pustejovsky (2002) describes that homelessness in any community is reason enough to take action to help those afflicted. For this researcher, the process of doing so begins with an acknowledgement of the suffering of others and refusing to “rationalize our negligence” (p. 234). Morality is invoked in this process, as it “bid[s] us to take a position with regard to the welfare of others less fortunate” (p. 235). Moral principles are culturally-centered and “learned through our interactions with our caregivers and our world,” forming a worldview of “what is right and wrong, good and just” (p. 237). If morality forces one to take a position, compassionate attitudes and caring behaviors are thought to manifest.

Nel Noddings (1984) theorized that our mothers were the first to demonstrate care to us. She asserts that society’s patriarchal social norms allow women to do the caring
whereas men think of caring more abstractly, outside of particular relationships. If we have positive experiences of being cared for by others when we were young and vulnerable, this logic portends that we should have a greater morality and increased desire to care. Homeless service providers—and essentially all people extending a hand to others—can repeat a learned behavior, moving from the position of recipient to that of giver.

Whereas care has to do with actions in the social relationship between two or more people, compassion is a more nuanced concept. It relates to an individual’s emotional responses (Hugman, 2005) and defined as a summation of criteria that “one must care enough about the circumstances of another, connect enough on a deeper level to feel empathy, and decide to act” (Reitz-Pustejovsky, 2002, p. 237; emphases are the original). Compassion depends on the existence of another, and on the recognition that such a person has needs one can meet. It is focused on an individual in a given situation in a certain moment in time.

Whereas care has a trajectory towards action for an individual, justice has a trajectory towards action for the public. Reitz-Pustejovsky (2002) offers a framework to explain the differences between those who assist others on an individual basis and those who get involved with larger, systemic-based work. She describes the former as an aspect of care and the latter as an aspect of justice. “Care is a moral obligation constituted of and rationalized as our moral duty to provide for others equitably. Articulated from afar, justice remains a constant principle, not action-oriented toward the one needing care” (p. 234). Justice acts in the purview of the public, and for the public; however, care is a private practice. The target, or subject of care, is an individual or even a small group.
Care would explain how activists help marginalized people, while justice would explain how they address their marginalization. Both principles inform an individual’s actions, but in different ways.

Justice as a theoretical concept has several philosophical underpinnings. Immanuel Kant suggests in *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1800/1986) that we can only promote our own autonomy when we refuse to be indifferent to others or use them for our own instrumental gain. Aristotle provides a framework for justice that is about “balancing what is due me with what is due other people, institutions and communities” as well being concerned with “how these distributions are performed (Prilleltensky, 2012, p. 9)." Freud, in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1929/2005) also recognized that our own protection is only guaranteed when we protect others. His theory asserted that one must subjugate some personal needs and drives in order to achieve the most personal benefits without fears of death or destruction of personal property. While in a vacuum one’s own selfishness would not be a problem (allowing him to kill, rape, and steal as much as he desires), the existence of neighbors who may also hold this same myopic sense of freedom interrupts the utility of an every-man-for-himself worldview. According to Freud’s theory, because we are proximal to our neighbors, we must come to a truce of sorts; we must treat others kindly. The repeated act of being ‘civil’ or other-focused births civilization. Further, the only guarantee of civilization is the coda that our greatest personal good follows the promotion of good in others. We are duty-bound and obligated to be attuned to the needs of others.

Levinas (1998) continues this view in his seminal proposition that ethics begins in the face of the other. He reasons that anyone’s own existence may already be “the
usurpation of someone’s place” (p. 148); therefore, humans must rid themselves of any fantasy that they are uniquely entitled, whereas others may not be. When humans are confronted with another individual (the metaphor of the face), their basic ethical duty is established. In other words, we are bound with “responsibility for the other” (p. 108)—treating the other well and caring about his or her suffering—and must account for our behaviors. When we align with “the vanquished, the poor, the persecuted” (p. 55) and rid ourselves of undue power and privilege, we disturb the natural, unjust order of the world by participating in this recognition and ethical/moral accounting. Levinas argues that people must be held accountable for their actions to other people. He introduces the idea that justice has “no other object than economic equality” (p. 37). He speaks of economics broadly; it could involve the stratifying systems of forgiveness, vengeance, or money. The first two systems are not enough to bring about true justice, however. Money, on the other hand, represents the “universal power of acquisition,” (p. 37) and reparations that redistribute money is a powerful way to restore justice. In this work, Levinas (1998) continues the tradition of asserting our primal obligation to the other, but asserts an idea that financial justice rises above all other forms. In collective action, the redistribution of economics towards the oppressed is certainly one aim.

Prilleltensky (2012) argues that well-being cannot occur in places with persistent conditions of injustice. Reitz-Pustejovsky (2002) writes that both justice and ethics must exist for the promotion of well-being of the homeless. “[I]f we only consider their human experience through universal, abstractly applied principles, then we can effectively distance ourselves” (p. 247). This is an argument that gets explored in the current study.
People who have experienced caring for homeless youth for protracted periods of time also found themselves advocating for the same population.

10. **Absolute morals.** While broadband morals were discussed as relevant in the preceding section, there is a small body of research showing that an individual who holds *absolute morals* may also be compelled to take collective action (often without much regard for personal consequences). For example, a religious conservative might block the entrance to an abortion clinic. The absolute moralist has a “moral benchmark for [their] group that, once transgressed, results in a motivation among individuals to protect these ‘sacred’ values” (van Zomeren & Spears, 2008, p. 670). Because values often transcend the specific situation and guide desirable endpoints and actions, they are often seen as worthy of challenging and protesting (van Stekelenburg, Klandermans, & van Dikj, 2009). Generally, absolute moralists tend to be pictured as working independently, or in small factions apart from larger groups (van Zomeren & Spears, 2008). No known empirical study has explicitly examined absolute morality and resulting activism within groups.

11. **Analyzing costs and benefits.** If we set aside what we know about ethics, can we assume that some people use a pragmatic set of determinants to decide whether or not they engage in collective action? Without due consideration of such determinants, theorists argue, one cannot successfully predict whether activism will arise (McCarthy & Zald, 1976). Many activists engage in analysis of the perceived costs and benefits of the role of activist and the specific actions they take on. For example, a peace activist might not risk a protest demonstration if she is in the late stages of her pregnancy, despite how important the cause may be to her. A policy director might not risk publicly criticizing a
senator’s stance on a pending bill if he hopes to later be employed by that senator. Van Zomeren and Iyer (2009) describe that group members may not participate in collective action when they (i) do not expect rewards for their efforts, (ii) do not expect their group to be strong or forceful enough to affect change; or (iii) have other personal, practical obstacles. Despite some empirical support for the importance of pragmatic or instrumental determinants, some argue that they offer an incomplete explanation for one’s actions. It might be a stretch to assume that individuals will take action as long as they can afford the costs and expect to succeed, discarding values and morals even when they are “tantamount to dehumanization” (Jennings, 1996, p. 85). They subsume the belief that individuals think of collective action as a rational choice just as any other choice in an array of options (van Stekelenburg, Klandermans, & van Dijk, 2009).

12. Seeing the personal and professional as political. The phrase the “personal is political” came out of the feminist movement of the mid-twentieth century and was the title of Carol Hanish’s (1970) paper, in which she wrote about her experiences in a women’s therapy group: “One of the first things we discover in these groups is that personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution” (n.p.). According to van Zomeren and Spears (2009), when working with the oppressed, such as homeless youth, an awareness of inherent power differentials is one important way to act politically. Strier and Benyamin (2010) wrote that politically aware individuals can encourage others in “action oriented towards changing the social context through social action, community development, rights advocacy, lobbying and other techniques” (p. 1916). I argue that an even simpler political act is witnessing. Witnessing involves taking “examples and
lessons to the village square…and then doing our best to convey them to as many others as possible. It means using them to refute myths that justify callousness and withdrawal.” (Loeb, 2010, p. 148). The ethics of witnessing affirms the bonds that link us in both smaller and larger networks.

Just as the personal can be political, the professional can be as well. Hugman (2005) posits that helping professionals are part of the structure society that is “divided structurally, so that the interests of various groups and the power to pursue those interests differ according to factors such as socioeconomic class, sex, ‘race’ and ethnicity,” and so on (p. 45). This is true for the case manager, mentor, counselor, doctor, lawyer, trainer, and other helping figures. Hugman reasons that every service professional’s role has political aspects because service delivery occurs within a framework of constrained resources:

Practitioners are not separated from the social policy process, although as individuals they may feel that they have relatively little power over policies while policies create powerful constraints over them (p 41).

Speaking of counseling practice, Crether and colleagues (2008) write that some approaches are “implicitly political in the sense that they encourage clients to adapt to the existing sociopolitical status quo” (p. 277). According to Hugman’s theory, every individual acting in a professional role has a volitional choice to participate or not in the current distribution of resources. But whether they do or not, their role comes with a set of expectations from the public at large. These expectations are often written into laws and ethical codes for practitioners. They constitute what is called a social mandate. Even though not every practitioner is conscious of it, taking part in the social mandate through
application of service to others is an inescapable engagement with that mandate (Hugman, 2005).

It is worth examining the professional-political link in this and proceeding sections because most work done with homeless youth occurs bounded in the service-professional realm. By definition, these youth are often disconnected from more informal relationships where they could receive help and support. The relationship that forms between youth and professional is a political one, even if it is not described as such. It would be unethical to participate in service without evaluating such circumstances: “Professionals who do not act when they are confronted by bad practice become complicit in that bad practice” (Hugman, 2005, p. 46). On the contrary, remaining ethical would presume that professionals are mandated to engage with both youth and the political structures that surround them.

II. Developmental factors: On becoming an activist

Whereas an examination of situational factors is important for identifying characteristics shared amongst activists, those factors do not explain the processes by which activists become. The temporal approach to understanding the activist phenomenon is critical to this research, particularly since an individual can’t be an activist without developing into one. I believe that if we understand how activists grow into their roles, we satisfy many stated aims of my study. Though no prior study has looked at the pathways to activism for homeless youth advocates—or homeless advocates in general—some work has examined people aligned with other issues. The extant literature is largely qualitative and theoretical. Empirical methods are diverse (though frequently retrospective) and some theories have not been tested.
People become activists by a number of different means: Some complexly, and others rather straightforward; some gradual, and others particularly abrupt. This section explores the developmental (or temporal) factors that make up a cohort of activists in America who engage in collective action for a variety of issues. It became clear when uncovering process-related factors that many applied generally to activists regardless of group affiliation. However, specifics processes were identified based on group affiliation. Following a review of general processes, I discuss processes that relate to activists of marginalized groups and then those of higher-status groups who advocate for the marginalized.

C. General developmental and temporal processes of activists. General developmental factors for activists, irrespective of group affiliation, pertain to the acquisition of skills and resources to reaching a tipping point. Activists are socialized into their role by other activists, their families, and other people. Many activists are particularly socialized as members of coalitions for certain causes. Others reach a state of activism by previously serving as volunteers. Each of these processes is described in detail below.

13. Acquiring skills, experiences, and resources. Some researchers suggest that a necessary set of skills, experiences, and resources must be present within individuals before they are ready to engage in collective action (see Moane, 2003). As a rule of development, one gains skills through interpersonal relationships—that is, forming connections and solidarity with other group members and finally, taking collective action at the political level. Only at this level does an individual possess a broad understanding of the vision, possibilities, and strategies for change (citation). In her study of the Irish
women’s liberation movement, Moane (2003) found several practices that led individuals towards social action: Building strengths, practicing assertiveness, maintaining positive images and role models, developing a sense of history, as well as exploring sexuality, creativity, and spirituality. Freire (1970) writes that oppressed individuals move towards collective action by starting a dialogue within the confines of their everyday situations, slowly working outward towards broader-based settings until one is affecting change at the level of social structures. He described that when people develop a critical consciousness they learn to perceive “the social, political, and economics contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 17).

Skill acquisition might flow from experience. The concept of generativity—introduced by Erik Erikson (1950) and re-cast as a precursor of collective action by Klar and Kasser (2009)—is defined as “the desire to care about something bigger than the self and to foster the welfare of future generations” (Klar & Kasser, 2009, p.756). Traditionally, it is thought of as a developmental task of middle-to-late adulthood, however Erikson (1950) believed that generative concerns occurred throughout the lifespan. It has been shown to relate positively to political interest as well as collective action (Klar & Kasser, 2009). According to Peterson, Smirles, and Wentworth (1997), people operating as generativists are thought to be “norm bearers in society…and take their responsibilities and activities seriously” (p. 1204).

Not only must an activist develop a set of skills and experiences, but resources must also be acquired along the way—particularly if an intention is to build a movement that is durable and far-reaching. Following the developmental perspective, Corning and Myers (2008) describe the idea of resource mobilization whereby activists are not in a
position to mobilize their resources until such resources acquire some critical mass. Individuals, in the development of becoming activists, must recruit others, fundraise, and engage in other administrative tasks central to the organization or movement to which they are a part.

14. Tipping points. Though the process of engaging in advocacy and activism is gradual—there may be no one line separating an activist from a non-activist—for some there may have been a tipping point that induced them to become full-fledged activists (Milligan et al., 2011). Nancy Brinker founded the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation in 1982 in the name of her sister, whose death she felt may have been prevented if she received proper medical attention (Blackstone, 2004). Candy Lightner started Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD, 2011) in 1980, following the death of her 13-year-old daughter due to a drunk driver. Closer to home, Rick Koca started StandUp For Kids (2011) after he was flabbergasted by the number of homeless youth living in his new home city of San Diego.

Tipping points not only exist for individuals to take action, but they appear to operate for organizations and social movements, as well. Understanding how these processes work can help explain some pathways towards social action. At the organizational level, Dannemiller and Jacobs (1992) proposed a mathematical formula postulating that several factors must overcome the resistance to embracing new organizational paradigms, including the effects of current-state dissatisfaction, a vision for possibilities, concrete steps, and creative leadership. Not surprisingly, each of these factors rests within individual stakeholders of an organization, and the last factor specifically references the role of the leader in tipping the organization towards change.
Echoing the centrality of the activist in changing their organizations, Gladwell wrote a popular sociological review of tipping points in 2000. He explained that the momentum for social change rests largely on a few types of people: Connectors who have large social networks and bring people together; mavens who accumulate and broker information to wide networks; and salesmen who persuade people to take action with their charisma and negotiation abilities.

15. Socialization processes. Any activist that does not work in isolation is part of a feedback loop that produces stronger and greater numbers of activists. Researchers describe this as a socialization process (see Corning and Myers, 2008). Working alongside other activists solidifies a group members’ identity, but it also—in a very pragmatic way—defines a set of duties and responsibilities for shared tasks, deadlines, and specific strategies in a given situation and place in time. Activists get to observe each other in their work and are socialized to speak in a certain way and mobilize their concerns like their peers and colleagues do. Socialization implies that there is an inescapable effect of doing work in parallel with other advocates, particularly for the same cause (Klandermans, 1997). A particular example of the socialization process is the propensity of children of activist parents to engage in collective action themselves (Corning & Myers, 2008). Jennings (1996) stated that “Once the work is begun then the social support provided by other advocates helps to maintain the commitment to act congruent with a connected sense of self” (p. 89). Paradoxically, many activists forge a shared identity with each other by affirming their own uniqueness in a context where so many others choose not to advocate (Jennings, 1996). It is likely that this shared
uniqueness protects advocates from the criticism of others and from a general sense of loneliness.

While no path toward activism is predetermined, researchers appreciate that activists are not only working; they are being worked on by the movement itself. Put another way, activists affect the social cause they work for and in turn, the social cause shapes them as advocates (Milligan, Kearns, & Kyle, 2001). Fendrich (1993) wrote of this succinctly:

political identities and commitments originate in collective political experience, not the other way around. The problem is not the political apathy of individuals, but the poverty of collective opportunities to act democratically (p. 144).

The interdependency between activists and collective action can strengthen one’s politicized identity (van Zomeren, et al., 2008). One can imagine a lobbyist who makes great strides changing legislation then continues to work on high-level political processes, consults with other lobbying organization on different issues, and perhaps enters politics as an elected official. One can also imagine an activist-volunteer organizing a get-out-the-vote drive and then taking on a campaign to restore voting rights to formerly imprisoned homeless youth, but then ceasing the work when he fails over several years to get any constitutional movement on the issue. The present study explores how homeless youth activists speak about their high and low experiences of engaging in collective action.

16. Joining a coalition. One particular way that activists are socialized in their roles may come from their involvement in coalitions (inclusive of collaboratives, partnerships, coordinating councils, and communities of practice). Kania and Kramer (2011) explain that social change comes from coalition-building, a necessity when “1.4
million nonprofits try to invent independent solutions to major social problems, often working at odds with each other and exponentially increasing the perceived resources required to make meaningful process” (p. 38). Kivel (2007) explains that one’s collective action is generally “part of a much wider network of individuals and organizations working for justice” (p. 146). Coalitions are an increasingly apparent vehicle used to strengthen the community’s ability to respond effectively to social problems—particularly when organizations are feeling pinched by their shrinking budgets to go at social action alone (Nowell, 1999; Salamon & Geller, 2008).

Joining a coalition is common practice in non-profit work (Nowell, 2009). In fact, being involved in a coalition that was qualified as having cooperative relationships between stakeholders was the strongest predictor of systems change effectiveness across 48 different coalitions studied by Nowell (2009). In qualitative interviews with non-profit directors in the nation’s capitol, Donaldson (2007) found that many who advocate were involved in coalitions, which were “valued as sources of information regarding policy and program changes, as important filters of information, and as providers of political cover to agencies that want to dispute government positions” (p. 153).

Cooperative relationships relate positively to communication frequency and shared philosophies. Nowell (2009) reviewed how different philosophical understandings about the nature of domestic violence among law enforcement, courts and therapists have created struggles within the domestic violence movement to work effectively together in order to produce collective action. I personally reviewed an example of how differing values within a child protective services coalition might cause problems for proposed solutions, concluding that, “The idea of collaborating without values is simply an
illusion. We are not neutral; our values are there at every stakeholder table we sit at” (Ameen, 2011b).

Beers and Reid (2009) detail a theory of change for coalitions using a case study of health promotion activists in Colorado. Given the states’ dismal rankings in health equity and children without insurance, a coalition’s goal of improving access to care for all residents was considered a massive social change effort. The process of collective action was in essence, a collection of activists coming together. Articulating the theory, the authors stated that organizations must first improve their abilities to advocate and represent a greater number of stakeholders. These organizations then form coalitions and become more vocal and inclusive. Later, shared policy agendas emerge from these efforts, while political will for changes to policy grows.

Clearly, youth homelessness is a problem of a much larger scale than the state of Colorado. It would seem that a similar need for broad-based support is felt and possibly practiced among homeless youth activists. Informal evidence appears to reflect a trend of engaging in coalitions and other socialization mechanisms. For example, the National Council on Youth Policy is a group of activists for homeless youth representing 12 service-provider organizations in 11 states. On a local level, youth provider alliances exist in many major cities. Speaking to the importance of coalition-building, I cited Dr. Etiony Aldarondo in my opening statements of the inaugural taskforce meeting:

My mentor has taught me two truths that I want to share with you right now: (1) If we fail to partner, then we suffer from failure of our imaginations. (2) If we want to go beyond mediocrity, we must form partnerships.

The current study explores challenges and benefits of engaging in homeless youth advocacy through coalitions.
17. Volunteerism. Trajectories of volunteers show that people are more likely to initially engage in volunteering if their parents were volunteers, if they identify with an organized religion, if they are employed, if they are highly educated, if they are actively involved in their community in other ways, if they are women (especially in North America), and if they perceive some sort of prestige associated with volunteering (Penner et al, 2005). Race and ethnicity does not to significantly predict volunteerism when socioeconomic and education factors are controlled for (Wilson, 2000). Notably, almost all of these factors influenced initial interest in volunteering, but were not found to predict number of hours volunteered (Matsuba, Hart, & Atkins, 2007); prestige survived longitudinal predictions in Penner and colleagues’ study (2005) and was not tested by Matsuba and colleagues (2007).

Identity is shown to be a strong component of volunteers and it accounts for reasons why people commit to a cause for such a long period of years (Matsuba et al., 2007). Volunteering transforms one’s sense of self, and that in turn sustains volunteering. Further, the connection is mediated by moral cognition, identity, and opportunity (Matsuba et al., 2007). This feedback model, however, does not explain or predict the context-dependent choice of which cause to support, when to support it, and why support it in the first place. Identity research has thus far been limited to understanding endurance in blood-donors, philanthropists, and high-school community service extraordinaires (see Matsuba et al, 2007 for review), yet this endurance model may also exist in the development of long-term homeless youth activists. Anecdotally I have found as a researcher and advocate that many people “volunteer” themselves to the cause much beyond the hours for which they are compensated.
D. Developmental processes of marginalized activists. I now focus on three areas of development for activists who come from marginalized groups: Relative deprivation, social identity, and politicized collective identity. Research in this area posits that out of oppression comes social and political identities that can mobilize those historically shut out of the political process to engage in activism.

18. Relative deprivation. One of the major theories posited to explain how everyday people became activists is that of relative deprivation, or RDT (see Walker & Smith, 2002; Zomeren & Iyer, 2009). This theory asserts that individuals who believe they are members of a relatively deprived group compared to other groups are likely to engage in collective action to improve their circumstances when emotions of anger and resentment surface. Group membership is a salient characteristic in this theory; activist behavior is unlikely to occur when the disadvantage or injustice is perceived as individual-based (Smith & Ortiz, 2002). What defines group-based emotions from an individual’s emotions is largely the shared nature of the feelings, but also one’s degree of group identification and the ways that ways that these emotions regulate within-group behavior (Smith, Seger, & Mackie, 2007). The theory has been used to explain protests against the current war in Iraq by American and British citizens (Zomeren & Iyer, 2009). Researchers have found that testing objective indicators of relative deprivation (e.g., income ratios of one group to another) fail almost entirely at capturing the predictive effects of the theory, but when testing subjective indicators (e.g., perceived income disparity), the relationship holds (Corning & Myers, 2002).

19. Social Identity. Social identity theory, or SIT, provides another way of understanding how individuals engage in collective action (Wright, Taylor, &
Moghaddam, 1990). It is similar to RDT in that actions of injustice against a group provoke individual members to act. However, SIT adds some specificity to the conditions of action. First, individuals must have specific knowledge of their group’s low-status position relative to another group’s high-status. Second, individuals must view such positionality as unwarranted. Third, individuals must believe that the status quo is unstable and capable of being changed (van Zomeren & Iyer, 2009). Even if the conditions of SIT are met, group members have a number of other strategies at their disposal to deal with disparity and inequality. Indeed some of these are disenfranchising: “People may accept or even internalize their disadvantage” (van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008, p. 509). This might help explain why a great number of people who do identify with their deprivation do not act to restore justice.

20. Politicized Collective Identity. Critiques of RDT and SIT have led many theorists to seek additional predictors and specifiers of collective action. Work by Simon and Klandermans (2001) and others has revealed a third model: Politicized Collective Identity, or PCI. Activists must have a politicized sense of identification with the marginalized group they are acting for. Without it, the group does not leverage the same amount of power or engage in collective action quite as much (van Zomeren, et al., 2008). A politicized collective identity results when group members involve society at large, triangulating them into a power struggle with the high-status group and forcing it to take sides. Low-status group members vie for equal standing with the high-status group by staking claim to membership in a more inclusive group that should entitle them to the same support (Simon and Klandermans, 2001). For example, gay adults seeking the right to marry in a church may gain ground in their struggles by politicizing their identities.
They could do this by comparing their inability to marry with the rest of society’s ability to marry, stating that as an equal member of larger society, they should be entitled to all the same rights and privileges. Waging legal battles in state or federal courts for increased marriage rights for people of all orientations will result in rules being set for all of society; thus, society is forced to take sides. Simon and Klandermans (2001) explain that the politicization process serves as a positive feedback loop, intensifying collective identity and incurring greater costs to opposed high-status group(s). Additionally, they argue that PCI is stronger than RDT or SIT independently because it forces a dialogue about the conflict and inequalities that raise group members’ consciousness of their membership. Another research team (van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008) suggested that in some cases “collective action participation itself may encourage the development of a politicized identity” (p. 524).

E. Developmental processes of high-status activists. The last section of my examination on activist qualities describes two developmental processes of activists who come from historically high-status groups and engage in collective action for marginalized populations or causes that are not germane to their origins. Some people engage in activism as a way to resolve tensions between their own privilege and the status quo. Others have gotten their start by initially engaging in social or human services with individual clients.

21. Resolving self/world tensions. Jennings (1996) applied a developmental theory to explain how people become involved in human rights activism through a dynamic process that occurs in the space between person and social context. Human rights activists, through their own identification processes, are generally attuned to world
events and pay particular attention to injustices and abuses. They recognize the interconnectedness and interdependency between systems, as well as between people. Further, these activists speak about a general concern for all of humanity rather than for particular groups, and they believed the supreme value of humans to be selflessness (Jennings, 1996). Their moral community, defined as “the group of people to whom one extends justice and concern over well-being” is broad and inclusive of people with whom they do not share many experiences beyond a general sense of humanity. Not only did Jennings’ participants describe social structures as interdependent, but they see themselves much the same way by recognizing that their personal actions affect the livelihoods of others. Furthermore, they experience a filial bond with others that is emotional rather than intellectual in nature. One participant stated, “If you look in their eyes you see the same things” (p. 88).

Noting that most people do not become advocates, Jennings (1998) reasoned that non-advocates take on a “passive acceptance” of social values and the status quo (p. 78); this theme will be discussed more thoroughly at the end of this chapter. On the other hand, advocates become by actively resisting oppressive societal values by “confront[ing] behaviorally the tensions and contradictions” between themselves and society (p. 79). That contradiction pits a social critique of activists’ societal and cultural contexts against their observations and beliefs about themselves. The tension tends not to resolve fluidly or permanently, but rather endures through frustration, rejection, and adaptation. Activists’ only hope at addressing the tension is to engage in collective action. Further, their motivation for continued activism is hopefulness rather than successful completion of the goal (Jennings, 1996). Accordingly, activism maintains their “sense of congruence
between action and the notions of self they developed relative to the societal values, structures, and groups which surrounded them” (p. 90). It seems from this scholarly contribution that activists resolve the self/world tension by being authentic in their actions.

An examination of **allies** for marginalized groups sheds additional light on how people from non-marginalized positions engage in collective action. Roades and Mio (2000) described the role of an ally as having three components: Recognizing one’s own privilege, recognizing the marginalized groups’ oppression, and receiving support in speaking out for others “to change the status quo” (p. 65). I discussed the first two components previously as they relate to **being** an activist (for example, see Leach et al., 2006; Harth et al., 2008). The third component is most fruitful to think about as a process since it appears that high-status activist behaviors are reinforced over time through a positive feedback loop.

Krejci (2008), using grounded theory to examine white men who became anti-racism allies, described many incremental components to the work. There was one universal theme; all participants spoke of receiving an early sense of fairness and justice from a variety of sources. Other reoccurring themes also emerged: Several men had friendships with people in the group they were advocating for, and these friends taught them about their oppression. Some men received formal training to be an activist and many received encouragement for pursuing social change. Even further, some men experienced oppression firsthand through membership in another marginalized group.

**22. Social and human services.** Many activists **become** through former or concurrent delivery of social and human services. According to Strier and Benyamin
“the process of involvement is a preliminary condition, a prerequisite for developing social awareness” (p. 1919). Whereas service provision entails “providing divisible benefits to particular individuals,” activism entails higher order activity in which “the range or quantity of such benefits [be made] available to entire classes of individuals” (Salamon, 2002, p. 3). As I discuss later on, the literature suggests that activists often start out as helpers, and move towards addressing structural problems that create individual crises for their clients.

Historically, intervention and prevention run the risk of maintaining the status quo for those receiving help. Direct services for clients often conceptualize deficits as a workable solution by treating the individual instead of the ecosystem. The result of individual-level interventions could be an “increase [in] the likelihood of victim-blaming and related iatrogenic effects” (Tseng, Chesir-Teran, Becker-Klein, & Chan, et. al., 2002, p. 404) such as the reinforcement of assumptions that people are homeless because of individual deficits. Prevention is thought by some to be fraught with a similar conceptual problem: Goals of prevention are often “achieved by moving individuals and settings toward predefined and presumed-superior states by countering their deviation from those states,” (Tseng et al., 2002, p. 405). Kimberlin (2010) writes that service providers can be reluctant to “fully empower constituents as advocates, viewing constituents as service recipients more than active organization representatives” (p. 177). Penner and colleagues (2005) warn that unilateral helping may reinforce status differences between helpers and constituents which “over time could create a sense of lower status, dependency, and powerlessness among recipients” (p. 385). These critiques of service delivery notwithstanding, a significant amount of intervention and prevention are necessary in
treating distressed and disenfranchised youth. Shelter staff, counselors, mentors, physicians, and case managers all have a hand in treating high-risk and already-homeless youth who often have no one else to turn to. Were these services to disappear, youth experiencing homelessness would have very little recourse.

Maton (2000) explains that “It is not an either/or; social transformation depends on multiple levels, ranging from the individual up to the societal” (p. 47). While I don’t doubt that individual services can revolutionize a youth’s life, I do believe that there is a trade-off between intervening and affecting structural change. In other words, lifting youth out of the river of homelessness downstream or midstream leaves little energy to stop the river’s flow upstream (see Whitehead & Popay, 2010). For homeless youth, downstream problems have to do with individual stressors and general lack of basic resources. As such, they are traditionally treated by intervention. Midstream problems are those that focus on risk reduction and prevention of at-risk cases. The holy grail of many social activists are the upstream problems, those that have to do with people who holds power and advantage over homeless youth, and how to go about redistributing it. Helping professionals who are interested in addressing the upstream problems often begin by asking questions about the social and political determinants of inequality for their population (Scutchfield & Howard, 2011). Those that are intrigued by these questions and undeterred by their possible solutions are those who move upstream with the problem and do work (though not exclusively) as social change activists.

Examples of addressing upstream problems are evident in the homeless community. The very name of the organization calling itself the National Alliance to End Homelessness implies implication that their mission is not to serve the homeless but find
ways to wipe out homelessness as a possibility or category. This is correct; in 1987, the organization’s leaders realized that “homelessness had taken root for a number of systematic reasons, and a ‘hot and a cot’ were not going to end the problem,” so they focused on research and recommendations that would orient policymakers toward the end of homelessness (see www.endhomelessness.org). In a similar vein, StandUp For Kids, a national organization for homeless youth with outreach and mentoring programs in 22 states, began with a mission in 1991 to “help homeless and street kids.” Realizing that a shift in orientation and priorities was necessary to respond to the youth they served, I was one of the volunteers who voted for a new mission in 2010: “Ending the cycle of youth homelessness.” It is no coincidence that the morning before we met to change the mission statement, we heard from Philip Mangano, former director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, who spoke at length on the need to address upstream problems with our youth.

Service becomes advocacy when service-providers become advocates. Toro and colleagues (1991) explained that professionals who have an ecological perspective on homelessness are generally committed to creating empowering and egalitarian relationships with their clients and understanding the contextual nature of their situations. The ecological perspective is “demonstrated through the long term commitment of the professional to create avenues of legitimacy and access for citizen influence across status and role boundaries” (p. 1215). This perspective is very different from those that are neutral regarding empowerment and individualistic when understanding their homeless clients’ pathology. Whereas the budding activist may have once intervened with
individuals, their *interventions* are now aimed at the meso and macro levels. The current study explains the helping professional’s consciousness of the upstream problems.

**Why are some people inactivists?**

In my former role as an Executive Director, I met many people who readily volunteered to work directly with homeless youth but whom I could never convince to call their senators, attend a council meeting, join a task force, or do grassroots action for policy changes. I echo Loeb (2010) who stated, “I’m troubled by the division between personal acts of compassion and the work that’s necessary to bring about more structural change” (p. 144-145). Even if the benefits of participating in both service and advocacy are similar, and there are enough resources to do both, most people generally choose the former over the latter. As it were, only a relative handful of individuals become activists in general, and activists for homeless youth in particular.

Why don’t some people remain, as I call them, *inactivists*? The most obvious possibility is that some people do not possess enough breadth or depth in the 22 factors that I identified previously. For example, they may not have support or training to develop the requisite sills of collective action; they may not possess the leadership traits required of activists; they may not have political identities; and so on. Some of the same factors that successful advocates have in spades are many of the same things that some people might lack (although research shows that these things can develop in nearly anyone).

Loeb (2010) attempted to make sense of people who never participate in collective action.

Those of us who become socially engaged seem to follow parallel routes to involvement. And those of us who hold back seem to encounter parallel obstacles.
Whatever our passions and commitments may be, we all face similar questions about how to cross the threshold from passivity to participation (p. 16).

Next I describe various other reasons why so many don’t cross that threshold from passivity to participation in collective action.

**Ignorance.** Loeb (2010) offered three different explanations for lack of activism. The first one may be called *ignorance*. It is best exemplified in Loeb’s account of meeting a particularly service-oriented student from an Ivy-league school. This young man stated “I hope that one day my grandchildren will get to have the same experience working in the same homeless shelter that I did” (p. 144). While on the one hand this thought holds aspirations that future generations will possess the prosocial values and experience the same helper’s high, on the other hand it denies any possibility of society without homelessness. It replaces a long-term strategy for ending homelessness with a short-term proposition that the homeless will always occupy shelters and stand in soup lines (Kivel, 2007).

Ignorance comes in other forms, too. Houston’s (1996) work suggests that many people lack an understanding of how their impact makes a difference in the world of others. Accordingly, people tend to be connected with their fuller purposes and sense of power when they overcome detachment by joining one’s “local life to great life” (p. 98). In other words, individuals who do not see reflections of themselves in role models who have paved a path before them are less likely to pursue collective action.

**Learned hopelessness.** Loeb’s (2010) second explanation has to do with learned *hopelessness*. He writes,

> Most of us would like to see people treated more justly…But we find it hard to imagine playing a meaningful role in this process. We lack faith in our ability to make a difference. The magnitude of the issues at hands,
coupled with this sense of powerlessness, have led far too many of us to conclude that social involvement isn’t worth the cost (p. 8).

Some people resign ourselves from asking questions like “Why there is so much hunger and poverty?” because the questions themselves are daunting. “It seems wiser and more practical to narrow our horizons” (p. 93). Accordingly, those who hesitate to fix any problems may do so because they fear not being able to fix them all; the sheer magnitude of an issue like youth homelessness might immobilize people who engaging in collective action.

**Individualism.** Loeb’s (2010) final reason for inactivity is *individualism*. He describes two myths held by individualists. The first myth states that we are masters of our own fates; therefore, we perpetuate the idea that we are immune from social problems like homelessness. Without the experience of vulnerability, we may not become activists. Homelessness can get recast as a set of individual failures to which one can only succumb by failing. Many people believe it is the “responsibility of our society not to guarantee material security for all, but merely to ensure that everyone has an ‘equal opportunity’ to get ahead” (Kivel, 2007, p. 141) regardless of whether there may power differences that keep people from succeeding. The second myth states that because we create our own destiny, we are deserving of our fates. For individualists, Loeb (2010) states that “all we can do is get our own lives in order” (p. 140) and attempt to place ourselves somewhere high on the latter of achievement.

The larger consequence of individualism is a hands-off treatment of systems of inequality. Quite simply, it “exempts even the most powerful economic, political, and social institutions from all responsibility for the state of society” (Loeb, 2010, p. 142). Individual solutions, rather than collective ones, have a personal approach that scales
back the possibility of addressing sources of power and inequality that affect the collective. Ultimately, we see no personal investment in helping others out of their distress. Loeb (2010) states that we can only begin to create a more just world when we acknowledge just how vulnerable we are to the social ills we wrongly believe we are immune to.

**Apolitical orientation.** Other theories of inactivism are also noteworthy. Eliasoph (1998) found that swaths of individuals preferred to be civically proper, displaying an etiquette that shied away from public dialogue, and with it, all political awareness. At times, however, one’s stated disdain for politics and construction of oneself as nonpolitical contradicts one’s participation in dialogue, volunteerism, and other activist duties (Blackstone, 2004). Some feel that activism work is too political or disruptive of the status quo. Both Eliasoph (1998) and Blackstone (2004) found that gender was inescapably related to apolitical orientations. This is not surprising, considering the strong, historically ingrained associations between nurturing care for others and a woman’s duty (e.g., Noddings, 1984). Under a framework of traditional gender roles and heteronormativity, it could be considered a conflict of roles to both nurture and fight for social change. “Without an understanding of gender that allows them to recognize their image of the good woman with that of the political actor, these women are left with no choice but to conceive of their work as nonpolitical” (Blackstone, 2004, p. 364).

**Pragmatics.** Working personally with volunteers, even those that have had a taste for collective action, I noticed that many are only involved for as long as they feel they have the time to give. Despite their good intentions, volunteers vacate their duties
for personal reasons, including health and family issues. “Real life took over,” read one email I received from a resigning volunteer. As volunteers do not get paid for their inordinate amounts of time, this can run up against their need to earn a living by doing something income-generating. Some activists, thus, might pull back or even stop engaging in volunteer duties altogether. If they do this without communicating their intentions, or receiving explicit permission from their organizations, shame can stymie reengagement at a later date. Loeb (2010) writes that people in this situation can “feel ashamed at even the prospect of explaining our withdrawal, so find it safer to stay safely distant from the movements that once stirred our hearts” (p. 295).

Compassion fatigue and burnout. Theories of compassion fatigue and burnout offer additional insight into why people do not choose to become activists, or fail to stay engaged for more than a brief stint. In many collective action projects, the long range vision sounds ideal but the incremental successes along the way might seem inconsequential. When activists engage in highly emotionally charged activities and reach little change within several months or even years, a sense of efficacy can get lost. The upset over lack of progress can grow and possibly morph into resentment for the population to whom one is dedicating significant time. As Loeb (2010) writes, “It’s deflating to be part of small groups trying to do big things for so many who don’t bother even to care” (p. 294). Compassion fatigue, also known as secondary traumatic stress, concerns the stress that results from either helping or wanting to help someone who is suffering (Figley, 1995); it can develop rather quickly, after a particularly emotionally charged encounter with a suffering person. Burnout, on the other hand, is a longer-term process of stress as a result of highly demanding responsibilities with little chance to
recuperate or reflect on that significance of the work. Both theories have been used to explain the high turnover rates of social workers in child protective services around the country (Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006). What stops compassion fatigue from becoming inevitable is in part the idea of compassion satisfaction, the “positive benefits that individuals…derive from working with traumatized or suffering persons” (Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006, p. 1072). It is also thought to be affected by having high-quality relationships with colleagues doing the same type of work, seeing one’s work as a calling despite its hardships, and seeing oneself as effective in serving those who suffer. Not only are those involved in the work susceptible to fatigue, but so too are members of the general public. Kinnick, Krugman, and Cameron (1996) found that the public’s compassion fatigue could arise from pervasive media coverage and interpersonal communication about social problems (p. 687). Being disinterested in otherwise compelling social problems was attributed to situational overexposure rather than to personality traits.

**The neighbor’s kids.** Social expectations help explain adults’ unwillingness to get involved in the healthy development of youth they are not related to (Scales, 2003). Undertaking a nationally representative survey of 1,425 American adults, the author found that there is little social reward for getting involved with other people’s kids, and little social consequence for failing to do so. It is simply not normal for most adults to be deeply engaged with young people outside their own families (p. 1).

Reasons for lack of engagement include “ambivalence between tolerance and responsibility for others” (p. 2), negative depictions of youth in media and research, a lack of perceived permission to be involved from other caregivers, and lack of explicit
community-held ideas about what constitutes reasonable responsibility. Ten percent of the variance of an adult’s engagement in the development of nonrelated youth was associated with demographic factors such as age, gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic status. The modal profile of an involved adult was a married female parent over 35 who interacted significantly with younger children (not teens), attended religious services weekly, lived in her community for 10 years, volunteered, and attended community meetings regularly. No demographic group was immune to a divide between attitudes and actual behaviors: “The clear conclusion we must draw is that the gap between what most adults think is important when it comes to engaging with kids, and what most adults are reported to do, is both broad and deep” (Scales, 2003, p. 199). It is important to note that the phenomenon addressed by this author is also codified in many ways into legal statutes across the country. Indeed, 16 states make it a crime to harbor a runaway or homeless youth and at least 8 make it a crime to interfere with custodial rights (National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty and the National Network for Youth, 2003). Adults with the benign ability and desire to provide care for homeless youth—their neighbors, students, family friends, congregants—are expressly prohibited from ensuring a young person’s well-being when that person is not in their parent’s care. It is reasonable to assume that failure to get involved on a personal level may also preclude one from becoming involved on a sociopolitical level.

**Oppression can silence marginalized groups.** The system that created inequality is incapable of supporting a rise from oppression without proper assistance and mobilization from inside and outside of the marginalized group. Members of marginalized groups such as homeless youth may be reluctant to take ownership of a
political struggle because of factors like inferiority, low self-worth, fear, shame, and misplaced anger, distrust, and competition (Moane, 2003). They may also be disproportionately preoccupied with poor mental and physical health, likely outcomes when resources are “not naturally distributed among people, but rather given to power dynamics, political disputes, and ethical considerations” (Prilleltensky, 2012, p. 18). What they must ultimately reach in the process of mobilization is awareness of “the causes of their condition” without which “they fatalistically ‘accept’ their exploitation” (Friere, 1970, p. 39). I argue that this process depends in part on assistance from those in power, particularly for a generation of youth who lack many of the human rights adults have and are disenfranchised from the political process until they reach adulthood. In many ways, according to Dimitriadis (2006), youth are “assumed a problem to be controlled, maintained, and policed” (p. ix). Consequently, without assistance in gaining entry to collective action from stakeholders with power, youths’ disenfranchisement cannot be considered a lack of personal will to improve their circumstances; however, it can look like inactivism to the outsider.

Lerner (1986) provides an alternative explanation for why an oppressed group cedes into inactivity. Despite making some very real gains against the dominant power structure, some people eventually give up and feel impotent to make further changes. He calls this phenomenon *surplus powerlessness* and writes that the marginalized, “instead of crediting what they had done” instead “described the reality in a way that made themselves seem even more powerless than they actually were. Moreover, they took this powerlessness as axiomatic, expected it, and then acted to ensure that it would remain the case” (p. ii). Lerner’s theory builds on the idea of a self-fulfilling prophecy of defeat.
Organizational cultures of activism

This body of research is focused on individual activists, but individuals are hardly ever free agents. Instead, many conduct their work under the banner of an organization and receive permission, recognition, training, and/or compensation through it. Most often, that organization has non-profit recognition from the government. The vastness of the non-profit field is staggering, considering that nonprofits “controlled over $1.59 trillion in financial assets and had expenditures of over $822 billion” in the year 2000 (Kivel, 2007, p. 138). Understanding how the culture and structure of an organization promotes or impedes advocacy is relevant, as this study ventured to understand activists contextually.

Many theorists agree that activism is necessary at the organizational level if change is ever to come forth. Schmid and colleagues (2008) found that organizations which operate exclusively in the domain of service provision will likely not affect any lasting change. “To achieve their espoused goals, they need to become a major actor in the arena where decisions are made” (p. 597). Tseng and colleagues (2002) note that organizations are best positioned to shift power inequities, since their power is shared amongst members who work towards a common goal (Tseng et al., 2002).

Using a quantitative, large scale survey of non-profits in several fields across the United States, researchers found that 86% of organizations participated in some way in the policy process, even if that meant sending form-generated emails to their elected officials (Bass, Guinane, Arons, & Carter, 2007). Organizations that did not participate in the process explained that it generally took away from the core activities of the organization; secondarily, they also cited roadblocks such as limited funding, the lack of
skills to engage in collective action, and confusing tax laws about lobbying as an IRS-sanctioned non-profit charity (Bass et al., 2007).

Many studies speak in *platitudes* about nonprofits: They “help maintain the quality of a democratic government and its responsiveness to the needs of all its constituents” (Kimberlin, 2010, p. 166); they “are the intermediaries between citizens and other institutions of government and business” (Reid, 2010, p. 3); they are “protectors of democratic participation” (Salamon, 2008, p. 3). Others reference obligatory or suggested advocacy as found in ethics codes, such as those instituted by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2002), the Council on Accreditation of Services for Families and Children (Kimberlin, 2010), and the American Counseling Association (Lewis et al., 2002). Because platitudes and ethics codes don’t necessarily translate to activist behaviors, some possible theories are provided here.

**Explaining “when.”** Salamon (2002) described four paradigms to account for activism or inactivism amongst nonprofits: Conflict, partnership, resource mobilization, and organization theory. Conflict occurs when the growth of governmental interests come to a head with those of the non-profit and attempt to retain the dominant position in society; advocacy is predicted to sprout naturally to regain power. Partnership, on the other hand, minimizes the extent of conflict and replaces it with a need to embrace government and support it in places where it is limited. Resource mobilization predicts that some organizations have relative lack of human, financial and structural capital to support ever-present social problems; those short on resources are not likely to advocate. Finally, organization theory explains that the organization is primarily focused on maintaining itself and workforce, these issues are prioritized ahead of constituents,
making advocacy undesirable or even harmful. Testing his theories with a survey given
to over 3,000 non-profits in the early 1980’s, Salamon found support for all four,
particularly partnership and resource mobilization. In other words, the organization that
participates in collective action generally has the resources to do so and is favorably
partnered with the government.

**Explaining “why.”** Whereas Salamon accounts for the “when does advocacy
occur” question, I believe we need a fifth paradigm to explain *why* it occurs: Recognition
of advocacy as fulfillment of the organization’s mission. There is some survey data to
support this. Salamon (writing later with Geller, 2008) offers that 74% of nonprofits
engaging in advocacy felt a moral obligation to do so, and 92% believed advocacy had
relevance to the people they served. In the authors’ list of ten possible reasons,
constituent relevancy ranked first, and morality ranked sixth (Salamon & Geller, 2008).
Bass, Guinane and colleagues (2007) found that organizations in their survey cited the
organization’s mission as the most important reason to get involved, followed by a
perception that it helped raised general awareness of their issues. Although these are not
the only reasons that prompt organizations to get involved, they are important.

**Empowerment and anti-oppression.** According to Salamon and Geller (2008),
90% of surveyed organizations “rarely” or “never” involved clients in their lobbying or
advocacy efforts. Service providers who become activists are asked to heed a warning:
Do not fail to engage constituents in collective action. Doing so retains a social order of
disenfranchisement, creates disconnect between what constituents need and what they are
given, and otherwise leads to frustration, conflict, and ad-hoc solutions (Strier &
Benyamin, 2010; Donaldson, 2008).
The process of promoting collective action generally occurs in an “empowering community setting” (Maton and Salem, 1995). Maton and Salem describe several features of organizational environments that are thought to empower their members, including staff, volunteers, and clientele. These features were organized into four themes. The first is a group-based belief system that inspires growth, sees its members in terms of strengths and capabilities, and believes that the mission is larger than the members itself. The second is an opportunity role structure, meaning that members have several different ways to participate, build their skills, and demonstrate responsibility. The third is a support system that is based on access to various resources, a network of peers who share a similar worldview, and a shared sense of community within and beyond the organization. The fourth feature is leadership that directly and indirectly commits to getting others to take responsibility and ownership for the organization’s mission.

Several theorists see empowerment as problematic. Blackstone (2004) argues that empowerment is a vague term which fails to address the political struggles that members should be involved in. O’Neill (2005) describes that empowerment hinges on people’s perceptions of access to resources, not on the actual items and power that they are entitled via distributive justice. Therefore, empowering someone by helping him think he has more power without any real change makes that person a victim of “false consciousness” (p. 18); without disrupting the flow of power, cycles of inequality remain in place. Further, Gruber and Trickett (1987) believe that it is paradoxical to expect that a group in power over another could do anything but undermine the empowerment of the lower-status group.
These critiques imply that while activists may be situated within an empowering setting, such a setting alone is not enough to create activism or demand that power and resources be redistributed. More than empowering, a setting might need to be anti-oppressive. Strier and Benyamin (2009) describe what an anti-oppressive organization looks like. The organization should, among other things, “acknowledge the effect of power relations on client-worker interactions…establish democratic organizational settings…promot[e] reflexivity…politiciz[e] the professional identity of social workers…and rais[e] the devaluated professional status of working with the poor” (pp. 1916-1919). Demonstrating the good of such an organization, Omoto and Snyder (1995) found that volunteers for the AIDS cause stayed involved over the long haul when they experienced social support for their activities, felt a sense of satisfaction with the organization and their assigned or chosen roles, and were integrated in other ways with the organization. The present study seeks to add to our understanding of the connections between organization and activist. All activists in current study were situated within organizations; some speak to ways in which their organization demonstrated empowerment and anti-oppression.

**Funding and instrumentalism.** Salamon’s (2002) four paradigms hinted that some revolved around resources and funding. Indeed, one of the most cited reasons of all service-provider organizations is lack of funding. Gulati-Partee (2008) calls this the “chicken-and-egg spiral: because of too few resources to support advocacy capacity building, non-profit leaders are prevented from championing advocacy and increasing financially support for this crucial work” (p. 95). Salamon and Geller (2008) found in a survey of 872 nonprofit organizations that over 85% devoted less than 2% of their annual
budget on advocacy activity, making collective action a tall order with such few resources. (According to IRS law, a nonprofit can spend up to 20% on lobbying and a virtually unlimited amount on other forms of advocacy; Battistoni, 2010).

An organization’s relationship to the governmental agencies funding it affects the type of advocacy that it engages in. Schmid, Bar, and Nirel (2008) found that non-profit organizations in Israel were more likely to advocate for various causes if they were not tied to government funding. They wrote that many organizations have adopted a don’t bite the hand that feeds you approach: “The more dependant the organizations are on public funding […] the more likely they are trapped in the iron cage and the more they develop behavior that conforms to the goals, service programs, and standards that the funding institution is interested in promoting” (p. 595). Regarding organizations specifically working with the homeless, other researchers in the United States have found that advocacy for the homeless is positively correlated to the amount of government funding an organization receives (for a review, see Landriscina, 2007).

Another issue marring non-profits’ jump to collective action is their confusion of “short-term wins and empire building with long-lasting, far-reaching social change that truly serves the public-interest” (p. 98). Salamon (2002) identified another reason, flagrantly instrumental: “Advocacy is somewhat more difficult for [service providing] organizations to support since those who benefit do so whether or not they belong to the organization or otherwise contribute to its operations” (p. 3). The effect of compliant organizations is that none can challenge the status quo; their proximal reward is continued access to services. More harmful is their distal reward, described succinctly by the authors as “institutional legitimacy” (p. 596). In other words, organizations that
accept government funding but do not seek social change around their issues are denying the possibility that they will ever go out of business. In youth homelessness, this would translate to an organization that feeds kids but never pushes for the day when kids don’t need their food.

While advocacy may be best incubated under certain organizational conditions, individuals are often the vehicles within organizations to shape and carry out social change. The current study specifically examines the qualities of those who are doing advocacy, the organizations to which they belong, and the interactivity between person and place.

Chapter summary

This study intends to extend our knowledge about people advocating for homeless youth. This chapter brought me closer to that goal in several ways: First, it described trends in studying activism efforts, creating a useful distinction between action and intentions to act. Second, it described what activists do and how their work matters. Third, it described a preliminary architecture for developmental and cross-sectional factors that have been assigned to various people engaged in collective action for a countless number of causes, groups, and social movements. I integrated a total of 22 factors into five categories, two of which are cross-sectional (skills and characteristics; worldviews) and three of which are developmental (general processes; developmental processes of the marginalized; developmental processes of the privileged). The latter contribute to an understanding of how people become activists, whereas the former give some flavor to what the sustained work for a social cause requires. Fourth, I discussed some factors which are thought to facilitate or constrain people who act. Fifth, I closed
with a discussion about the organizations that most advocates work in, in order to link the actor and place in a conceptual network.

Activists are an extremely diverse group with no solitary developmental pathway. A question as large as “why did you become?” requires a comprehensive inquiry of various factors, from those that constitute worldviews and skills to those that explain why marginalized and privileged individuals are beckoned to act. It also requires an examination of how they gained the skills, resources, and support systems capable of engaging and sustaining in this work. This chapter introduced a large swath of theories from psychological, organizational, sociological, philosophical, and related fields to give some shape to the concepts of activist and advocate that were largely unsynthesized in the existing literature. I quite possibly have not identified all the operational factors for this group yet I built a collection of factors from an iterative and expansive process, paying particular attention to the internal and external circumstances that predicted or correlated with collective action.

As a lifelong learner, I recognize that my best understanding of the human condition comes from looking at the multitude of disciplines shaping very complex phenomena, particularly when one discipline does not yet have all the answers. As a student of counseling psychology, my eyes see behavior as a mosaic of motivations and processes around one’s emerging and ongoing involvement in the human condition. Counseling psychology also informs me that the questions themselves are so large that I must begin listening for the answers to lead me in further pursuit of truth and

6 Although it could appear that this study casts a hundred nets in search of a few fish, I argue that the ocean of activist development is vast and thus necessitated a thorough review. Rather than use this chapter to definitely tell the story about activist development, I have introduced a set of factors that prepare a framework for homeless youth activists.
understanding. The chapters that follow are offered as a response to the large and small questions that this review raises for activists working to better the conditions of homeless youth. This chapter informed the topics that participants in the study spoke about, just as it provided a robust framework upon which to rest new and familiar factors uncovered in the data.
Chapter III: Methods

Rationale

This study’s choice of methods is based on aims to (a) expand what we know about homeless youth activists by presenting them as nuanced individuals; and (b) expand the potential for more activism by critically examining its origins and qualities in a sociopolitical context. In light of these aims, particular methods of qualitative research are well suited to explore pathways for homeless youth activists. This is especially true when so little is currently known about this group. Qualitative research is commonly used to understand the experiences of human beings when such experiences depend on the meaning that humans assign to their own experiences. It recognizes that human experiences are inherently complex, ideographic, multilayered, and multiply determined by culture and context (Krejci, 2008, p. 33). The approach allows genesis of a theory that is firmly grounded in the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Two studies of activist pathways support the use of qualitative methodologies. First, Jennings (1996), studying activists engaged in global human rights, used a phenomenological approach that captured the emerging explicit themes of the activists’ work when they spoke about their roles freely and consciously. Second, Krejci (2008) used a constructivist grounded theory approach to examine how white anti-racist activists came to perform that link of work.

I used a critical qualitative orientation (CQO) that incorporates a phenomenological framework and grounded theory process.

Critical qualitative orientation. Critical qualitative research is concerned with social inequality, promoting positive social change, and refining social theory (Carspecken, 1996). CQO has evolved
through battles against the oppressive effects of biased research that at first appeared to be ‘neutral’…Critical epistemology does not give us recipes for helping the poor and downtrodden; it rather gives us principles for conducting valid inquiries into any area of human experience (p. 8).

I chose this method largely because homeless youth activism presupposes an idea that youth homelessness is perpetuated due to oppression and inequality. The social concerns of CQO are entirely relevant when attempting to understand an individual activist’s relationship to power; how they came to understand their own and how they came to see a shift of systemic power as essential to addressing youth homelessness.

In CQO, the researcher is known as a criticalist who attempts to advance a form of social criticism (Carspecken, 1996). Criticalists share a number of assumptions in their value orientations. Most importantly, they believe that research should advance efforts for change, particularly for groups that have significantly less privilege than others. The author writes, “We should use research to uncover the subtleties of oppression so that its invisibility to those affected by it might be removed; so that oppression might become challenged, and changed” (p. 7). Further, criticalists attempt to avoid oppression in their own research by understanding that truth comes in many forms by different informants. Finally, criticalists use CQO to understand how power distorts truth claims and knowledge.

CQO evokes several core concepts, including objects of inquiry, social sites, and settings in a package that is called a “focal region” (Carspecken, 1996, p. 33) surrounded by a complex social context. The focal region is similar in nature to Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model using concentric circles to show the nested interactions between individuals (microsystems), local sites (mesosystems), and larger systems such as economics, politics, and culture (macrosystems). It draws upon Bronfenbrenner’s earlier
work (1974) that reasons that one of the most thorough ways to study youth issues is to understand their relationship to policy.

CQO defines an object of inquiry as the holistic understanding of how and why a phenomenon exists; it preferences rich, thick descriptions of the phenomenon from multiple perspectives. CQO defines sites as the specific locations where people interact. In the current study, sites are the locations where homeless youth activists developed their sense of activism—not just cities and towns, but organizations and coalitions, for example. Each site is often characterized by its own set of routine activities. Settings refer not to physical spaces but to the boundaries placed on expected behavior, which are set by shared understandings between individuals. Settings are usually established by institutional rules, sites, and larger contextual practices (the macrosystem in Bronfenbrenner’s nomenclature). In CQO, these contextual practices form the outermost circle of analysis. As I sought to understand how homeless youth activists come to be, it was important to understand the systems in which they live, and how those systems were integrated. Carspecken (1996) writes that “actors are not forced to act by conditions; instead they are rather strongly influenced…or resourced/constrained…to act in broadly predictable ways” (p. 37). In the current study, influences consisted of internal facets, such as beliefs, attitudes, and cultures that formed one’s identity as a homeless youth activist. Resourceful or constraining conditions are external to the activist and include laws and economic conditions that might predict the development of someone in such a role.

Phenomenology. The current research is based in a phenomenological framework because “all that we can be sure of is the existence of the perspective, which
is not an object but rather a phenomenon” (Carspecken, 1996, p. 12). Phenomenology assumes that the object itself is constituted by multiple perspectives which all overlap to some degree (Carspecken, 1996; Schutz, 1997; Patton, 2002). “The experiences of different people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essences of the phenomenon” (Patton, 2002, p. 106). Humans routinely interpret their experiences as they describe the experience itself. The careful, rigorous, and thorough process of understanding it was done by gathering retrospective data from those who directly experienced homeless youth activism. The method assumes that a conscious awareness is the only awareness that humans have access to in understanding their world (Patton, 2002). Carspecken (1996) critiques phenomenological approaches because there is a tendency to “foreground one part of an overall experience” (p. 19). CQO thus retains the holistic experience of participants (homeless youth activists in this case) by also bringing to the foreground “the meaning of our activity, the reasons why we are focusing on something and noting its properties” (p. 19). In CQO, it is not possible to break down human experience, meaning, and social action into discrete variables without losing the contextual nature of the actions and conditions.

**Grounded theory.** Whereas CQO provides principles for challenging oppression of homeless youth, and phenomenology provides a framework to access a group’s lived experiences as activists, grounded theory is introduced as the third methodological component that can lead to the development of a working theory about how homeless youth activists come to be. Grounded theory is presumed to be absent of a priori assumptions about how the developmental process of activism is assembled. It involves steps and procedures for connecting induction and deduction through the constant comparative method, comparing research sites, doing theoretical
sampling, and testing emergent concepts with additional fieldwork (Patton, 2002, p. 125).

It also involves immersion with data, including line by line analysis of interview transcripts and the connections of codes until linkages between codes emerged into categories, and categories form a complex explanatory theory. Again, because the existing theories that from the literature on activism are largely disconnected from each other and rarely approach the domain of youth homelessness, grounded theory became a logical choice to piece together different elements emerging when participants discuss the qualities and processes that constitute their roles as activists and advocates.

Intertwining phenomenology, CQO, and grounded theory was not an inherently clean venture because the first approach disagreed with the latter two on the basis of truth claims. Both CQO and grounded theory apply some rigor to explaining their data and help keep the researcher’s subjectivity from rendering analysis a totally subjective endeavor. The latter two traditions hold that it is possible to help the researcher examine biases through a set of disciplined steps that will produce a theory or social critique that may be somewhat credible for other researchers working in the same traditions.

In short, this blended approach seeks to gain entry into conceptual lives of participants with the goal of understanding how activists construct meaning around events and situations in their lives that influence or constrain collective action. As a qualitative inquiry, this approach privileges known, rational explanations for behavior over unconscious processes that are favored in traditional psychological research (Jennings, 1996). This does not infer that the emergent theory will be obvious to all participants; but that it will be derived from conscious, communicative discussion.
I introduced in Chapter One the personal and professional vantage points through which I entered my work. I also discuss how I approached validity claims and threats to trustworthiness in sections on data collection and analysis below. I describe these safeguards not just to acknowledge and limit my subjectivity as a researcher but also to enhance the research process and its implications (Krejci, 2008).

Participants

Participants were thirteen adults currently engaged in collective, progressive action for homeless youth for at least one year in the United States. Because the scope of this study was limited to the systemic inequalities of the U.S., I did not recruit individuals that have engaged in collective action elsewhere. The research was limited to an understanding of processes that explain activism in people over the age of 18 (legal majority), given the possible problems in obtaining youth assent and parental consent for their participation. Participants were qualified as “homeless youth activists” by endorsing a set of behaviors, identities, and commitments using an operationalized definition of activism (see the instrument section below for further details of this criterion).7

My phenomenological approach assumes that participants have a worldview about their roles as activists; therefore, I included people that have been engaged in activism for at least a year, even on an occasional basis. While some researchers have suggested that it can take 10,000 hours to achieve an expert status in any field (Ericcson, Prietula, & Cokely, 2007), I believe that the phenomenon of activism for homeless youth is fairly new and did not expect to find many participants at that high end of engagement (e.g., 40 hours per week for 250 weeks). Inherently, activism is a democratic process that

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7 Participants were not excluded on the basis of the scope of their advocacy; Cress and Snow (2001) infer that movements that are national in scope get recognized and researched, leaving behind the local movements that may have been just as successful on a smaller scale.
does not rest on the requirement of professionalization (though there are professional
lobbyists in the field); unlike playing music or practicing psychotherapy, collective action
is cyclical and its stakeholders and particular issues constantly in flux. One year is a
moderate requirement yet still afforded participants an ability to have employed a range
of activist behaviors. It left open the possibility that participants have still engaged in
other qualities that make experts, including “improving the skills you already have and
extending the reach and aim of your skills” (Ericcson et al., 2007, p. 4).

The rich, contextual explanation of activist development that follows required that
the participant pool be diverse among a number of demographic characteristics. As Table
4 illustrates, participants represented various professions, organizational settings, ages,
sexes, religions, and lengths of experience with homeless youth and with activism. There
was less variability when it came to SES. Six participants were male and seven were
female. After discussing the limits of confidentiality and giving participants several
weeks to opt for an alias, every participant chose to use his or her given name in the
study. They ranged in age from 24 to 61, with a mean age of 42.1 years (SD = 12.1,
Median = 37.0). 8

While six participants held advocacy and policy positions, seven held director or
head titles within organizations that served youth. In their paid roles, nine participants
advocated for youth specifically and four advocated for youth in addition to other
populations. All participants were college-educated and twelve had advanced degrees
beyond the baccalaureate. Two participants were spiritual but not religious, five

8 Although race, sexual orientation, and geographic locale were not directly queried, my knowledge of
participants indicates that twelve are White/Caucasian, and one is Black/African-American. Three
participants explicitly noted a gay or lesbian orientation via interviews and no one noted other sexual
orientations. Participants represented six states and the District of Columbia.
identified a religious faith (four practicing a form of Christianity, and one practicing Judaism), and six did not identify or respond to a query about a religion and spiritual affiliation. Twelve participants were raised in families with middle SES, and one was raised in a low SES household. All 13 participants currently identified at some point in the middle SES range. Participants ranged from having zero to 38 years of direct work with homeless youth, with a mean length of 12.3 years ($SD = 13.1$, $Median = 6.0$) and cumulative total of 160 years. They ranged from having one to 38 years of advocacy for homeless youth, with a mean length of 13.6 years ($SD = 13.5$, $Median = 10.0$) and cumulative total of 176.5 years. Two participants had a longer history advocating than serving; two participants had the reverse; and the rest had equal lengths of time in service and advocacy.

**Recruitment of participants**

Participants were recruited purposefully according to their ability to speak significantly to the questions guiding this research (Morrow, 2005). In qualitative studies, a predetermined number of participants is less important than a contextually rich and thorough analysis of a small number (Patton, 2002; Morrow, 2005). Lincoln and Guba (2005) suggest that participants are recruited until a saturation point whereby no new information emerges with successive participants. Previous researchers looking at activist pathways have recruited between ten and twenty participants (Jennings, 1996; Krejci, 2008). Because the extant literature contains a high number of diverse activist factors (situational and developmental), I intended to maximize the possibility that various developmental and situational factors could emerge in data collection.
### Table 4: Participant demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Current Job Title (Organization Type)</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Religion or Spirituality</th>
<th>SES as Child/Youth</th>
<th>SES as Current</th>
<th>Years working with homeless youth</th>
<th>Years advocating for homeless youth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>André</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Program and Policy Analyst (national federation)</td>
<td>MPA</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>Upper Middle Class</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Policy Director (national association)</td>
<td>MPA</td>
<td>Episcopalian</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Executive Director (local youth agency)</td>
<td>MS - Urban Affairs</td>
<td>Not listed</td>
<td>Lower Middle Class</td>
<td>Mid/ Upper Middle Class</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debby</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Executive Director (local youth agency)</td>
<td>BA, Additional Training</td>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>Lower Middle Class</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeff</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Research and Communications Director (national think-tank)</td>
<td>MPP</td>
<td>Not listed</td>
<td>Lower Middle Class</td>
<td>Upper Middle Class</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jon</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Associate Director (local homeless agency)</td>
<td>MSW, DSW</td>
<td>Non-religious Jew</td>
<td>Upper Middle Class</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirsten</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Director of Advocacy and Volunteer Services (statewide social service agency)</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Lutheran</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Mother Hen (local youth agency)</td>
<td>J.D., LL.M.</td>
<td>Super spiritual</td>
<td>Upper Middle Class</td>
<td>Struggling Middle Class</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Senior Policy Analyst (local youth advocacy coalition)</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Spiritual, not religious</td>
<td>Lower to Middle Middle Class</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Hyatt</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Project Consultant, Social Media Coordinator (statewide research project)</td>
<td>MSW</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Very poor, low SES</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Executive Director (statewide nonprofit)</td>
<td>JD</td>
<td>Unitarian-Universalist, practicing spirituality</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>Upper Middle Class</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Executive Director (local youth agency)</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Not listed</td>
<td>Middle Income</td>
<td>Upper Middle Class</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theresa</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Director of LGBT Youth Programs (statewide youth agency)</td>
<td>MA - Family Therapy</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While initially I considered recruiting participants who were never service providers as well as participants who were formerly homeless youth, I opted to purposefully recruit a majority of research participants who moved from direct service into advocacy and activism. I made this decision in order to more fully describe and delineate a subset of the phenomenon, while still recognizing that multiple pathways are possible. Further, I chose this particular pathway to highlight because it is one that offers significant implications for how training programs prepare service professionals to advocate, as well as examples of how agencies and collective action causes can promote service providers to do this work. Finally, former and current service providers are often those who participate in coalitions, policy councils, and congressional testimony panels. Doing so brings forth a limitation that I return to later: I could not account for all possible pathways those who do collective action.

I recruited 20 participants and successively enrolled 13 in this study until saturation was reached. Of the seven individuals who were not enrolled, one stated a lack of identification as an advocate or activist for this population, one declined participation, one I was unable to schedule due to time constraints, and four did not respond to requests (including two recently homeless young people referred to by me by two different providers).

Snowball sampling was the preferred method of participant recruitment. I was knowledgeable about seven participants and had prior professional relationships with five of those seven (ranging from brief introductions to a one-year close working relationship). This first wave identified peers for inclusion in the study. By this method, the participant pool was narrowed to a second wave of participants who had confirmation
as activists or advocates by their peers; this is important in establishing a level of
trustworthiness from informants. I asked first-round participants to especially nominate
peers who may not be represented by visible organizations, who may not define
themselves as activists even when their actions dictate otherwise, and who may have had
direct experience at one point with homelessness as a youth. These known participants
referred five others for the second wave of sampling. During the course of data
collection, I enrolled two additional participants that I had learned about, one from a
record of Congressional testimony, and the other through a provider training network.

All participants were contacted by email or telephone with an invitation to
participate in a study about homeless youth advocates and activists. Individuals who
responded to my invitation (I would make no more than one two attempts via email and
one via phone) were given further information about the study and electronic access to a
blank consent form and three surveys, which are described later. The need for signed
consent was waived by University of Miami’s Human Subjects Review Office; all
potential participants fully consented verbally to the study. Once participants completed
the surveys, telephone interviews were arranged for ease and quality of recording.
Interviews were recorded and later transcribed with the assistance of a paid professional
transcriber. I spot-checked at least ten minutes of each interview and found no loss of
data or fidelity through engagement of a second party.

Data collection method

CQO involves several cyclical stages of research, three of which were used in the
current study: (i) Dialogical data generation, (ii) discovering system relations, and (iii)
using system relations to explain findings. The first stage involved data collection; the latter two pertained to data analysis.

Data was generated in dialogue. I chose to use individual interviews with activists because they allowed participants influence over the direction of data collection and the specific materials discussed. According to Carspecken (1996), interviews democratize the data collection process. Participants produce subjective schemas and metaphors to characterize the processes that them to do collective action. When done in a facilitative way, interviews allow participants to explore issues using their own vocabulary, schemas, and ideas (Carspecken, 1996).

A semi-structured interview allows for the researcher to offer a few lead-off questions; the participant will tend to “talk out theories” as they discuss their actions. Carspecken (1996) prefers concrete questions because they allow participants to stay in the same mind-set as they are when performing collective action. The researcher is encouraged to generate theory in later stages. I wanted participants to speak about a variety of subjects, so I borrowed a technique from Carspecken (1996); that is, to have a short list of domains that emerge from the literature, and within each domain a lead-off question as well as covert categories to help guide the participant (see Appendix A for my standard interview protocol). One significant limitation should be apparent in this method; my literature review described a robust and diverse set of 22 factors describing possible situational and developmental factors of activists. I did not expect participants to speak to all of those factors, yet many were included as domains under the lead-off questions, and others emerged in the analysis. Intentionally, I approached the interviews
as an opportunity to consolidate and integrate possible factors when possible and introduce new ones when the preponderance of data called for it.

I was interested in gathering rich information about four domains: (1) How participants understood youth homelessness; (2) how participants developed activist stances; (3) what motivated their activism, internally and externally; and (4) what sites and settings they operated in. Lead-off questions were general enough to allow participants to speak about a number of different subtopics (e.g., for the second domain, participants were asked to speak about some of their first experiences with activism). Participant interviews ranged from 48 to 97 minutes, with a mean length of 70.6 minutes ($SD = 15.3$, $Median = 69.5$).

I chose not to use focus groups for several reasons. Though activists perform their work individually and in groups, their developmental process as activists largely happened before they found membership in a community of other activists. The current research questions were focused on very particular factors of which an individual has phenomenological awareness. I was concerned that some focus group participants would assume that another speaker’s process identified their own as well. Thus, nuances and differences could have gotten minimized or lost in discussion. Also, I was not interested in group dynamics amongst participants for this study. Further, there was a pragmatic reason to use individual interviews in lieu of focus groups: I wanted participants to have ample speaking room to touch on a wide variety of possible factors. Validity requirements in this stage included six checks. First, I used peer debriefing with a colleague (a non-participant white adult male previously involved in homeless youth advocacy), inviting him to review my interview protocol to ensure that I was not leading
participants to answer in certain ways. Second, I used member checks to invite commentary on the interview process. Several participants responded to queries following their interviews about things they thought I should ask future participants. Third, I encouraged participants to review their transcripts to ensure they felt successful in their attempts to express themselves; five of 13 participants responded with clarifications to small segments of their transcripts. Fourth, I encouraged participants to use their own terminology instead of demanding they use mine. This check was particularly important given that not all “activists” define themselves as such. Fifth, I attempted to create a style of interviewing whereby truth and power were kept separate thereby allowing “all parties [to have] equal say” (Carspecken, 1996, p. 170). Sixth and finally, I engaged in praxis. I strived to “be a criticalist whether [I] know it or not…[making my] work a praxis through which [my] own ideas about who [I am] constantly change[d]” (p. 171). I invoked general checks on my own subjectivity by following Peshkin (1988) in “looking for the warm and cool spots, the emergence of positive and negative feelings, the experiences I wanted more of or wanted to avoid, and when I felt moved to act in roles beyond those necessary to fulfill my research needs” (p. 18). To these ends, I kept written and typed fieldwork journals as a place to brief and debrief after encounters with participants and consultants, and throughout subsequent stages of data analysis and reflection (see Appendix E for an example reflection taken after an interview with one participant).

**Data analysis procedure**

Although data collection continued in subsequent stages through continued interaction with participants, stages two and three primarily concerned analysis. I
believe, as Kleinman (1991) stated, that “analysis begins at the start of the study” since “our values and feelings are caught up in the analysis” (p. 185).

The second stage of CQO is conceptualizing the social system in order to understand the “relationship between the social site of focused interest and other specific social sites bearing some relation to it” (p. 42) in an attempt to “consider one’s findings in relation to general theories of society, both to help explain what has been discovered [in stage one] and to alter, challenge, and refine macrosociological theories themselves” (p. 172). Using participant narratives and the codes that emerged from stage one (originally 129 codes, synthesized to form 92)\(^9\), I endeavored to make sense of the collective and disparate values and attitudes that activists carry about homeless youth, about the phenomenon of youth homelessness, about sociopolitical structures that hinder or impede, and also about the concept of being an activist. Specifically, Carspecken (1996) emphasizes the need at this stage to understand how activists, as social actors with unique “views of life, desired identities, and beliefs about society” engage in “cultural reproduction” through their volitional acts. It was necessary here to understand how the sites where participants worked and rested were locked together in a “reproductive loop” that gives meaning to their activism. That means I sought to appreciate “how and why routines that take place at one social site during one period of time are coordinated with events and routines on other sites at other times.”

Two assumptions of this stage are that (1) all action is conditioned and limited by the cultural realm in which participants do their work, and (2) system relations are

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\(^9\) Many codes in the first stage had a low endorsement rate of one to two participants. In order to make the data more manageable, I took efforts to identify other codes that these quotations could be reduced into when possible without losing the meaning evoked by them. In most cases, I chose an arbitrary code cutoff of three participant endorsements to ensure that themes were sufficiently corroborated.
produced and reproduced by participants under these conditions. Carspecken offers that participant behaviors will likely be shaped by uneven political and economic power distribution. Paying attention to the sites, conditions, and relationships between actors, acts, and larger systems was essential to stage two. Particularly because this study attempted to understand the development of activism within individuals sharing a common target, I sought to understand how pre-activist, early-activist, and current-activist behaviors are connected and integrated into the culture and systems in which these participants exist. Further, I used this stage to analyze the connections between participant narratives and those pathways and processes that emerged from the literature review to generate new and synthesized codes.

A necessary validity requirement of this stage is to pay close attention to insider versus outsider positions. As I reconstructed the social system of activists, I sought the insider view, by “pit[ting] their universalizing claims with [my] own and let the two engage in dialogue” (p. 189). I relied on peer debriefing, member checks, and journaling for this purpose. All participants from the first stage were invited to participate in this reflexive process with the goal of getting broad consent of the implications I conceptualized and the coding hierarchy that was emerging from grounded theory; two participants responded and provided positive feedback to my code list with no modifications suggested. Participants were invited to reflect further on questions related to marginalization and/or privilege, and three responded electronically; their comments are embedded in the following chapter. Two female peers—one current student in my program at U.M., and one former student from a foreign training program—with knowledge and application of qualitative methodology and prior experience serving
adolescents—agreed to review a sample of coded transcript segments and my code list. Three participants and their subsequent three-to-four page excerpts of transcript were chosen at random using a random number generator (see www.random.org) in a method proposed by Krejci (2008). Peers gave structured and open-ended feedback; none of the commentary indicated objections to the existing coding that I included in the following chapter.

Stage three of CQO is the final stage whereby I used macrolevel social critique to understand and abstract the findings into a cohesive grounded theory. Appropriate critiques were *good fits*, meaning they saw society as a “complex field of coordinated action that crosses spatial and temporal regions” (p. 202). This theory incorporated ideas of power and privilege as well as an explanation how one’s activism fulfills needs or desires. According to Carspecken (1996), “interests reflect the position of a group economically, politically, and culturally within society” (p. 205).

The emergent grounded theory pays close attention to the sites in which participants functioned as activists, using an examination of social and political power as a way to explain their conditions of action. Presuming I created a satisfying theory in this stage, it should be able to answer the ordinal research questions about how homeless youth activists become and what characteristics describe them. In stage three, it is particularly important to heed Peshkin’s (1988) warning to not turn this project autobiographical by instead *taming my subjectivity* by checking for accounts of distortion and projection through additional validity checks. Whereas in stage two I sought to enter the inside world of participants, I invited them in stage three to gain an “insider’s position in the researcher’s culture” (p. 197). In so doing, I intended for participants to find the
model clear and true to their developmental-contextual pathways as activists. All participants were invited to respond to a visual and textual description of the grounded theory, and five responded. They each made comments affirming that the theory generally fit their own views and likely those of other advocates and activists. In particular, two participants commented that the theory picked up on themes of privilege or marginalization, concepts they never previously considered in those terms, but which they agreed were relevant. A third participant wondered if an additional factor (parenthood) was relevant to the development of advocates; while it might be so, parenthood was not systematically assessed and would require further discernment in another study. A fourth participant who was very supportive of the theory itself felt that one factor that I attributed to him should not have been attributed, and one that I did not should have been attributed (see Figure 4). I reviewed his transcript and agreed with his rationale for the misattribution; however, I found no textual support for the addition. My rationale is that I systemically based attributions on textual analysis of the interviews and subsequent clarifications to the transcript (which this participant made). I did not assume that unattributed factors in a list unequivocally meant a participant did not share any element of a factor, did not find it applicable to other activists, or could not agree post facto that it might apply. I believe post facto endorsement lends credibility to a sense that credible factors were synthesized and properly named. These methods preferred participants’ in vivo access to a phenomenon rather than a post facto sign-on to additional factors; some limitations of this are described in more detail later.
Instruments

Early on in the second chapter, I discussed the debate about whether it is best to describe activists by their behavior or by their intentions and attitudes to act. Believing that activism is both attitudinal and behavior, I was interested in both. However, as I would not define doctors as people who have never treated a patient, I did not define activists as people who have never acted on behalf of homeless youth. I therefore took an inventory approach to the question of how participants engage in activism, particularly if they were not already using terms like activist or advocate. The structured instruments that follow helped establish that participants met the inclusion and exclusion criteria for this study. The first two related instruments also provided a mechanism in which to supplement narrative data with additional information provided outside of the interview.

Activism orientation. The Activism Orientation Scale (AOS, Appendix B) was developed by Corning and Myers in 2002 and shortened by Klar and Kasser in 2009; these researchers found that their shortened AOS had high internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.96) and correlated highly with its original, longer version (r=0.97). In consultation with Klar and Kasser (personal communication, 2011), I further revised the instructions so that all items specifically pertained to activism for homeless youth (instead of global or undirected activism). The revised version had 22 items describing types of activist behaviors, ranging from the mild (e.g., sign a petition on youth homelessness) to the risky (e.g., engage in a political activity in which you knew you will be arrested). Seven risky behaviors and 15 low-risk behaviors were measured. The scale asked participants to describe to what extent they engaged in each of the activities in the past year, and how likely it was that they would engage in each of the following activities
in the future. There were four Likert-type choices for each item (not at all; a little; moderately; a lot) and each item was rated twice, once for past-year engagement and once for future likelihood of engaging. This information is useful in distinguishing established behaviors and presumed intentions.

Activism realization. Participants also completed the Activism Identity and Commitment Scale (AICS, Appendix C), designed by the same authors, Klar and Kasser (2009). According to Klar and Kasser (2009), the scale was created after separate scales measuring identity and commitment loaded onto a single factor that accounted for a total 76% of variance in activity. AICS has high internal consistency (Chronbach’s alpha = 0.96) and was shown to correlate significantly and positively with measures of positive affect, meaning in life, self-actualization, psychological need satisfaction, psychological well-being factors (such as environmental mastery, and positive relations), and social well-being (social acceptance, and social contribution). Klar and Kasser (2009) demonstrated that AOS and AICS correlate with each other (r = 0.71). After consultation with the authors (2011, personal communication), I revised this scale, too, so that all statements pertained specifically to homeless youth activism. AICS asked participants to rate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with eight statements, four of which related to activist identity (e.g., I identify myself as an activist) and four of which related to activist commitment (e.g., I make time for activism, even when I’m busy). Likert-type responses were not at all, a little, moderately, and a lot. AICS introduced an operational definition of activism to the participants, describing it as “advocacy for a social or political cause with various conventional and unconventional means.”
**Participant demographics.** The third instrument used in this study was the participant demographic information form (Appendix D, data presented in Table 4). Following Krejci (2008)’s basic format, this form asked participants to describe themselves along a number of open-ended categories, including sex and gender, age, occupation, level of education, religion and level of spirituality, socioeconomic status as a child, and current socioeconomic status. It also asked participants to list either their name or an alias for the purposes of the study and in future publications or presentations of research. All participants elected to use their own names; 12 opted for their first names and one for her surname. This demographic data was deemed relevant for the purposes of describing participants as individuals with other qualities apart from those surrounding their collective action (i.e., sex, age, education), to discuss their collective action in light of their length of experience with the population, and to contribute knowledge around factors of activists identified in the literature review (i.e., religion, socioeconomic status).

The information collected from AOS and AICS instruments are presented in the following chapter. I did not use any of the instruments to create a mixed-methods approach (for example, by computing between-group differences). These instruments were used to (1) screen participants so that they fit the operational definition of activist, and (2) describe in succinct terms the range of activist activity and, along with the demographic form, present a broad overview of the participants interviewed for this research.
Chapter IV: Results

The results presented in this chapter are a rich exploration of activists and advocates for homeless youth using the methods outlined in Chapter Three. The second stage of CQO requires a presentation of systems relationships in an attempt to understand how behavior is shaped by forces primarily external to individuals. A key question in CQO concerns how participants and their cultures (defined broadly) interact to create and reproduce advocacy and activism for homeless youth. This chapter seeks to accomplish that using a ground theory to organize and contain 13 participants’ interview and survey data. Over 1,020 quotations and ninety-two codes were analyzed in this chapter to richly address the research question: Why do people become and remain advocates for homeless youth? Using CQO, I broke down that question into an initial description of the focal region of homeless youth advocates, and then explicate a variety of reasons that participants became and remained advocates for this population despite its inherent challenges.

Setting the stage: Understanding the advocate in context

The critical qualitative orientation (CQO) is based on an establishment of a focal region, which includes (1) the object of inquiry (homeless youth activists) and phenomenon (why do people become and remain such), (2) the social sites they inhabit (careers, organizations, and coalitions), and (3) the settings in which they roam (the beliefs about their work, the boundaries between their work and other careers and identities, resources needed to do the work, and so on). The focal region will be explicated throughout this results section, but will require some initial definition through
a surface-level understanding of what activists do and where they work. The first section is therefore described as “Setting the stage: Understanding the advocate in context.” It includes a range of descriptors about the careers and current tasks of homeless youth activists sampled in this study, followed by a discussion of their work products, namely the accomplishments that they have secured for homeless youth through their work. Additionally, it describes outcomes that they have indicated as markers of success in their line of work.

Moving from the object of inquiry to the social sites of this cohort, I describe three nested entities that surround homeless youth activists in their line of work. The micro social site is first; it characterizes the organizations that employ these activists, including information about the organizations’ missions, cultures, and funding as they pertain to doing advocacy. Some participants compared their organizations to others, providing additional insight into the range of places that engage in advocacy. Participants spoke their organizations being the gatekeepers to social change, influencing the type and frequency of advocacy they can embark on. The influence is bidirectional, however, as some participants also detail ways that they’ve influenced the organizations in types and frequencies of advocacy.

The meso social site is second; it details the coalitions that participants are part of, sometimes through, and sometimes independent of, their organizations. Many speak about the importance of doing advocacy with others in this social site, and describe the shared activities that are germane to social change within coalitions. While most participants identify common goals that their coalition partners work toward, most also detail the limitations and challenges of doing advocacy in this way.
The macro social site is third. My description of the national context of homeless youth advocacy attempts to capture the impact that geography has on the nature of youth homelessness and the agendas and successes of activists. This site is further delineated by participants’ understanding of social change writ large for homeless youth, from past, present, and future perspectives. That is, participants share their impressions of social change for homeless youth by reflecting on where this “movement” (or lack thereof) has been, where it is now, and where it might be or ought to be headed. This temporal analysis acts as a moving viewfinder, reflecting on the changes that participants have noticed in youth homelessness and activism over time.

**What advocates do**

**Current advocacy.** All 13 participants described the current work they did as advocates and activists for homeless youth. As previously stated (see Table 4), there is substantial variability in the types of jobs that participants hold and the scope of their organizations’ work, both in terms of population and geographic coverage. Kirsten, a 32 year-old Director of Advocacy and Volunteer Services at a statewide social service agency, is one of those individuals that advocates for other disenfranchised populations in addition to homeless youth:

> I also cover everything else, so refugees and financial counseling and people with disabilities and older adults, and there's a very long list of things that I pay attention to, so I’m not by any stretch of the imagination a...full-time advocate on this stuff.

Additional tallies show that four advocates hold or held positions at organizations with national scope, three hold positions at statewide organizations, and six hold positions at
local organizations. These numbers do not tell a full story, however, since all but one advocate who is involved at a local or state level is also part of state and/or national coalitions and committees working to address youth homelessness.

In the broadest sense, describing the impact that their work has on the population they advocate for, the opinion of several participants was that their roles were fairly significant. André, a 37 year-old Policy and Program Analyst at a national federation on homelessness, stated that, “typically homeless youth don’t have a large convening voice that gets heard on a national level, so in effect I should be their voice, maybe not directly but be a voice for them.” Dan, a 50 year-old Executive Director at a youth-serving agency, spoke of his role in a similar manner: “I am involved in pushing people for change.” And Debby, a 61 year-old Executive Director at a youth-serving agency and Chair of a national council for homeless youth policy, elaborated on the personal role of homeless youth advocates that she knows:

I think we all feel some sense that we are very significant, and I think it’s true in …protecting this group of kids from being ignored and, you know, we…felt a tremendous part, many of us, in changing things to humanize them in behalf of these young people. And I think there is a sensibility that we are significant in maintaining good protection for them.

Like Debby, several other advocates spoke unprompted about how they defined their work not only in terms of specific job duties, but also in terms of impact and significance for homeless youth. Instead of speaking generally about the work being done, they often made such impact personal, referencing their own work being done to address the problems and solutions. Jeff, a 35 year-old Research and Communications Director at a national think-tank, spoke about his personal contribution as an advocate: “It kind of

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10 For the purposes of this research, three participants who lead agencies or policy programs in Washington, D.C. for D.C. constituents were coded at the local level.
becomes a personal challenge to think through all the innovative ways that policies could be changed and programs could be changed to improve and really help the chances that these kids have.” An advocate who asked that this statement remain anonymous commented that “part of me just kind of naturally wants to make sure that what I’m doing has as big of an impact as possible…I feel like it’s the work that I do here, whether it’s research or advocacy or managing my staff, I feel like it definitely is pushing us, pushing the country in the right direction.” More will be said later in this chapter about the personal responsibility that many participants identified.

Homeless youth advocates are also youth advocates, requiring a significant command of both policies and practices surrounding youth development and homelessness. Bob, a 45 year-old Policy Director at a national association, spoke of his roles in two worlds:

We kind of are a hybrid. Sometimes our work was thought of as children, youth and family policy, and um, sometimes were thought of as homeless policy …. Like to be a homeless advocate you don’t really need to know much about the child welfare system, but to be a homeless youth advocate you need to have some foundational knowledge about the child welfare system or know where to get that knowledge or know who advocates for it, who runs the programs at the state level. And so it’s having to examine public policy and public programs that you wouldn’t necessarily need to know if you weren’t focused on children and youth.

Bob is one of the three participants who have been engaged full time at various points in their careers in homeless youth advocacy. Other advocates who are engaged in this issue part-time did not articulate the hybrid role. Notwithstanding, the data show coalescence around specific skills that participants believed were necessary to do this work regardless of one’s length of engagement in advocacy (described more fully in a later section).
Figures 1 and 2 describe the specific behaviors that characterize the work of participants by presenting responses to the Activism Orientation Scale (AOS; developed by Corning & Myers, 2009; shortened by Klar & Casser, 2009; modified by Ameen, 2011). Figure 1 shows participants’ responses to questions about their activities and behaviors related to homeless youth activism and advocacy over the last 12 months. Questions one through 15, which reference relatively low risk behaviors (from giving talks about youth homelessness to sending letters to elected officials), were generally endorsed “moderately” or “a lot.” The exceptions were boycotting products and participating in marches and demonstrations, which received very little endorsement. Of the seven high-risk behaviors that could lead to arrest (questions 16 through 22), five behaviors were not endorsed at all; in political demonstrations for homeless youth, one participant in the past year participant in “a little” in events where arrest was almost certain, and three in events where arrest was possible. Figure 2 assessed the same behaviors and activities, but asked participants to predict the likelihood of engaging in them at some point in the future. Given the heavy shading, participants appeared eager to engage in low-risk behaviors, often with greater likelihood than they had in the past. Of note, six more participants expected to engage in marches and demonstrations in the future than they had in the past, possibly foreshadowing a desired trend of greater visibility for youth in the political sphere. Future high-risk behaviors still received overall low endorsement rates, and no participant expect that they would engage in these “moderately” or “a lot.” Nevertheless, 27 participants said they would engage “a little” in some type of high-risk behavior in the future, compared to only four who have done so in the past.
Figure 1: Representative behaviors/activities completed in the last twelve months, shaded by frequency of participant endorsement (maximum is 13)*

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<td>3. Organized a political event (e.g. talk, support group, march) on youth homelessness?</td>
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<td>9. Attended a political organization's regular planning meeting focused on youth homelessness?</td>
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<td>11. Encouraged a friend to join a homeless youth organization?</td>
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<td>12. Donated money to a homeless youth organization?</td>
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<td>13. Wore a t-shirt or button with a message about youth homelessness?</td>
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<td>14. Participated in a homeless youth protest march or demonstration?</td>
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<td>16. Engaged in a political act. for youth homelessness in which you knew you’d be arrested?</td>
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<td>18. Engaged in a polit. act. for homeless youth in which you feared some of your possess. would be damaged?</td>
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<td>20. Engaged in an illegal act as part of a homeless youth protest?</td>
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<td>21. Blocked access to a building or public area with your body for reason related to youth homelessness?</td>
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<td>22. Engaged in any political activity for homeless youth in which you feared for your pers. safety?</td>
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Figure 2: Representative behaviors/activities expected sometime in the future, shaded by frequency of participant endorsement (maximum is 13)*

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<td>1. Will invite a friend to attend a meeting of a homelessness youth organization or event?</td>
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<td>2. Will serve as an officer in an organization involved with youth homelessness?</td>
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<td>3. Will organize a political event (e.g. talk, support group, march) on youth homelessness?</td>
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<td>4. Will give a lecture or talk about youth homelessness as a social or political issue?</td>
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<td>6. Will boycott a product for reasons related to youth homelessness?</td>
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<td>7. Will distribute information representing the youth homelessness cause?</td>
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<td>10. Will sign a petition for a homeless youth cause?</td>
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<td>11. Will encourage a friend to join a homeless youth organization?</td>
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<td>12. Will donate money to a homeless youth organization?</td>
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<td>13. Will wear a t-shirt or button with a message about youth homelessness?</td>
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<td>14. Will participate in a homeless youth protest March or demonstration?</td>
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<td>15. Will help organize a campaign on youth homelessness as a social or political topic?</td>
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<td>16. Will engage in a political action for youth homelessness in which you know you will be arrested?</td>
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<td>17. Will engage in a physical confrontation at a political rally concerning youth homelessness?</td>
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<td>18. Will engage in a political action for homeless youth in which you fear that some of your possessions will be damaged?</td>
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<td>19. Will engage in political action for homeless youth in which you suspect there’d be a confrontation/possible arrest?</td>
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<td>20. Will engage in an illegal act as part of a homeless youth protest?</td>
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<td>21. Will block access to a building or public area with your body for reasons related to youth homelessness?</td>
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<td>22. Will engage in any political action for homeless youth in which you fear for your personal safety?</td>
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In addition to surveys about their behaviors as activists and advocates for homeless youth, participants also spoke of their duties during interviews. Verbally, participants identified a core set of duties that define what they do: Largely evaluated and promoted programs and policies that will improve conditions for homeless youth or reduced the number of them in America, and prevented further youth from becoming homeless. They did so by conducting and/or disseminating research reports, preparing position statements and reports on current or proposed policies, and directly influencing the policy process through democratic involvement (lobbying, meeting with elected officials, testifying before panels, etc.). This work does not happen alone: Seven of thirteen participants spoke about their efforts to engage youth in collective action, twelve participants spoke about the activities of sharing a policy agenda with peer advocates in collaborative networks and coalitions, and 11 spoke about opening doors for other people to advocate as well. Maggie, a 30 year-old Senior Policy Analyst for a local youth advocacy coalition, explained that part of her job is to “provide opportunities for the activists or the mobilizers or the providers to have a chance in front of decision-makers to voice those concerns in whatever format they see fit.” She is able to do this because her role provides her with awareness of speaking opportunities and affords relationships with policymakers.

The work of a homeless youth advocate does not remain static from day to day or week to week. Several participants spoke about a bevy of responsibilities that ran a large gamut, requiring them to “wear many hats” and “do a variety of different things.” For example, Jeff reported,

I…wear so many different hats in this job that, you know, it’s hard to kind of pick just one. But I think…they all apply in different situations,
um, so I certainly won’t take offense if one is used more than another.
[Laughs] You know, sometimes I am doing research. Sometimes I’m
writing. Sometimes I’m speaking. Sometimes I’m lobbying. Sometimes
I’m doing other kinds of advocacy. It just kind of depends on the day to
some extent. I guess ‘advocate’ would probably be the…broadest word to
use.

In a similar way to Jeff, Maggie does not see her only role as an advocate, but also a
“convener” and a “bridge between people:"

I do a lot of advocacy work in a variety of ways, be it testifying, writing
reports, doing op-eds or articles, issue briefs, talking points and a variety
of things that I then disseminate out via that bridge role to a variety of
partners…[A] lot what I do is create bridges between people who are on
the ground living and breathing this and understanding these young people
on a day-to-day to the people who are making policy and legislative
decision-making.

Jon, a 60 year-old Associate Director at a locally-focused homeless agency, was not
always convinced that what he did constituted advocacy. He explained, “My perspective
is if we create a task force on elderly in shelters that looks at the issue and tries to come
up with some ideas of what we could do, I don’t know if that's strictly advocacy.” Dan
also offered a different take on advocacy, inferring that fundraising was connected to
opening doors for more services: “I probably spend more time advocating with potential
donors than anyone else.”

As I outlined and will discuss more thoroughly later, research is a critical factor in
the common work of most advocates; in fact, nine spoke about the importance of
advocates being engaged in research at some level. For Ms. Hyatt, a 26 year-old Project
Consultant and Social Media Coordinator for a statewide homeless youth policy
initiative, research was a near-constant focus of her job: “I’m looking at all the existing
research out there on youth homelessness and what’s coming out, and then try to share it
in ways that makes it accessible to policymakers and state agencies, community members
and service providers.” Maggie believed that intervention and outcome research informs the recommendations she makes as an advocate, but she must tailor her recommendations to be “reflective of what our local needs are.”

Some of the participants in this group did not engage with homeless youth regularly, while others had frequent or constant interactions. This role distinction had to do primarily with whether their organization served young people, and secondarily with whether they were charged with policy work versus administering or developing youth programs. For Rich, a 44 year-old Executive Director at a statewide organization that manages supportive housing projects, his work now is largely administrative. He reported,

“I always kind of wonder about my own balance even now being the director of the statewide program that does more than just youth, you know. I just feel a little bit far removed, and especially as a parent of young children, you know… I’m not even around youth culture as much as I used to anymore… My [own] kids are going to Disney On Ice.”

Rich came from a national organization where he worked on homeless youth policy full-time. For the participants who were not hired to do advocacy full-time, they were generally charged with program administration duties. Sue, a 59 year-old Executive Director at a locally-focused youth agency, must run an organization in addition to creating social change for homeless youth. She described her primary job function thusly:

[A]lways the focus, at least for me [has been] around young people, making sure I had the right staff in place, making sure the training was good, making sure that…the philosophy that I believed in…continued in some way, shape or manner.

In a later section, I describe participants’ perceptions of the importance of maintaining connections with youth in order to do this work authentically. It would suffice to say now
that there does not appear to be a consensus, and many participants said they were capable of staying informed about the needs of homeless youth without interacting regularly with them.

**Accomplishments of advocates.** Nine participants spoke about their specific accomplishments in advocacy. While this list is by no means complete, it is intended to offer a sampling of successes and identify patterns around those successes. I share some of these in detail, and aggregate others that were told to me during the course of interviews.

Some participants reflected on their current successes, such as Ms. Hyatt’s published compilation of a “some of the best recommendations out there on ending youth homelessness” and Jon’s harm-reduction approach which is garnering national attention by the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness. On the other hand, some participants in this study have successes that reach back one to three decades. Debby takes modest credit for being “part of the early voices…that mounted a campaign to change the laws of this country such that we were not supposed to be permitted to lock up status offenders or handle status offenders [such as runaway youth] as if these acts were tantamount to criminal acts.” Dan explained that his work on a national committee produced a “Standards of Excellence” guide which outlines proper ways that state systems can work with youth who age out of foster-care and transition into adulthood.

Accomplishments for advocates seem to fall along national, state, and local lines. Examples of federal youth advocacy – provided by Bob, Sue, and Jeff – are illustrative of efforts to channel passion into a bill and find support in various ways. Bob, who had been
engaged in homeless youth advocacy for 10 years, recounted two significant successes. The first was the introduction of a “Place to Call Home Act,” which was a comprehensive federal Bill that sought to increase the number of protections for runaway and homeless youth. This Bill came from a set of principles that his organization’s members held: That “every young person should have a place to call home and that home should include… connections to caring adults and supportive peers, and access to a network of high-quality resources and support to grow and develop and become independent.” Bob explained that he guided the Bill’s development in his organization’s policy committee by “convert[ing] that vision into ‘well, where are there moments of opportunity in public policy to advance that vision?’” Not only did he need to guide his fellow advocates, but he also needed to identify a policymaker who could represent it before Congress. “We wouldn’t have been successful if we hadn’t found a member of Congress who is also of our opinion that it’s intolerable that there are young people in our country who don’t have a safe place to live at night.” It was Bob’s strategy to have this Congressperson “drop a very large bill that wasn’t intended to pass in full,” assumedly so that it could make a political impact and certain pieces of the Bill could find their way into future legislation, which is what occurred.

The second of Bob’s major accomplishments was helping to secure a $19 million increase in federal appropriations in RHY funding which he described as “a nice boost in resources that facilitated more grants to more organizations to do intervention work with runaway and homeless youth.” Despite this increase, RHY funding levels have since been stagnant. For an advocate like Debby, who also provide services to youth, just being “able to to assure some real quality of service to this community for so long” is itself an
accomplishment. She reasons, “the past few years have been really, really, really bad for us, very difficult. So, I’m very proud … that we’re still kicking. I’m proud that we have, you know?”

Like Bob, Sue spoke about introducing federal legislation, having “helped write the Chafee Bill for kids aging out foster care, which has helped a lot of our homeless youth across the country.” She recollected that the Bill came about from discussions she was having as part of two national coalitions about foster-care youth. She recollected thinking at the time,

Here were kids that we as a society are parents for up until the day they turn 18. They turn 18 and it’s like, ‘Have a nice life.’ Well, we don’t do that same philosophy. We don’t that with our own children… So that's kind of the philosophical conversations that were happening. And then, we just started evolving to a whole theoretical construct of how that would look. What should that look like? What could that look like? I mean, states still have the, you know, still can do some design work on their own and…figure out how to do that based on what they need in their own state, but if there were some federal allocations that could drive some of that, maybe, maybe there would be young people that weren’t so many, young people, homeless, that were former foster kids.

In a similar rubric as Bob, she worked to articulate that vision with language with policy suggestions and transformed it with language that is customary and germane to federal policy. Finally, she worked to find Congressional support for the Bill. Sue remarked, “We had a lot of support. It wasn’t hard to get it supported at that time, and Senator Chafee is the one who was the lead on that at the time. So that's why it’s the Chafee Bill…It was pretty fun when I look back on it. When I was doing it, it was a big pain. But I learned a lot.”

Jeff rounds out the three participants who spoke about their accomplishments in federal legislation. He credited one formerly homeless youth that came the LGBT policy
division he directs with being a major inspiration on his organization developing a
“founding document in terms of research n LGBT youth homelessness.” He presented the
document to the Administration for Children, Youth and Families at the Department of
Health and Human Services and found support with the Commissioner.

After a couple of meetings, I think we kind of sold him on…really focusing on
this…population. And from there we just…we wanted to keep the issue alive.
We wanted to make sure that we were always having new products so we could
be reaching out to [Commissioner] Bryan [Samuels] and other decision-makers to
keep educating them about the population.

Jeff used interviews with local homeless youth to build additional “products,” including
blogs, newspaper columns, and longer reports. He believes this was strategic, in that “it
always helps if…like if you’re trying to lobby somebody to have a new product that you
want to share with them.” But Jeff’s later accomplishment was even larger: He was able
to push for inclusion of a pilot program on family reunification for LGBT homeless youth
in Senator John Kerry’s 2011 Bill for homeless and foster care youth. According to Jeff,
this was the first time ever that LGBT homeless youth were identified in a Bill. The
process involved a significant amount of serendipity:

I was having a meeting with Senator Kerry’s staff about something
else…and it really resonated with the senator’s staff…and so they thought,
his staff, that it might be possible to work something into that draft bill
about LGBT youth homelessness…Then I followed up with them and had
lots of, you know, follow-up meetings, conversations, and talked through
what the best way was to work LGBT youth into this larger bill that he
was doing, and we got that done.

At the state level, both Rich and Jon were centrally involved in getting their states
(Minnesota and Maine, respectively) to pass their own Runaway and Homeless Youth
Acts. Jon stated that the accomplishment was significant in that it ensured “some sense of
responsibility that there were young people that were falling out of the system and that
there were [now funded] programs that were trying to work with them.” Initially in Maine’s government, “there was years of denial that that group even existed.” John described that his first step was to “bring homeless youth providers across our state together into kind of a group that now meets regularly and does some advocacy around what kids’ needs are and how to organize services.” Rich explained that getting the state to pass this Act was a “long, long process. I mean, literally…I tell people took us five years to enact, you know, because it took us that long to kind of get our ducks in a row.” When the law was passed, it was not funded. It took the work of another advocate, Kirsten, to found a coalition in the state she shared with Rich at the time, and secure funding. Kirsten recollected that, in 2006,

pretty much it was just he and I running around the capital. And then, we wanted to get it funded in 2007 and he was no longer here. We brought together all of the homeless youth serving providers to say, like, “We gotta work together and make sure this thing gets passed.” And then, after that, we were kind of a coalition that had been created for that purpose of passing and maintaining the funding.

Participants in this study have also been active at the local level to increase visibility and services for homeless youth. Maggie developed and led her city’s first-ever comprehensive count and descriptive study of homeless youth in 2011. Rich and Sue helped implement new housing models for homeless youth. Sue’s efforts helped turn the local response away from group homes:

Everybody put everybody in a group home. Then all of a sudden we realized that kids were running away from the group home—hello!...We started doing more scattered departments because a lot of kids wanted that much independence and we were punishing them for running away when they were telling us they really didn’t want to live in a group setting.

As a gay-identified attorney, Rich banded together with “a group of lesbians and a couple of gay social workers” to “form the community that started the first Host Home Program
for LGBT youth around the Twin Cities in 1999.” Host homes are similar in nature to the way any family might take in a foreign exchange student. He recalled that the process grew from “early stages [of trying] to actually institute programmatic responses beyond just having kind of wild-eyed visions of advocacy and trying to do what we could within our own systems of care.” His coalition eventually got “a proposal together of what the Host Home Program would do and, um, and we eventually got, uh, if I remember right, we got a seed grant from one of the foundations that it seems like once we got our foot in the door with one foundation, it was easier to open up the doors for dialogue with other foundations.”

**Measuring the success of advocates’ work.** For all the job descriptions that advocates fill and all the accomplishments under their belts, it would not be possible to describe what they do without discussing their indicators of success. Nine participants shared various ideas of success, from impacting individuals and service delivery to impacting systems and the public at large.

Starting at the individual level, Sue’s framework of success appears to derive from a question she asks herself: “Would I do that for my own child?” She articulated a desire to see young people loved and cared for (what she referred to as “preachy”), so that they might develop into healthy adults:

>[M]y end goal is that young people are responsible citizens in our country, that they understand what it means to be part of a community that, uh, take responsibility for themselves and the people around them. I guess that's always my angle is that they grow up to be, you know, pretty cool adults, that they can figure out how to live their lives and have families and get…do all the traditional things that most of them really just want, have a nice home, have a nice family. You know, most people, that's all they really want.
For Liz, a 32 year-old self described “Mother Hen” and Executive Director of a homeless youth program, her idea of success is meeting youths’ need for respite from the streets by having support in place:

I want every young person, whether a minor or not a minor, to have a safe place to go. If they’re in a situation where they are on the streets or about to be on the streets…there just needs to be a safe place for them to go. And when I say safe I don’t just mean, you know, for their physical safety but like a nurturing, supporting place. While we figure out all the…underlying problems in our society, [chuckles] there just needs to be like a…safe haven where people are…

Participants like Sue, Debby, Liz, and Maggie hoped that their success would be measured by recognition and continued availability of services when they are needed—whether that was more shelter beds, a centralized intake process for youth in need of housing, or general availability (and appreciation) of services for youth. Debby wanted “recognition that we play a significant role. Some people don’t really know what we do.”

Bob also recognized that success on one level depends on whether the “programs that are most tied to the homeless youth [get] maintained? What’s the resource level? Are there increases, declines? Those kind of precise, you know, more targeted measures.”

Four participants articulated a need for greater awareness of youth homelessness. Debby’s statement characterizes this sentiment: “I think some of it is the increase in the awareness that exists and the reasonable responses to, you know, that we really must do this.” Maggie speculated that awareness might lead to greater political leadership on the issue. She spoke about success in terms of building an integrated, collective vision for youth in her local area that would be expected to have “a ripple effect in the outcomes for youth generally.” Similarly, Ms. Hyatt reported a desire to see “a statewide plan to end
youth homelessness” which could lead to better statistics on homeless youth to understand where trends were headed and eventually work to bring those numbers down.

Although four participants believed it was possible to end youth homelessness completely, no advocate felt that his or her success could hinge entirely on that marker. Bob explained, “I think the work I do matters. I would like to think the work not just that I do but that advocates do makes a bigger difference than it ends up. We just still have persistent and chronic conditions in our country that are not marks of a great society.” In recognizing that suffering still persisted, Dan stated, “the fact is that I feel good tonight because I can live with the small victories.” Rich reported, “success for me is just feeling like I’ve contributed to a better society on a general welfare stand.”

For a majority of participants, success was future-oriented; they anticipated that their incremental efforts would lead to untold results down the road. This was particularly salient in advocates such as Bob and André who were not working in direct service. As a full-time advocate, Bob explained that “I don’t have encounters with people who are receiving services, so the reward I have to look for is some other kind of measure.” André, who previously provided direct service and case management, also noticed a shift in the idea of success. “Before it’s like doing the work itself was very satisfying and you could actually see the change and do this and…it was great. But now I find myself, as I get older, trying to…I have to remind myself…why I’m doing the work that I’m doing or that the work that I’m doing is effective.” Bob inferred that people who get pleasure from seeing “at least some good news each week” may not be suited for policy work around youth homelessness. André stated that seeing the success of one’s
work (i.e., from a research report on youth homelessness) is rarely ever immediate: “I think it’s gonna be something that’s always in the works, always down the line.”

**Where advocates work: The micro (organizational) level**

All of the participants in this study were employed by organizations that gave them some latitude to engage in advocacy. According to CQO, the sites at which advocates are found are often telling because they constitute the boundaries and qualities of the work. Moreover, they help explain the phenomenon central to this study: Why do people become and stay homeless youth activists. Much like advocates themselves, organizations have histories, cultures, and missions of their own. To link one with the other in an ecological system enriches the phenomenon. Whereas subsequent sections will outline the qualities of coalitions that participants joined or formed, as well as the state of social change for homeless youth, this first section will describe five characteristics of the micro site; that is, the organizations that advocates inhabit. The data reveal that (a) Some participants identified their organization’s responsibility in addressing youth homelessness by changing society, serving as a model to other organizations, or influencing public policy; (b) some organizations are impacted by funding sources and by what one participant called “self-interest”; (c) some organizations appeared to facilitate or constraint participants’ roles in the social change process; and (d) some organizations were receptive to participants’ efforts to shape a policy agenda.

**Organizational responsibility.** All participants provided examples of how their organizations were serving homeless youth in some way. Kirsten illustrated that this work often stemmed from an institutional sense of responsibility: “I think that the
organization has increasingly understood that part of our responsibility is to build the public will...I feel like it’s very clear to us organization-wise that we are charged with not just providing services to people but building the public will.” As for how that public will is shaped, several participants described organizational efforts to influence the policy process. André believes that his organization clearly differentiates between strategies that would end homeless versus those that would maintain it. He stated, “Feeding homeless people is very important of course, but that's not going to alleviate their homelessness status. Wanting to swim, you know, from here to Cuba or something is gonna raise awareness of the issue but it’s not really going to solve it.” Rich, having once worked at the same organization, gave examples of how they used data to change the focus on what receives federal funding: Its aim was “not just throwing out money at pitiful stories about kids that are starving on the streets” but rather asking “what…works to change that around” and “how do we talk about long-term change for kids?” Other participants identified a critical role by which their organizations influence the policy process by working with policymakers. For example, Maggie’s organization was positioned to work directly with those in power: “[W]e can go in and do those backdoor conversations and get government buy-in, but also…make sure that when we’re doing that we’re reflecting the actual needs of the community we’re talking about.” Jeff explained that his organization sought influence in a concerted way: “We’re not trying to…mobilize lots of people to do something across the country. That's not really the model we use. We’re much more about influencing the influencers, and so trying to like get good information and good ideas into the hands of people who can do something with them.”
Three participants spoke about the influence they hope to have on other youth-serving or advocacy-based organizations. André illustrated this by describing that “where [our organization] comes in is to…help guide people with the best practices and…interventions and models to respond appropriately.” Jon believes that his organization’s low-barrier model of care provision is worth broader adoption by the provider community:

We let everybody in. We don’t care if you’re high or not or if you’re untreated in your mental illness. Our primary goal is to get you in here so we can help and keep you safe and ultimately help you deal with those issues…[S]o you want that kind of thing to be talked about for programs that have pretty high barriers and expectations and how that can work.

Participants explored the long-range impact that their organizations might have. Dan explained that his organization’s efforts went toward “trying to raise a generation of caregivers who can raise the next generation of children.” Debby offered that her organization is “trying to create paths that lead to a life…where their talents and skills can be utilized and where we…feel like equals at least in large measure to…the chance of happiness in life.” Maggie said that there 120-member organization was “generally in the mindset of [asking], ‘How do we propel and…prepare young people for success?’” Bob, who stated that he was “less optimistic” over time of ever seeing an end to youth homelessness, was conservative about his organization’s impact: “I mean, how can one little nonprofit organization made of some other small nonprofit organizations change the world?

Four participants outlined the importance of sustained institutional involvement in advocacy. Jon noted that lengthy engagement gave them a better command on history: “At this point I think we probably have more history of homeless advocacy and services
in Maine that almost anybody, and that's…one of the positives that you have when you’re trying to make changes. You know when this is the third time this happened or the fifth time that we’ve had the same conversation.” Maggie stated that sustained advocacy efforts resulted in shifts in support by her organization’s membership base:

At the onset we were very much about tracking what was happening and the need for members to weigh in. Right now, I think we’re very much at a…pivotal point where executive directors of our member organizations have faith in our staff and institutional capacity to really synthesize information that they give us with information we get from research and from local policy…[and] to actually inform some of those changes.

**Impact of funding on organization.** Eight participants noted that their organization’s advocacy and activism was in some way impacted by their sources of funding, whether they were private or public dollars. Because Maggie’s organization is largely funded by foundations, she believed that “some of our funding I think dictates the type of work organizationally we take on” but she found hardly any constraints on youth homelessness efforts once they secured pockets of funding for that issue.” André’s organization, more than 75% funded by foundation grants, stated “I think it would probably be a little less of biting the hand that feeds us and more of making sure…that we do what we said we were gonna do because we got fed.” Dan’s organization also does not rely on public funding:

Because we ask normal citizens to give us this money, it allows us as a private org to do more community organizing and advocacy; not just testifying and meeting behind the scenes, but it may be standing out with signs with our young people outside of city hall.

In cases where Dan’s private donors may object to their efforts, he has found ways around that potential barrier. “Sometimes I have had not to participate in things because
people have been big donors of ours. In that conversation we may just do our work through the [coalition].”

Taking government grants has an impact on what some organizations’ can claim or do, but the chilling effect does not appear to be uniform. Maggie reported, “I’ve seen it organizationally in that they have relied heavily on federal dollars and that has really dictated the type of work and scope of work that they do.” Ms. Hyatt explained that her organization is “a grant-funded project but within a state agency, and so we always kind of look at the state perspective.” Sue did not feel that her organization, which relied on federal dollars, was impacted in the same ways. Dan explained, “If you receive government money, nothing precludes you, in theory, from lobbying. What precludes you is what percentage of your time you can spend lobbying.”

Three participants identified a tension amongst organizations trying to preserve and perpetuate their agencies versus those trying to ultimately alleviate the need for their services. There was no consensus around the percentage of organizations at either end, yet each participant identified him or herself on the latter end. Theresa predicted that a truly successful impact could put them out of business: “We’re working toward a society that’s more inclusive and more accepting and affirming of LGBT youth, and if that actually happens then our programs won’t be needed.” On the other hand, she identified “other colleagues I work closely with where I would say they’re probably more drawn to advocacy from the point of view of increasing services, if you will.” Debby was also aware of “a lot of people who probably spend a lot of time advocating to keep their programs alive” but believed they were outnumbered by those who were “really highly connected to this field, [whose] passion really is the broader concern.” Jon articulated a
frustration that many human service providers are “self-interested” and do not advocate consistently around issues that don’t directly affect their bottom line – issues “like hunger …. that really impact the folks we work with..It’s just interesting that until it affects their budgets it’s less an issue of population.” He has gone against these providers while advocating: “So sometimes we’ll say things that might [chuckles] undercut their stance or their funding because we think it’s right, and then people don’t like us for a while.”

**Organizations shape advocates.** A clear majority of participants (nine of 13) spoke to the ways that their organizations shape their engagement; at some times facilitating it and other times constraining it. Some participants have gotten approval for their advocacy from their organizations’ directors and management. Kirsten felt that the heads’ buy-in gave her the freedom to develop a youth homelessness policy agenda: “One of our strategic imperatives is to end homelessness for children and youth, and so you know, it’s very clear from this organization that this is a really important area of work.” She added, “Our voice is uniquely powerful because we do provide statewide services and a whole host of stuff that fit into us wanting to do something.” In fact, Kirsten’s organization provides her with leave and administrative resources to host coalition meetings. Theresa stated that her manager, the Executive Director was instrumental: “I think he tries to get people engaged, and he understands the importance of networking with your colleagues and having partnerships with other agencies.”

Some participants must get buy-in from the Board of Directors for the work they do, and two spoke of the intricacies involved with that layer of approval. Jon noted that his organization’s Board “gets” that their mission is inclusive of advocacy and only recalled them stepping in “when there have been big statewide issues” that might have
funding implications; in one case, the organization temporarily lost some of its faith-based funding when it spoke out in favor of gay marriage equality. Theresa noted that the Board’s responsibility is to understand how all the efforts its organization takes on “connect together” and relate to their mission statement. In her experience, “I think there have been questions from time to time of, how much of our work is being an LGBT service provider and how much is being an LGBT advocate? How much is providing a homeless youth program versus homeless youth advocacy?” Theresa recalled conversations “helping them understand the value of the work that's done and what goes along with that…we often say part of our job is putting ourselves out of business eventually.”

André reported that he must be “be very cognizant of” his organization’s “voice and their perspective,” along with their funding ties. André had been employed by his organization a little more than one year. On the other hand, three participants with longstanding terms as their agency’s heads did not identify the same challenges. Illustrative of that sentiment was Dan: “I have a voice that can make sense. I’ve been a CEO for almost 20 years. No one is stopping me from spending the time and doing the work.” Similarly, Debby said that she was “a longstanding ED [executive director] and so I think that I’m given my own head, a lot more than a lot of people would be.”

Ms. Hyatt recognized that her positionality within a state agency made it “a little bit inappropriate to use the term ‘advocate’ or ‘advocacy.’ We’re a nonpartisan, you know… a nonpartisan think tank for the state legislature, and so, um, we have to be a little careful about any kind of…image of bias as like an advocate since we’re sort of presenting the research and should be…theoretically unbiased.
Advocates shape organizations. Five participants identified their own stake in affecting the direction their organization takes in policy and advocacy, in very unique ways. Dan inferred that he set the tone within his organization as it relates to advocacy: “It is shortsighted in a business sense that leaders don’t take the time to affect strategy. I have a bias towards those who are doing the work.” Liz affected change in her organization’s capacity to address core social change by breaking away from the parent organization that was ostensibly limited her capacity to advocate:

I didn’t need a title. I didn’t need the name. I didn’t need anything. I just needed this program to flourish, and I thought like it was stagnant and I felt like impotent, like Groundhog Day, like putting Band-Aids on things.

Liz began a parallel initiative to expand services and advocacy for youth, which has been met positively thus far, which gave her increased flexibility to be vocal, in a way that was more receptive and less alienating: She reported that “people are so excited about what we’re doing and I think a lot of it is the way I’m showing up for them. I’m not showing up as like this pretty conceited person anymore. I’m showing up different to them.”

For his part, André believed that he was moving the needle on a specific issue by encouraging his organization to look more closely at racial disparities amongst homeless youth:

I feel like we can’t really tackle the issue of homelessness without talking about race...[but] you know, we’re not a social justice organization... We’re having focus on homelessness and, housing being the solution to it. So it’s a bit out of our scope, but being able to at least feel like I have that on people’s radar makes me feel like maybe I can accomplish.

Not all efforts to affect change are permanent. While Jeff was able to bring LGBT youth homelessness into the federal agenda, he recognized that his ability to have his
organization maintain constant focus in this area was limited, since he did not feel that he was “in position to be saying we should be diverting resources” from one population to another, making it personally “difficult just given the fact that we’re operating in a reality that has a lot of constraints in terms of resources.”

**Where advocates work: The meso (coalition) level**

As all of the participants in this study performed their work in organizations, all participants conducted a sizeable portion of their advocacy in and through coalitions. Coalitions here are defined as an alliance of advocates (representing themselves or their organizations) brought together for a shared purpose of collective action for homeless youth. Some coalitions have time-limits and closed foci, others are open-ended in both regards. The importance of coalitions for accomplishing social change is emphasized by the examples that follow, and highlights an ecological site of involvement for homeless youth advocates.

**A range of coalition types and activities.** Ten participants discussed the common activities of the coalitions they were involved in. They include action campaigns around particular legislative issues, organized visits to the state and nation’s capital to meet with legislators, arranging for briefings with various experts and youth, arranging for legislators to visit local shelters and outreach programs, holding monthly meetings on programmatic and policy developments, and to a lesser extent, holding demonstrations. Many coalitions work around a legislative calendar, anticipating and responding to issues that may affect homeless youth. At times when fewer proposed Bills are of relevance, the coalition mobilizes their membership support in other ways; for example “thinking about
how we create more sustainable community engagement that then would attach to our advocacy work” with an aim to “make sure that we get the people in who want to support, and we coordinate so we can all sing from the same sheet of music and make a big impact” in order to “work towards an end to youth homelessness” (Kirsten). All noted coalitions had at least one convener or organizer. The position is not always paid or stable. Debby, who now serves as Board Chair of a national homeless youth coalition, stated “it’s not the first time around that, you know, the organization was not able to sustain the kind of full-time director and lots of perks and so we had to kind of go back to core heap.”

Coalition members often work together in a way that Maggie endorsed as “collaborative” and Theresa described as “collegial.” Rich explained that in his coalition, each member played a key role based on his or her skill-set: “It’s just that we had different things we could contribute to it. So Kevin could work on the public health side and the social workers could probably work…on child welfare…[A]ll of us had our little parts, and what I was trying to bring to the table was, well, has anyone ever thought about writing a law to try to actually get the laws passed.” Outside of scheduled meetings, members communicate via closed email groups and in lesser cases, through dedicated websites.

Coalitions can be described in part by their length and structure. Newer coalitions, like Rich’s, had less structure: “[P]art of it is social, so think about people that are having coffee hour together and hang out at the bars together, going out for lunches together. We were just having natural conversation.” As time went on, people in this loose network “agreed that a couple of us had to actually take the step forward of approaching
legislators. So, we started with our own legislators and we started to branch out,” learning how to advocate through trial and error: “We didn’t have the…organizational capacity or the individual knowledge to kind of take it to the next step except by fumbling along ourselves in the time that we had available to us.” Eventually Rich stated that “[w]e became more and more cohesive as a group because we were spending more time together. We started to have the same vision. We talked the same language.” Theresa had been involved in both a coalition appointed by the mayor and a less formal “networking group” of youth service providers. She explained that the former had a timeline and set of priorities whereas the latter was comparatively less structured:

[E]very two years, they put out a ‘state of the city’ report covering all kinds of different issues, but it’s not like it’s, ‘Okay, this is the one reason we’re together. We’re gonna meet that goal and then we’re done.’

As a result of less structure in this coalition, she admitted feeling an equal “sense of responsibility” yet found herself “more I would say lackadaisical about my work involvement, like task involvement” because there were fewer and less stringent deadlines.

Maggie, Bob, and Kirsten worked for organizations that were member-based; the most formalized coalitions of this cohort. Members joined when they were “aware of what our guiding principles [were] and agree[d] that their spirit matches ours.” Members were generally social service organizations but occasionally individual advocates that paid annual dues to the coalition in return for collective action for their constituents. (In Kirsten’s coalition, the dues are only $50 per year, enough to cover some basic meeting expenses.) Stemming from the exchange of money for advocacy, there are shared expectations on both sides. From the coalition, Bob felt that members expected
“information about what’s going on in the federal policy space so they can be informed and potentially prepared …for what may be changing…in terms of their service delivery.” Adding to this, Maggie believed that her members expected the coalition to “have a strong enough understanding of what’s going on on the ground to create informed recommendations as those changes are discussed or implemented.” From members, coalition organizers expected that members would show “loyalty to the organization” (Bob), be “active in the organization when they’re presented opportunities,” (Bob) serve as “experts in the field, to weigh in” (Maggie), and to be able to work on, particularly the advocacy front and engagement of the legislature” (Kirsten). At times, “the question is, who’s gonna do the work and who’s gonna participate and how much time are they gonna invest? And there's not like a conflict there, it’s just a question of investment in time.”

**Benefits of coalitions.** Participants identified five benefits they gained from coalitions: traction, protection, breadth of support, greater effectiveness, and networking. For Ms. Hyatt, it was the sense that more legislative traction was gained from a diversity of expertise. For Dan, the strength of a group meant that he did not have to singlehandedly put his organization on the line.

When it gets down to the hardcore stuff, it might be worth it to have lobbyists or government affairs specialists, or join larger groups that can do it for you -- so you don’t feel that you’re involved directly in banging on someone’s door. I find that very helpful when it is not just [my organization] going after somebody.

Sue also identified this process, but in her coalition it was government employees who asked the coalition to support causes they were unable to speak out about. “When they know they can’t say something because of who’s in office, they usually slip a little note
to us and say, “Can you go take care of this?” [Chuckles] So, I think we have a pretty good partner. They wouldn’t like to anybody know that's what they do, but that's what they do.” As one example, she explained that these federal liaisons asked the coalition to focus on carving out specific government funding for “pregnant and parenting young people…I mean, we all were [caring for them], and we weren’t allowed to, but we just didn’t talk about their babies, you know.”

Sue explained that a national coalition gave issues a greater base of support. She would call on members to target their district’s legislators who may be opposed to or unaware of the coalition’s agenda. “I would call whoever had the basic center or one of those projects in that community and say, ‘Hey, can you help? He needs to visit one of our programs to understand the issue that could happen to these kids that are aging out.’” Ms. Hyatt stated that her coalition improved her effectiveness: “[W]e get excited having conversations with people outside of the office, and so we kind of work harder when we’re back at the office.” Rich had a similar sense: “I was excited. It felt like you’re a part of this young movement, you know…I thought we were gonna be the next generation of professionals changing things.”

Apart from making progress on key legislative issues, members enjoy a secondary benefit of what Bob described as “connectivity to peers, working with a similar population and encountering same organizational challenges with others.” Theresa also noted that it was a chance to “network with other agencies and kind of keep up on what’s happening.”
Challenges of coalitions. Despite the various benefits of coalitions, seven participants identified challenges and limitations of engaging in collective action through a coalition. As chair of a statewide coalition, Kirsten summarized hers: “I think the challenges…mostly pertain to investment of leaderships from the various partners at the table and capacity as it relates to being able to get things done, and then the balance of engaging people in advocacy versus engaging people in policy discussions, and wanting to make sure that people feel like it’s worth their time to continue to be at the table and that we’re doing something.” On her first point, Kirsten wished that more executive directors stayed involved; presumably, the pass the responsibility of attending these meetings on to lower-ranked colleagues.

While it appears that a majority of participants joined coalitions with similar advocacy purposes, four individuals found that coalition colleagues competed for limited resources and sought to stake their claim to a particular type of service, at times leading to impediments in collective action. I call this phenomenon “peacocking.” According to André, “different organizations have different philosophies, so there's sort of competition…or everyone has their own approach to solving or addressing the issues.” Rich found that the six agencies in one of his coalitions “all had their own turf issues, does that make sense, with their organizational areas.” Ms. Hyatt found that some coalition members grumble when others want to discuss their youth outcomes (as mentioned in the literature review, outcome tracking in the homeless youth arena is poorly developed). Theresa stated, “[there are just a lot of agencies that don’t really wanna work together necessarily. They’ll sit in a meeting or they’ll have a conversation about [a youth] they’re referring to each other, but there a lot of people are very
protective of meeting their own service goals or being the place that's known for this or the best of that or whatever.”

Liz had a uniquely challenging experience in her government-organized coalition, which appeared to be paying lip service to the needs of homeless youth:

I find that I’m sitting around a table with all these people who work in an office and have all this funding and have all these programs that are just ‘fantastic,’ and [the members are asking] why aren’t the youth utilizing them and all of this? I then, [chuckles] quickly became just as frustrated as the young homeless people because I’d been there with them. I tried to get an ID with them. I tried to get them signed up for Workforce. I had tried…I’d done everything through their eyes and it’s impossible what...people in their offices think that these young people can do, because the system is like fighting itself here. It’s a real, real mess... [But] I’ve been quiet about it because…it’s a very highly-charged political environment or continuum up here for homeless people…and I didn’t wanna be shut out. ”

She further detailed an experience going on outreach with members of this coalition:

I just went out to see, you know, they took me to ride along, and there were four vehicles…two PhDs, and six other people who were paid by the [coalition] to help homeless people...and we drove around downtown like the A-Team, almost running over pedestrians and stuff, hunting down people, “Are we seeing, you know, Claire, over here? Where is she? Turn it around.” And they jump out of the van, like a SWAT team…Not surprisingly, most people didn’t want their help...Now, I was with them for three hours, …and we helped one person and scared off another two, and I was just like counting in my head all the manpower and the talent and the money that was used that day and just thinking if I had 5% of that how much I could have done, how I could have really, really helped someone with that money, and it’s just frustrating as hell.

One other challenge of coalition-based work is the decision-making process, which three participants highlighted. Sue reported that at times, taking action through a coalition is a slow process: “I was on committees and everybody had their own opinion. You know how committees work…Doesn’t happen quickly.” Maggie found that in her coalition, it took time to move away from consensus and help members “understand how all of this interconnects and why we’re taking a stance on a certain piece of legislation.”
Kristen has retained a desire to be “fully consultative and collaborative in how we come up with the policy stuff, but sometimes the policy stuff really bores people, and so we don’t wanna turn them off based on that. So, I think that's a challenging balance for us.”

**Where advocates work: The macro (sociopolitical) level**

Participants not only work in organizations and coalitions, but they are members of a sociopolitical moment in space and time. The final aspect of context is an exploration of the impacts of geography on how youth homelessness is recognized and acted on, as well as the state of the homeless youth movement from past, to present, to future. For example, advocates in the present study spoke about their impressions of youth homelessness never reaching a point of critical movement, and what it might take to eventually get there. The significance of these descriptions constitute the outermost level of a participant’s focal region.

**Impact of geography.** Seven participants implicated geography as having bearing on the way homeless youth issues were recognized or advanced. Maggie described that awareness of youth homelessness varied between places she’s lived. “It’s the places where it is just physically the most visible that I think have had the most traction… [In] Vegas and definitely DC, Portland, LA where it’s just a little more in your face, there have been opportunities to create some push to create some change.” Having grown up in rural northern Vermont, Maggie felt that “most people don’t ever think about homelessness” there, despite a great number of young people who couch-surf. Later, working in Boston, she found that “youth homelessness is definitely invisible, [so] I never felt like people really understood some of those connections I was talking about, of
why this is a very real problem, making hope for creating change really hard to come by.”
Now working in a mid-Atlantic urban center, she found that there is greater awareness.
“[I]t’s such a visual issue on an adult side that looking through a youth lens it’s not hard
to imagine how this is an equal problem even if it’s not as visible for young people.” This
is significant for advocacy efforts because policymakers “aren’t as reluctant or shocked
that it’s an issue, so you feel like you already have an inroad and there is a chance to
make some change.” Rich found, when working on homeless youth advocacy at the
national level that “the framework of how they understood it was still very local.”

Some participants acknowledged region-specific issues related to youth
homelessness, the sense being that “there are probably some geographic or even cultural
issues around homelessness based on different areas that you’re in” (Theresa). According
to Liz, in her city immigration is a major concern. “We have a huge population of kids
from Central and South America with all varying degrees of paperwork…So they’re in
limbo, you know, of being deported and in constant fear of being detained. Some of
them have been in immigration jail already.” Theresa found that in her major northern
city, which is “not financially solvent for a lot of families” that

Homeless youth programs are almost a bit of a right of passage, if you
will, for some youth, as…a lot of families that are lower-income or,
maybe too large for their living setting or have other pressures…it almost
becomes, ‘Now you’re old enough, it’s time for you to go out and take
care of yourself, even if that means you stay at a shelter to get that done.

Two participants highlighted differences between urban and rural areas. Jon, illustrating
one difference, found that larger cities were more attractive to youth experiencing
homelessness: “They gravitate to the city where there are some resources and where
there's a real street scene. So that also can be something that really exacerbates the problem as kids get sucked into some of the street stuff.”

Rich moved from a large Midwestern city to the nation’s capital to do advocacy work. He was able to speak about the differences in advocacy between locations in terms of the number of advocates and the scale of resources. On the first difference, he said “I used to complain that it was the same six to ten people around a small table, you know, scratching our heads, trying to figure out what to do with the 2500 kids that we had in [our city] at the time and knowing that we only had about 200 bed spaces.” When he started working on federal advocacy, he mistakenly thought “Oh this is the big time… this is the big league. And I get there, and I get to the first meeting, and there were like six people.” This surprise led him to conclude that “it’s always a small group of committed people that always makes the difference.” On the second difference, he compared efforts at the state level to get one million dollars, whereas the federal RHY budget was $115 million. “So, to the extent that you could advocate for 50,000 more housing vouchers for unaccompanied homeless youth, that would do wonders across the United States. Whereas, I was trying to just argue for 20 extra bed spaces [in my state]. Having worked in other cities herself, Theresa found her current northern city a very supportive place to work in advocacy because “there are a lot of amazing advocates and a number of youth programs and amazing people to work with…and some systems kind of already in place.”

State of the homeless youth movement. Five participants expressed that there has not been and currently is no nationally orchestrated movement around youth homelessness indicated by “enough of it happening that you get a sense that they’re a
sizeable percentage of society that feels that way and wants to do something about it” (Bob). Dan believed that “more kids are aging out of foster care now than they ever did. You do start to wonder if we’ve improved on advocacy. One guy said that he spent 30 years down the drain.” In fact, Dan inferred that the animal protection movement has comparatively seen a longer history and in some cases, greater advances. André inferred that despite public conversation about youth homelessness since the 1990’s, only now were people “starting to try to get better data.” Bob agreed:

When’s there been a march in Washington around housing or homelessness, you know? When’s the last time someone chained themselves to the White House fence to protest national homelessness issues?...I don’t feel like there's a movement…I’ve been working in this area for 10 years and there's still youth homelessness, so what’s going on? We haven’t fundamentally reinvented our public support system for vulnerable children and youth to make sure every young person has a home.

Trying to diagnose the lack of a movement, each of eight participants offered a different explanation, ranging from lack of awareness to lack of coalescence and marginalization. Maggie believed that “people still really don’t get it, get the extent of the issue or understand all of the factors that…could impact that issue.” Rich stated that homeless youth activists make up “such a small niche” that “continue to be marginalized because it’s just not seen as a huge issue,” compared to the number of youth who are truant, or in juvenile detention. Ms. Hyatt didn’t feel there were enough advocates to address the issues and Sue felt that homeless youth weren’t being routinely engaged in collective action. Bob felt that there wasn’t a single individual – a “Martin Luther King” type – who would “devote their life to that one specific message and stick with it and create a following, and not just a following of the aggrieved but a following of the sympathetic to the aggrieved.” Debby stated that social change has never coalesced
around “whole-scale investment in the kind of support services…that I think community
needs because it’s a mixed patchwork around this country.” Dan identified a lack of
community organizing, planful consolidation of organizers, training for advocacy and
activism, and difficulty competing with “the billions of dollars that gets poured into
lobbying from the for-profit field.” Liz felt that governmental homelessness
agencies are “just run like a business [but]…they’re not looking at new ways to go about
this. They’re just in the box with a lot of money.”

Despite a lack of a movement, participants identified various trends in youth
homelessness and advocacy over time. While Debby found that the number of youth who
are homeless or at-risk is increasing, particularly amongst the 18-21 year-old set, André
believed that “we’re at that phase again where people are just ready to start
responding…in a targeted manner.” Maggie felt that young people who are in
governmentally funded programs will continue to face an uphill battle to “stay in
programs” yet did believe that gains have been made in making “people appreciate, for a
variety of factors, how poorly we have done by… those kids who are most likely going to
end up in…a situation of homelessness.” Bob did not feel the impact was substantial. He
could not recall seeing any shift in proportions of legislators who feel it “a priority to take
care of the needs of the most vulnerable among us,” versus those who “feel that there are
other priorities among the people they represent, so they don’t focus their energy on
that.”

Looking forward, Sue felt there was some potential to bring the national
conversation about affordable and transitional housing around to homeless youth, and her
national coalition was planning for a way to speak out for that. Kirsten was brainstorming
with other advocates in her state about creating “a new onramp for young people to enter the child welfare system who are currently experiencing homelessness” and continues trying to translate federal acts for the state level. Although Liz was skeptical that governmental 10-year-plans make a difference in ending homelessness, and André felt that it would take “at least” ten years, Ms. Hyatt believed that creating one in her state would induce public and governmental accountability. Bob hoped that an eventual homeless youth movement would be incorporated into one around “strong families” or “poverty;” something “that we fit in rather than a movement just on a segment of a larger problem.” Dan was emphatic that a movement takes sustained work:

I look at my kids who wonder how did the Vietnam War protests happen. It isn’t some big gigantic thing that happens… there were only a few marches in the streets… most of this stuff takes active engagement, day in and day out, making it a priority in your schedule.

Jon reminded me that a bulk the work of advocates did could disappear with new political leadership. According to him, his Tea Party-affiliated governor believes that “everything [in the budget] is bloated” and services providers and advocates “are just crying wolf about people’s needs.”

**Section summary.** The second step of the critical approach (Carspecken, 1996) requires that one’s research question be encapsulated in a focal region containing the object of inquiry (homeless youth activists) and the sites they inhabit (organizations, coalitions, and national contexts of collective action for homeless youth). This first section of Chapter 4 explored each aspect of the focal region. It began by describing how advocates define their careers, tasks, accomplishments, and markers of success. Participants indicated that they performed a wide range of low-risk collective action
activities and planned to do even more in the future (see Figures 1 and 2). They described
their previous accomplishments in terms of local, state, and national policy changes, and
they defined personal success as impacting the life courses of homeless youth, impacting
service delivery, or impacting systems and public structures. The section continued by
describing where participants worked, speaking to their specific organizations, coalitions,
and assessments of youth homelessness as a national issue. In ecological terms, these are
known respectively as the micro, meso, and macro-level sites in which participants work.
All participants were part of organizations that worked with or behalf of homeless youth
in some way. There was a near-even split between participants working in youth-serving
organizations and working in policy-based organizations. Participants described their
organizations as gatekeepers to social change, but also responsive to their own efforts to
build political will for homeless youth. All participants were part of coalitions, which
were seen as vital for broad-based collective action but do not always reflect a consensus
of views, values, and approaches amongst coalition members. Participants also embedded
in a sociopolitical history of youth homelessness in America. They spoke about perceived
past, present, and future trends related to collective action for this population, concurring
that there no current “movement” taking place, despite concentrated work by various
stakeholders. When assembled together in a focal region, the advocate is no longer a
detached object of inquiry, but a bounded and contextually determined subject of micro,
meso, and macro level processes. Assembling the focal region now allows further
analysis to unfold about how participants entered and sustained themselves their roles.
The following sections present data addressing these issues.
Becoming an advocate

To understand how activists and advocates came to be, it is important to identify the factors that participants cited as relevant to their development. This section begins with an exploration of participants’ lives before they engaged in advocacy, identifying such factors as their family lives, geographical locales, schooling, volunteer work, and first memories of systemic engagement. Some participants identified personal experiences with marginalization (including homelessness) and others had an early awareness of their privilege in society. In later sections, the data reveal that participants were suited to become advocates because their careers nurtured a commitment to advocacy. Some participants’ early jobs were advocacy-based and others were more strongly centered around direct service with various populations, including disconnected and homeless youth. In the latter group, I trace how they moved into professional advocacy. This exploration finishes with a discussion about the support that advocates receive from others. When the support came early, it often propelled participants into this work. For other participants, it is partly responsible for sustaining their current involvement. Each part of these results foreshadow, in a way, the omnipresent dedication to homeless youth that all participants presently share.

Pre-vocational life.

Family experiences promoted advocacy. Seven out of eight participants who spoke about their family indentified family members who were actively engaged in their communities. Debby’s reflection illustrates this pattern of family members creating an environment that kindled participants’ own later involvement:
My personal history is that I come from a family of activists and people who all have taken a lot of responsibility. Actually, my parents were, you know, both very involved in, um, left-wing political movements of various kinds…. My parents are heroes to me. They’re role models for people who led lives of purpose and, um, very ethically clear and always looking for how it is to be a good person in the world and to provide leadership for that.

Rich also spoke about the values and ethics that his family demonstrated to him.

My framework was that we were called somehow as a family to help other people. That was really instilled deeply by my parents…They had very strong personal ethics around that and really instilled that in my brother and I that one of our roles in being a responsible member of society was giving back, and they always looked for ways to involve us in ways of giving back.

Maggie believed that her parents were shaped by the times: “I think in terms of energy and willingness to push for change, my parents are very much born…children born of the ‘60s.”

Parents, grandparents, and older siblings of those interviewed for this study had public servant professions ranging from teachers and principals to nurses, social workers and even the head of a convalescence center. Many parents supported their children’s volunteerism and also discussed politics and political issues with their families. For Jeff, he didn’t share his family’s political views but learned to articulate strong arguments counter to his father’s: “I felt like to some extent that he was probably wrong about a lot of stuff and I think that just…helped me go in the opposite direction from where he was politically.” Jeff believed that “within my family is probably the first place I tried out some of those skills.”

Three participants reflected on ways that their parents encouraged their own self-advocacy. In high school, Maggie recalled that her mother encouraged her to
independently work out an issue with her teacher by setting up a meeting with the teacher and guidance counselor. “She really strongly encouraged me to not be passive, and that if this is something I was passionate about to go ahead and pursue it and sort of push the envelope.” A few years later, Maggie’s mother advised her to coordinate a rally and bring in the media to overturn the superintendent’s decision not to allow a transgendered folk singer to speak about AIDS awareness at her high school.

Most participants had far from perfect family experiences, but were able to identify positive outcomes. Debby stated that her “parents were complicated people… And as a result…of whatever my experience was, I felt like I got and understood that desire to find yourself, to find your voice, to speak to what was going on.” André stated that his family “definitely suffered some catastrophes that were linked to…being African American” such as incarcerations, and early deaths due to gang violence, and believe he may have had this “in the back of my mind” while pursuing advocacy and social change for others. Theresa reported that when she came out as a lesbian, “having my family be supportive and not having that risk of homelessness, then my experience was even that much more motivating for me” to help LGBT homeless youth who were kicked out. Jeff recounted that he “couldn’t have a good relationship with my mother because I was gay.” Nevertheless, his family was supportive of him moving to more tolerant places and stand up for others: “I think they were probably kind of happy that the worst thing about me was that I was arguing for people’s rights and things like that.”

*Geography shaped advocacy.* Jeff noted that he “grew up in a pretty conservative area,” making it a challenge for him to come out as gay and be accepted by others; he now directs LGBT policy initiatives in a largely liberal urban center where acceptance is
arguably more easily won. Maggie grew up in a rural area which maintained civic duty in that “people did hold one another accountable or lend a hand when they could.” Rich moved from small town to “a progressive northern city” that “still had issues but [also] had a sense of hope and a sense of wanting to do better.” Ms. Hyatt recalled a fourth-grade trip to the state capital, and feeling “so enamored with the building and the surroundings, and I had just learned what a legislator was and I was like, ‘I wanna be a legislator…I’ve always been kind of excited by politics and the physical Capitol which I right now work across the street [from].’”

**Religion’s influence on advocacy and systemic thinking.** According to Table 4, seven participants identified a specific religion or spirituality, and the remaining six did not list and/or identify with any faith or spirituality. When prompted to describe various influences on their activism and social engagement, three cited religious and spiritual influences directly. Dan reported that out of a Catholic and spiritual faith, “it’s about unconditional love and absolute respect. If we shared that in all our human interactions, we wouldn’t have these issues in the world.” Rich stated that he grew up with “people of strong faith” and as such learned that “you work out of your faith and out of your concept of God to give back to those that that don’t have…or that can do better.” He did not feel his advocacy was a calling but that it “informs both my own personal ethics as well as what I think I should be doing with my life.” Jon studied religion in school but realized that it wouldn’t “make it clear…how one was supposed to live.” He came to the conclusion that “you just have to do what you think is right…and that sort of led me to the work—trying to be a good person, I guess.”
School promoted advocacy. When asked to reflect broadly on influences in the direction of advocacy, nine participants spoke about schooling and higher education. As Table 4 shows, all 13 participants have advanced degrees or training beyond the undergraduate level. Two have law degrees and one has a doctorate. Five participants recalled specific graduate training in public policy, although the degrees range from Conflict Resolution to Public Administration to Public Policy to Social Work. Jeff’s decision was last-minute after he realized that he did not want to go to law school: “I was kind of at a loss what to do after graduation, and discovered that there was something called a Master of Public Policy that you could go get, and…all of the pieces fell into place pretty quickly.” During graduate training, a research fellowship that led him to see there was “this whole sector that was actually doing a lot of advocacy work. And so I started like looking at how different changes in our country were actually impacting nonprofit organizations.”

Both Ms. Hyatt and Jon, who received MSWs, discovered early in their training that they were more interested in macro level issues and systems change than learning principles of therapy. (Sue got her Master’s in Organizational Development because she, too, felt that she “liked the bigger picture.”) Jon said, “I did a second-year placement that talked me out of that really quickly because I hated it.” He learned through a subsequent Doctorate in Social Work that he preferred to “directly impact things” and did not want to work in administration or academia: “The reality is that [training] experience was so unpleasant to me…in terms of everything being about what was written and not what was done. The only value was getting an article published, not if you had actually done something of value that you could feel valuable about in.” Ms. Hyatt wrote a thesis about
the challenges that LGBT homeless youth had in accessing social services, gave the paper to a gay and lesbian center, and they started a homeless youth initiative, which she continues to advise.

School influenced participants in more ways than exposure through curriculum and projects. Two participants cited the influence of professors on their interest in advocacy. Ms. Hyatt remembered having

some really fierce professors that...just kind of like got me fired up about social injustice and advocacy. And so I think I felt really passionate about it in school and when I was doing clinical work, I would realize pretty quickly that a lot of the problems that I was seeing, you know, were due to kind of systemic failures or macro-level issues.

One participant, Kirsten, spoke about multiple factors coalescing in college:

[R]eally, it was my own sense of what it was to be in college and what it was to be a young person and what needed to be happening there and my annoyance that there wasn’t enough going on, and then my sense of elation that once we’ve started some stuff up, and it’s certainly not all just me.

As Kirsten demonstrated, an existential query, combined with her sense of obligation, a lack of social engagement, and peer support, led her to be a young activist.

*Volunteering promoted values and exposure to homelessness.* Volunteering played a considerable role in the early lives of at least seven participants who discussed their volunteerism. Sue reported that being involved in Girl Scouts “carr[ies] through your whole life...Helping people that are less fortunate than you...trying to make a difference in the world.” Prior to working on homeless youth advocacy, two individuals were involved in LGBT campaigns – marriage equality and LGBT foster care parenting among them. The greatest majority (five individuals) volunteered with homeless
communities prior to engaging in advocacy for them or with them. Dan said that his experience at a youth shelter was “where I came to understand poverty:”

I grew up in the suburbs in Ohio and I saw poverty but didn’t really have a context for it. But here I was thrown in the middle of it. Seeing that there was so much of it really devastated me as a human and as an American. It moved me to change my entire life quest to set out to help young people.

Jeff developed “regular and in-depth personal connections” with homeless individuals at a church’s drop-in center over a two-year period. Rich went from tutoring at a drop in center to providing legal representation to homeless youth at a drop-in center following an incident where several youth were beaten by police: “I kind of went from being a tutor to kind of being more of an, uh, a legal advocate in the real sense of legal aid kind of advocating for rights…Then from there I started to get more heavily involved.” This involvement led Rich towards trying to figure out as an attorney [chuckles] who I could sue in order to help the kid with life, you know, like someone was to blame for their predicament and if I could just find the right legal argument or the right defendant, I could be the plaintiff that sued them for resources and somehow help the youth find greater stability in life and have opportunities that all youth should have.

After nearly three years in this volunteer role, Rich was hired to run a street outreach program for youth for five years, during which time he wrote a RHY act for his state.

*First exposures to social change.* Ten participants recounted stories of their first exposures to social change; that is, experiences of addressing injustices at a level higher than they were presented. While these are undoubtedly not the only stories that shaped their future involvement in advocacy for homeless youth, they were recounted with certain significance. The stories can be separated into three different categories: *early*
exposure to social change (three participants), exposure during college (four participants), and exposure through work (four participants).

From the first category, early exposure, Liz described that she was “a vegetarian when I was age 10, in Texas, before veggie burgers, before anything.” Then in middle school she would “sign petitions to save the dolphins in tuna nets, and getting the recycling program going, and I was very, very active like that and I just embraced that role.” This activism ended when she was silenced by two male teachers:

I was taking algebra and my teacher was a coach, and then my computer science teacher was a coach, and I was shut down a lot, like when I had things to contribute or questions to ask, and it…was the first time I’d really encountered anything. I didn’t really know what sexism was at the time but I soon learned, and I think at that point something really changed in me because that was the first time there was something wrong with speaking up, and I went quiet for a while.

Liz described those instances as pivotal in that she went from being active to being silenced; later in her retelling, she describes how she discovered strength to combat sexism. Maggie had a similar experience in school which “feeds into some of my perspective around system failure…[and] some of my appreciation for what change can do for a young person comes from.” After her fourth-grade reading delays were attributed to a diagnosis of dyslexia, she was taught in a way that allowed her to reach high-school levels within a year. “I think that gave me an appreciation for…how a system, like an education system, if it’s equipped to catch something correctly can just immediately change the trajectory of a life.”

In the second category, exposure to systems change in college, participants’ experiences ran a gamut. During a clinical placement in his Social Work training, Jon witnessed how an agency would “get all this money to deal with people with major
mental illness and they barely spend any energy on them.” This experience taught him that there was a “need to feel really clear about wanting to advocate for systems, and…people.” Theresa learned about the “concept of silences equals death that the AIDS activist community developed a long time ago” and took an interest in studying human sexuality. She recalled, “[T]o me, I didn’t make the connection for years…that it’s really about if we aren’t talking about something so important like our sexuality [then] all we’re doing is creating social health problems, individual problems, relationship problems, family problems… And so I guess that was kind of my core where I started, and I felt really moved.” Kirsten led “a couple of busloads of my peers” to organize against the World Trade Organization meeting that was held in Seattle in 1999. She stated, “just standing up and taking leadership and having people join me on my college campus and doing some really cool stuff was important” for recognizing that her voice mattered.

In the third category, participants reported first dealing with exposure to systems issues through work. Bob illustrated this experience: “I guess my exposure to what seemed to be…meaningful change for human beings seemed to come from nonprofit organizations and volunteers.” André first ran into other advocates when he was involved in child welfare work; these advocates generally “opposed child welfare and [were] kind of the watchdog.” Early in her career, Sue started “working with really tough kids coming out of different systems at that point…helping them find safe places to be,” which led to testimony at the state level about shortening the response time for a youth who needs services.

**Experiences with privilege and marginalization.** All but one participant revealed moments in their development when they recognized their privilege or had
minimal power. Following from the literature review, which discussed pathways for high-status and marginalized groups into activism, this section describes the both classes of experiences for some individuals who advocate for homeless youth. First, I review the participants’ experiences with marginalization, and then discuss how existence and awareness of privilege impacted their choice of work or their worldviews.

**Personal experiences being marginalized.** Participants’ experiences with marginalization fall into three categories: Coming out, experiencing homelessness, and being a woman. In the first category, André, Jeff, and Rich described how they were mistreated because they were gay, yet largely used these experiences to be connect with youth through their professional work. André grew up understanding that being gay was “a bad sort of thing” because he was “picked on and teased and stuff at school” which caused him to self-isolate.

“I never like reached out to my parents to say, you know, ‘I’m…going through this at school because people think that I’m gay,’ you know? So I kept that all to myself…I just felt like if I had someone to talk to…that maybe things would have been different….I always felt like I wanted to be that sort of open-minded, supportive positive person to someone else that was in need…that's sort of a direct cause to me getting into social services.

He stated that he “only thought about and fantasized about running away…. [but] I didn’t even know where I would go if I ran away and I didn’t have a plan.” While Rich did not come out until law school, he noticed that others who came out were discriminated against. He chose to wait on coming out “because I didn’t want lose my privilege. ..And I thought that if I came out I couldn’t be the lawyer I wanted to be.” One of his realizations as he “became more ingrained in the gay community” were the “disparities of queer kids in homeless populations” as well as his group marginalization doing outreach as “just
queer people…out getting queer kids.” Jeff described classmates who were “always saying very racist homophobic things.” Because he was gay, “I always felt like I could have empathy with people on the outside, and that's a pretty relative term but I think…it just gave me a different perspective or lens to kind of look at the political world.” He described “reject[ing] everything out of hand from where [my father] was” because “I knew in my heart that that wasn’t me.”

Two participants identified experiences with homelessness, namely unstable housing. Maggie recalled having a “chaotic childhood in my own right and definitely lower middle class at the very best.” Following arguments with her father, she contemplated sleeping in the backyard in a tent but always had friends that she could stay with. In her final years of high school, “I think one more bad fight…and that would have been a tipping point where I would have made the choice to be elsewhere or told my mom I wasn’t coming home.” Later, after an abusive relationship ended in her early twenties, she crashed on friends’ couches for two weeks, but did not consider herself homeless at the time. She reported that the experience

give me a lot of empathy for why young people don’t want to identify as homeless…[T]he fact that I had friends I could rely on, and thankfully a paycheck…kept me from feeling where I got defined as homeless. Short of those things, it would have been much more stark.

Ms. Hyatt’s impoverished family was evicted from their apartment when she was 12 because they were unable to pay rent; she alternated between staying in a hotel with her mother and three siblings, and living on her own with her grandmother. When her family lost housing again when she was 15,

that was the last time that my family and I all lived together because they stayed homeless for another maybe three or four years living in hotels, and
I went to live with my grandmother… and then couch-surfed kind of and stayed with [three different] friends through high school and into like my first year of college….

Once her third friend took her in, “they had a shed in the backyard but it had electricity, and that's where I lived then for the next close to three years… I had like a twin-size bed and…not quite a dresser but kind of like a little shelving thing.”

Neither Ms. Hyatt nor Maggie recognized they were homeless at the time. Ms. Hyatt explained,

I'm not sure that I explicitly identified with others who I considered homeless at the time, but I remember there being other families staying in our hotel for the same reasons—poverty, eviction, a lack other options—and I identified with those children. As I've gotten older and more reflective and immersed myself in this issue, I do identify with the homeless population at large.

She initially “exclusively blamed my parents for our homelessness. My worldview has changed, but I definitely considered it our problem and our failing.” She believed that “having a personal connection to this population has sustained my work in this area.” Ms. Hyatt described only “coming out” as formerly homeless a few times in her line of work, possibly because she doesn’t “like asking for help” or “want to seem needy.” She noted that “it’s probably good sometimes to let people know that kind of thing because it does challenge the…face of homelessness.”

Liz represented the third category, which is marginalization as a female. Her experiences being “shut down” by teachers because she was outspoken and an atypical “science and math girl” have been noted previously. She admitted that this continued into her fist professional job; though she was given explicit permission to challenge her boss, she was shut down again. Though she believed that “our communities would be better
places if we had more women in politics and in positions of power” she has experienced
difficulty with a societal view where “women are supposed to be a certain way
and…where men have had the power and the leadership and the executive roles.”

**Confronting privilege and using it for good.** More than half (seven) of this
study’s participants noted a recognition of their privilege, even when three also recounted
experiences with marginalization. Some participants stated that their family lives were
very different from those of many youth with whom they work. Sue acknowledged being
“very fortunate” growing up, and enjoying her encounters with less-privileged youth as a
Girl Scout. Jon said that he grew up with “upper middle class” status but “always
gravitated to kind of kids who were from the projects for whatever reason.” Kirsten
identified that she had the unique privilege of being a young person whose “voice
mattered and could make an impact.” Liz recognized a discrepancy between the activities
of the privileged compared to homeless youth:

> I haven’t really been in their shoes. I haven’t spent the night on the street.
> I have not had to fight off a sexual predator. I’ve not had to do any of
> those things. I’ve not had to sell my body to survive, like I cannot even
> fathom that, and the fact that that's going on while we’re just going to the
> shopping mall and going to the fancy restaurant, I just…don’t understand.

I asked Liz to further reflect on her privilege in a follow-up interview. She stated that
sometimes “I feel guilty that I am so privileged while others seem to have such little
privilege…I know guilt is not productive, but it is present for me. I feel like I should be
utilizing all of the gifts the universe has given me.” In doing so, she aims to help youth
recognize and access their own power, something she believes “resides in everyone”
despite stark external evidence to the contrary: “It is a goal of mine to expose the youth to
tools to realize their power…That is when we are really going to make some changes.”
Three participants who identified as gay (and in some spheres are marginalized) found ways to connect with homeless youth by recognizing their relative privilege following the coming out process. Once Theresa came out and was accepted by her family, she felt it was “unbelievably tragic that you don’t have your family support simply because they don’t accept your identity. I mean, to me it seems like a no-brainer. It’s your family.” She reflected in a follow-up interview, “I often think about my privilege of having a home, a family, an education, and an awareness that many of the youth I work with do not have these things. It makes me want to work harder to help them plan for success in their lives…Although I am underprivileged in this society as well—being a woman and being a lesbian—I can find ways to utilize the privilege I have to benefit homeless and LGBTQ youth.” In a similar way, Jeff reported that he seeks to use his privilege to help homeless youth. “I realize that I have never faced the challenges that this population does, so I never pretend to know what they’re going through on an individual level. That said, I want to use the power I do have to help them, because it’s the right thing to do and because there are so many ways to make things better.” Rich stated that “white privilege means a lot in our society, so I was never told that I couldn’t do things…I was never told that that was something that I should not try for.” Elaborating further, he believed that this “gift” he was given as a child—of not being “given exposure to oppression and discrimination and harm”—comes with the responsibility “to admit that you have privilege and to confront that…and to try to not embrace it to the extent that it should be embraced.”
Starting a career.

*Sociopolitical contexts were ripe for advocacy.* According to Table 4, participants have been advocating for homeless youth for a range of one to 38 years. Their involvement has spanned four decades in history. Three participants reflected on the sociopolitical climate around their forays into advocacy for homeless youth. The data reveal that two were experiencing the tumultuousness of the sixties and the Vietnam War and one was influenced by the AIDS movement. Jon did not feel that it was possible to forget or “walk away from most any of the things that I thought back then” in the sixties. After the Vietnam War ended, Debby recalled, “there were hundreds and hundreds of young people coming to Washington DC, you know, traveling the highways and byways, hitchhiking…there was a street culture that developed very quickly.” She believed that the climate of their generation was supportive of young people finding “opportunities to feel engaged in changing the world, improving the world.” Rich, two to three decades later, recognized that he was greatly influenced by the queer activism and advocacy when HIV and AIDS were spreading across the country.

*Meeting homeless youth for the first time.* Six participants described their first encounters with homeless youth; for one person, it was through living in a large city. André was in his twenties “when the idea of young people being homeless first kind of struck me…I never really connected it to anything larger. Like the four or five that I saw, I would have never thought in a million years that there were possibly hundreds of thousands more across America.” For four other participants, encounters with homeless youth occurred through work experiences. Maggie’s experience typifies what participants encountered. At an agency she worked at, she came into firsthand contact
with young clients who became homeless, causing an emotional reaction: “It made me really mad that we’re telling kids all along that we’re gonna help them succeed and we’re gonna transition them into adulthood and they can do it and it’s, easy if they just do A, B, C, and D; and it was misleading.” Other participant stories reflect a personal connection to homeless youth. After meeting a formerly homeless youth as an intern at his office, Jeff said “it really seemed to resonate with me in the sense that it’s about real people’s lives, it’s about real people’s futures.” As a first year attorney, Rich was invited to go on street outreach in search of youth, which was a transformative experience for him: “I knew there was homeless families with children, I knew there was adults, but I had no concept that there was these teenagers and young adults that were on their own that were without any type of family support.” Jon first came across homeless youth while doing crisis work at a bus station: “That probably was the greatest influence. I realized I love that…I mean, it was crazy stuff working with the Port Authority Police and I mean, I was dealing with homeless youth and mentally ill adults.” Sue first encountered runaway and homeless youth at the organization she currently directs. Working with this new population “was a natural [fit]…it wasn’t any different than the other kids I served.”

Growing from desires to serve or do social justice work. During the course of interviews, participants mused on their initial thoughts about their careers; some thought about advocacy after service, and others came to advocacy by wanting to advance social justice for various populations. For four people, advocacy developed after a primary interest in serving others, particularly youth. André was compelled to study psychology because of his own experiences feeling isolated, hoping that the training would help him “be there for someone as part of my career.” He later realized that psychology “wasn’t
necessarily what I had in mind.” Similarly, Jon said he “must have been born to be a social worker” but that the direction toward advocacy and working with homeless youth was born out of a vocational ethic: “You know, we joke about being downwardly mobile at times, but doing what you love is what you have to do.” Sue learned when she was a teenager that she enjoyed working with people, but is not sure what led her directly into homeless youth advocacy: “I followed a path however that path happened, and I followed a path that was set out and took advantage of opportunities when they came and stayed true to what I believed in.” Theresa had a similar pull to young people: “As I entered my career, it still to me just seemed like it’s a very meaningful point in our life when we are in that cusp of young adulthood, verging from adolescence into adulthood.” She found that later doing advocacy was “just a natural connection for me” in that she was motivated to address the “sadness of a young person being on their own before they’re ready.”

Five participants were compelled by careers dedicated to social justice. Rich “knew I wanted to be a lawyer from an early age…to advocate for low-income communities.” He “didn’t have a sense that I was going to end up as a child or youth advocate. I just kind of fell into it once I figured out there was a glaring need” and no one in the legal community addressing it. According to Kirsten, “I think I just kind of fell into my work in Washington and… when I was…looking for jobs, I was pretty clear that that these are kinds of jobs I was really looking for.” Liz stated that youth homelessness was not on her radar for a long time but “just by the nuances of fate [I] ended up here.” Bob talked about “a draw to work on human service issues” through advocacy, but noted that his current career was more instrumental: “I didn’t grow up always wanting to be a
homeless advocate…I’ve kind of come to homelessness advocacy more as I was choosing to advance my career.” When Jeff started his career in human service advocacy, he thought “I would be happy having a career that was centered on this kind of policy change and policy process and I could do something with that.” Debby said that it was “very plain to me that whatever I would have done in my life as a profession I would have had to do with my heart.” She considered running for public office but declined, realizing that “what you have to give to get is maybe not worth it for me.” She reflected that her “route to youth homelessness was in many ways around the issue of youth having a voice in our society or youth having more of a voice. I saw it as a political issue.”

**In search of a “living wage.”** A minority of five individuals were led in part by a motivation to find higher paying positions wherein they could still pursue social change for youth. André reported, “As I got older, the little pay that I was getting to live my life became a factor to where it was like, I am giving a hundred percent…And then I’m getting little pay for it. At one point I just decided that I needed to focus on myself and my career so I could hopefully help people in a different way.” Rich came to a similar conclusion, when as a foster parent “I worried about my ability to actually care for them with the income level that I had… I felt a responsibility to not neglect their needs as well as for my own personal career path.” He left the helm of a street outreach program to take a part-time job for a statewide organization that advocated for homeless kids, and later worked at a law firm on family law issues: “That extra $500 a month made a huge difference in my ability to navigate my own budget.” He wondered at the time if he would have to only do public policy on the side in order to support himself and the youth in his care. Despite “always feel[ing] guilty about” moving to public policy work, Ms.
Hyatt said she wanted to be “honest” about the need for “a living wage:” “[M]acro issues can help pay the bills more than doing direct service” where the equation tend to be “you get paid half as much, you do twice the work.” Jon exemplifies the participants that have remained in direct service administration while taking on many additional advocacy responsibilities. He reasoned that “people come and go in this field because they don’t pay much and…it can be very frustrating. But [for] some people it’s just what you like to do.”

**Section summary.** I organized descriptions of how participants grew closer to advocacy by referencing three overlapping period of time: their pre-vocational lives, their experiences with privilege and marginalization, and their early vocational aspirations and experiences. Participants revealed that they were influenced as young people by a number of factors, including their families, religions, schools, and volunteerism. Some participants recounted their first or early stories engaging in collective action. Others spoke about their experiences meeting homeless youth, or recognizing youth homelessness as a social problem, for the first time. While these moments in and of themselves are not predictive, they are part of a larger trend of movement into advocacy. This movement received extra fuel from participants’ personal experiences of marginalization (due to gender, sexual orientation, SES, and homelessness) and their own recognition of privilege. Finally, this section described what was happening for participants when they moved into their first careers—in their internal lives and in the world around them. Participants reflected on how certain careers made pragmatic or ethical sense. In all, twelve clusters of experience form this theme.
Advocacy becomes a career choice

Immediately following the previous section’s examination of the strands of pre-vocational momentum, this section details the six occurrences that typified most participants’ decision to engage in collective action for homeless youth wholly or partially through their respective vocations. This section extends the previous section in unique ways: It details how participants transitioned from early clinical and advocacy jobs into their current or recent roles, offers their perspectives on the maturation and evolution inherent in their work over time, and details the range of social supports that make a difficult job easier to enter and endure.

Transitioning from early clinical and advocacy jobs. Each participant described earlier jobs and careers before they were in positions of doing homeless youth advocacy and activism. I briefly present highlight from participants’ career timelines below, which follow two broad trajectories into homeless youth advocacy: Five participants started in other forms of law or advocacy, and eight participants started by doing clinical services for youth.

One of André’s first jobs after college was working at a group home. He had trouble with several aspects of the job—the low pay, long days, overnight shifts lack of “professional environment,” and job instability—causing him to seek case management work. He got involved in three agencies working with youth in foster care, doing permanency planning for youth aging out, developing wraparound care models, and supervising the recruitment of foster and adoptive parents. He described that homelessness was “a real outcome that we were trying to prevent.” After conversations
with his partner about wanting to do advocacy with LGBT youth, he “literally stumbled across” his current job posting, which “really felt magical in a sense…They were interested in someone with a child welfare background and an LGBT background, which I had both.”

Like André, Jon also worked as an overnight counselor for a youth residential treatment program. He was “really struck by…the people who seem to know youth in an intimate way, people like I was at the time, living with them, had so little influence on what was going on. It was really people who came in like the social workers and others.” He later went on to develop programs at another nonprofit, then returned to graduate school where he was offered a post working with homeless populations. While completing his dissertation, he was “doing a lot of consulting and going into programs to train homeless youth programs in New York… I hated that because I hated feeling like I had such a small impact on what was going on that I wanted to have a bigger impact at least wherever I worked.” He moved to a northern state seeking to run a shelter.

Dan started volunteering with the New York chapter of a program he now runs in another city, leading him to be hired as a counselor, then promoted to run “a myriad of programs” from street outreach to residential programs for youth. He said, “I knew at this point I was going to stay in this realm.” Dan moved out of state to start a family, worked at a foster care agency, and joined a statewide group focused on quality of care issues for youth. “I worked with a lot of providers to push policymaking down to foster-care.” Next, he moved to Florida to start up a youth agency and was invited to serve on national committees for older foster-care youth, “despite my full time job.” He became aware
through this work that “we as a child welfare system cannot expect an 18, 20, or 22 year old to really make it on their own if they’ve come from a difficult background.”

Debby began working at a homeless shelter and was sustained by finding a “place there for me to reach out to these young people and provide kind of an older-sister voice to them to keep them safe and to assure that they didn’t feel pressured into doing things that were gonna really be a detriment to them.” She said the leap into advocacy happened “organically I suppose.”

Sue began working with young people at the age of 20 at a group home, and remained in positions of service and administration for her entire career. Ms. Hyatt’s clinical service to youth was bookended between an earlier undergraduate placement at a statewide social work organization engaged in “on a macro level looking at social justice issues” and her current job that grew out a graduate placement. She purposefully looked for placement that were not clinical: “I had kind of done a lot of that in the past, and so I wanted to do something different and I’m really interested in this type of work…The population happened to be homeless youth.” Theresa started out doing clinical work with adolescents and families, then provided treatment at a homeless youth drop-in center and later, at a large homeless youth shelter. She recalls being drawn to advocacy by the experiences of “going out doing training and speaking and organizing” around LGBT youth issues. Within her latest two positions, she was able to “grow in my…understanding of the partnership between advocacy and direct service work.”

Maggie also began in social services, first working in a group home and then running an independent living program for young males who were transitioning from
foster care or the juvenile justice system back into their communities. She grew frustrated at the cycle of “family failures” leading to kids being removed from their homes, and the short nature at which the state would “basically cut their funding [for particular youth] on a 72-hour turnaround:”

I understood objectively why a system was pulling the plug on him to a degree, but I also knew what reality this young man was gonna face when he walked out the door, and as much as he drove me nuts and frankly abused me for the better part of two years, I would never wish that on anyone, and that a kid who’d been taken into care in early elementary school could be dropped in 72 hours with no plan was…really, really upsetting.

Maggie then moved to DC for prospects of better work, stopped looking exclusively in jobs typical of her Master’s training (which she referred to as “desperation in the job hunt”), joined an afterschool program, and then learned about the opening for her current position. According to Maggie, her hiring advantage was that she was “passionate about” youth homelessness and “understood [it] pretty intimately.”

Two participants, Jeff and Bob, worked at trade associations before moving into more socially based advocacy. After a chance to intern with a congressman and for his state’s Democratic party in “desk jobs,” Bob worked for an engineering membership association on “science and technology policy and professional regulation issues.” He then took a job at a homeless advocacy coalition, convening a group of other advocates to address healthcare needs of the homeless. The position “came to a close,” so he transitioned into his current position; he had a competitive edge in that he had already built “a decent track record in homelessness” and “knew who the players were in terms of other advocacy groups in town.”
Jeff completed an advocacy internship at a trade association; “I wasn’t really passionate about the issues that I was working on but like I was definitely really interested in the process of how political theater is staged, how you kind of get an idea out there, how you work and follow up to make the idea come to life.” After graduate school, he did more work studying non-profit advocacy: “My first couple jobs were more about kind of studying the process and studying the infrastructure of advocacy rather than actually doing it….It would be great to write a report or write a chapter in something, but then nothing really happened with it. And so it was always kind of like, ‘Oh, why did spend all that time working on that thing?’ He said that he found the work “dry to some extent” but appreciated that he could work on expanding nonprofits capacity to engage in policy change. He later evaluated spending patterns of philanthropies which “got me into the circles of foundations that supported LGBT issues…It was much more behind the scenes but it was moving from kind of a general sense of advocacy to something very specific.” He was led closer to his current job out of feeling that he “really [missed] he more public stuff that I had done at the watchdog group in terms of press and advocacy and lobbying.” A colleague told him about his current job’s opening and he “hit it off” with his employer, taking the job a few months later.

Rich moved from legal aid work to run a homeless youth continuum program. Because of a potential conflict of interest with contracts, he gave his legal volunteer work at the youth drop-in center to someone else, which “freed up some of my time at night…to work on advocacy…I worked longer than I had to in ways, but I had always done that through my volunteer work, and so now I just kind of filled it up doing advocacy work.” He was recruited for a position at a national homeless association
because of his experience crafting state legislation, so he moved halfway across the
country and took a position in federal policy for homeless youth for over four years. Of
the switch, he recalled that he “had no trouble moving to DC because I thought, well, I
can work on the big circle now. I don’t need to work on the state circle.” Concurrently,
he got married and adopted two foster children; he and his partner agreed that they
wanted to return to the lifestyle of the Midwest.

“Evolving” into advocacy. Participants ascribed qualities to their movements
from earlier career posts to ones that were more centered around advocacy for homeless
youth. Six participants described this movement as a variation of “evolution,” a
“journey,” a “natural progression,” or a “logical progression.” Jeff noted that the type of
advocacy he does “never entered my mind.” He felt that “every job is kind of…an
evolution to some extent where, you know, there's definitely a relationship from one job
to the next but it’s always slightly different…but it was moving from kind of a general
sense of advocacy to something very specific.” André reported that his current position
was “like a natural progression because I was still going to be able to work on these
issues” around youth, LGBT issues, and child welfare. “I wasn’t completely going out of
my knowledge box except for maybe on the policy aspect of things.” While Rich was
engaged in volunteer legal representation for homeless youth, he said that he weighed
doing 50-75 cases for youth each year against getting a statewide Runaway and Homeless
Youth Act passed with funding, allowing him to

serve a couple hundred kids a year in services that they never had
before….So, for me it was like a really logical progression… It wasn’t that
I thought I was doing bad work or that I thought I was doing useless work.
It was just that I thought, well, I can have a larger impact.”
Like others, Maggie thought her career progression was “an evolution…it was exposure to some really dynamic young people and some frankly flawed community or social interactions and some really flawed government and state systems.” Theresa believed that attending coalition meetings helped her identify themes and trends in the field, asking questions like “LGBTs are highly represented in the homeless youth population, and what’s the reason for that?” Similarly, Liz felt that coalition meetings helped her try to “put all the puzzle pieces together” about what her community was doing for its homeless population when she recognized: “I want more for my life and I want more for my community and I want more for my country.” She was not willing to be “resigned to the way things were,” and anticipated that advocacy would be “multiplying the force in society…and it’ll spread.”

It is noteworthy that two participants—Maggie who explained an evolution, and Theresa who explained a gradual process in career growth—also gave contrary euphemisms at other points during their interviews. Maggie said that she must have reached a “tipping point” and Theresa said that “at some point a light bulb must have gone on.” Nevertheless, as their stories unfolded, they tended to speak about a slower and connected series of events and realizations.

**Moving beyond direct service.** For the seven participants who moved from direct service into advocacy (though not in every case, away from it entirely), opinions about service work fell into two categories. Three spoke about direct service feeling draining or paralyzing and four spoke about a recognition that advocacy provided a better return on one’s investment in time and effort. André, Jeff, and Maggie identified with the
former category, and consequently each is now engaged full-time in advocacy and research work. André recalled that when he was involved in foster care services,

What got in the way was a lot of the policies of the organization, a lot of the limitations that are set upon you when you’re trying to simply help a child or help a youth or help a family…And that started to factor in with the burnout because despite [the fact that] all you want to do is help…you can’t, and that I think becomes very draining.

He also responded to increased needs to earn a higher wage, which helped him see that he “could hopefully help people in a different way.” Maggie said about direct service,

As much as that informed and absolutely was critical to where I’m at now, I don’t think I could have stayed optimistic putting out the fires day in and day out, and I think I am a little too empathetic in that I would have constantly seen each individual crisis and obviously felt compelled to respond to that as opposed to being able to see the larger systems issues. So for me to be able to step out of direct service and really look at a more macro level of issues was huge. I became very paralyzed with sadness a lot of the time, and frustration. So I think finding the right fit in how to effect change for me has been huge.

Being out of the direct service world, she believed that she was now able to “appreciate” youths’ struggles more. Jeff, too, spoke about sense of burn-out, despite limited contact.

Doing an hour or two at that homeless program…was like just so draining for me and for other people. The people who work there regularly, they loved it. They like got something out of it.

While he enjoyed aspects of the work, he understood that it was “not something that I could sustain just like emotionally or physically.”

Another cohort of participants cited a different reason for spending a portion (or all—in Ms. Hyatt’s case) of their energies on advocacy for homeless youth. Theresa’s response was typical of this cohort:

Really direct service work only goes so far, that you have to…work toward creating change unless you just want to keep having the same issue
that you’re addressing forever. I think part of my journey around making
the bridge from direct service to advocacy has also included understanding
the bigger picture, I think, for youth as well.

For similar reasons, Ms. Hyatt said that she “can’t turn a blind eye to the bigger picture”
and gave an example from a recent moment when she was forced to return to direct
service until funding for her homeless youth research program was restored:

Immediately I was working with a young woman and…I felt her mental
health issues were absolutely stemming from failed social welfare policies
[and] immediately I remembered why I like doing macro-level work. You
can kind of work with so many individuals but you’re not really
addressing the underlying problems.

Two other participants in this latter cohort spoke of the need for advocacy to
integrate with the direct service for homeless youth. Sue mentioned that “the day-
to-day stuff can only go so far if you don’t have the backing of the funders or the
policymakers.” She came to the “realization as I matured career-wise there's a lot
of great people doing direct service. There aren’t as many of us doing the
advocacy to make sure we can have direct service on a national basis or a state or
a local basis.” Debby, too, spoke of the harmony between service and advocacy in
achieving a vision of supporting young people who didn’t have families: “It’s not
just the attachment to a way of providing services. It’s attachment to the mission
of protecting these children in a broad sense.”

**Maturing as an advocate.** Engaging in advocacy is a process with its own
learning curves. Eight statements about particular lessons learned emerged from
interviews, falling into three categories. Two participants stated that prolonged
engagement gave them better knowledge and skills related to the policy process. Bob
noted globally that “anytime you do things more than once, you gain knowledge, so it’s
the natural improvement of understanding.” In a similar way, Jeff reported that he moved from a “vague, theoretical idea of advocacy” to direct application of research and skills on specific policy items. Two participants stated that prolonged engagement made them more cynical or jaded, but provided little description of how that came to be. Finally, a cohort of four participants stated that they learned to make better progress with a patient, inclusive style. Maggie explained that she was able to change her tone when advocating from at once being “so off-putting that people just didn’t want to buy in and I would get nowhere” to now being more inclusive and collaborative. Kirsten recognized that “part of just growing up and maturing and understanding what the world was coming to realize that “change takes time” and policymakers need the support of advocates. Liz is in the process of “re-finding my voice, a voice that will be powerful but engaging and collaborative, not like I’m the enemy pointing my finger at everyone telling them they’re doing their jobs wrong.” She said that colleagues helped her see that “instead of waging a war, [I could] plant new seeds as a way to help homeless people long-term.” Ms. Hyatt was also coming into a different style, in part to maintain the neutral stance required by her employer, and in part for her message to be more credible. “What’s more important than kind of fully expressing my personal feelings on the issue is, in this arena, getting the information out there and getting political will to address the problem. And so sometimes those things are at odds.”

**Receiving guidance and encouragement from others.** Participants addressed the issue of how there were supported in advocacy. Two participants reflected on early mentors; those individuals who encouraged them or reassured them in their vocational paths. Jeff talked about a priest that pushed him “into taking that internship in DC… he
was definitely a mentor who I think saw something in me and kind of pushed me in the
direction that he thought would be fruitful and interesting.” He later found “acceptance
that I never thought was possible” from a professor that later employed Jeff doing “part-
time nanny duty and part-time work with her law firm and her clients.” He said that he
“grew up thinking everybody hated gay people and all this crap, and she’s like…“Jeff, I
know you’re gay. I don’t care.” Jon identified his older brother, a social worker, as a
major influence in his decision to follow similar training.

Two participants described being introduced to youth homelessness advocacy by
others. Sue credits her involvement to mentors who “opened the door.” She doesn’t think
she would have gotten involved if “I hadn’t been asked to be on that national committee,
if I hadn’t been [told], “Yeah, we think you can do this.” As described earlier, Rich was
taken on out street outreach by a man “who got me hooked.” He later developed a
“social network of queer friends” to dialogue about the “plight of homeless youth as
being a queer issue that the queer community should take on and not leave to the straight
community.” A doctor wanted the group to start a campaign called “Don’t fuck [sic] our
kids.” Rich reflects that “became kind of this call to action for me like” and he believes
he was “propelled…to become even deeper involved” by “wanting to be a part of this
fledgling new advocacy queer community.”

Two newer advocates discussed the particular role-modeling that their colleagues
provided. André described a contagious passion: “It’s very refreshing and cool to be
around people like this because they really know their stuff and it challenges you as an
advocate, as someone who wants to do the work to think about things differently.” He
remarked that these interaction were “also humbling because [you are] not only new kid
on the block in the office but in this world of homelessness.” Jeff spoke his boss who helped him transition from a job that was “very behind-the-scenes and quiet to this job, which was very public” by working closely with him on a major advocacy initiative. She also modeled for him the work-life balance. He observed in her, “Okay, you’re just like hanging out with Obama in the White House, and then like two hours later you’re with your family dealing with this Pokemon card war.” He admired the balance of doing “really cool, important thing during the day and throughout your life” while also “hav[ing] a nice family life too…and not just be[ing] about work, work, work.”

Two other newer advocates talked about specific work perspectives that they learned from others. Maggie explained that colleagues helped her be patient with the social change process: They “help me understand that even though the change I have made even in my 18 months…feels very snail-paced and incremental, it’s…more progress than has been to date and it’s actually pretty measurable in the grand scheme of a political system.” Ms. Hyatt described a former supervisor who “really served kind of as a guide to me on how to…us[e] language that's not ideological, being really inclusive of who could be stakeholders in this issue.”

Engaging in the work of homeless youth advocacy also requires ongoing support. Several participants, ranging from newer to longer-term advocates, reflected specifically on the impact of a social support system. Sue said that a network gave her the ability to ask, “‘Hey, you can do this,’…You think I can really do this?” ‘Yeah, go. You can go do it.’ ‘Okay, let me give it a try. You think I can do it, then I must be able to do it.” Facing burnout, Liz sought out a group of fellow advocates to share the work. “I kind of felt like I was doing it all by myself for a long time, and that was an enormous weight to carry
around.” She soon realized that “a lot of what we’re doing is overlapping, so we’re wasting time. We’re reinventing the wheel when really we should be figuring out a more cohesive strategy, efficient strategy, to utilize everyone’s talent.” Her support system helped her feel “inspired by them and…they’re feeding off of that energy and momentum, and I think it’s crucial for getting anything accomplished.” Theresa, too, found that a network of colleagues helped “orient me and ground me to the picture and understand the role of advocacy” such that “you have to work toward creating change unless you just want to keep having the same issue that you’re addressing forever.” She stressed that “more advocates, more people in this line of work really need to grasp…that collegial-ism, all it does is better the situation. There's just so much positive to it… I think the work itself can only be better and stronger and your teams be better and stronger by that collaboration.” Completing this section on role models and supports, Jon was the only participant that spoke about finding encouragement at home: He described his wife as being a “real leader in issues around the minority communities here” and the pair supported each other in their commitments. He found it instrumental that he and his wife “were pretty consistent in our values.”

Thinking about future work. Given the sensitive nature of participants speaking about the future career shifts, including reasons or desires to move on from their current positions, this section has been de-identified. One participant foresaw a future in youth advocacy, ensuring “that we’re cultivating positive experiences and positive outcomes for young people.” A second person touched on that desire yet also identified a growing confidence in wanting to take on more leadership abilities: “I never saw myself as someone who thought that I was right
in trying to change people’s minds about how I see the world…But I’m at the point now where…I do want to…have them see my vision to solve an issue or address an issue.” Another participant envisions a future in being challenged by “consulting work…to take what I’ve learned and provide it” to others. A fourth participant spoke about the need to raise children in a less urban area closer to family and friends yet was confident in being able to “still do great work here as well.” A fifth participant is phasing into retirement and assisting with a search for a replacement. This person has already budgeted in five to six trips with the next leader to “grasp” the national landscape for youth homelessness and to visit some model programs around the country. Two participants spoke about the challenges of leaving. Facing frustration and limited pay, one individual had planned at one point to leave town entirely because “if I was here, I couldn’t leave what I was doing. I could not turn my back on these people, because I felt like if I turn my back there was no one left to pick up the pieces.” Another individual stated that the “institutional knowledge in my head… won’t be replaceable without someone else going through another [length of time] to replace it.”

**Section summary.** This section described six factors clustered around a theme of early vocational momentum for advocacy and activism. No one in this study was predestined to become a homeless youth advocate. Yet, here they were. Many had earlier jobs consisting of direct service and case management of vulnerable youth. Several participants transitioned from these jobs into program administration and advocacy. Other participants moved from collective action in other areas to collective action for homeless youth. When engaged in the work over time, participants described factors such
as evolving, maturing, and considering future work. Most participants endorsed social support as a major influence on their desire to be an advocate, or as an encouragement when political action got incredibly tough.

**Through the eyes of advocates: Self-views and world-views**

How advocates understand the world and their own place in it is only possible to examine following an exploration of the early and vocational processes that brought them to this work. In this section, participants share beliefs about their roles as advocates and activists, their identity as advocates beyond work, and their personal sense of responsibility to homeless youth. The section ends with a catalogue of opinions that participants had about youth homelessness from a variety of angles: who is responsible for it, why it exists, and how it can be addressed.

**More than just a job.** Some participants see advocacy as part of their identity. Five people described a core aspect of their work resonating with them as individuals. Debby believed that “this is not just about a job. There's a mission to it…the care and protection of those young people are near and dear to my very sense of self.” Similarly, Dan explained that “Advocacy isn’t just in-your-face advocacy, it really is just a daily mantra - a swatch of clothes that you wear every day.” Jeff described that any advocacy work needed to align with “what I think my purpose is.” Ms. Hyatt recognized that even when working on other issues outside of work, “I kind of have this sort of like same professional identity [as a social worker] that I tend to carry out into the world with me.” She continued that her “code of ethics something that I take very seriously…emphasis on social justice, social action and political action…That informs me on a daily basis. That’s
something that I take with me no matter what.” Jon said that his job duty was to help his organization make a difference as a service provider “but you can’t do that without worrying about the bigger systems out there and without sometimes getting involved;” consequently he thinks of himself “as primarily an advocate” both at work and in his spare time.

Not all participants were active solely around youth homelessness issues. In fact, six spoke of making time for other issues as well, ranging from LGBT causes (Jeff and his now-husband were a public “spokescouple” for marriage equality) and disparities between class, race, and sexual orientation (André) to progressive causes effecting minority communities (Jon and his wife do this work), voting rights (Debby “agreed to be arrested this past April”), and public health (Uncovering a local health hazard, Liz “found so many layers of corruption as I was doing it, like peeling an onion…and then no one did a damn thing about it”). Participants also identified being anti-war activists, demonstrators against Medicaid cuts, local-food advocates, and environmentalists. Participants believed that there were similar threads between the work of homeless youth advocacy and other causes. The most common thread for Jeff was that social injustices could lead quite easily to youth homelessness. According to Bob, threads are easy to identify:

I’m sure if I looked at environmental policy or transportation…it’s probably the same issues: What’s the money required? Where should money be directed? What’s the role of the free market....? Or in the case of children and youth, the families themselves compared to public authorities? Those kind of major questions and decision points carry across all sorts of policy areas.
As Bob found similar questions across issues, Sue cited similar tactics: No matter the issue you advocate for, “you have to make sure the nuances of each population is part of the plan. But if you’re not at the table you can’t be part of the plan.”

**More advocacy than activism.** All participants completed the Activist Identity and Commitment Scale (AICS; Klar and Kasser, 2009; modified by Ameen, 2011). As Figure 3 illustrates, most participants have a moderate to strong activist identity. In fact, six or more participants agreed “a lot” with statements one, two, three, and four related to how they see themselves and are perceived in terms of activism for homeless youth. Similarly, most participants have a moderate to strong commitment to activism. Only question seven, related to going out of one’s way to engage in activism for homeless youth, resulted in fewer than six endorsements at the highest level.

Despite the high identification and commitment to activism as demonstrated by the AICS, during interviews 11 of 13 participants defined their role exclusively as advocates. This is a distinction and departure from the term “activist;” the two remaining participants thought that both terms could equally apply to themselves. All participants weighed in on their impressions of what an activist does, using words like anger, civil disobedience, consequences, demonstrations, direct action, emotions, fights, getting arrested, honor, mobilization, old-fashioned, organizing, outsider, protesting, and untenable. Kirsten understood activists as having “a rabid appetite for change, a knowledge of many of the grave errors of the world… and an appetite to organize these people and make things happen and engage with pretty lefty agendas and demonstrate and all of those good things.” Although Debby defines herself as an activist and sees activist work (like getting arrested) to be particularly effective, she said that the term
“sometimes could have a pejorative sense,” and wondered if Occupy Wall Street protesters were viewed as “troublemakers” in their activism.

Figure 3: Activist identity and commitment, Shaded by freq. of participant endorsement*

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<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Statement</th>
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<td>Activist Identity</td>
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<td>2. I identify myself as an activist for homeless youth.</td>
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<td>3. People who know me well would call me an activist for HY.</td>
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<td>4. Being an activist for HY is an important reflection of who I am.</td>
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<td>Activist Commitment</td>
<td>5. I am truly committed to engage in activism for HY.</td>
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<td>6. I make time for HY activism, even when I’m busy.</td>
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<td>7. I go out of my way to engage in activism for HY.</td>
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<td>8. I take the time I need to engage in activism for HY.</td>
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*Shading legend: □ = Do not agree at all. □ = Agree a little. □ = Moderately agree. □ = Agree a lot.

Three participants spoke about their roles being more effective as advocates.

Maggie noted that she takes “a more backdoor approach to seeing that change happen versus the in-your-face demand approach…[but] there has to be both at the table.” Sue “never felt that [picketing] got me anywhere” and learned that “anytime you do anything extreme you make more enemies than you do friends.” She found it more useful to “temper a conversation for today…knowing that tomorrow I could have the conversation that would make more sense. Kirsten reported that she transitioned out of activism: “I am
now 32 years old and I have a different role to play in society…. those roles change as we age and mature and have different opportunities and responsibilities in life.”

Nevertheless, she said that her experiences as an activist enriched her: “I think it would have been a detriment to my life experience to have not experienced all that.”

There were some noted costs to engaging in activism. Professionally, André said that if he identified as an activist, “the assumption would probably be that I have my own agenda or that I was going to be untenable, meaning that I might be out saying whatever I felt like I needed to say and not try to do so with the voice of the [organization].” Dan stated that in his director role, “I don’t just get to be a freewheeler…We have to be very careful not to cross the lines that impact the institution - not for the institution’s sake but we’re the ones that serve 40,000 meals per year.” Ms. Hyatt noted she understand an activist as someone “who cares about an issue and is fighting on behalf of that issue. Compared to an advocate, she thought “the term activist has kind of like a stronger meaning or like identity associated with it.” Nevertheless, she also thought “there is a stigma that comes along with activist” and getting paid through a government grant made it unlikely that she would endorse that role: “The State has to have the subtle objectivity that…seems kind of like antithetical to activism.” She found that her way of engaging in collective action was “sitting within the system.” Liz stated that activism entail “consequences…that I as a person and I as a lawyer really just couldn’t gamble with.” At the same time, she “wholeheartedly” believed in the goals of activism and felt that “people don’t do that enough.” She found it “unfortunate” that efforts such as Occupy were too quickly shut down in a “David and Goliath” act by the government.
Two other participants reflected on the survey questions. Bob believed that he rarely saw activism on a national scale for youth homelessness. If it were to exist, it is “either more suited or more implementable at a micro level, like in a community…you know, protest when a shelter’s going to close,…those kinds of public displays of objection.” Rich stated that he saw activism as “something where it’s around public displays of either protest or civil disobedience, or… just direct action.” He didn’t feel himself to be an activist in that sense of the word, joking “I think sometimes when I’m sitting here it feels like I’m behind a desk and it doesn’t feel very active.”

Some participants discussed the distinction between activism and advocacy. Dan reflected that “people are looking at community organizing projects as activism, and advocacy as more legislative.” Kirsten agreed with that sentiment: “I guess the advocate is working to change the…the systems as they exist and working within the boundaries of the system…and I think activists like to push the whole system itself.” André said that activists appear to be saying “We want, this, we just want it now…whereas an advocate is more thinking about strategy and planning and being a voice, being pragmatic.” Maggie stated that “I see a lot of people who’d call themselves homeless advocates who I think are much more activist-minded in that they’re demanding social change or policy change without a whole lot of nuance into what that looks like in reality. They just want the change.”

Out of these distinctions, a few participants were in support of both styles existing in the youth homelessness sphere. Kirsten noted that the “two roles are not incongruent or mutually exclusive; they actually can be really useful for one another.” A second participant, who asked that this comment remain anonymous, felt that it was “usually
important, especially for really big policy changes, to have a noisy activist group of people kind of stirring up trouble.”

**A clear sense of responsibility.** While participants attributed the responsibility for homeless youth to a variety of actors and factors, a majority (eight) obligated themselves to find solutions. For three participants, this belief took hold within their own family systems. Maggie believed that her own awareness of youth homelessness implicated her in continued advocacy: When she recognized a pattern of “pulling babies out of a river,” she said “I think at that point it became evident to me that other people probably didn’t appreciate that it was this really complex series of circumstances that lead young people down this road and I got it, and now it was the time to make some systems change and help other people to appreciate that.” She noted that she was raised with the belief that “if you’re smart and passionate about something, it’s sort of your responsibility to do something, and that you have to be tenacious about it.” Sue compared her success to her own parenting: “I believe that if…the services delivery system I’m involved with isn’t good enough for my own children, then we shouldn’t be doing this work at all.” Jon also guessed that his sense of duty might be personal in nature: He began step-parenting three teenagers who “all had problems” and “I don’t know if it’s driven by any kind of guilt, but I just feel like there is always more that one can do, I’m kind of a workaholic.”

On a systemic level, Rich believed that his “role as a member of society is to guarantee the highest level of welfare for all members of society instead of just my own small family or community.” Dan recognized a goal to “level the playing the field and help more young people become successful in life.” Theresa said that she has “always
been concerned about the underdog my whole life.” Noting that within the homeless community youth are one of the most underserved segments, Ms. Hyatt said that “my coming to work it feels important, like if I’m not doing it probably nobody else is.” Liz articulated a responsibility to “not only educate people about the facts and circumstances about what’s going on but to show them in…creative ways, in lighthearted ways…the face of homelessness.”

Three gay or lesbian-identified participants (out four that disclosed their identities) spoke about a particular responsibility of their own LGBT communities to help homeless youth. Theresa said

We’ve pushed this message of, ‘…Be out, be visible, be fighting for our rights,’ and then we end up with…now the average age of coming out is so young that we have people who are still dependent on their family for their well-being that are coming out and being rejected by their families…So I feel like there's certainly a piece of the onus on the LGBT adult community to step forward and say, ‘We need to help take care of our youth as well.

Jeff echoed a similar concern, but clarified that there is a need to educate more in the LGBT community about homelessness rather than blaming anyone.

Rich said that he was compelled to “infiltrate” a homophobic homeless youth organization that was working with a disproportionate number of LGBT kids. He and his LGBT peers

all understood that level of oppression. We all understood what we were working with. We didn’t want to raise the next generation of LGBTs in that same rubric, so we thought…this was our opportunity to advocate for our kids. Really we thought of them as our kids.
He took his responsibility for youth a step further, adding that

there’s a lot of African American kids, there’s a lot of American Indian 

kids, there’s a lot of…other kids out here…and as queer advocates we 

have to stand up for all of those marginalized communities even if we’re 

not a part of those communities ourselves.

For Rich, he believed that as a member of one marginalized community, he must support all others.

**Desires for a more just world.** Nine participants articulated beliefs in wanting to maintain or restore a socially just world. Ms. Hyatt’s comment could signify a sentiment shared by many members of this cohort: “I really saddened by social injustice issues, and one of the only things that I can do generally to soothe myself is to feel like I’m making a difference.”

Six spoke about a world supportive of all youth. Dan stated, “Most of us will have a good life; that’s why it shouldn’t be hard for us to dedicate ourselves to kids who’ve had their childhoods stolen.” As he was describing his views, he looked for something in his office: “There’s a quote I have around here somewhere that says something like ‘your goal should be to do the most good for the most people.’” Jeff’s belief was similar: “I think that there should be a general commitment and ethos in our society…really making sure that we’re doing everything we can to make sure that [young people] have what they need to grow up and succeed, however they define that.” Sue was struck by the discrepancy between child welfare and real life: “They turn 18 and it’s like, ‘Have a nice life.’ Well, we don’t do that same philosophy. We don’t that with our own children.” In her life, she subscribes to a belief that “if you can offer a hand and someone will take hold, then you’re responsible for that hand you gave them.” Liz felt that “Our kids are the
future of the country and to turn our backs on them…just doesn’t make any sense to me.”

Jon noted that “there’s nothing cooler” than “at all levels…trying to create a place that kids can come and be safe.” Jon stated that “doing what I think is right” involves, “at all levels…helping individuals and trying to create a place that kids can come and be safe.”

Theresa finds youth homelessness the “worst tragedy in the world” because youth have to endure lack of social connections.

Two participants spoke more generally about their wish for a socially just world for all people met through a redistribution of resources. Rich said:

I’d like to believe of course that a society has a concept of community…and I’d like to believe that everyone has a self-interest in creating a healthy community for all members of society to adhere to certain basic livability standards—that we don’t allow people to starve, we don’t allow people to go without healthcare, we don’t allow people to go without shelter, and we certainly give people the tools in order to have opportunities to advance their own self-interests.

Debby noted that society faces an unwillingness to share its power: “[I]n so many ways, we do know what people need, and I don’t know that as a society we’re ready to say we want to make sure that everybody has these things.”

**Advocates think about youth homelessness.** Previous parts of this section examined participants’ self-views (i.e., seeing advocacy as more than just a job, identifying more this advocacy than activism, and feeling a personal sense of responsibility to youth homelessness) and worldviews (i.e., desiring a more just world for youth, wanting LGBT communities to take ownership). In order to more fully elaborate the ways in which participants understand and communicate the phenomenon of youth homelessness, I now turn to other worldviews they identified related to the themes of ownership and responsibility, solutions for, and origins of youth homelessness. Although
these themes may not directly address the research question, synthesizing information from these themes adds to the focal region of sites and settings introduced in the first section of this chapter. That is to say, how participants speak about these themes provides the reader with another window into the shared and distinct worldviews of participants. I offer their representative quotations about responsibility, origins, and ideas about solving homelessness in the three tables that follow. In the final chapter, I will return to these quotations with a critical lens.

**Who’s responsible for youth homelessness.** Participants were asked open-ended questions about who is responsible for youth homelessness. Table 5 provides a list of nine response categories identified, sorted from most to least frequently cited, as well as a representative quotation illustrating the category. The range of endorsement was from one to ten participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party deemed responsible</th>
<th>Number of participants endorsing</th>
<th>Representative quotation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community/Public</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>There's a lot of education that needs to be done…a lot of awareness that needs to be raised, and just challenging some of the images of the homeless youth population particularly. (Ms. Hyatt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self (participant)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBT Community</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State/Local Government</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>There was years of denial that that group even existed, that if kids wanted help that they would get it from within [the state department of human services], and obviously kids who weren’t getting help were outside the system and not their responsibility. (Jon)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Young people don’t just show up in the world. There are people who create them, and youth homelessness is the result of families that are failing or fragile in their ability to nurture the children in their life. That's why we have public systems to accommodate for human weaknesses. (Bob)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Federal Government 4  
The government of the United States has a role to play in that. They suck at a lot of things and they are slow to react. We know that. But incentive can be set up to do a better job. It truly is an investment. It needs to be national policy to ensure that youth don’t become homeless. (Dan)

Systems of care 4  
I think that at a certain point there is a sense of detachment from the systems that create the problems in the young people that we seek to serve…So the fact that we have a child protection system and we have a system of supports for children, particularly children 18 and under who are experiencing homelessness—those are incongruent realities, and yet they are both true. (Kirsten)

Organization 3  

Funders 1  
I think [of] the culpability of even some of our philanthropic leaders and other kind of big-think leaders who like to gravitate towards the sexy return on investment concept as it relates to those kids. I have no problems about that, of course, but deciding that you’re gonna put all your eggs in a particular concept basket does not necessarily raise all those boats. (Kirsten)

Media 1  
I would also honestly hold a lot of media accountable. I think people have a very skewed perspective of what a homeless young person looks like personally, or even without generalization in that sense, the reasons that got them there, and I think they should be held accountable as well. (Maggie)

* Note: Representative quotations for this category were provided in earlier sections.

**Why homelessness exists.** Participants were also asked open-ended questions about why the phenomenon of youth homelessness existed. Table 6 provides a list of eight response categories identified, sorted from most to least frequently cited, as well as a representative quotation illustrating the category. The range of endorsement was from two to 11 participants.

**Table 6: Participants discussed “Why does youth homelessness exist?”**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason implicated</th>
<th>Number of participants endorsing</th>
<th>Representative quotation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multiple problems</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>I see it as a multifaceted problem, and I think that part of the challenge in addressing it is that it’s not just coming from one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Code</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family issues</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth homelessness is...</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>primarily caused by conflicts within families. Multiple reasons why those conflicts occur: Could be longstanding interpersonal arguments, it could be chemical addiction, it could be mental health, it could be poverty, but there's a breakdown of family for which the parent is either unwilling or unable to care for youth in their care.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systems failure</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I've talked to people like the school counselor who has been a counselor for 30 years and he said he's never seen [child protective services; CPS] take any kids that are 17...So that's a real breakdown especially...where you can't house a minor unless you're licensed by [CPS]. So no one is allowed to take care of this kid because the one legal entity that's supposed to be taking the care of the kid is purposefully, kind of willingly, not taking care of the kid.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth’s mental health issues</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think a lot of mental health disorders are both misunderstood by families and also that families just aren't equipped in some way even if they do kind of understand what’s happening, how to deal with it. And I think some of that is developmental, but a lot of it is just your run-of-the-mill mental health issues whether it’s depression related to traumatic experience or almost a PTSD reaction, or whether it’s something more biological like schizophrenia, if you will.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disconnectedness</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s family, it’s the community, it’s the school, it’s connections to any of the institutions in people’s lives that have, I think, helped to stabilize and support people. I think that all of those ties have been frayed by so many forces.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics and class</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think that because of the issues of homelessness in our world, which have been so exacerbated by the economic circumstances, there are many more people, young people, who are of great concern to us up to age 24... [Y]oung people that we see here...don’t tend to be the kids that have resources.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of housing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When there is lack of affordable housing, obviously I think that homelessness becomes more likely. I also think for youth either living with their families or not...they’re one of the subpopulations that has the least access to housing.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oppression</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think we’re driven to protect our own self-interests, and I think what happens then is that when you get enough of a segment of society that is controlling its own wealth and income that it wants to maintain those control systems...it then marginalizes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the sufferings of those that do not have access to the same amount of wealth or access of resources. (Rich)

**How youth homelessness can be addressed.** Finally, participants were asked open-ended questions about how youth homelessness can be addressed.

Table 7 provides a list of eight response categories identified, sorted from most to least frequently cited, as well as a representative quotation illustrating the category. The range of endorsement was from one to five participants.

**Table 7: Participants discussed “How can youth homelessness be addressed?”**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason implicated</th>
<th>Number of participants endorsing</th>
<th>Representative quotation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Invest in youth development, birth to 25</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Kids are clearly not a priority in the world…We wouldn’t stop our investment, if there was any, at 18 or 20, we’d do whatever it takes. We don’t spend the real time or the real money to invest in young people…It just doesn’t make sense to cut off our nose to spite our face. Adulthood in a western culture doesn’t mean you’re living on your own at 18. (Dan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve family’s resources and capacity to care for youth</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>[We] need more funding to address the issue that a lot of youth run away and become homeless because of family conflict…When people start looking at youth as part of a family unit and not as an individual, then the family can get more assistance to address the issues that cause youth to run away or get kicked out or however. (André)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can and should be ended completely</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>We need to be focused on ending youth homelessness. There is no question about that. And we absolutely can. The question is how. (Kirsten)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannot be ended completely</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>I want to think that's possible, but I don’t think that there is any silver bullet that's going to get us there…I feel like there's always going to be many different things that lead people to homelessness. We're human beings. We're like always creating problems. (Jeff)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can only be addressed by multiple means</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>You have to deal with each one as an individual. And what do they want to do? ...They’re gonna only work towards the goals they believe in. The minute we do cookie-cutter work, it won’t work. I mean if everybody gets the same five things and they’re supposed to be successful, we all know that doesn’t work. (Sue)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Section summary. Participants qualified the ways in which they frame the social problem they are devoted to addressing through collective action. This section surveyed participants’ worldviews, providing representative insights into how they understand youth homelessness from three angles: The responsibility for addressing it, the various origins of it, and the proposed ideas and challenges to solving it. Some common themes emerged from the data. Related to responsibility, participants commonly viewed the general public as having a significant stake in addressing youth homelessness. To a lesser extent, they also saw a role for governments and child welfare systems. Many participants understood their own responsibility for the issue, and those who were LGBT-identified generally felt that the LGBT community should have a vested interest in the
well-being of homeless youth. Related to origins, participants almost universally described the reasons for youth homelessness as multiply determined and multifaceted. Those who broke down the complexity in greater detail identified specific roots in families, welfare systems, untreated mental health, disconnectedness, class issues, and to a smaller degree, lack of housing and the oppression of marginalized people. Finally, on the theme of solutions, participants had a range of eight different ideas, although no single idea approached a majority endorsement. Some participants felt that youth homelessness could be solved completely, and an equal number disagreed. A few felt that the problem needed to reach a “tipping point” before it had sufficient public will to change. Solutions to ameliorate youth homelessness included multiple means; more specifically, participants identified housing, investment in youth and families, and building stronger communities. The emerging worldviews of homeless youth advocates elucidate the issue as a problem with various causes, solutions, and corresponding obligations. The final section returns the focus on necessary conditions to being an advocate.

**Being an advocate: Necessary qualities**

In this section, participants described the various qualities that they have indentified in themselves and believe are required to be a successful or enduring homeless youth advocate. Whereas previous sections have looked developmental qualities related to becoming an advocate, this section peeks under the hood at factors that allow people to “be” and “stay” advocates. Some data comes from responses to an open-ended question—such as “What does it take to do this work?”—although most participants spoke about the characteristics of an advocate through several explanations
and explications during their interviews. The data fall into five categories, demonstrating that this agglomeration of advocates has certain personal characteristics, technical skills, relational skills, leadership skills, and connections to youth. Table 8 lists the categories, factors, and frequencies from the 13 individuals in this sample.

Table 8: Being a homeless youth advocate demands these factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identified factor</th>
<th>Number of participants endorsing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal traits: Poised and ready</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to fight</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stick-to-it-iveness</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balance to fight burnout</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Technical skills: Expertise in content and process</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expertise in issue</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of legislating</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systemic thinking and understanding</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal skills</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research/analytic skills</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relational skills: Working with policymakers</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building relationships with supporters</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding policymakers</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leadership skills: Opening the door for others</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educating others</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging staff</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involving youth</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Connected with youth: Keeping the agenda real</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passion</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct service experience</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remembering personal stories</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The personal characteristics most commonly identified by participants are qualities of being poised and ready to engage in this work over protracted period of stress, while keeping a balance between work and personal life. Technical expertise is a more diverse category, illustrating that advocates generally possess (or develop over
a number of different job-based skills to do their work well, including expertise in both the process and content of advocacy. Along with technical skills, many participants described the importance of understanding their policymakers and relating to stakeholders in a way that facilitated social change and pushed their agendas forward. Several participants were managers in their fields of advocacy or administration, and speak to the qualities that are important to being a leader, such as educating others about the skills and issues, and involving others—youth and staff primarily—in collective action. Finally, several participants spoke of the importance of working with, understanding, and empathizing with homeless youth; it is these connections that kept many advocates passionate about their roles.

**Personal traits: Poised and ready.** Participants indentified four traits that relate to being an advocate: Confidence, a desire to fight, “stick-to-it-iveness” (which is a combination of patience and persistence), and balance to fight burnout. Combined, these qualities signify that doing this type of work requires being poised and ready for engagement in policy and legislative issues against (and often with) people in positions of power.

**Confidence.** Confidence was identified as a core factor by six participants. Bob explains that over time, he was “able to be in a room and speak with a little more authority because you’ve just done it longer….confidence to be more assertive, less timid.” Rich gained his confidence by peers and colleagues: “I do think what they were able to convince me of is that I have something to offer, that my experience on the local level and the time I spent really working with the nonprofit community was the most valuable…[that] I wasn’t just some lawyer that had ideas about legal rights of kids.” Sue
gave advice for future advocates, encouraging them to be confident: “Don’t be afraid to speak up. What you say is important. Remember, those people that are in those big jobs, the ones that we elected, still work for us, and they are supposed to listen to us, so make your voice heard.”

Desire to fight. Thematically related to confidence, three participants spoke about their personal desires to fight for homeless youth in a political arena. Sue explained, “You have to be willing to take that risk. You have to be a risk-taker. You have to be willing to say, ‘Okay, I really believe in this and I don’t care who you are. You need to listen to me.’” Jeff offered that his job puts him in a position to “be ready to argue to people about why something that might not seem like an obvious solution could be one of the solutions that you use to tackle a problem.” Debby spoke about feeling “very enlivened by being in a battle in which I am pushing against what is. [It] feels like the right work to be doing.” She reflected on “different sensibilities and gifts and experiences in your life probably that cause you to feel more or less capable of pushing the envelope…and I’m just glad it’s me.” At the same time, she recognizes that not everyone is able to do that; “I think it creates a lot of anxiety for some people.”

Stick-to-it-iveness. Eight participants also identified qualities of patience and persistence, which join into a fitting word coined by Debby: “Stick-to-itiveness, I guess…a kind of doggedness.” It is a quality that she identified in herself: “I think that there is a way, when I look back, I don’t know where it comes from…I can do it well, I can do it better, I can make a difference.” She elaborated further on the benefit of her persistence, noting that “there is a part of me that feels like the things that last are things that have deep roots. So there's some part of me that I think has felt that and stayed and
has continued to grow the garden.” Variations on stick-to-itiveness were shared by others in this study. Jeff stated that he has “the perspective that there's not one thing any of us can do to make the world better like instantly. It’s like a lot of small fights that don’t really stop.” For example, Sue described the years that it took her and colleagues of lobbying to get the Chafee Bill passed into law: “[I]t doesn’t happen overnight. You have to be patient enough and work through it to make it happen.” She was sustained by the belief that this work would pay off for the “percentage of our street kids and our homeless kids that had aged out of foster care…here was one thing we could do for them.” Liz did not always have this quality, yet learned its importance through her maturation as an advocate. When she first started in the field, she “had the door slammed on my face by some people, and then I just accepted that as a ‘no,’ as a block.” She came to realize that there was no use in people taking then ‘no’s’ “personally, like it’s something about them, it’s an offense to their own person, their egos and identity, whatever.” Her advice, of which she also practices now, if that “you really have to get yourself out of the way and not be reactive and push forward in a persuasive way but in a non-confrontational way.”

**Balance to fight burnout.** A different set of eight participants had the most to say about one additional quality of being an advocate: The need to have balance in life to counter burnout. To discuss this characteristic, it is necessary to first validate the premise that advocacy could grow tiresome. Jon was surprised that so few of his colleagues were still involved in collective action alongside him. André explained, “Before, doing the work itself was very satisfying and you could actually see the change…it was great. But now I find myself, as I get older, having to remind myself why [chuckles] I’m doing the
work that I’m doing, or that the work that I’m doing is effective.” While Bob explained that “personality style” generally dictates whether people “clock out after a reasonable nine-hour day” or work “long hours and bring stuff home,” he recognized that the schedule of an advocate is consistently unpredictable and can override one’s ethic about the work-life balance; for example, “there’s a hearing next week that we need to write the testimony for and we only heard about it [just now].” Jeff spoke of doing what he could to resist a grueling schedule:

[It is] just something we always have to be working to make better; you have to work hard when you’re at your job and you have to be smart and you have to be good, but it doesn’t mean that I’m gonna stay here every night till 10 o’clock and neglect my husband and neglect my friends and neglect my health. I could do that, and I’m not gonna be as good of an advocate as I would be if I had more balance.

He was humble in recognizing that “I’m still a human being in a much larger place and we all die.” For him, it was more important to know that his “life was worth something and that worth doesn’t have to just be because you like worked yourself to death.”

André looked for ways to “re-energize” himself as most participants did. For a handful, this happened through reflexivity. One advocate (who asked that this quote go unattributed) noted that the day-to-day work can shift quickly, and “if I don’t do enough to take a step back and kind of see that a shift has happened and evaluate whether it’s good or bad, I’m antsy about it and just feel stressed out and burdened.” Theresa noted that she, too, found it important to keep “checking yourself” by getting an “understanding [about] what’s happening for yourself.” Nearly all participants (11 of 13) illustrated reflexivity implicitly during the interview by reflecting, unprovoked, that explorations such as these were useful and significant. André said “this exercise if you will has caused
me to revisit where I’ve been and where I am now.” Speaking of the informed consent, “I think part of the disclaimer was, you know, as for participating you won’t benefit from it in any way but, I feel like I have, so I’m glad.” Debby said “I wish I did” reflect more regularly; even though “I’ve given some talks and speeches,…not a lot gets at some of the things that I think I could talk about.” Jeff inferred that the chance to reflect on his work reminded him of “having a therapy session.”

Other strategies are useful to list here. Ms. Hyatt also found her balance against the sadness of homelessness by “read[ing] uplifting stories of a homeless youth that makes it out,” and “do[ing] something productive at my work that day because I really need to feel like I’m making a difference” and also “debrief[ing] at the end of the day with my partner, and other friends or my housemates. I talk about what happens and what upsets me.” Similar to the last strategy, Sue found that keeping her family as a priority was essential; for example, she takes Fridays off in the fall to see her son play college football, and immediately following our interview, she was going to help her grandson with his homework. Participants also spoke to the importance of reminding themselves about past successes, strategizing differently, and not taking setbacks personally: Sue kept a proverbial “pocketful of successes to get you through the hard times,” Liz found other ways to “come at” social change after deciding that “I could not wage a war because it was gonna kill me” and Jeff tries not to “let the outcome…determine what you think of yourself at the end of the day.” Theresa offered final suggestions: “Taking a break when you need to, finding a new project that excites you if you’re losing a different project,” and reaching out to colleagues on a continual basis “to keep yourself from falling into that depth of burnt-outness.”
**Technical skills: Expertise in content and process.** To “be” an advocate, and to fulfill all the job duties that were mentioned in the initial section of this chapter, one must also obtain job-related skills, a broad set of expertise in both the content and process of advocacy. On the content side, participants spoke about the need to have knowledge of legislating and knowledge in issues around homeless youth in America and the history of policies and policymakers. On the process side, participants were expected to possess systemic ways of thinking and understanding youth homelessness, skills to create and analyze research, and for some, legal skills were also considered vital.

**Expertise in issue.** Expertise in the focal region of youth homelessness advocacy was identified by four participants. Bob said that this consisted of:

> figuring out who’s an expert in the particular area and paying attention to what they have to say when you’re in meetings with them or knowing which organizations have a history of advocacy in the same area you are so you can know who allies are, or know at least who’s gonna have a point of view that may differ from yours and to not be surprised when they do.

In addition, Bob noted that it is important to know “how the public programs that you’re working on have come to be and what debates already occurred on the very same thing that you’re worried about.” This ostensibly would save an advocate time from repeating initiatives that did work in the past. Jeff felt that a command of the issues is important when trying to convince a legislator to buy in to: “You really have to make sure that you have a pretty tight case statement and arguments in terms of why this is something people should pay attention to and spend some time on.” As an advocate builds more of a knowledge base, they become what Sue called “local expert[s]… someone that people turn to.” Jon explained that some of his colleagues are effective advocates because they are extroverted but he felt that his own contribution as a more introverted person was just
as useful because he brought expertise to the table: “I’m kind of too serious to be good at that,” – what he describes as “schmoozing and hanging out” – “and that's okay because there's a balance there, and when there’s a need for me to go and be the ‘smart’ one, they’ll bring me out.”

**Knowledge of legislating.** An equal number of participants noted that it was highly relevant for advocates to have an understanding of the legislative process. Dan was keenly aware that legislators might “try to confuse and confound you” to “try to keep you from coming back” so as a counter-strategy, he found it useful to have “an understanding of the system itself and the higher strategies.” Bob listed some of those aspects: “[H]ow laws become passed…how to write bill language or how to get your message points into one side of a page, not two.” Two examples of this skill demonstrate its utility. First, Sue explained that in her Federal bill, it was critical to understand how federal and state governments were autonomous on certain issues which would cause implementation problems when the bill passed. Second, Liz explained that when she came to understand her county’s rules and regulations around their homeless point-in-time census, she found out they were different from those of the federal government overseeing the census, giving her room to push for changes in the direction of more accurate representations of youth.

**Systemic thinking and understanding.** Along with content knowledge, four participants identified the importance of having a framework for thinking about systemic problems and responses. As it were, collective action generally targets system reform over individual and micro-level responsibility. Sue noted that when she began working for homeless youth, “it hadn’t dawned on me 30 years ago that in order to do the work I love
there was a lot more work to do than just doing the [clinical] work.” Dan spoke of the parallels between advocacy, business, and science. First, of science: “[I]n the science world, it would be notching down, going into the micro. In the social sciences, it’s notching up, into the macro. Asking why is this happening, and then why is this happening?” Second, of business: “Given the current business structure, if I wanted to help 20 kids instead of 10, what would I need? Do I need to get the government involved? Thinking in a larger picture is about trying to solve something on the ground using larger strategies.” Dan also credited good advocacy as a combination of “policy work plus some good theory.” Jeff believed that advocates need “a sense of the broader landscape that the problem is situated within.” Although “there's no silver bullet that's going to take care of this problem or issue,…you kind of have to look at the full spectrum from…policy options and policy prescriptions to help solve it.”

**Legal skills.** To a lesser extent than other skills, legal skills were identified by two participants. One endorser—Rich—was a lawyer himself. He articulated the benefit of his participation in a homelessness coalition; he was the only one “looking at this from a law perspective.” While some of the changes the coalition wanted to see involved “distributing resources to support specific intervention,” most were “about changing the law to advance legal rights, which is a different concept.” Dan, who does not have a law background, respected the contributions that attorneys made on pro-bono work “using their law firms’ time.”

**Research and analytic skills.** Research and analytic skills were the most relevant factor to being a homeless youth advocate (tied with empathy for nine participant endorsements). André said that “data is the one thing that's pretty much needed
throughout all types of programs…[I]n the role I’m in now, data and research plays a huge part of, the work, probably 90 to 95 percent.” He elaborated that data is a commodity when pushing for social change: “People wanna know the data. They wanna know the evidence. They want the black and white despite what you’ve observed or been told numerous times.” Rich explained that policymakers are not interested in “just throwing out money at pitiful stories about kids that are starving on the streets.” As such, he has made it his focus as advocate to ask, “How do we take limited resources and spend them in the best way that has the biggest impact?”

The importance of research is illustrated in three examples. Jeff used a research report written by his work team to push for wider youth representation in a current bill in Congress and Ms. Hyatt compiled reports regularly that can she shared “in ways that makes it accessible to policymakers and state agencies, community members and service providers. Jon conducted three distinct cost-studies to “show that homelessness is more expensive than housing; that it saves people money to house those folks that are homeless” and used the data to influence his state government’s funding priorities. Sue hypothesizes that she would train new advocates by pointing them to “good research.”

**Relational skills: Working with policymakers.** It is not enough to have technical skills and an attitude of readiness for policy changes. One must be willing to engage with policymakers over a long period of time in collaborative ways and also in ways that anticipate their needs and abilities to advance policies for homeless youth. Participants spoke about these two related ideas as follows.
Building relationships with supporters. Five participants identified skills that aided them in forming instrumental relationships with coalition partners and supporters. André’s purpose for doing so was in part, “to get people on board with a sort of perspective or thought or an idea.” Theresa connected her relational skills to a principle that one person cannot do it alone:

I think that you have to be willing to have an interest in working with other people…[with] it not being about what you’ve done versus what another agency has done…Because no one agency, no one person, can make all the changes that need to be made. It’s got to be a society response or a community response.

Collaborative relationships helped Jeff do policy change work; he formed these relationships by “successfully managing personalities and kind of making sure that you don’t become your own worst enemy.” Dan made it his business to consider everyone a potential supporter:

I am an ambassador to anybody I meet…You will go to a checkout counter at Giant and if you always carry that happy heart, every relation you can have that day will have an impact…The business world knows this. Wherever they go they clearly understand future and potential customer engagement. In the advocacy world, the smarter we become in realizing that this is how you can become in your everyday - be a walking billboard and advocate for homeless youth - the sooner we will see how every single interaction is an opportunity.

Dan’s willingness to engage in relationships helped him conceptualize a greater network of supporters of this population.

Understanding policymakers. Relationships with policymakers are instrumental in social change for homeless youth, and sometimes these relationships are crafted instrumentally or intentionally. Maggie articulated that “officials are really bound to their constituency. Even if they’re not elected, in many ways they still have to respond.” Eight
participants spoke about what Sue called “getting to know the folks that are making those decisions.” Participants learned various skills in regard to working with elected officials and their staffs. Maggie described engaging lawmakers in your agenda as early as possible: “[T]o get change to actually happen, people have to A—feel like they have a voice in it and have some ownership, and B—aren’t blindsided.” As a result, she spent time in meetings “building some internal buy-in so that when the activists come to the table, people are a little more willing to listen. They have a context of understanding… It’s not necessarily the first time they’ve heard it.”

Dan, Bob, Kirsten, and Liz spoke about ways they help their officials in turn help their causes. Dan learned that “if you start talking in this big policy wonk conversation, people start drifting into their political ideations and you’ve lost them.” He finds it more effective to help stakeholders “get their arms around it and start to make sense of it” before “it becomes too big of an issue” to tackle. Bob discussed the importance of “understanding the customer” in that politicians will be more cooperative if provided certain things to advance an advocate’s issue, whether that is concise talking points, data, or Bill-ready legislative language. He believed that these provisions separated professional advocates from other constituents an official encounters. Jeff learned from recent experience on Senator Kerry’s Bill that it “always helps to have a new product that you want to share with” those one might be lobbying. Kirsten shared that when pressuring on a policymaker to make important decisions, an advocate must bring forth other supporters for youth homelessness, for public will can turn into political will: “[T]hey can’t do it by themselves and they can’t be expected to do it by themselves. They’re representatives of the public sentiment that needs to support their leadership if they’re
gonna make that move.” Liz learned that policymakers “have their agenda, so you have to know where people are coming from and kind of get in their world for a minute. And just because they have their own agenda doesn’t mean that they’re bad.” She sympathizes with “be[ing] a representative that really cares about your community and really trying to do something” without obvious solutions and sufficient funding. In these situations, she has learned to work with politicians by “engaging them some other way outside of that [legislative] system, because they’re just cutting things [in the budget] left and right.”

Other participants spoke of more strategic ways to work with officials on policy change. What Maggie described as “finding their pressure points,” Jon exemplified by bringing Veterans to testify on a legislative item that would similarly impact homeless youth: “Suddenly everybody sits up a straight and [says], ‘Oh, that's horrible. It’s gonna affect you.’ I mean, they’re one small part of the group but you know that that's a group that will get listened to.” Maggie once heard advice that “policymakers are overgrown adolescents.” Consequently, her experience negotiating with youth has some bearing on how she creates relationships with officials: “They like to feel in charge, they like to feel like it’s their idea, and sometimes they need their ego stroked and they need some structure and a lot of heads-up and five-minute warnings.”

**Leadership skills: Opening the door for others.** Leaders—individuals who can influence people in a particular direction—by definition share a similar function with advocates. In fact Dan saw it as common that “people at the CEO level…are involved in this. I think if people have any leadership training, they do have a moral sense that they have to be a part of the overall global solution.” Participants discussed their roles as leaders in social change by not only doing collective action themselves, but also
involving others in the work through education (two participants), training and modeling for staff (four participants), or directly involving youth in collective action (seven participants).

As participants reflected on what it meant to be a leader, three remarks surfaced. Debby said that she “had the willingness to be bold and the capacity to convince other people to come along and rally resources.” Jon discussed that his role was to “coordinate and supervise” but recognized that he “learn[ed] from the people who really are on the front…who run the services.” Sue discussed the importance of communicating both a “passion and vision” for advocacy to others; whereas passion is “that you have to believe in what you do” and lacking it makes someone simply a manager, vision is “know[ing] were you want to get to.”

**Educating others.** Two participants described how they educated others. Theresa said that part of being a leader has been “really working to educate other advocates and other providers” in new models of intervention for homeless youth so that they could in turn, “believe in the work, understand the importance of it, and know how to talk to young people about it.” In this way, she felt that the most promising yet under-funded and under-researched models might actually thrive. As a leader herself, Liz takes four different approaches to education. First, she believes that education may help link America with a history of activism:

People don’t know about the Federalist Papers and things like that…I feel like we became less and less educated and people don’t know, kids now don’t know, the great story of our nation and what our real principles are and what this country stands for and should be.
Second, she invites people to her program’s drop-in center as a way to dispel myths about homeless youth: “It’s been said many times, ‘Everyone just kind of blends together. I don’t know who’s homeless and who’s a volunteer.’” Third, she educates others on the importance of careful language to describe the population: She tries to use the term “a person experiencing homelessness” because “when you say a homeless person, it identifies their whole identity…It completely eliminates everything else that they are, and all of a sudden they’re labeled, and then they start to identify.” Fourth, Liz found it useful to present homeless youth in a non-traditional light “because it’s such a heavy subject that I kind of see people shut down. Their brains are kind of like, ‘Wait, whoa, too much, too much, overload.’” Her intent has been to connect youth with the arts: “Something to kind of just empower these young people and show people their other facets, their creativity and their talents and their joy. They’re so joyous.”

**Encouraging staff.** Four participants either invited their staff and volunteers to get involved in social change, or modeled their position as an advocate to them. Through modeling, Dan said that “When I’m looking at each of my staff, I promise them I am going to do all that is in my power to take care of homeless kids. That drive is one of the things that helps me advocate.” Kirsten saw potential in everyone she worked with: “I think of all of my colleagues across the organization as advocates, and so it’s my job to help them understand that for themselves as well.” Sue was direct in the way she went about articulating a vocational responsibility of advocacy to her employees:

I push my staff a lot to get out and speak…get out and do something…because [their] voice is important. And if that opportunity’s never there, you don’t know that you should do it…[Y]ou have to open the doors up. That's a responsibility of leadership…and shame on us if we’re not doing that with those people that want that opportunity.
Liz described going through an evolution in her leadership, beginning with what she called a “lone wolf syndrome:” “I was doing it all by myself…and I for some reason was refusing to ask for support even though people all around were just waiting to help. They just didn’t know how.” Now she has claimed value in striving to “really empower other people instead of wearing all the hats… [Y]ou start a little spark or something, you’re spreading a fire, and by empowering these young people, we’ll just be multiplying the force in society” towards social change.

**Involving youth.** Seven participants involved youth in collective action for youth homelessness; as Dan explained, “Our clients are given a voice. The young people we work with are part of our advocacy and community organizing.” Jeff brought back the formerly homeless youth who encouraged him to pursue LGBT youth homelessness as a policy item while he was Jeff’s intern: “We still paid for him to travel and go to a few different things to be kind of our ambassador for the report.” Jon’s agency organizes a homeless voices project, training people to go to the state capital and speak regularly in meetings and briefings with their elected officials. He suggested that many youth are initially enticed by going on “an excursion of sorts.” While some of them don’t show up or stay engaged, others—like two young males who were formerly homeless and about to get housed together as roommates—were “pretty impressed [because] people really thought what they said was worth listening to and it made them feel really good.” Liz found that “you see them line up when they’re included in something. They feel like they’re contributing and they are.”

As to why adult advocates involve youth, many spoke about the authenticity. According to Maggie, “I think too often we tell ourselves that we are youth-led, and what
we’re actually being led by is what youth are telling other adults and other adults are telling other adults, and I know there's stuff that's lost in translation.” Liz believed that it was “very beneficial for people in the community to see it on a human level, not just a statistical” or stereotypical level. Jon spoke about youth voices being perceived as more effective to policymakers:

The best way to make a point anyway, if you’re trying to advocate, is not to just do some grand globalized and big thing about inequality, but...we’re asking people to talk about how [a law change] would impact them.

While Rich believes that letting youth advocate is important, he finds it necessary to “have the right balance” between helping youth tell their stories and “mov[ing] this public policy ball forward” by not “get[ting] mired in youth voice.” He explained, “at some point you need to take that and think in terms of the mainstream culture and the dynamics of oppression and start to frame it in ways that youth wouldn’t or couldn’t.”

A few participants spoke of the not-so-easy task of involving youth. Maggie said that will take youth service providers who “open up space in some of these more formal settings and prepare our youth to participate in those settings to talk about this stuff frankly.” Not only must the policy sphere be amenable to youth, but also youth must be assisted in crafting their messages. Maggie explained that it can be hard to find the right young people who are “thoughtful and presentable enough that you want bring them to a formal meeting...as affiliated with your organization, but you have to do it. “ Jon seconded that feeling: “[W]e have advocates that say things that make people want to crawl under a desk or disagree...but they really need to make their own way sometimes and we need to make sure we’re not telling them what to say.” Additionally, two
participants explained that it was important not to exploit a youth’s story: There is, according to Maggie, a “fine line of asking a young person to…talk frankly without having to divulge too much information or personal experience….It’s only a handful and can’t keep going back to those same young people.” Challenges aside, participants were surprised with the advocacy of the youth they worked with. Jon said “we can underestimate their [ability to] connect all the dots.” Maggie said that “young people are far more introspective and articulate and able to I think identify what they need or how they’ve ended up where they are than most adults give them credit for.”

**Connected with youth: Keeping the agenda real.** Participants have found a variety of ways to keep their collective action on point and in line with the youth they serve. Six individuals spoke about empathic connections with youth being instrumental to their work, four discussed the relevance of individual stories to sustain them, and five spoke about the importance of passion in the enduring advocate.

**Passion.** Bob noted that “To be an advocate, you need to care about what your issue, message, population is…[Y]ou have to be passionate about your cause…[I]nside you, you need to care about what you’re working on, working toward, who you’re representing.” Dan agreed, noting that having a “drive is one of the things that helps me advocate,” and Sue said “passion to me is the key to success in this field. “ Jeff added that ground-level passion for the work must be channeled through more “opportunistic policy responses” to specific issues.

**Direct service experience.** While a previous section explored participants’ desires to take on larger issues than they could through the design of direct service, a
majority of participants (nine) were shaped into authentic advocates by prior or concurrent service to youth. Touching on the crossover trend, Debby noted that “this is a field that because of its history has attracted and kept the interests of a lot of people who combine both advocacy passion with social services passion.” As a former case manager, André found that youth “saw me as someone that they could trust…so getting that feedback from a lot of the youth that I worked with, they sort of without knowing gave me permission to move on with my career.” On the other hand, Jon’s current proximity to youth still aids him: “If I get to questioning why I do what I do, I can just walk out into the teen center…and it reminds me, and that's a big part of why I do the work I do and how I do it.”

When Rich moved from an environment surrounded by youth to a strictly policy atmosphere, he said that this came at a cost: “I didn’t have that same direct contact to youth voices and their own concept of justice, or what was most important for them.” Those who can remain in direct service or connect with other providers noted several benefits to their jobs as advocates. Sue offered one of them: “[T]he young people I’ve worked with for a long time…probably prepared me more than anything…The only way to know it is to dive into it.” Maggie had a similar belief: “I don’t think I would be a third or even a quarter of the advocate I am now if I hadn’t had that direct experience with young people where you did feel like every three to six months you were prepping for a fight to give them the time they needed to hit stability.” Also, Maggie said that her skills in working with youth were transferable: “You can’t just come in and demand change or demand a solution. There has to be all of these additional steps….if I can do it with an 18-year-old, stubborn, mentally ill, abused, mistrustful adolescent, I can do it anywhere.”
Debby offered a fourth benefit: “When you are somebody who is a direct care provider, people listen to you more, good or bad. They know you’re doing the work.”

**Empathy.** Participants explored how empathy was an important part of their jobs. For example, Theresa felt “like I can put myself in young people’s shoes in an emotional sense” and Maggie said she had “some internal appreciation for what family conflict can look like” and “a depth of appreciation and empathy for the hurdles that at-risk youth—and likely the youth that end up homeless—face which was useful.” Empathy is a predefined factor; participants strengthened their empathy through several means. Two individuals noted that it comes from drawing on a history of personal experiences that youth may also be going through. Ms. Hyatt, who was a formerly homeless youth, believed has a “particular empathy with folks experiencing homelessness because of that.” Maggie suggested “remembering what it was like being adolescent” because “the minute we try and look at these issues from a…purely policy-driven perspective…we’ve limited ourselves.” If participants are unsure how their own early experiences might relate, Maggie hoped that people would be “more willing to ask for the input of others.” Theresa encouraged others to “spend a lot of time with young people in the programs, doing activities, either interviewing them, just really getting [to know them].” A third participant, Debby, noted that she become more empathic by “rel[y]ing on other people to be of great assistance” and has “taken seriously learning and listening to other people’s points of view about what’s at work, what are the dynamics that's going on with this particular person or what’s going on in the community generally.” As an example, “I work substantially with an African American population and I have learned enormous amounts from others about what that experience is and how it plays out in all
interactions.” Liz has drawn from her own marginalization as a woman, noting “it’s the same thing, just like these kids not having a voice.”

**Remembering personal stories.** When participants reflected on the significance of their policy work, several spoke about the primacy of understanding youth homelessness through individual stories. Those, according to Jeff, are “much more vivid for me than some of the other issues I work on.” He noted his mind’s tendency to “kind of flash through some of the names and faces that I’ve kind of encountered in doing this work” when he hears about the issue. Jeff continued, saying that he usually tried to frame issues in terms of youth he might have known; “then I kind of switch more into the policy advocate role and start thinking through the connections and resources I have to help direct resources and programs for the population.” Although Ms. Hyatt was often “behind my desk at a computer by myself,” she watched videos from her agency’s homeless youth perspectives project: “It’s always those types of things that kind of move me the most.” Rich found that policymakers tended to frame homeless youth at an individual level as well. Working in the Capital, “it was surprising to me how…the homeless youth problem got defined from a local perspective;” in other words, “children issues [are] really personal for people, and if you can define it in a way that makes sense in their own family context or their own community’s context, it resonates to a much greater degree.”

**Section summary.** The preceding section articulated five sets of characteristics, skills, and other commonalities amongst participants and others who engage in homeless youth advocacy in any sort of sustained way. Participants inferred that to do this work—and possibly to do it well—one must be able to last in protracted battles for social justice, one must have a solid understanding of youth homelessness and the legislative process,
an ability to forge effective relationships with policymakers and other stakeholders, a leadership style that opens the door for greater involvement from colleagues and constituents, and an ability to keep one’s advocacy passionate and grounded in stories about and relationships with homeless youth.

**Why people don’t become advocates**

The most obvious factor that my study’s participants have in common is their engagement in advocacy or activism. I was curious why participants’ felt more people were not involved in the same things, despite their relationships with homeless youth through service or program administration, or just general membership in a community. Although this is speculative, it offers an explanation of why so many people do not become homeless youth advocates. Nine participants responded to questions of this nature or reflected spontaneously on the differences between those who do this work and those who do not, with several themes emerging. Four participants described lack of involvement as a matter not developing competencies; four connected it to maintaining focus at an individual level; three connected it to disempowerment or lack of desire to fight; and two connected it to resource constraint, in that people “need to get paid to live” (Bob) and might not “have the time” (Jeff). One participant each also attributed it to a lack of empathic connections with youth (Jon) and a less “innate sense of justice” (Liz).

Regarding competencies, Liz suggested that advocacy was often seen as an abstract concept for people: “[P]eople may be an advocate and they’re not even knowing it, or people may be trying to be an advocate but aren’t really advocating.” Bob said that competencies largely developed through what people chose to study as well as what
they’ve learned in prior and current positions. Both Bob and Jeff said that it was important to respect differences in skill. According to Jeff, “I know I wouldn’t be a great hands-on service provider, and I wouldn’t even want to try to pretend to be one.” Debby said that while some staff may be “really wonderful with working with kids…and not necessarily very good at, how do you navigate a system for someone?” She believed that part of the difference is “having systemic thinking” abilities.

Some participants suggested that those who don’t advocate simply “have more of a sense of reward from seeing human progress that's at the individual level” (Bob). Rich cited a family member who was equally happy raising children as Rich was advocating; to him, “success is in small circles and I think they’re in large circles, and so my joy is that the fact that you can find those opportunities [to feel successful] anywhere.” Dan felt that when micro-focus people “start understanding individual problems, they’ll get into the bigger picture. They’ll start asking, ‘What can be done policy wise?...What can I do? Is there a policy to guide that?’”

Earlier in this Chapter, participants articulated that one must be poised and ready for the challenges of social change. Debby believed that confrontation caused anxiety for some people, causing them to stay away. Others may have tried collective action unsuccessfully and became “disenchanted” and “feel[ing] so stuck” in an environment where “this is never gonna end…there’s always gonna be homelessness or always gonna be abuse or always gonna be this or that” (Theresa). Liz also spoke to a resignation that likely disempowered large swaths of people: “It may be that you realize you’re just a cog in the wheel and you don’t feel like you can be anything more than a cog in the wheel. And if that wheel is rigid and…broken and wobbling along, that's just how it is.” She felt
that society, usually at the hand of corporations, tried to “to keep people scared and in line...fearful...living paycheck to paycheck...They don’t want to upset the apple cart. They don’t want to piss people off.” She inferred that all is not lost in these cases however; other advocates could “quit judging them so much and just get in their world for a minute, and then see how you could empower those people.”

**Abstracting findings about systems relations**

Thus far, I have presented descriptive, narrative data to shape the focal region of advocates and explore a variety of reasons that participants became and remained advocates or activists for homeless youth. The data clustered around 91 codes in six themes from contextual sites to developmental processes to situational factors. In all, 20 codes were ascribed to the focal region—including the advocate and his/her job functions, successes, and measures of success, as well as information about their organizations, coalitions, and general assessments of collective action for homeless youth. I ascribed 13 codes to early life and career factors that promoted advocacy and activism for participants, and eight codes to homeless youth advocacy becoming an explicit career path. I used nineteen codes to describe the qualities and skills that advocates identified as necessary for being an advocate. As CQO encourages an exploration of how participants make sense of society and systems relations, I also used 31 codes to describe advocates self- and world-views related to youth homelessness, its origins, its solutions, and its ultimate ownership.

The final stage of data analysis using CQO is an abstraction of findings about systems relations to explain the data presented in subsequent sections and make sense of
participants’ actions in light of external forces and internal understandings of the world, often in sociopolitical frameworks. This stage brings us as close as possible to a comprehensive answer to the research question. In so doing, it was necessary to continue building a grounded theory through reorganization and synthesis of data points. By sheer size, 91 explanations and reasons are too unwieldy to effectively tell a story that can address implications for theory, research, policy, and nurturing of more activists and advocates for homeless youth. I therefore set out to construct a theory in similar fashion to the approach taken in the literature review (refer to Table 3); that is, I sorted critical factors according to whether they were developmental or situational in nature. Whereas the developmental factors explain why people became homeless youth activists, situational factors provide insight into why people remained in this line of work as opposed to doing other things with their personal or professional time. As Figure 4 demonstrates, a synthesized treatment of the research question resulted in a more manageable set of 30 factors contributing to the phenomenon of homeless youth advocacy shared by 13 participants, and possibly by other advocates.

Of the 30 factors in Figure 4, ten derive from more than one code and are marked with an asterisk, whereas 20 are single-code factors. Twenty factors address the “becoming” (development) and ten address the “being” (situation) of activists. The first five categories are developmental explanations and the final two are situational explanations. Developmental explanations are as follows: Participants (1) received foundations of community involvement early in life; (2) experienced privilege or

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11. The 30 factors in Figure 4 represent 68 of the original 92 codes. A total of 24 codes were not included; they represent participants’ views about the origins, solutions, and responsibility of youth homelessness shown in Tables 5, 6, and 7.
marginalization; (3) started careers foreshadowing homeless youth advocacy; (4) chose to advocate for homeless youth in their careers; and (5) possessed self and world-view promoting advocacy. As for why participants remained in the advocacy role—the range of participant engagement is from one to 38 years—situational factors indicate that participants (6) felt validated and supported in that role; and (7) possessed or articulated necessary qualities of being an advocate.

While sections that follow explain these categories in greater detail, it is first necessary to detail the other features that are embedded in Figure 4. At the top of the figure, each participant’s name is listed in its own column. When participants indicated in their interviews that they endorsed, agreed with, or met criteria for a given factor, the factor was shaded gray for that participant. Thus, it is possible to read this figure left to right from categories, to component factors, to endorsement by each participant. The last column tabulates percentage endorsement of each factor; a ratio of the number of gray boxes to 13 participants; a factor survived inclusion in the table if at least three participants endorsed it; the range of endorsement is therefore from three to a maximum of 13. It is also possible to read this figure vertically for each participant, getting a sense of the factors that were relevant for each person, assessing unique pathways toward advocacy, as well as commonalities between participants. The bottom row of the figure tallies the number of factors endorsed by each participant, demonstrating a range of 12 to 25 out of a possible thirty critical factors ($Mean = 19.2, SD = 3.8$). It does not appear that length of time advocating for homeless youth had much bearing on the spread of endorsements; newer and more veteran participants had high and low endorsement rates. One final set of information is embedded in the figure; a percentage that represents the
endorsement of each category across all participants. That is, a ratio of the number of shaded gray boxes in each category to the total number of possible endorsements (13 participants multiplied by the number of factors that each category houses).

**Figure 4: Developmental and situational factors of homeless youth advocates**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category (% met across ppts)</th>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>André</th>
<th>Bob</th>
<th>Dan</th>
<th>Debby</th>
<th>Jan</th>
<th>Jeff</th>
<th>Liz</th>
<th>Kirsten</th>
<th>Maggie</th>
<th>Ms. H.</th>
<th>Rich</th>
<th>Sue</th>
<th>Others</th>
<th>Percent of all ppts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Receiving foundations of community involvement (62%)</td>
<td>Family experiences promoted advocacy</td>
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<td>92</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Religion shaped advocacy</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Schooling promoted advocacy</td>
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<td>Volunteering paved social interests</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Had early experiences with collective action</td>
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<td>2. Experiencing privilege or marginalization (50%)</td>
<td>Had personal marginalization</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Confronted privilege, used it for good</td>
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<td>3. Starting a career foreshadowing homeless youth advocacy (42%)</td>
<td>Sociopolitical context was ripe for advocacy</td>
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<td>Had early experiences with homeless youth</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Articulated desire to do social justice work</td>
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<td>Articulated desire to serve</td>
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<td>31</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Choosing to advocate for homeless youth in career (46%)</td>
<td>Searched for better pay</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&quot;Evolved&quot; into advocacy</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Transitioned from earlier advocacy jobs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Moved beyond direct service</td>
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<td>5. Possessing self-and world-views promoting advocacy (58%)</td>
<td>Advocacy was more than just a job*</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Articulated measures of success</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Identified self as activist</td>
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<td>Clear sense of responsibility*</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Desired a more just world</td>
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<td>6. Feeling validated and supported in advocacy (63%)</td>
<td>Organization is committed to homeless youth*</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Affected change within organization*</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Joined or led a youth homelessness coalition*</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Matured as an advocate while in role</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Received guidance and support from others</td>
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<td>7. Possessing or articulating necessary qualities to be an advocate (91%)</td>
<td>Personal traits: Poised and ready*</td>
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<td>Technical skills: Expertise in content, process*</td>
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<td>Relational skills: Working with policymakers*</td>
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<td>Leadership skills: Opening door for others*</td>
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<td>Connected with youth: Keeping agenda real*</td>
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Note: * indicates a component factor, comprised of two or more codes; other factors derive from one code.

For example, category 6 (feeling validated and supported in advocacy) was critical for 84% of participants that remained advocates. Category endorsement ranged from 42 to
91%, with an average of 56% endorsement across the first five developmental categories, and 87% across the final two situational categories.

It is important to mention how this table was prepared. I considered a participant’s explanation of a factor as indication that it was relevant to becoming or being a homeless youth advocate, and subsequently shaded it as an endorsement. For example, if a participant did not state “I have the personal traits of a leader” but described ways in which he or she led others into advocacy, I endorsed this factor for them. If a participant stated that leadership was generally important to do the work, but did not use personal language, I also marked this as an endorsement. Equally important to note is that factors were considered endorsed if they were mentioned during interviews but not through surveys that participants independently completed prior. The only noticeable impact from this decision relates to the “identified self as activist” factor; whereas at least six participants agreed “a lot” with statements about activist identity on the AICS measure (see Figure 3), only three participants agreed with this identity in the interview. As a part of my attempt to create a participant-centered lexicon, I specifically asked each person to comment on their preferred choice of words. Several spoke about their understanding of activism departing from their own concept of themselves as advocates (this is described in more detail in the previous chapter). For this reason, combined with the fact that all of the survey questions preference activism and never mention advocacy, I based endorsement for this factor solely on interview data. Finally, if participants later believe that a factor applies to them or to advocates in general and this was not indicated explicitly (or close to it) in their open-ended interviews, it remained unshaded. In the next
section, I move on to a broad discussion of the five developmental and two situational categories before providing a theory of being and becoming a homeless youth advocate.

**Developmental categories.** The category named “receiving foundations in community involvement” was endorsed 62% of the time across all participants. It contains five factors (family, religion, schooling, volunteering, and early experiences with collective action) and reflects the involvement of a variety of critical forces and influences in an activist’s life prior to their current identities as advocates for homeless youth. Family was the most common influence for participants. In aggregate, they acknowledged that their family members were often engaged in their communities, served the public by profession, articulated values and ethics, and encouraged them to volunteer and stand up for themselves. Even adversity in early family settings was recognized as a propellant to later advocacy. Though religion was infrequently endorsed, three participants noted that it informed an early sense of commitment and responsibility to serve others. Religion provided these individuals with a shared goal to be good people and treat others as equals regardless of perceived differences. Participants volunteered in a variety of settings, receiving exposure to people with different experiences and fortunes; a sizeable number volunteered directly with homeless youth, setting themselves on a pathway for continued work with and for this population.

All advocates pursued higher education. Several were exposed in graduate school to courses in public policy and advocacy (even if they received degrees in social work) and many received the taste of what I’d call “the good fight”—advancing social justice either through foundational opportunities to address systems-level problems through placements, research, and extracurricular involvement. Participants also learned about
social problems early in life (in grade school or college), and if not in these locales, then in their early careers. The commonality amongst those experiences was the current awareness that they were witnessing a symptom of a larger problem when it occurred (i.e., being silenced in the classroom was interpreted as a sexist action). The findings from this category demonstrate that participants had pre-advocate introductions to things outside of themselves and their families – that is, real or potential engagement in their communities. This may have influenced their decisions to stay engaged at this level.

The category named “experiencing privilege or marginalization” was endorsed 50% of the time across all participants, indicating that these types of encounters with power may not occur in all people who later become advocates and activists. The category contained two factors; one referenced personal experiences with marginalization (on the order of sexual orientation, gender, or homelessness), and the second represented participants’ awareness of their own privileges (such as with race, class and supportive families), which was later used to benefit marginalized groups. Three participants spoke of experiences with both factors, demonstrating that they are not mutually exclusive. Additionally, three did not speak of their experiences with either factor, suggesting that these experiences are significant but not necessary conditions to later engage in advocacy for homeless youth.

In the next category, “starting a career foreshadowing homeless youth advocacy,” a range of factors describe experiences that later connected to engagement in collective action. This category had an overall endorsement of 42%, the lowest rating of all explanations. Despite a relatively lower overall endorsement, every participant endorsed at least one factor in this category. Three participants described a national sociopolitical
context that was ripe for engaging in social justice work: Two joined the workforce in between the late 1960’s and the end of the Vietnam war; another joined following the sweep of AIDS across the county, and its subsequent mobilization of queer activists. Participants described early experiences with homeless youth in the work setting. Participants also articulated a desire to do one of two types of work early on: Provide direct service to youth or start a path of advocacy as a profession. It is probably that these early jobs gave participants skills and exposure that were instrumental in acquiring later positions. Similarly, the exposure to certain fields and types of work that one found meaningful tended to elevate participants’ awareness of systemic and sociopolitical problems.

The fourth category involved an active choice to advocate for homeless youth in one’s career. Containing four factors, this category had a 46% overall endorsement rate. A few participants spoke of a career move that was motivated in part by higher wages. The most well-supported factor in this category is that of participants moving from direct service into advocacy. All but two individuals moved from addressing homeless youth to addressing youth homelessness or doing both concurrently. The two who did not do so currently have full-time advocacy positions. A handful spoke of an evolutionary process; a series of events and realizations (not all of which were explicated) that encouraged them to address social inequalities for a population many were previously exposed to. These events generally shared two common themes: Participants were growing frustrated with what little they could do at the individual level to affect bigger change; or they began to see patterns in the types of youth who became homeless.
The fifth and last category demonstrating developmental processes for this cohort is called “possessing self- and world-views promoting advocacy.” It contains five factors and has an endorsement rate of 58%. While some might prefer to see this category as situational, participants spoke regularly about the origins of their views and about maintaining and strengthening those views over periods of time. Therefore, the connections between present and early foundations root this category as a process rather than a static entity. Many participants viewed their role as an advocate as more than just a job; they described it as an identity or way of life and used their skills and passions for collective action around more than one social issue. Three participants saw themselves as a combination of both activist and advocate; as someone who could effect change from inside and outside of the political wall. Participants articulated a clear sense of personal responsibility to address youth homelessness, which was generally aligned with desires for a more just world; that is, social justice beliefs about a society that can and should be doing better for homeless youth and other vulnerable populations. This category also accounts for nine participants who articulated that success to them as advocates meant fulfillment of a larger vision for homeless youth, systems, or the larger public. The thrust of their collective action has been to advance these issues over the long haul.

**Situational categories.** Two final categories are situational; that is, they provide ways of describing how advocates have sustained in this line of work. Together, they explain what one might need or expect to find after at least one year of collective action for homeless youth. Category six is listed as “feeling validated and supported in advocacy.” It was the second-highest endorsed category of the seven at 83%. It comprises five factors: Working in organizations committed to homeless youth, affecting change
within those organizations, joining or leading a youth homelessness coalition, maturing as an advocate, and receiving guidance and support from others. Whereas the first three in this list were endorsed by every participant, the latter two were endorsed six and nine times, respectively. Participants in general were not free agents; rather, each were part of institutions that allocated some of the participants’ time to do homeless youth advocacy, direct service, or both. They generally supported these individuals to do what was required to advance a predefined mission, and in turn, all advocates spoke of the significant ways in which they fostered and further their institution’s commitment to collective action. Each participant was also part of a network of colleagues—advocates and providers, primarily—that met regularly to strategize solutions that might alleviate youth homelessness or boost services within their geographic scopes. Participants generally endorsed support and guidance as a critical component of their ongoing advocacy, even if that support first occurred when they were children or students. Support came from colleagues and supervisors that advocates formed relationships with in coalitions and inside their own institutions. Nearly half of all participants recognized that they were different now than when they had started as advocates; some had a solid understanding of the stakeholders and issues, or a strong way to build political and public will that was previously not as strong.

The seventh and final category of this emerging theory speaks to the qualities deemed necessary to be an advocate for homeless youth. This category had the highest overall endorsement across all factors at 91%. The component factors range from personal traits to skills (in technique, relationships, and leadership) to connections with the young people for whom they advocate. In a nutshell, advocates needed to be poised
and ready for protracted fights for hard-won protections; relatively expert-like in the legislative process, homeless youth policy, and youth homelessness; capable of forming instrumental relationships with policymakers and managing the debates that ensued; a leader of fellow staff and homeless youth constituents to see the importance of advocacy to address youth homelessness, and willing to connect regularly with youth or youth stories so that the passion and authenticity of more abstract policy issues will not get lost on them or on bureaucrats.

A theory of becoming and being a homeless youth advocate

The theory that emerges from the preceding categories addresses how participants become and serve as homeless youth advocates and activists. It can be stated succinctly as follows: Individuals who are engaged in homeless youth advocacy emerge from an early recognition of need outside of their own selves and families, and continue to make sense of the world through awareness of social injustices determined by their positions in society. While they foster early desires to serve the public, the direction this takes is shaped by macro (e.g., cultural shifts, and geographic locations) and micro (e.g., encountering homeless youth) experiences at critical developmental periods in their growth. When they go out into the workforce, they ask whether their jobs will bring them personal and civic fulfillment. This reflexivity leads most to refining an ideal career based on a clear sense of responsibility to others and a desire for a more just world, particularly for disenfranchised youth. When they arrive at their current careers, they find they cannot address youth homelessness alone, so they build and maintain relationships with superiors, colleagues, and young people. They also sharpen their ability to craft a
convincing argument based on fact and anecdote while advancing that argument in the political sphere for as long as it might take to reach results.

This theory can be represented graphically, as I have shown in Figure 5 with the five developmental processes represented by continuous arrows (the “becoming” processes). These arrows converge with two situational realities (the “being” processes) and create the essence of homeless youth advocates and activists in the present study.

**Figure 5: Becoming and being a homeless youth advocate**

![Diagram showing five developmental processes converging with two situational realities to create homeless youth advocates.]

This theory can be illuminated further by applying any of the trajectories from Figure 4 onto Figure 5. I will select Bob because he spoke to the least number of factors and yet had a high-visibility career in homeless youth advocacy that has already crossed the decade mark. Bob described a family of public servants and had an early sense that he wanted to do human services policy. He took a detour in other work while gaining the
skills to earn a job in homelessness advocacy when the opportunity arose. Though he didn’t believe in an end to youth homelessness, he felt that a great society could do much better for its homeless young people. He was in an organization that did not always have the resources to support his work, yet it always convened a coalition of members that were vocal and articulate about the changes they wanted to see every legislative season. Bob endured in the organization and crafted a set of skills that earned numerous successes for homeless youth at the federal level.

**Summary**

I set out to create a theory that could shed light on how ordinary people do great things for homeless youth. These are individuals that address the upstream sociopolitical shortcomings that drive a river’s current and push millions of youth into the river each year. The data provide an illustrated application of various themes for individuals who share similar passion for and commitment to homeless youth. The theory I outlined at the end of the previous chapter is informed by rich descriptions of narrative interview data and supplemented by other scales and measures. Theoretical development was subject to a number of validity checks as data underwent analysis using a critical qualitative orientation informed by phenomenology and principles of grounded theory. Raw data was transformed from nearly one hundred codes into a synthesized list of seven categories, five describing how participants became advocates, and two describing how they remained advocates for a collective total of over 175 years.
Chapter V: Discussion

A critical evaluation of homeless youth activists

When I began this study, I focused on answering why people become and remain homeless youth activists. It seemed to me that answers would help expand knowledge about activists doing collective action, present activists as nuanced and enduring individuals, encourage more science-informed activism on behalf of homeless youth, and also help promote advocacy as a viable intervention to the field by reducing psychology’s political illiteracy (Prilleltensky, 2003). Whereas the theory outlined in the previous chapter is illustrative of grounded and phenomenological approaches, this section brings a critical lens (Carspecken, 1996) to interpret the data. Thus, this discussion focuses on: (1) How well I have answered the research question; (2) how participants may benefit from the current structure of advocacy and activism for youth homelessness; and (3) the problem of my involvement in the systems surrounding this important sociopolitical problem. The section ends with a discussion of the assumptions, limitations, and implications of the study for theory, research, training, and the researcher-participant.

Assessing the research question. In order to more fully understand the implications that derive from participants’ development and service as homeless youth activists, it is important to assess how well I have answered the research question. Doing so is, in part, a venture in critiquing what participants have revealed as well as what they haven’t revealed. Carspecken (1996) writes that through communication, “One acts meaningfully and claims an entire order of values and norms, plus an identity, plus a structure of ‘kinds of identifies’ into which one locates the self, plus an implicit theory of society, all at once” (p. 169). In light of this, the narrative data presented in Chapter 4 is
rich with not only personal, subjective views of homeless youth advocates, but also a set of implicit claims that participants have made about the world. I have unpacked one such claim here, related to the origin of the problem.

Whereas most participants acknowledged that youth homelessness is due to multiple, complex issues, only a minority of participants saw oppressive forces and lack of basic resources as the causes of this social problem (refer to Table 6). In fact, family issues were the second most endorsed reason, and a youth’s mental health was the fourth. Participants’ under-recognition of oppressive and constraining resource distribution relative to other factors at the root of youth homelessness indicates that they don’t consistently understand youth homelessness as a matter of injustice. Believing youth homelessness to be a social problem is suspect at this juncture, particularly when it has been endorsed frequently as a shortcoming of the individual and his or her family. In this cohort, people recognized that individuals had untreated mental disorders and that families had high levels of dysfunction. This encapsulates two implicit views: One, that the youth is an individual actor capable of meeting his or her needs in a way that mitigates risk for becoming homeless; and two, that the family should be the primary containing structure for children throughout their development and be able to control the forces that lead their children to run away. These views tend to isolate the individual and family from a complex web of external factors, and may unduly place stress on fragile entities that are not in actual control of their own destinies.

The criticalist would ask, If participants see the development of “homeless youth” as owing frequently to forces of individual determinism, how then might they see their own development as homeless youth activists. Individual determinism was a dominant
theme voiced among participants in this study. It was endorsed in several developmental processes, including all of those related to one’s career growth, choosing to advocate for homeless youth, and possessing self- and world-views promoting advocacy. It is also a prevalent yet unspoken theme in both categories related to serving as an advocate, with the exception of two factors. Participants paid recognition to their families, schools, religions, and volunteer opportunities on the younger end of their development, but they tended to see themselves as continuously evolving individual actors with little mention of enduring external factors as they reached the stages of vocational development, skill acquisition, and career endurance. Taken together, the participants’ views of self and of homeless youth are informed by an overarching belief in individualism, a belief that I argue exists prior to one’s conscious awareness of him or herself as a nexus of behaviors determined by multiple forces. The belief may be so enduring than even critical consciousness (Friere, 1970) may not identify it as an operating and organizing force. Participants ascribed circumstances to events in their lives using the only tools they had been given in this culture where it is common to explain life outcomes as products of self-determination (Cushman, 1996).

It seems reasonable to believe that participants’ individualistic views were further complemented by their movement towards advocacy from direct service. It is in this kind of interactional sphere with homeless youth that service providers are given tools to assess, diagnose and treat the afflicted individual and in some cases the afflicted family. The iterative process of treating more and more individuals can lead one to blame the victims one is treating (Tseng et al., 20002) and also reinforce the status differences between helper and recipient (Penner et al., 2005).
The individualist framework has some implications with regard to the status quo of youth homelessness which I will return to in the following pages. For now, I offer that this implicit organizing framework assists in meeting the criticalist’s task of alluding to what participants did not say. It is wholly important to understanding how well this study answered the research beyond what participants can speak to by conscious access to information. The phenomenological view is thus complemented by the criticalist interpretation. To be sure, there are a great number of individuals whose stories may not be represented in this study. Carspecken (1996) noted that individuals “find a position for themselves within our claimed worlds and either reject it or affirm it or modify it when acting back” (p. 169). Participants largely self-identified as advocates over activists and imbued activism with negative imagery and high-risk behaviors. It appears that participants were able to identify with activism when the term was operationalized in survey form but when given the chance to share their own terms to describe their work, activism was largely minimized and treated as the other. While some admitted that activism had a place in collective action, many did not see it as central to their work. What was said by participants was that advocacy had professional utility for them; what was not said was that activism incurs a cost that they were unable or unwilling to take on.

These claims about activism suggest that activists may be marginalized within the current structure of collective action. If this is the case, how fully can I understand why people become and remain activists within a cultural context that offers few safe spaces for certain types of collective action? I offer that activist development is a cumulative process of many factors. My retrospective approach (working backward from someone’s identity as advocate into their becoming of one) inordinately selects for certain types of
stories and trajectories that may not befit those who see activism as more central to their identities. Were I to return to this cohort to further explore this issue, I might look for the outlying examples of the “activism” that people separated themselves from, how those separations happened, and specific developmental processes that might account for activism but do not surface when activism is suppressed.

**Participants in relation to the status quo.** In addressing *why* people become homeless youth activists, it is essential to answer *who* becomes an activist. A critical analysis demonstrates that the status quo is often perpetuated even by those entities that seek transformational changes for those most oppressed by society. In this study, participants were a somewhat homogeneous group. All but one identified growing up in a middle SES household, and all presently identify as holding middle SES. They were also similar in their organizational and coalitional affiliations. Participants were employed by organizations that gave them substantial freedom (time and/or compensation) to engage in collective action. Each participant was part of at least one coalition of like-minded advocates which assembled to advance shared goals. As previously indicated, another point of commonality between participants is that each valued their stake as an advocate more so than an activist. Collective action in this study then was waged by those who are not so depraved of resources and power that they cannot participate in systems that acknowledge them as disruptors of such power. In addition, this group did not include those with the greatest economic power in society who are often missing in collective action, unwilling or unable to personally dis-empower their own social class in pursuit of greater good for homeless youth.
Notwithstanding the limitations of data collection and analysis described elsewhere in this chapter, the above mentioned similarities between participants bring up an inescapable question for the criticalist: *Does social change for homeless youth allow for greater divergence of change agents than those I have identified here?* It is possible that social change is a commodity that is traded only by insiders and stakeholders who play a game that the political system has created. Failure to adhere to the rules of the game (e.g., creating depoliticized research reports; testifying inside official hearings instead of demonstrating outside of them) may limit the credibility and influence that an “outsider” may bring. Social pressures alone may cause some to want to be affirmed instead of ostracized, shaping behaviors towards complicity. Organizations that are committed to standing in the good graces of policymakers in order to secure funding or representation have no immediate incentives to deal in high-stakes activism. Participants spoke about the need to tailor their messages to accord to their organization’s standards, as well as the expectations of those who fund their work. The study raised a few examples of advocates working in opposition instead of collaboration, but they often did so incognito. Organizations and their employees may be unwilling to risk contracts and wages by pointing blame directly at any one entity when that entity has power over the purse, so to speak. The tension involved in *not biting the hand that feeds you* is highlighted in research on non-profit human service organizations (Schmid, Bar, & Nirel, 2008). Participants in the current study were more likely to name vague or multiple forces responsible for addressing youth homelessness, and the public at large, before addressing more localized actors (see Tables 5 and 6 for examples). It is possible, given the qualities of the current structure of advocacy, that activists, outsiders, lower-SES
individuals, those who are not part of coalitions and organizations, and others yet to be delineated, are barred access to the political process, and have wholly limited opportunities to redistribute justice for homeless youth. Thus, finding more advocates than activists in a cohort of individuals may not be an anomaly in this study. It may be the result of natural selection by forces that sustain one type of change agent and disenfranchise others. Who becomes a homeless youth activist, or at the very least, who can sustain being one for a length of time, may be those who know the rules of the game and have agreed to play by those rules.

If we believe this assertion that collective action for homeless youth selects a certain type of person over another, it is then important to ask who benefits from this arrangement? I would like to argue that the economic and political establishment does. Provided that policymakers are motivated to keep their base happy in order to get re-elected, they are expected to be most responsive to those that can assure their futures in politics, such as large donors, backers, and sizeable organized groups of voters. Redistributing a finite pool of resources by diverting them from these kinds of voters onto others is politically costly. This would be especially true in youth homelessness, when it might appear that homeless youth carry fewer campaign dollars and votes than other constituents. In this political system, power is closely guarded. Inactivism, a term I explored in Chapters 2 and 4, is therefore an asset to the establishment because it ensures that there will be less demand for redistribution. When people do advocate, they behave in relatively circumscribed ways, making their voices heard by following the rules given to them, not necessarily ones they write themselves.
Further analysis yields an additional challenge of the current sociopolitical structure to the development of transformative practices on behalf of homeless youth as it relates to youth homelessness: Its power to fragment large social ills into smaller specialty issues (e.g., youth homelessness, foster care, juvenile delinquency, and teen pregnancy). In speaking about the Occupy movement, Srdja Popovic, the young Serbian organizer who trained many Arab Spring rebels, noted that “this is not just a story about capitalism. It’s a story about unjust societies around the world” (Leibovitz, 2012, p. 21). In a similar fashion, I argue that oppression of youth is not just a story about homelessness.

Although this study did not identify any individuals or organizations that wished for youth homelessness to persist, it did identify several participants who did not believe that it could not be solved completely, or who felt that a societal tipping point would need to be reached before any drastic solutions would emerge (see Table 7). In this regard, some advocates have resorted to ameliorating the issues and symptoms rather than liberating youth from homelessness. To see oppression addressed at the group or collective levels, more advocates and activists would need to work toward delivering political power to youth instead of altering feelings, perceptions, and other subjective indicators of collective action (see Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007).

**My involvement in youth homelessness.** Up until this point, I have spoken about my own trajectory as a homeless youth activist in mostly neutral or positive terms. Carspecken warns that if I am not prepared to feel threatened by what I have learned, “power may act through [my] privileged position as the one who writes about others…to distort the representation of what is there at the expense of those studied” (1996, p. 169).
To circumvent that power, I must lay down my own need for recognition and validation as a researcher and an activist. As an activist, I admit that I want to be viewed as someone motivated by distributing justice to the greater good because I cannot live comfortably in a world where injustice exists. I am uninterested in people attributing my “fighting the good fight” to a personal lack or overcompensation. In truth, I aspire to be regarded well by others. I recognize that certain forms of public acrimony are scary and unsettling to me. They require a type of mobilizing that overcomes significant fear, and a type of action that endures despite competing demands for personal attention. Further, these acts often bear unpredictable repercussions. I have thus far sought to address youth homelessness without being willing to lose my own status quo as someone with a great deal of power and privilege—enough privilege to walk away from it and return to my clean bed every night, and to preserve relationships with other stakeholders in the short term, even when our ideological divides may not converge on the same long term goals.

Consequently, being a researcher close to the subject matter has allowed me to recognize these same motivational forces in other individuals whom I have asked to lay bare and be subject to critical analysis. I am led to believe that activism, in the manner articulated by participants, is also something that I personally do not have much comfort in doing right now, even when it outweighs its perceived costs. There is an adage I recall from clinical work that says you can only take a client as far as you are willing to go yourself. I speculate that this is also true in dialogical data collection as a researcher. By association, I am aware that I was drawn to participants who had insider positions and who worked largely in systems that could tolerate their behaviors. Further, I recognize that I made judgments about who my aspirational peers are by those I chose to recruit for
this study. The criticalist is beckoned by Carpsecken (1996) to confront his accustomed identities. In so doing, it seems reasonable to assume that there may have been moments in the execution of this study when I did not push through to understand the unspoken assumptions that govern participants’ worldviews or self-awareness, yielding to my own lack of awareness or desire to maintain my concepts of the world. Nevertheless, I have attempted to use a critical lens here to create space within psychology for greater examination of social disparities that traditionally leave out the contextual determinants of behavior, and seldom look at collective action as a means to a necessary social end. Following the sections on assumptions and limitations of this study, I will return to the ways in which my own subjectivity is intertwined with and shaped by this research.

**Assumptions**

Five interrelated assumptions must be clarified to properly delineate this theory and its corresponding graphic representation in Figure 5. *First*, the theory assumes that all actions are shaped by focal regions. The theory is bounded by the participants’ understanding of their jobs, successes, and sites of collective action (organizations, coalitions, and national contexts). Participants are unable to exist outside of these zones that shape their behaviors, attitudes, and values. While the current set of participants saturated one explication of a focal region, a different set of participants advocating for the same population could just as easily occupy a different region. Therefore, it is important to note that this theory may only be true for this sample. I discuss this further in the section on limitations.
Second, the theory assumes that there are several early and enduring processes that have propelled certain people into advocacy. While the developmental phases a future advocate goes through are somewhat linear, closer examination shows they can overlap considerably. Family influences, for example, may impact an individual’s choice to do collective action long after a participant took a career in a related field. More complex feedback loops might even show that bidirectional processes shape and connect each phase with ones before and after it. In a graphic way, where I drew arrows with solid lines in Figure 5, they can also be dashed, connected, or double-sided for different advocates. I ordered the phases in a way that honored most participants’ realities despite participants rarely recalling their stories in chronological fashion. There is considerable room for others to rearrange and speculate about which phases and factors come before others. This critical theory leaves room to be further enriched by its inherent variability.

Third, this theory assumes that growth never stops for an advocate. One can find strands of earlier developmental processes still effecting veterans in this cohort. The arrows in Figure 5 might leave one with the impression that the significance and essence of one set of developmental factors ends when one arrow meets another. This is neither the intention of the theory nor the graphic. As Carspecken (1996) would argue, a critical theory allows for systems relations to be produced and reproduced by participants even when they have seemingly “arrived” at their destinations. I do not believe that anyone has ever arrived; what I know about the field of vocational development, for example, refutes a static interpretation of advocate and activist development.

Fourth, the theory assumes that at some point in their current careers, participants must possess a critical mass of skills and supports to stay involved in their chosen work.
These are what separate non-advocates, inactivists, occasional agents, and self-interested agents from people who are fully engaged and enduring advocates for social change. The factors that get called upon to engage regularly in advocacy behaviors range from leadership and relational abilities to technical skills and personal traits. While processes may lead an individual in a given direction, the litmus test of sustainability is whether or not participants have remained in advocacy over a period of time (an average of more than 13 years, in the case of this sample).

Fifth and finally, the theory assumes that both becoming and being are central to homeless youth advocates. One cannot be if one never was propelled in a certain direction, and one never really becomes if one doesn’t have the qualities and views to sustain. In other words, advocacy requires both long-range developmental foundations and current situational demands. Those individuals who do not have a sufficient set of the former may never rise to see an opportunity or necessity to advocate for homeless youth, and those who are lacking in the latter may never engage in collective action for sustained periods of time. The literature review and participant reflections on why some people do not advocate supports this assumption.

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations worth exploring, some of which I alluded to in the previous section. Most apparent are a set of epistemological limitations. Participant recruitment created the first boundary on who was and who was not a homeless youth advocate. Although several participants remarked that their circle of colleagues was small and in some cases dwindling, there are undoubtedly homeless youth
advocates in America who never run in that circle, leaving them relatively unaccounted for in this study’s cohort. These may very well be individuals who engage in higher-risk activist behaviors and who work on the margins of institutions and systems that this cohort is mostly internal to. Their processes of developing and experiences of being an advocate or activist may therefore be very dissimilar. The theory may look foreign to individuals who don’t share some of the same demographic, occupational, or sociopolitical realities as my participant sample. I address this limitation by noting that my study offers the most integrated theory that I could access based on a boundary that was drawn to describe particular pathways and not others. Those pathways were primarily individuals who were employed in youth-serving and policy-focused sites and who frequently transitioned from service into advocacy. The most conservative response to this limitation is that I may only have a story about thirteen participants. While this story passed through several checks for credibility, it remains to be tested on a larger and more diverse sample. For example, future studies may wish to recruit participants who do not work in policy-based or youth-serving organizations.

Whereas participant recruitment formed the first epistemological boundary, data collection created the second. I determined that participants would contribute to a critical theory by retrieving stored knowledge and responding to questions that I posed. The generation of data depended on in vivo, conscious awareness of one’s developmental and situational processes. Participants were not given weeks or months to prepare for a reflective dialogue. They were not asked to write a journal about their experiences. They were not tracked over months and years by an independent rater. They were not interviewed in groups or even in the same room as this researcher. They were not asked
to respond to possible factors that I did not uncover in my literature review. I did not look at codes with low participant endorsement (see Footnote 10), which limited my ability to examine outlying and minor cases below a certain threshold. Moreover, I did not consult other materials produced by participants (such as memos and research reports) nor available contextual data, such as information about organizational board membership and affiliation. On one hand the effects of this method are untold; our alternate reality could reveal a different set of factors through different methods of verification, and have an even stronger critical lens in which to view the data. On the other hand, I only know what participants shared in a time limited, linguistically dependent manner, corroborated with what I have already read and what I have theorized in close contact with the data. To this limitation I offer that phenomenology is a richly supported tradition, and my aims had a pressing rationale for participant-centered data generation. Nevertheless, future research can build on the current study by collecting data through other means and comparing it to the extant literature and the results herein.

Demand characteristics bring up a related limitation. In this study, participants may have been positively biased in their retrospective retrieval of developmental factors as well as their current assertions of qualities, characteristics, and worldviews. I offer several examples falling into two categories of pressures that participants may have faced in responding to my questions—personal and professional. On the professional side, homeless youth advocates are rarely if ever the subject of a research study. They may have few if any other opportunities to provide a window in their worlds, causing them to see this study as a significant and somewhat permanent image that they release to the public. Additionally, participants engage in building political will based on their
reputations with policymakers. Thus, a study that lambasts the political process or shows some measure of incompetency may have detriments to their work and attainment of goals. Some participants noted that their bravado and emotional appeal for collective action was molded over time to be more patient and inclusive, and less accusatory and driven by anecdote. It is reasonable to assert that the knowledge they shared with me was equally tempered. Professional demands also pertain to the positions that participants have in their organizations, coalitions, and with the other participants they perceived to later be reading their stories. Participants universally wanted their real names to be used in the study; this is unsurprising given their frequent public engagement, however it may have subdued a set of responses otherwise shared more willfully in private. On the personal side, psychologists know humans ritualistically attempt to put their best foot forward and minimize weaknesses. This may be especially true when dialoging about personal challenges with strangers who have privilege and authority, as I do being a white male obtaining my doctorate in psychology. Discussing one’s history of marginalization and oppression is inordinately affected by one’s relationship to an interviewer. Further, what one believes it takes to be an advocate may rest somewhat on what good they perceive in themselves. The data I collected do speak to burnouts, setbacks, defeats, and inadequacies, but perhaps not to the same degree that participants actually experience these phenomena. Similarly, the data support a view that sustained advocacy is difficult, but it may actually be harder than participants reported in this study. In future studies, sustained engagement with the researcher, greater anonymity of participants, and a larger sample size are three techniques that may help offset the potential effects of these demand characteristics.
The developmental phases identified in my theory are limited in some ways by a cross-sectional approach. As I noted in the section on assumptions, several factors overlap in the lifespan of participants, and sequencing factors and categories in a clean and linear way was not possible. Independent raters tracking participants over months or years may be able to impose a chronology of development with more confidence. Some processes in the “becoming” of homeless youth advocates may show themselves to appear before others. Notwithstanding this possibility for future research, I know of very few non-biological processes that are unidirectional. A clean, linear trajectory may not only be antithetical to developmental theories, but unhelpful in widening the field for more advocates who may have missed lockstep requirements earlier in life.

In sum, the current study was bounded by choices I made in participant selection and data collection. Other modal individuals are engaged in collective action, and this study did not capture all voices. In particular, no one identified as a strict activist and no one was presently homeless or defined as a youth. Whereas I provided a particular method to answer this core research question, there are others, including those reliant in quantification and experimental designs. Despite checks for trustworthiness and credibility, and several years as an advocate and activist myself, I did not have prolonged engagement with my participants while collecting the narrative data used in this study. Thus, the proposed theory is circumscribed on 13 participants instead of all homeless youth advocates and activists. Generalizing is only recommended in the same person-centered tradition in which the data was verified here.
Implications

Having discussed some important limitations of this critical study, I now focus on the implications that it has for theory, research, training, and for me personally.

Theory. The study accords with many disconnected theories introduced in the second chapter. A comparison of the 22 factors I identified in the literature (see Table 3) and the 30 factors I identified through critical data analysis (see Figure 4) shows that a rich exploration of homeless youth advocates concurs on several points introduced previously for other activists and advocates addressing various injustices. Both developmental processes and situational variables are represented. Advocates develop by acquiring skills, resources, and experiences through previous jobs, volunteerism, and other life experiences. Advocates find it more productive to work in groups and so they often join coalitions. They often find support for their efforts inside and outside of their organizations; some mentors introduce people to collective actions, while others nurture and redirect advocates who are already involved. Broadly speaking, advocates exist in a community that helps them conceptualize, strategize, and mature in their work. Beliefs about justice, care, and ethics begin forming at an early age with guidance from other people. Marginalization and oppression are central driving forces. Personal experiences on both the receiving and distributing edges of power help many advocates develop political identities and an unshakable sense that cannot passively accept social injustices.

At the same time, this theory expands the extant literature in several ways. The most significant way is that it provides an illustrated application and integration of various factors at work on individuals sharing the same passion and commitment. This
study is the first known synthesis of a set of factors this diverse and expansive. It is one of few attempts to bridge developmental and situational factors. Moreover, the theory uniquely demonstrates a bidirectional relationship between individual actors and the micro, meso, and macro sites in which they work through a critical orientation. It is also one of few theories that examine the influences of privilege and marginalization in participants who later seek to address privilege and marginalization in others. The study encourages an integration of some theories that are often capitulated as being either/or. Two examples demonstrate this. First, Cress and Snow (2000; previously discussed on pages 51-52) speak to the ways in which some advocates use diagnostic framing to name problems and culprits, whereas others use prognostic framing to address solutions and strategies. This critical theory of homeless youth advocates supports a hybrid role; participants were both diagnosers and prognosers; their worldviews cast a system of stakeholders in a network of responsibility, while their skills as advocates helped advance sociopolitical arguments. Second, advocates can experience both marginalization and privilege at different points in their life and in different settings. Some participants in the current study were treated negatively due to sexual orientation yet they used privilege of their family stability, class, or race to open doors to schooling and vocational opportunities.

**Research.** This study adds to research being done to understand the individuals that comprise movements and commitments to social injustice. It provides an attempt to bring disparate discourses inside and outside of psychology into the same forum. It is timely to integrate what we know about movements from various disciplines if social science researchers wish to be relevant in the current world theatre. Citizens in many
countries are facing a growing discontent with current systems of resource allocation. Our political pulse is racing as strongholds in several imperial nations are falling, governments and “rebels” (a term used frequently in the media) are engaging in new civil wars, and the Occupy movement in America is awakening from a winter of hibernation and reformation as we prepare to vote for the presidency. Do the individuals who oppose injustice in Yemen, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, Oakland, Washington, and Manhattan have anything to do homeless youth advocates and activists? If so, the current study is poised to aid researchers in bridging theories and introducing rational methods of inquiry.

At the same time, the limitations of this ambitious study demonstrate that more research must be done in this area using both qualitative and quantitative designs. After analyzing data, I see that follow-up on any number factors will likely lead to further explication and identification of relevant factors. Future mixed-methods approaches might be able to give greater clarity to a number of opaque curiosities, such as the sequence of developmental processes, the weighting of certain factors over others, the relationship between certain factors, and the predictions that various pathways have for personality style, leadership potential, vocational ambitions, and especially social change. This study’s participants spoke in dynamic ways about their views on responsibility, origins, and solutions to youth homelessness. I would encourage future researchers to ask, how are these themes related across and between participants? As of now, research on effective frames to build public will are imperative and currently understudied in the homelessness literature. The data obtained here and in related studies can also fruitfully be used to inform hypotheses related to independent measures of activists’ success.
Training. This study shows promise in supporting more people getting involved in social change. I first address paradigms for training within post-secondary academic programs, followed by non-profit organizations. Academic programs that train students to engage in the helping or health service professions may be best suited to complement coursework with engagement in social change, but by no means should only these programs engage in preparing the next generations of advocates and activists. Instead, thoughtful training curricula can emerge from interdisciplinary and even school-wide efforts. Just as I have drawn from a variety of disciplines to inform the research, I believe that many disciplines have something unique to contribute to training.

Overall, there is great significance in the fact that no participant came out of the womb wearing combat boots. Loeb (2010) was interested in demystifying the mythical activist by bringing him or her down to human size. This study does the same. While participants in this sample have accomplished remarkable feats (e.g., securing more housing for homeless youth, creating federal and statewide legislation to make child welfare more accountable) they appeared to do so with remarkable normalcy. They resumed their day jobs and made it home to be with their families. They universally recounted their stories with characteristic humility. Though they succeeded in large ways, they didn’t win any of their gains without effort. In fact, sustained work was a common thread amongst participants who made traction. With this knowledge, academic training programs can prepare advocates for long-term engagement by helping students experience the value of sustained engagement in projects and in developing long-range visions for change. Whereas several participants in the current study were invited by someone else to take on one or two social change activities, programs are well positioned
to provide invitations early and often. Teachers and professors can customize invitations to certain campaigns around themes that are relevant to their students or to a given course. If the latter option is selected, students should still maintain some freedom to choose aspects that appeal to them, as underlying passion is one of the necessary qualities that sustain one’s commitment to advocacy.

Educators can model for students how to fill out an online action alert, how to call one’s mayor, how to conduct a visit with an elected official, how to write a letter to the editor about a social injustice, and so on. As students participate in these activities, they should be provided opportunities to reflect on what they mean with their peers and instructors. Service learning programs are well positioned to do this, with an enhanced emphasis on the sociopolitical process as opposed to exclusive emphasis on nonpolitical civic engagement. This study demonstrated that forging an advocate identity is an incremental process, so it is important to first give invitations and then begin teaching easy skills for engagement. These skills can intentionally build in complexity and duration as students gain confidence in their abilities and accumulate minor successes. Whenever students begin thinking about careers, they should be exposed to career paths that leave room for advocacy.

The language used to describe power and oppression in this study may be unique to some academic programs. If that is the case, it can be worthwhile to integrate a power-centered lexicon into one’s classroom. The result of doing so can potentially open up opportunities for students to reflect on their own experiences with privilege and marginalization in ways that recast internalized guilt and shame as sociopolitical injustices with external beginnings and ends. Beyond the lexicon, students would benefit
from understanding the social determinants of sickness and well-being as applied to populations and individuals of interest to the training and trainee. As institutions incorporate more language and discussion about macro issues and power, and provide more direct opportunities and modeling of behavior, they could arrive at a point where the culture has shifted toward collective action. If this is the case, programs would be wise to develop a mission that reserves a place for advocacy in teaching and training. This not only codifies the centrality of advocacy for helping professionals, but it can attract more students with valance for collective action.

Just as academic programs can become better trainers and nurturers of advocates, so to can non-profit organizations. An examination of an organization’s mission is central to determining where and how it can support advocacy for the causes and constituents it represents. Generally, the champion for advocacy is a CEO or executive director, but that doesn’t preclude other individuals with aforementioned qualities or leadership potential to be champions as well. Regardless of who the internal champion is, it is important that this person help other stakeholders (such as the board and management team) see the connection between the mission statement and deep engagement in advocacy. Drawing these connections is crucial in order to achieve greater buy-in from numerous parties that govern the organization. Organizations that wish to advocate more will also need to engage in a thorough discussion of where it allocates its financial and human resources. Participants in the current study are sometimes on a lonely island of advocacy in a sea of service provision. A sustained organizational commitment to social change would require that the agents are compensated and allocated things appropriate to the size of their advocacy agenda.
The researcher-participant. More than one year ago, I embarked on a project that was of great importance to me as both an emerging psychologist and as a newcomer activist for homeless youth. Seeing with my own eyes the tragedy of youth homelessness and having some framework to understand social justice theories, I wanted for this country to treat its youth differently. I wanted those in positions of power to be more accountable for systemic shortcomings that do irreparable harm to vulnerable souls. Many months later, youth homelessness still looks the same. Meanwhile, however, I have gotten to know in a very intimate way those people who are slowly making my desires come true, for lack of a better term. Of course, they do this not for me, and maybe not even for organizations that pay them. They do this because they have agency to affect change, the support to stay engaged, and the conviction that such change is possible, necessary, and urgent.

On a profound level, I have been humbled by the participants who joined my study. While I admired several professionals prior to my contact with them, I completed this project with utmost respect for each person, their stamina, and the theatre of advocacy as a whole. During interviews, I was struck by how articulate and poised these participants were, and also how they could readily describe complex phenomena as if they were just waiting for the opportunity for someone to listen. When I reviewed and coded their transcripts, their stories came alive—each metaphor or contention was laden with deep meaning about their lives being intertwined with the fates of youth they may never have met. While I am humbly aware that I stand in the shadows of their great achievements, I no longer view these individuals as myths that cannot be touched. Participants have stories not uncommon to my own trajectory and those of friends I know
well. There is an advocate in each of us, and in each advocate there are a number of factors that can lead us to act.

This study clarified differences between advocacy and activism on behalf of homeless youth that I held at the outset. I found myself speaking about activists for months, but after interviewing participants I was immersed in their language and using the term advocate regularly. The shift in terms is evident in this study; it did not seem authentic to continue embracing a word that was not shared amongst those doing the work. I had correctly assumed that I would find tension between these terms, but did not expect to find as much as I did. The tension goes beyond what Blackstone (2004) called border activism (see Chapter 2). These participants are indeed politicized individuals, yet to be successful in their work they must navigate areas where activism has negative value. In an effort to leave behind some artifact of my journey through this research, I have intentionally not swapped out terms that I already laid down in print. Upon reflection, I see that my intention to invoke a term that held powerful imagery was not necessarily the most strategic way for participants to build political will with stakeholders.

This study helped me examine my own commitment to advocacy and youth homelessness. Interestingly, my immersion in this study caused me to be so wrapped up at times that I missed youth mentoring meetings, gave up street outreach, and even passed homeless individuals on the street without offering as much as an acknowledgement. I walked by with determination, with purpose…and yet also with hypocrisy. I have come to see that there are many tradeoffs in my pursuits; that I feel immensely passionate about homelessness and still can become disconnected and
detached from the youth who breathe it. I can spend multiple hours at one time writing and reflecting about social injustice, yet not alleviate it with transactions at the interpersonal level. Like the advocacy and activism tradeoff, this is another significant tension that I have embodied and have found some company in.

As I venture into life after graduate school, I know I will be confronted with solutions that bear problems, and problems that bear no immediate solutions. I have been encouraged by my engagement in this study to be thorough, just, and patient with both solutions and problems. I am fortunate to have a job that allows me to help students see the value in advocating for psychology and the public interest, and yet I acknowledge that I am shaped by my terms of employment (and wish to stay employed) to act within circumscribed bounds; to leave some high-risk behaviors at the door and attempt to make significant gains with an insider’s perspective, tools, and access to privileged resources.

As an emerging professional, I am hyperaware of how the choices I make now will affect the doors that open for me down the road, and how my own views of what it takes to create social change are being altered by my present and past circumstances. I would hope that my own work grows and nurtures new generations of people to bring more justice to youth. If I had a second hope, it would be that I have responded—if only for one moment—to Shinn’s (1992) question: Homelessness: What is a psychologist to do?
APPENDIX A
Participant interview protocol

[There are four domains represented in the interview protocol. Each domain has a lead-off question and several categories to guide the participant through in their response.]

1. Understanding youth homelessness.
How do you make sense of youth homelessness?
- Factors that cause, sustain, and end homelessness for youth
- Describe the phenomenon; is it one of inequality/contradiction
- A responsibility / mandate / related to faith
- How can it be addressed
- Can you imagine an end to youth homelessness / what does that look like
- When the work feels done / when you feel fulfilled / how you measure progress
- What impacts have resulted from your work
- Short and long term goals of this type of activism

2. Developing an activist stance.
Will you speak about some of your first experiences in activism?
- Terms used to describe work
- When did activism for homeless youth seem relevant to you
- First aspirations and intentions to pursue it
- Experiences with privilege being marginalized
- Accidental or intentional involvement
- Experiences in other forms of service / volunteerism / activism / advocacy
- Values and belief that align
- Personal experiences with homelessness / vulnerability to it / connections to it
- Inspiration, mentoring, learning of specific skills from others
- One turning point or cumulative
- What made you think that your voice was important to add / self-doubt
- Weighing the costs and benefits of action

3. Internal and external motivational factors.
What factors supported or constrained the emergence of your activism over time?
- Continued intentions / perceived needs met
- Challenges in starting, gaining momentum, maintaining strides as an activist
- Level of enthusiasm / ever alienate anyone or cause conflict
- Support from family, friends, colleagues
- Coalitions / shared values within coalitions / process of setting a common agenda
- Demographic factors (age, gender, ethnicity, culture, SES)
- Practice of self-care and nurturance / reflective practices
- Balance between work and personal space / pulling out of the movement
- Low-points, i.e., disappointments, setbacks, burnouts, rejections
- Why don’t people advocate for homeless youth
4. **Sites and settings.**

Describe the environment or location(s) where you perform most of your activism work.

- Where does accountability lie, professionally and personally / who supervision your work
- How are homeless youth viewed in your site / setting
- Current state of the youth homelessness ‘movement’
- Who are the opponents, who needs to hear the message
- How is conflict dealt with
- Who do you share beliefs with
- Is environment relational / empowerment-focused
- Importance of building a community / efforts taken to do so
- Grand tour of your activist duties / how would you redistribute them
- Extent that other staff, volunteers, board members participate in activism
- Extent that homeless youth come to see struggles as interrelated and participate in activism
- Sources of funding for activist work / influence of funders over work
### APPENDIX B

**Activism Orientation Scale (AOS) – Short version, revised**

**Instructions - AOS-past:**
Please indicate to what extent you engaged in each of the following activities in the past year, specifically concerning youth homelessness.

Scale:
- 0 – Not At All
- 1 – A Little
- 2 – Moderately
- 3 – A Lot

**Instructions - AOS-future:**
Please indicate how likely it is that you will engage in each of the following activities in the future, specifically concerning youth homelessness.

Scale:
- 0 – Extremely Unlikely
- 1 – Unlikely
- 2 – Likely
- 3 – Extremely Likely

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Past year</th>
<th>Future</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Invite a friend to attend a meeting of a homelessness youth organization or event?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Serve as an officer in an organization involved with youth homelessness?</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. <strong>Engage in a political activity for youth homelessness in which you knew you will be arrested?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Organize a political event (e.g. talk, support group, march) on youth homelessness?</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Give a lecture or talk about youth homelessness as a social or political issue?</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. <strong>Engage in a physical confrontation at a political rally concerning youth homelessness?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Send a letter or e-mail expressing a political opinion about homeless youth to the editor of a periodical or television show?</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Boycott a product for reasons related to youth homelessness?</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. <strong>Engage in a political activity for homeless youth in which you feared that some of your possessions would be damaged?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Distribute information representing the youth homelessness cause?</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. <strong>Engage in a political activity for homeless youth in</strong></td>
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*The 7 high-risk items are highlighted*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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<td>which you suspect there would be a confrontation with the police or possible arrest?</td>
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<td>12. Send a letter or email about youth homelessness to a public official?</td>
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<td>13. Attend a political organization's regular planning meeting focused on youth homelessness?</td>
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<td>14. Sign a petition for a homeless youth cause?</td>
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<td>15. Engage in an illegal act as part of a homeless youth protest?</td>
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<tr>
<td>16. Encourage a friend to join a homeless youth organization?</td>
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<td>17. Donate money to a homeless youth organization?</td>
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<tr>
<td>18. Block access to a building or public area with your body for a reason related to youth homelessness?</td>
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<tr>
<td>19. Wear a t-shirt or button with a message about youth homelessness?</td>
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<tr>
<td>20. Engage in any political activity for homeless youth in which you fear for your personal safety?</td>
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<tr>
<td>21. Participate in a homeless youth protest march or demonstration?</td>
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<tr>
<td>22. Help organizing a campaign on youth homelessness as a social or political topic?</td>
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Source: Klar and Kasser (2009) developed a short version of this scale originally published by Corning and Myers (2002). Modified by Ameen (current study).
APPENDIX C
Activist Identity and Commitment Scale (AICS), revised

Instructions:

To understand the next questions, please read the following broad definition of homeless youth activism:

*The goal of activism is to advocate for homeless youth socially or politically; the means of activism can vary greatly, e.g., from institutional acts like starting a petition to unconventional acts of civil disobedience.*

Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

Scale:
0 – Do not agree at all
1 – Agree a little
2 – Moderately agree
3 – Agree a Lot

1. Being a homeless youth activist is central to who I am.
2. I am truly committed to engage in activism for homeless youth.
3. I identify myself as an activist for homeless youth.
4. I make time for homeless youth activism, even when I’m busy.
5. People who know me well would call me an activist for homeless youth.
6. I go out of my way to engage in activism for homeless youth.
7. Being an activist for homeless youth is an important reflection of who I am.
8. I take the time I need to engage in activism for homeless youth.

[Odd numbers represent activist identity; even numbers represent activist commitment.]

Source: Klar and Kasser (2009), modified by Ameen (current study).
APPENDIX D

Participant demographic information form

Purpose: This information will be used to describe participants who have agreed to take part in a study about homeless youth activists and their life histories. The first question asks you to either list your real name or a preferred alias. You do not have to indicate your name if you prefer to use an alias. If you use an alias, your real name will never be mentioned in the study. The name of your choice will be used in future publications and presentations of the research.

Instructions: Please answer the questions below to the best of your ability. The answers are open-ended on purpose, however each can be answered with just a few words.

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<th>Name or alias</th>
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<th>Sex/Gender</th>
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<th>Age</th>
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<th>Current job title</th>
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<th>Organizations represented</th>
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<tr>
<th>Length of time involved with homeless youth</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of time involved with activism to deal with youth homelessness</th>
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<th>Educational level</th>
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<th>Identified religion, if any, and degree of spirituality</th>
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<th>Socio-economic class as a child</th>
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<th>Socio-economic class currently</th>
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APPENDIX E

Example of Journal Entry following an individual interview with Theresa – 1/20/12

Theresa was recommended to me by Andre when I asked for his recommendations for other colleagues around the country doing great work for homeless youth. She responded to my request favorably and it took us two reschedulings to get to our meeting, but this happened quickly and cooperatively over email.

The interview itself was efficient. She had an appointment in an hour I wanted to respect for need to get ready and take a breather before her next meeting. I think I felt that I was talking to someone I respected and appreciated how busy she was. I revered this in a way. In my own reflections, I view being busy for a cause one is passionate about as a personal virtue.

Beyond efficiency, the interview was comprehensive. I enjoyed hearing her reflections and I thought that she was incredibly ‘on’ – able to give responses, even when she didn’t regularly talk about or think about a particular issue, in a way that demonstrated great macro thinking. In addition, being articulate was a clear trait or hers.

She works a lot with LGBT homeless youth. At this moment, I can’t recall if the division of her agency helps all youth or just LGBT youth in particular.

I enjoyed her passionate perspective that “somehow we expect them to be adults when on the other hand we see 20-somethings still living at home.” This is a phenomenon I’m very intrigued by. We learned about emerging adulthood and the trend of seeing more kids in their 20’s living at home, getting money and support from their parents instead of getting an independent start on their careers and families. Homeless youth, by most senses, don’t have the same access to services and supports. So who is this shifting trend speaking about? Is it leaving whole reference groups out of the conversation. Is emerging adulthood a luxury while quick and dangerous punts into adulthood are the norm for non-dominant, more marginalized groups? I think being at the point of realizing the dichotomy, even on a personal / observational level, is important in creating and sustaining a body of work in advocacy. It speaks to differences in life course based on access to capital. Advocacy tries to address these things.

I also enjoyed Theresa’s sense that ‘everyone’ has a responsibility to address youth homelessness. It is not just the province of one group or another – families are not put to blame any more than elected officials and the average non-politically-involved person with no kids. It is an inclusive sense that we must advocate as community members first; one might expect that Theresa would be an advocate regardless of her occupation. With regard to LGBT HY, I like how she mentioned that LGBT adults have a similar responsibility for their population. She made a connection between encouraging youth to come out – and then not being able to provide youth with resources once they decide to do so and have to personally and single-handedly have to deal with the consequences. This admittance reminds me of the responsibility that Andre and Rich identified, but less that Jeff and some other participants (self disclosed as LGBT or not) identified, at least explicitly.
Theresa came from an MFT counseling program, did counseling with teens and their families, and then also worked as a clinician with HY in New Orleans. She came out later in life, but there apparently was never a doubt in her mind (WHAT CONFIDENCE!) that she would be rejected by her family. She was not. Nevertheless, she claims that she has the connection and empathy, and the feeling of sadness for youth who are on their own before they are ready. In fact, she spoke about having a connection to HY is “essential” to being an advocate for them.

She spoke about a kind of awesomeness of teenagehood – this it was both fascinating and scary. I personally like to quote something I heard a former director of a HY shelter in Miami – that we make a pass through childhood to adulthood alone or with the help of others; I sure as hell didn’t do it alone, nor do I think I could do it alone. For me, this saying helped express in words the sense of why I am intrigued by adolescents, and have spent the better part of my early career and educational training studying and working with this population. I don’t want anyone to have to go at it alone, and I think HY are a population with fewer resources than anybody. Their very homelessness is a testament to that. In this tense, Theresa and I shared an emotion – “sadness” of seeing a young person being on their own before they are ready.

She went on to say that it is “the worst tragedy in the world to allow young people to be homeless.” That we – collectively as a society, and as individuals as well – have allowed this to happen. A tragedy in front of our eyes, on our watches, in our complicity. I wonder if that alone is enough to fire up someone into taking action. I imagine for some it is a mobilizing force, and for others it is an arresting force.

When I asked her why some people become advocates when others do not, she said that some people have more ability to act on their empathy. She emphasized the word ‘act’. I am reminded of a previous participant who said that she was invited to be an advocate. Is that where the ability comes from; from an invitation? Is it always latent or does something help it develop. I look elsewhere for ideas about where it develops and/or is nurtured. Theresa came back to the idea of people not really growing as advocates – even when they see the same problem over and over again – by speaking about a ‘block’ from looking at the larger solutions. She speculated that people may also be ‘disenchanted’ and ‘resistant to talking about prevention.’

She spoke about how a HY population is different based on geography. Akin to this, she found that working in a large city was important in her career trajectory because there were ‘lots of advocates and systems in place’ for YH. As part of her former job, she joined the a coalition that meets monthly, organizes together. This was her entrée into YH and to the city and to the idea of advocacy – of what she calls ‘working toward creating change.’ (Here, I am reminded of my own way of getting to know Miami – a new city that was sexy and vibrant seeming, but didn’t appear to scratch much below the surface. I wanted to know the depths of the city, and I think that volunteering served that purpose; it showed me that beneath the big buildings and palm trees was an inordinate amount of suffering. I went looking for it. Secondarily, I joined a volunteer organization for the social aspect, but I don’t think that was a driving force.)
Theresa moved to her current employer as a program director. She didn’t leave behind her clinical skills. In many ways, I believe her stance as an advocate extends from her own philosophy of care that she tries to institute now as a division director. She aspires for a service package for HY to be comprehensive and holistic. Not simply bedding and feeding – youth need life and job skills. Not simply how to survive, youth need to know how to live. Youth need time and space and support to identify their aspirations.

I could tell in my interview that Theresa really believed in the services that her org was provided, and they were a thoughtful mix. With this view of the necessary components of caring for the other, I imagine seeing that not every youth had this was an impetus for further collaborations in her city with other service providers.

I think that Theresa views integrated services – creating them, offering them, and pushing for them – as a form of advocacy. This gives advocacy an immediate impact. It is not a fight for this or that symbolic policy, but a sense of working with other local experts on a real issue and coming to a conviction that youth simply need MORE than what is currently being offered to them. MORE in a thoughtful and holistic way. From her personal conviction of what youth need stemmed a role for an advocate to push for these things w/in coalitions.

Given her demonstrated leadership, Theresa was asked by the mayor to serve on a commission for LGBT HY. She credits her ED has an exemplary mentor to her; this person formed partnerships with other agencies. She also credits the board as being helpful, but it was clear that she didn’t always get the green light – the board had trouble with how much service vs. advocacy the organization should be provided. She reckoned that the board was simply not in the trenches and couldn’t see how the two (svc, adv) are not inverses of each other.

She identified several qualities that it takes to be an advocate: optimism (to ward against being burnt out), collaboration (must like working with other people), empathy, not being protecting about meeting service goals (in a way that pits svc against advocacy in a trade-off way – but also in a way that put orgs together in a death pit, fighting for the limited dollars available to perpetuate their orgs instead of looking for ways to fulfill the larger mission of ending or reducing YH). Additionally, empathy is important as is humility – she said that ‘not one person can make all the changes that are needed.’ I think many of these qualities cluster together; does not being sociable have to do with being less competitive and more able to see that togetherness is more effective than separateness? I think it does. She goes on to say that an advocate must be able to ‘check yourself’ – understand limits, take breaks, not putting self into a rat race.

(As an observation about process, I am struck again by how thoughtful Theresa is and how there really is a ‘flow’ to her work – stemming from her core beliefs and personal characteristics. I can also see how the long-term traits connect to the transient qualities and environments that one kinds himself in. I should make sure that I emphasize the bridge between the state and trait categories I listed in my literature review.)

I wrote a note during the interview that I would love to work with Theresa. This is fairly significant because I generally find myself asking amongst peers and colleagues whether
I would want to work with them. That I identified her as a great leader that I would be happy to work day in and out with tells me that I think she is successful and thoughtful and reasonable and has admirable traits that will give me room to grow as an advocate myself.

(What am I clouding here? What am I missing in my admiration of this participant? I must remember to be critical in forming pieces- in not letting admiration for one participant make that person’s story the ‘right one.’ It must equally inform the trajectories I seek to uncover; not overshadow or justify certain things over others.)

Part of my curiosity is in how groups of advocates work together. Because Theresa has served on both a coalition of svc providers and a commission of various experts assembled with executive order, she stated some notable differences. A commission has an end goal, it is closed off (from other speakers? From other realities?), more interdisciplinary, more intense and organized in terms of tasks, and less collegial. That can definitely impact one’s motivation to involved him/herself in these types of commissions. (I should ask more about the implications of these types though it feels tangential to me, though. Can’t think of how it is really deterministic for an advocate at the moment.)

I learned that being an advocate is transitive – it changes someone by allowing them to be more outspoken. It has allowed her to use someone’s ignorance as an opportunity to teach that person.

Above all, and I may have identified this earlier, but an advocate is not just a profession. It is an identity. Theresa believes this. Quite eloquently, she stated that the goal is not to make institutional change but to make social change. We are part of a social fabric inside and outside of work. HY are part of our society, not just clients that we serve. The sand on which we all stand is moved by each of us.

(This is another reason why I think Theresa really resonated with me personally; I too view my role as an advocate as a part of who I am in totality, not a subset of my skills or professional/paid responsibilities. Although I have faltered lately – frozen in the face of micro injustices and limited in my passing, non-volunteer-based interactions with the homeless. I really want to connect but I feel held back. More in a rush. Ugh. I dislike this part of myself at the moment. I ask questions like ‘have I sold out?’ These work and personal happenings are inseparable and informative to each other.)
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