



Asking for Change: Feasibility, acceptability, and preliminary outcomes of a manualized photovoice intervention with youth experiencing homelessness



Kimberly Bender^{a,*}, Anamika Barman-Adhikari^a, Jonah DeChants^a, Badiah Haffeejee^{b,1}, Yolanda Anyon^a, Stephanie Begun^c, Andrea Portillo^{a,2}, Kaite Dunn^{a,3}

^a University of Denver, 2148 S. High Street, Denver, CO 80208, USA

^b Elizabethtown College, USA

^c University of Toronto, 246 Bloor Street West, Office 434, Toronto, ON M5S 1V4, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Photovoice is a participatory action research method that empowers participants to photograph their everyday lives as a means of documenting and advocating for their needs; it has rarely been utilized with young people experiencing homelessness. The current study examined the feasibility, accessibility, and preliminary outcomes associated with participation in Asking for Change, a manualized Photovoice intervention, among youth (ages 18–21) staying in a homeless shelter ($N = 22$). Multiple sources of data, including field observation, standardized pre-post measures, and qualitative exit interviews were collected across two cohorts of Asking for Change. Results suggest the intervention was feasible and highly acceptable to many young people, created new opportunities to connect with young people, and, among those surveyed pre and post intervention ($n = 9$), was associated with improvements in communication skills, social connectedness, resiliency, and well-being. This article discusses the challenges and benefits inherent in doing this work and outlines a robust research agenda to move this knowledge base forward.

1. Introduction

Numbering 1.6 million in the United States (Molino, McBride, & Kekwaletswe, 2007; Ringwalt, Greene, Robertson, & McPheeters, 1998; Whitbeck, 2009), homeless youth are defined as persons under age 25 who lack regular, fixed, and adequate nighttime residence, including youth in transitional or emergency shelters (42 USC § 11434a [2][B]). These young people experience many stressors, including physical and sexual victimization, mental health challenges, and engagement in risky sexual and drug use behaviors (Slesnick, Dashora, Letcher, Erdem, & Serovich, 2009). Despite the clear need for services and treatment (Gwadz et al., 2010), youth experiencing homelessness are often poorly linked to service providers (Feldmann & Middleman, 2003) and reluctant to engage in services (Hudson et al., 2010; Kurtz, Lindsey, Jarvis, & Nackerud, 2000) due, in part, to distrust of formal and informal support systems (Auerswald & Eyre, 2002).

Researchers have increasingly emphasized the need for using novel methods to better engage and empower this population; exploring youths' unique perspectives is critical to developing culturally

appropriate interventions tailored to their needs (Hieftje, Duncan, & Fiellin, 2014). Photovoice is one such innovative participatory action research method that empowers participants to photograph their everyday lives as a means of documenting and advocating for their needs, concerns, and struggles (Wang, Burris, & Xiang, 1996; Baker & Wang, 2006). This study examined the feasibility, accessibility, and preliminary outcomes associated with homeless youths' participation in *Asking for Change*, a Photovoice intervention guided by a structured manual.

2. Background literature

Photovoice is a participatory action research (PAR) method grounded in empowerment education, feminist theory, and documentary photography. The approach involves providing participants with cameras so they can document their everyday lives and identify shared strengths and concerns in their communities (Wang & Burris, 1997). Participants then use their photos to create awareness via

* Corresponding author at: 2148 S. High Street, Denver, CO 80208, USA.

E-mail addresses: Kimberly.bender@du.edu (K. Bender), Anamika.BarmanAdhikari@du.edu (A. Barman-Adhikari), Jonah.DeChants@du.edu (J. DeChants), haffeejee@etown.edu (B. Haffeejee), Yolanda.Anyon@du.edu (Y. Anyon), stephanie.begun@utoronto.ca (S. Begun), aportillo2112@outlook.com (A. Portillo).

¹ Present address: Elizabethtown College, 1 Alpha Drive, Elizabethtown, PA 17022.

² Present address: 2415 24th Street San Francisco CA.

³ Present address: 5577 Sawdust Loop, Parker, CO 80134.

critical group dialogue and ultimately advocate for social change (Wang & Burris, 1997). In doing so, participants build skills by working together, learning visual methodologies and sharing their voices with decision-makers through collaborative group projects. Photovoice is designed to empower populations with marginalized voices in decision-making (Wang & Burris, 1997).

Despite many strengths, youth experiencing homelessness are among the most marginalized and disempowered of youth populations. The longer youth are unstably housed, the more estranged from formal institutions and disaffiliated with mainstream society they become (Piliavin, Sosin, Westerfelt, & Matsueda, 1993; Sosin & Bruni, 2000). Such estrangement is associated with a range of adverse experiences, including increased arrests, victimization (Thompson, Jun, Bender, Ferguson, & Pollio, 2010) and substance use (Chassin, 2008). These adversities create further barriers to formal employment or continued education, missed opportunities to re-affiliate with prosocial institutions (Ferguson, Bender, Thompson, Maccio, & Pollio, 2012). This population would thus benefit from interventions that disrupt such narratives of disaffiliation and marginalization.

Although Photovoice has been used broadly with a variety of populations to address an array of public health concerns and social justice issues (Wang & Burris, 1997), few studies have investigated the approach with youth experiencing homelessness. Preliminary assessment of a Photovoice project conducted in a primary health care agency serving homeless young people in Australia found initial success in recruiting and retaining youth (Dixon & Hadjialexiou, 2005). This 6-week Photovoice pilot workshop engaged youth in a health needs assessment, with participants reporting that they formed new relationships and felt rewarded as they worked with others to create a printed postcard to disseminate their message (Dixon & Hadjialexiou, 2005). While the project successfully engaged youth in the project overall, it struggled to engage them in social action as originally intended, suggesting implementation is feasible, but further research is needed to refine the approach and determine whether such projects can lead to collective action.

Photovoice has received greater empirical attention for its utility with homeless adults, however. Both within the U.S. and internationally, Photovoice has actively engaged homeless adults in projects advocating for health and housing issues important to them (Bukowski & Buetow, 2011; Wang, Cash, & Powers, 2000). As a seminal example, Wang et al. (2000) studied Photovoice workshops focused on health promotion with adult men and women living in shelters. Provided over a one-month period, the project successfully engaged participants in recording the strengths and issues in their community, and facilitated critical group discussions of everyday difficulties. Participants then engaged in advocacy efforts with decision makers, contributed to newspaper articles, and narrated photos at a theatre to an audience of hundreds of community members. Despite significant hardships, participants attended regular sessions and reported increased peer support, self-esteem, and quality of life as a result of having an opportunity to express their perspectives (Wang et al., 2000). This preliminary evidence suggests Photovoice may be an engaging and beneficial approach to connecting with, empowering, and building strengths among homeless populations.

Previous work does suggest that young people experiencing homelessness are interested in having greater voice in regards to agency services and in the broader community (Ferguson, Kim, & McCoy, 2011). Service approaches that provide opportunities for youth to have input and participate in governance are associated with greater engagement in programming (Leonard et al., 2017), and young people who feel empowered report lower distress levels and greater satisfaction in emergency shelters (Heinze & Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni, 2009).

The current study builds on limited evidence investigating the utility of Photovoice with young people experiencing homelessness by examining the feasibility, acceptability, and preliminary outcomes

associated with youths' participation in a manualized Photovoice project, titled Asking for Change. Asking for Change involved two cohorts of young people residing in a homeless youth shelter in documenting issues most important to them, dialoging about those issues, and creating awareness via community exhibits. The study also analyzes youths' rates of recruitment, retention, satisfaction, perceived benefits, and changes on key outcomes from pre- to post-project. Building on these results, the paper proposes a conceptual model and research agenda for advancing the study of Photovoice with youth experiencing homelessness.

3. Methods

3.1. Sample and recruitment

The study sample ($N = 22$) was comprised of young people staying in an emergency homeless youth shelter that provides overnight stay, meals, and referrals for other services to 40 youth ages 18–21. The shelter aims to provide short-term stays (approximately 40 days); however, with long waitlists for transitional housing and no official limit restricting length of stay other than aging out at age 22, young peoples' stays at the shelter varied from a day to several months. Purposive sampling was used to recruit youth who were interested in participating in a pilot Photovoice project. Youth entered the study in two ways: 1) shelter staff were asked to nominate youth, via a list solicited during a shelter staff meeting, identifying youth they thought would be interested in/benefit from participating in the project; and 2) youth self-nominated themselves after reading Photovoice fliers posted in common areas at the shelter.

Once youth were staff- or self-nominated, a team of four trained interviewers conducted individual screening interviews with nominated youth in private offices. Screening interviews were designed to select youth invested and committed to the project. Semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 45 min and asked youth about their interests and motivations for being involved in the project, the social issues important to them, their ability to remain committed to project over time, and their abilities and strategies for discussing difficult topics with their peers. Youth were given a \$10 gift card to a local food vendor to compensate them for their time. In total, two rounds of interviews were conducted (about 3 months apart) to select youth for two separate cohorts of the Asking for Change project. Twelve youth interviewed in the first round and 10 interviewed in the second round, and all youth interviewed screened into inclusion in the Photovoice pilot intervention. All study procedures were approved by the PIs' institutional review board (IRB).

The total sample consisted of 22 youth ages 18–20, identifying racially/ethnically as White ($n = 3$; 14%), Black ($n = 6$; 27%), Latino ($n = 6$; 27%), Native American ($n = 1$; 5%) and multiracial ($n = 6$; 27%). Youths' self-identified gender included 10 males (45%) and 12 females (55%), and youth reported diversity in regards to sexual orientation, including 18 straight youth (82%), 2 lesbian youth (9%) and 1 bisexual youth (5%) with 1 youth not reporting sexual orientation. Youth had varying education levels, with most having achieved their GED ($n = 6$; 27%) or currently enrolled in high school ($n = 6$; 27%), while others had graduated from high school ($n = 3$, 14%), dropped out of high school ($n = 1$; 5%), were currently enrolled in college ($n = 2$; 9%) or other educational status ($n = 4$; 18%).

3.2. The 'asking for change' intervention

The Asking for Change Photovoice intervention aimed to bring together a group of homeless youth and adult facilitators in a structured project that served to (1) build relationships and connection, (2) teach social, emotional, leadership, and photography skills, and (3) empower youth to be social change agents. The intervention was guided by a positive youth development and youth empowerment framework,

whereby adults provided structure and resources to the group, and youth shared decision-making power in most steps of the project (Anyon & Naughton, 2003; Ozer & Douglas, 2015). The structure of the intervention was articulated in a manual developed by the PIs to provide facilitators with clearly stated objectives and activities for each session, yet facilitators were empowered to use the manually flexibly, incorporating youth voice in decision-making to be responsive to individual groups' needs and interests, while still meeting key objectives.

The manual primarily adapted material from a youth-led action research curriculum called Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning (YELL) (Anyon & Naughton, 2003). Research on YELL with adolescents from low-income communities of color in urban areas indicates that this program promotes participatory behaviors, socio-political awareness, critical thinking, problem solving, and public speaking skills (Anyon & Naughton, 2003; Conner & Strobel, 2007; Ozer & Douglas, 2013; Harden et al., 2015). Adaptations included shortening the intervention timeframe (from 1 year to 2 months) to accommodate common transience among homeless or unstably housed youth, decreasing the breadth and depth of activities focused on theoretical constructs due to the shorter timeframe (e.g. abbreviated conceptions of social change), modifying activities to be more developmentally and contextually relevant to young adults who are experiencing homelessness, and changes to or elimination of activities that required a larger group of participants. In addition, the PIs integrated established Photovoice guidelines (Palibroda, Krieg, Murdock, & Havelock, 2009) into the manual, including a process for collecting photos, and dialogic group analysis of themes across photos. The PIs developed the Asking for Change manual in consultation with existing literature, an expert on youth empowerment programming and positive youth development, and an expert on youth voice and youth organizing. Manual development was an iterative process, with experts providing comments and revisions to manual drafts, the research team meeting to discuss this feedback and make revisions, and the facilitators providing further comments suggesting changes between cohorts.

The Asking for Change intervention included the following phases: community building and group norm setting, skill development, information gathering via photography, and social action public exhibit. Across this process, each group meeting involved an opening meal and check-in, a main activity/discussion and a debrief. The initial phase of community building and norm setting began with activities that created opportunities for youth to get to know one another and to establish collective expectations for their work together. The intervention then introduced activities aimed at building social emotional skills (e.g., communication, problem solving) and photography skills (e.g., lighting, framing, composition). A professional photographer joined group to teach photography skills and help youth practice skills learned through a photo scavenger hunt. At this phase in the project, youth were each provided with an electronic tablet with built-in camera, and were encouraged to begin taking photos to bring back and share with the group. The data collection phase was an iterative process in which youth took photos, shared and discussed each other's images, identified issues important to them, decided on a shared topic, and took additional photos. Example topics selected by youth included: barriers, stereotypes, boredom, freedom, and prosperity. Facilitators then helped youth to ponder the root causes of the problems they identified and to formulate recommendations to address these problems. Each of the two cohorts' projects culminated in social action; participants planned and implemented community exhibits at a local café in the city's art district to raise awareness about issues facing young adults experiencing homelessness. Participants ($n = 9$ across the two exhibits) displayed their photos and presented on the conclusions drawn in the project. The two events were attended by university faculty and students, participants' family members, and representatives from the homeless youth host agency; although invitations were extended to local politicians and decision makers, to our knowledge, none attended.

Each of the two cohorts of the project met at the shelter for 2-hour

weekly group meetings over the course of 8–12 weeks. Although the project was originally designed to last 12 weeks, following the first 12-week cohort 1 pilot, adjustments were made to the curriculum to abbreviate to 8 weeks in order to reduce attrition. To honor youths' time in contributing to the groups, youth were paid \$20 in gift cards per group meeting attended, provided with a meal during each session, and were given their project tablets upon project completion.

Each cohort was facilitated by two research team members (a total of four facilitators) who consisted of social work faculty, doctoral, and masters students. In addition, three research team members served as participant observers and were tasked with taking detailed field notes. The team was thoroughly trained in research and intervention methods with youth experiencing homelessness, by the PIs, as well as in youth empowerment programming, by two project consultants. The research team represented diverse racial/ethnic and gender identities. They met weekly for debrief sessions that included planning, intentional adaptation, and problem solving to improve the project. The current study represents a pilot of the intervention and, thus, facilitators were given some freedom to adapt the manualized curricula; facilitators discussed each adaptation with the research team to ensure it aligned with the goals and philosophy of the intervention and documented each adaptation and the rationale behind it; such adaptations are described below.

3.3. Data collection and analysis

Multiple sources of data were collected to systematically assess the feasibility, acceptability, and preliminary outcomes in the Asking for Change pilot project. Data collected included: field notes, exit interviews, standardized self-report measures conducted at pre and post intervention, and public comment cards.

3.3.1. Observation field notes

To assess feasibility and acceptability, facilitators tracked attendance in group sessions, noting retention, attrition, and reasons for attrition provided by youth. To assess acceptability and to inform further adaptation of the manual, participant observers took extensive qualitative field notes during each group, documenting youths' responses to each activity, as well as what was working well (or was challenging) over the course of the project. These qualitative field notes were compiled and analyzed by one observer using content analysis techniques in order to make replicable and valid inferences by interpreting the meanings underlying physical messages (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009), then coding the gathered qualitative data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Silverman, 2000). This inductive approach involved coding while reading through the data, followed by the segregation of the data codes into data clusters for further description and analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Schreier, 2012). The observer paid attention to certain phrases, words, patterns of behavior, circumstances, ways of thinking, events and topics which were repeated or stood out (Seidman, 2006). Data were highlighted for those patterns and regularities in order to obtain emergent themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and were then presented in main conceptual themes with each theme illustrated by quotations found in the data.

3.3.2. Exit interviews

Exit interviews were conducted individually with a subgroup of youth participants who could be located and agreed to participate ($n = 9$) after the project concluded. These interviews were facilitated by research team members not directly involved in the group sessions in order to reduce bias; interviews lasted approximately 30 min, and youth were provided a \$10 gift card to compensate them for their time. Exit interviews included qualitative questions querying youth regarding of the intervention acceptability (how they experienced the group, favorite aspects of the project, what kept them committed, what was most

difficult, how the project could be improved), and their impressions of preliminary outcomes (what they gained, what they learned). The qualitative responses were audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using template analysis. The template approach allows for the identification of themes or domains in relation to prescribed areas of inquiry (Padgett, 2008), developing a priori codes to guide the analysis and identify emerging themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The exit interviews also included a quantitative measure of program satisfaction, that asked youth to rate how much they agreed (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree) with several statements regarding their enjoyment in the project (e.g., enjoyment taking photos, talking about photos, learning about their community). In analyses, quantitative ratings were dichotomized (1 = agree/strongly agree; 0 = other), and frequencies/percentages were reported.

3.3.3. Pre-post standardized measures

To assess preliminary outcomes associated with participation in Asking for Change, a quantitative survey was administered by research team members (not directly involved in facilitation/observation) who read survey questions aloud to each participant prior to the project beginning and, if available, at posttest (directly after the project ended). The quantitative survey consisted of standardized measures of self-efficacy (The General Self-Efficacy Scale; Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995), social connectedness (Social Connectedness Scale; Lee & Robbins, 1995), resiliency (The Resilience Scale; Wagnild & Young, 1993), self-esteem (Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale; Rosenberg, 1965), Civic Engagement (Pre-Adolescent Civic Engagement Scale; Nicotera, Altschul, Munoz, & Webman, 2010), and Personal Well-being (Personal Well-being Index-Adult 17; International Wellbeing Group, 2013). Reliability was examined for each subscale. Paired samples t-tests examined changes on each measure from baseline to posttest across all participants who could be located and agreed to participate (n = 9) after the project concluded.

3.3.4. Public comment cards

Public comment cards were distributed at the public exhibit to understand exhibit attendees' reactions to the photos, their captions, and youth presentations. Attendees included staff and other youth from the host shelter, friends and family of project participants and facilitators, and other community members. Comment cards were submitted voluntarily, and asked attendees what thoughts were elicited or what they learned by attending the exhibit. Hand-written comments were typed

into a single word document, given to youth participants, and clustered into themes for research purposes.

4. Results

4.1. Feasibility: Attendance and attrition

Attendance and retention trends over time for each round of the intervention can be seen in Fig. 1. Both rounds started the program with < 100% attendance, as some youth left the shelter after being selected to participate but before the intervention began. Attendance for each round gradually declined over the first four weeks of the program and then stabilized over the last four to eight weeks of the intervention. Asking for Change evidenced more participants, on average, during the second round of the intervention (72%) compared to the first (49%). This may be attributed to the change in intervention schedule. Sessions in the second round were held in the evenings and participants may have experienced fewer conflicts with school and work commitments. The second round was also shortened to eight total sessions from the original twelve, which may have also contributed to higher attendance rates.

Youth missed project meetings for a variety of reasons. The most frequently cited reasons were having to work and no longer living in the shelter. Other reasons for participants' absences included appointments with doctors, potential employers, and interviews with local news outlets, a birthday, being asked to leave the shelter, a family event, being incarcerated, and out-of-state travel. Program facilitators noted that they felt these absences were sometimes indicators of positive changes in the youth's life, such as getting a new job or finding new place to live. Some youth left notes and messages through other youth when they could not attend, suggesting that some study attrition was the result of the general instability of these youths' lives, rather than a lack of engagement with the program.

Young people, especially in the first cohort, were disheartened because of rising attrition in their group over time. Almost all youth from the first cohort felt that this affected morale and group cohesiveness. One of the strategic suggestions made by youth, upon exit interview, to reduce attrition was to delay the distribution of the tablets (because youth noticed that some participants stopped attending after they received the tablets) and have stricter requirements about who gets to keep these tablets. Youths' suggestions for increasing retention were incorporated in the second cohort of the project with success.

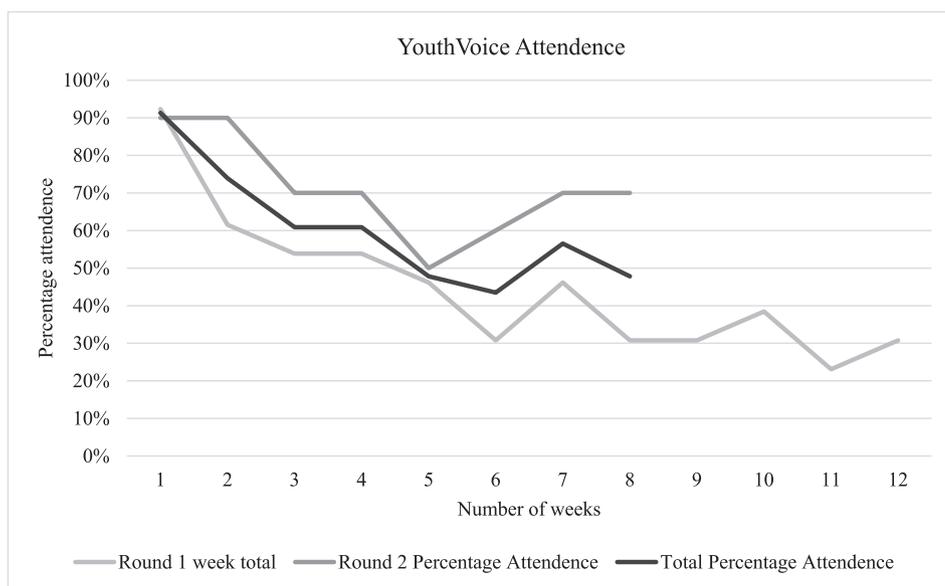


Fig. 1. 'Asking for change' attendance rates over time.

4.2. Acceptability: Strategies and challenges in engaging youth in asking for change

Observers' field notes and individual exit interviews with youth, analyzed separately and then combined, provided triangulation around several strategies that appeared to engage youth in Asking for Change while also identifying challenges encountered in attempting to engage.

Observers noted that *power-sharing in group activities* was a critical strategy. Group facilitators provided a structure for activities that created opportunities for rapport building and collective expectations for youths' work together. Facilitation included engaging youth in active learning, redirecting those who were distracted, listening and showing empathy, providing encouragers (e.g., positive affirmations and shout outs), asking expanding questions, and connecting perspectives across group members. In addition to these more traditional group facilitation strategies, adult leaders also emphasized youth sharing power during activities and in making decisions about the larger project. They allowed youth time to process their thoughts aloud and facilitated a group decision-making process during critical decision points in the project (e.g., topics to photograph, themes captured, how to share findings). When conflicts arose, facilitators asked for youth input, for example "How do you feel about group members re-joining the group if they have been restricted for an infraction...Has this happened for anyone else in the group? What would youth change?" Because the voices of youth experiencing homelessness are often silenced, such power sharing with adults was experienced as fairly novel. Over the course of the project, young people took more ownership over the process (leading discussions), actively engaged their peers, and become more dedicated to the process and project goals.

Youth, upon exit interview, also commented on the value of having a voice and being heard by adults in Asking for Change. Youth believed they had a platform to give voice to their diverse yet shared experiences. They described feeling empowered and rediscovering their agency, feeling like they are a part of decision making in the group. Youth also appreciated the youth-led nature of decision-making (in choosing what issues they would advocate for and creating rules for group interactions), a process from which this group often feels excluded.

Observer notes also highlighted the importance of *facilitator vulnerability*. In creating a "safe and brave space" and building rapport, facilitators showed vulnerability through personal sharing in the group, which was followed by youths' active engagement. Youth engaged facilitators in reciprocal conversations in which youth asked pointed questions about (1) whether facilitators have stereotypes about youth experiencing homelessness; (2) whether facilitators had experienced barriers such as discrimination and stigmatization, which youth described as "things that keep people apart but shouldn't;" and; (3) instances when facilitators felt that they were not being "heard" or "listened to." Facilitators responded to such dialogue by recognizing the motivations behind youths' questions, and honoring the importance of understanding everyone's perspectives and biases before the group can form trust. Facilitators often shared openly, disclosing past experiences, thoughts, and feelings as they related to the topic shared in the group. At times, such vulnerability took the form of facilitators and observers thoughtfully disclosing how thankful and honored they were that youth shared their powerful stories. These facilitation skills emphasized thoughtful consideration of when to disclose personal information and the crucial role of creating a safe/brave space that allows for vulnerability and building rapport, equalizing power, and being authentic in engagement with youth in order to encourage youth to do the same.

In exit interviews, youth echoed the importance of this novel dynamic between adults and youth. Youth mentioned that they find it hard to trust people because of their past experiences (e.g., abuse and trauma) and often felt isolated. However, most youth felt the intervention allowed them to get to know their peers better as it created the environment necessary to have meaningful discussions essential in

fostering a sense of community. One youth noted the initial difficulty in opening up to other participants. For example, in identifying a challenge in group, one youth stated, "Probably kind of opening up a little bit. Just because I don't really know a lot of people very well. And so I don't really, it's just kinda hard to do that, right off the bat."

Beyond peers, building relationships with adult facilitators and observers was transformative. Youth overwhelmingly stated that the members of the research team respected their autonomy and were as relatable, approachable, and personable. In noting how this relationship with facilitators kept youth engaged in the intervention, one youth mentioned "You know, it seems like you guys, you know, are not just snob professional d*cks, like trying, you know, just kind of, kinda get your homework or, you know, your papers done or whatever, you know, with this project and leave. You kinda showed, you know, appreciation towards us." Youth felt valued by facilitators who were dedicated to them and to the project.

Photos and journaling served as emotional outlet, noticed by both observers and youth participants. Youth participants felt that being able to self-reflect by journaling and using pictures to talk about sensitive and difficult issues helped them share experiences which would otherwise be difficult to express and process. One of the participants captured this sentiment beautifully, she said, "The writing part. That kinda hit home for me. Showing everything that I felt, seeing into those pictures and everything. Some of the deep dark things that I would never have said." Field notes indicated that the visual, technological, and creative aspects of the Photovoice methodology were critical to engaging youth, especially a group of youth who often find it difficult to trust people, particularly adults and service providers. Youth took risks in Photovoice, and some initially struggled to pick themes for photos to take, and how to capture these themes specifically through photos. Yet, in their exit interviews, youth noted that at the end of the intervention, they felt confident in their abilities to think more abstractly and creatively and find meaning in their day-to-day life through their pictures.

Finally, youth enjoyed *having structure and an escape from stress*. Being involved in the project provided young people with a sense of having a larger purpose and engaging this purpose was an opportunity to escape from the daily stressors of their lives. For example, one participant indicated that he looked forward to attending the groups because "I'm that person that likes to be busy doing something so, um, Photovoice like, helped me with that...everyone kinda needs to do a project." Another youth, after discussing "drama" and conflicts common in the shelter, noted, "Yeah we got to be secluded for a little bit and it felt good to take a break from all that stuff."

While youth recognized the overall value of Asking for change, true engagement took some time; and *conflict and drama* were common. Observation notes showed that, in the first two to three weeks, youth were easily upset and triggered, they easily "insulted" one another, and had difficulty reliably supporting one another on a consistent basis. Youth struggled with respecting and working through different peer perspectives. Such interactions mirrored interactions labeled as "drama" common among young people living together at a shelter. Drama was difficult to avoid given 40 youth were living in tight quarters with no privacy, all with their own opinions and struggles. Drama and the stress of living in the shelter was center in youths' minds and hearts but very difficult to address directly. Drama in group meetings resulted in youth "not feeling heard," "respected" and "bullied" by their peers.

Young people similarly commented on their occasional conflict with peers during post-program interviews. As the project progressed, participants took some time to work through interpersonal tensions, which made some youth uncomfortable in speaking out. In noting this as a challenge, but as something that they were eventually able to resolve, and which ultimately brought them together, one youth said, "There's some people who were yelling and all that. Who couldn't decide on a decision and you know, I can't like, I just can't deal with that, but we got through it. So I'm happy about that." Over the course of the

intervention, observer notes showed, through engaging in group activities over time and building skills in communication and teamwork, youth slowly transitioned from a need to take care of oneself to a value for taking care of others and the group as a whole. Although old conflicts sometimes resurfaced, as the team formed, the group focused more on achieving mutual goals and less on their individual needs.

4.3. Acceptability: Quantitative ratings of intervention satisfaction

Youth reported high rates of satisfaction with the program. Among youth who completed an exit interview at the end of the program ($n = 9$), 89% agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed being a part of the project, taking pictures, and sharing what they learned with others outside of the group. Slightly fewer (78%) agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed talking about the photos they took. Reports of community engagement were also encouraging. All youth participants (100%) agreed or strongly agreed that they felt they took pictures that accurately reflected life in their community, that they enjoyed learning more about their community, that they learned skills that might be helpful in the future, and that they would participate in a project like this again. Approximately 78% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they felt like dropping out of the program at some point, suggesting commitment waned over parts of programming but remained high for most youth.

4.4. Preliminary outcomes: Pre-post standardized measures

Youth demonstrated change on several (but not all) constructs assessed through standardized measures (see Table 1). Cronbach's alphas for subscales were acceptable and ranged from 0.72–0.86; however, one measure, self-esteem, showed insufficient internal consistency reliability ($\alpha = 0.17$) and was eliminated from analysis. For reference, means and standard deviations for each scale for all participants ($N = 22$) at pretest are reported first, followed by pretest and posttest means and standard deviations only for participants with data at both time points. These participants ($n = 9$) did not report a significant increase in personal well-being ($t = -0.85, p = 0.42$) from pretest ($M = 7.33, SD = 1.10$) to posttest ($M = 7.72, SD = 1.77$); however, exploratory posthoc analyses revealed that they did report significantly higher ($t = -3.33, p \leq 0.05$) satisfaction with their lives overall (an item from the personal well-being scale) at posttest ($M = 8.11, SD = 1.54$) than they did at baseline ($M = 6.11, SD = 1.76$). Youths' reports of social connectedness increased significantly ($t = -4.45, p = 0.002$), nearly doubling from baseline ($M = 2.49, SD = 1.01$) to posttest ($M = 4.93, SD = 0.90$). Finally, the change in youths' resiliency scores was marginally significantly ($t = -2.26, p = 0.054$) from baseline ($M = 6.04, SD = 0.62$) to posttest ($M = 6.36, SD = 0.39$). Positive but non-significant trends were found for self-efficacy, and no significant change was found pertaining to civic engagement.

Table 1
Change in self-reported standardized measures from pre- to post-intervention.

Measure	Pretest (full sample; $N = 22$)		Pretest ($n = 9$)		Posttest ($n = 9$)		T test	P value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Resilience			6.04	0.62	6.36	0.39	-2.26	0.054
Personal well-being	6.77	2.16	7.33	1.10	7.72	1.77	-0.85	0.42
Social connectedness	2.82	1.00	2.49	1.01	4.93	0.90	-4.47	0.002**
Self-efficacy	3.39	0.38	3.40	0.28	3.53	0.38	-1.28	0.236
Civic engagement	4.18	0.59	4.30	0.41	4.29	0.49	0.17	0.87

** $p < 0.01$.

4.5. Preliminary outcomes: Youths' perceptions of what they gained from the intervention

During qualitative exit interviews, youth shared what they gained or learned through participation in Asking for Change. Most youth felt the intervention had an unexpected yet profound impact on them and described it as a transformative experience. Their responses were summarized into four primary benefits of participation:

4.5.1. Forging a common social identity and shedding the stigma associated with their living situation

There was consensus among participants across both cohorts that this intervention provided them with an opportunity to be a part of something bigger, such as a community with a larger purpose. The project served as a platform to make meaning out of their past experiences, what the experiences meant, and how such experiences continue to impact them. The following quote from one participant illustrates the above sentiment, "They could literally inline their thoughts to what I was feeling and it was like, 'Okay, we're not the only ones'. There are people literally who are so wanting to know how they can help their community that they actually think along the same lines."

Additionally, whereas youth were initially reluctant to identify as homeless, often blaming themselves for their situation (i.e. internal stigmatization), by the end of the intervention, youth were not ashamed of claiming their common experience of being "homeless." They were also able to de-stigmatize their own existence and identities by understanding how their lives are embedded within a larger system over which they had little control, and that their living situation did not define who they were as individuals. Highlighting this newfound sense of social identity, youth from the first cohort started their presentations during the community exhibit with the words, "I may be homeless, but I am also..."

4.5.2. Identifying as change agents

While the intervention itself did not produce any tangible outcome in regards to affecting social change, most participants felt the intervention equipped them with the skills and the desire to serve as change-agents for their communities. One youth poignantly captured this sentiment, and said, "It really opened up my eyes and said, you know, what am I doing with my life that is so unnecessary that I can't make change for other people. And that, it was a difficult decision but I'm happy I was able to go along and, you know, speak my mind and actually show that I actually, you know, want to make change." Another participant similarly reflected, "Um, like it will help me to like actually want to help. Like it won't just make me sit back when there's stuff that can be done like the smallest things that could help. And I'm not gonna stop being who I am and that's part of me and helping others. Like that's gonna help me like help anyone I can."

4.5.3. Renewing and rediscovering personal resilience

For many youth, the intervention also led to personal growth. Several youth expressed having a renewed sense of confidence, self-efficacy, and tenacity to achieve their goals. Despite feeling challenged by stereotypes and unfamiliar challenges of living away from their home communities, youth conveyed a realistic and positive view of their life and development. One participant noted what she gained from the intervention, “Dedication, hard work. And that, you know, even though you're going through a rough time in life, you can always find a way back home to where you want to be at.”

4.5.4. Interpersonal and group communication skills

Youth also reported that they were able to improve their levels of communication, self-efficacy, and restraint because of the opportunities for group interactions afforded to them due to their participation in the intervention. They noted how they were slowly able to work through differences in opinions and engage in dialogues, which not only acknowledged these differences, but also emphasized their abilities to reconcile discrepancies in a respectful manner. Describing how the intervention helped him build better communication skills, one participant said, “I think definitely with working with others it's like first you have to be understanding and listen to them and then once you have, once you're done listening and you can put yours in, you can see both perspectives.”

4.6. Preliminary outcomes: Public response to exhibits

Comment cards reflected attendees' reactions to the exhibits, and conveyed four themes: 1) Deeper empathy for the adversity of being homeless: “This picture made me think about what it would be like to be homeless/in poverty and to watch people who aren't. It must be hard and discouraging to see people take these things for granted”; and “At this exhibit I learned how much homeless youth have to endure. I also learned some insight as to what thoughts and emotions they are experiencing on a daily basis: sadness, loneliness, and despair.” 2) A new recognition of the resilience of youth experiencing homelessness: “A picture that really spoke to me was *Outside Looking In*, it made me think about how fragile we are, yet how much we can accomplish with persistence”; and “At this exhibit, I was reminded of how beautiful and resilient people are! I am inspired by these incredible youth. Their courage and compassion for others is truly exceptional. Even in the midst of tremendous adversity they have proven their ability to endure and succeed. We need more humans like this in the world.” 3) Self-reflection of privilege: “At this exhibit I learned my own prejudice and need for growth”; and “It was interesting how the photos and the impressions the youth shared made me feel separate from them. Privileged, maybe or aware that there are so many things I take for granted. And yet, in their words and in their images I feel an emotion and a soul connection to them and to everyone around me.” 4) Empowerment through photography and voice: “At this exhibit I learned the power of people finding their voice and sharing their story to create change”; and “At this exhibit I learned that you don't know where someone really comes from and what they are going through until you take the time to understand/talk with them. A great event and reminder”; and “At this exhibit I learned that people are people. We all see things differently and that is beautiful. Homelessness does not define anyone, but art helps express who someone is beyond words.”

4.7. ‘Asking for change’ model development

Based on extant literature, theories of youth empowerment, and the pilot study findings presented here, our team developed an Asking for Change conceptual model (see Fig. 2). In this model, participation in the (modified) 8-week Asking for Change intervention with a small group of peers and adult facilitators is hypothesized to help young people develop trust and connection to others in the group, build social

emotional & photography skills, share their perspectives and empathize with the perspectives of others, and become more aware of the causes, challenges, and stigma associated with homelessness. We anticipate that the development of these proximal outcomes will lead to longer-term outcomes, including increased self-efficacy (i.e., the belief in one's abilities to reach goals), a shift in identity from viewing oneself as “less.

than” due to homeless status, to instead seeing oneself as a resilient and powerful agent of change, and, finally, to increased willingness to engage others (service providers, prosocial peers, housed friends and family) to take steps to exit the streets (including setting and achieving employment, housing, educational goals).

5. Conclusion

The current study aimed to investigate whether the Asking for Change Photovoice intervention was feasible and acceptable in a shelter serving homeless young people. Agency leaders and researchers alike may be hesitant to invest limited resources (time and money) in providing such opportunities, questioning whether youth will attend and are capable of engaging in these higher order processes when basic needs are not met. Yet, our results refute these doubts by indicating young people are interested in, and capable of, participating. Continued attendance, engagement and dedication to the project for many participants, as well as positive impressions and satisfaction ratings post program, run counter to typical youth engagement in traditional youth services marked by distrust and lack of follow-through (Hudson et al., 2010). In fact, youth participants described the Asking for Change project as a “bubble” in the context of the broader shelter, suggesting that it represented a rare opportunity to connect with one another and trusted adults, to share their voice and be heard, to take on leadership roles, and to overcome some of the relational and power struggles inherent in shelter life.

Indeed, the structure and philosophy behind Asking for Change is likely unique among traditional shelter services. The notion of sharing power with young people and partnering with them to engage issues of their choosing, placing them in the position of expert, is novel in service settings that have, as their primary goals, having adults meet provide basic needs quickly and safely to many youth. While there is limited Photovoice research conducted with youth experiencing homelessness, a related study, investigating homeless young people's participation in a PAR project (not Photovoice specifically), similarly found youth participants reported benefiting by feeling valued and listened to by adults and feeling empowered, as they realized their participation improved the quality and the impact of the research project (Gomez & Ryan, 2016).

The high acceptability of this approach suggests that interventions guided by positive youth development and empowerment frameworks might be more culturally and contextually responsive to the needs and interests of youth experiencing homelessness than traditional top-down services. As described in the introduction, unhoused youth regularly experience discrimination, stigma, and marginalization. To survive in the face of such obstacles, young adults experiencing homelessness develop persistence, independence, and “street smarts” to navigate formal and informal resources (Bender, Thompson, McManus, Lantry, & Flynn, 2007). Moreover, they have responsibilities such as securing shelter and food that are typically expected of adult caregivers. These dynamics can lead to resistance towards typical power arrangements based on age, disconnection from pro-social institutions, and distrust of authority figures (Travis & Leech, 2014). Scholars have argued that programs focused on leadership and social justice are more appealing than traditional services because they honor these lived experiences (Ginwright & James, 2002). Furthermore, viewing young people more holistically and as partners may serve to build relationships with individuals who are often hesitant to trust (Auerswald & Eyre, 2002). Opportunities for community building, dialogue and leadership are rare for this population, but could be

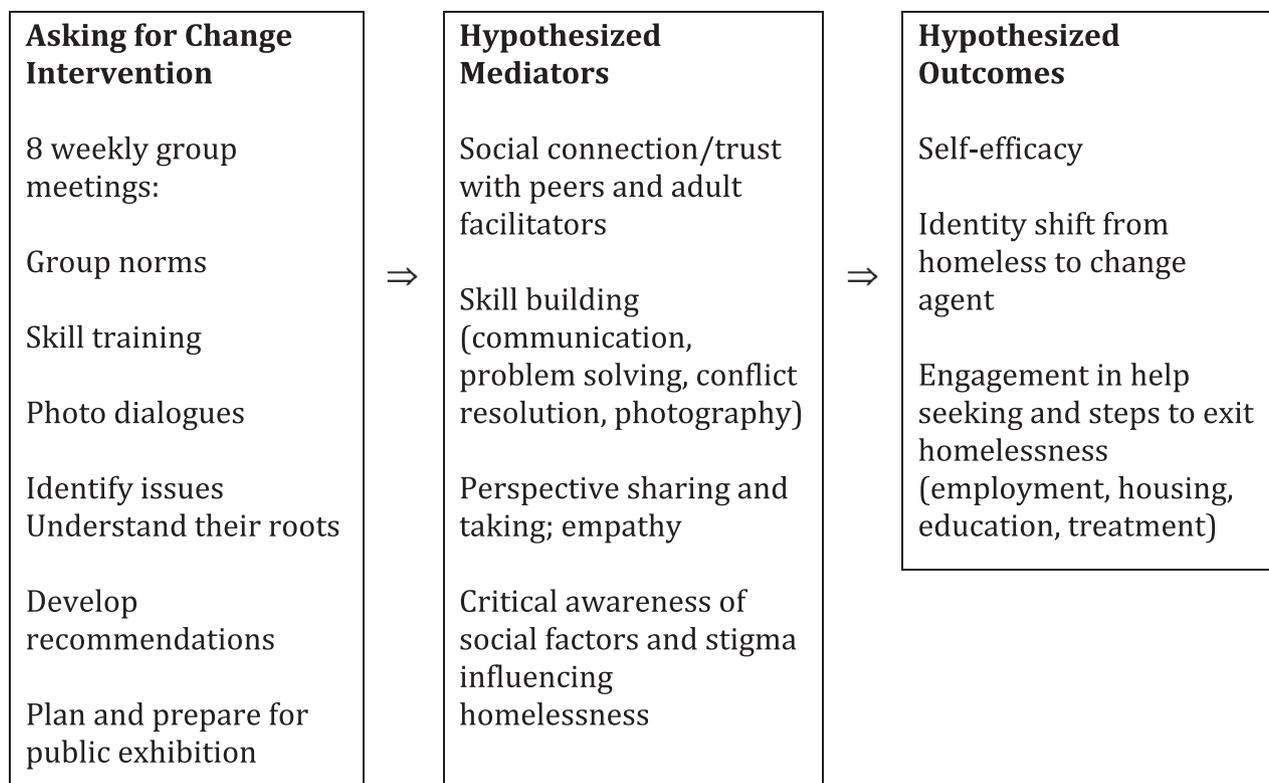


Fig. 2. 'Asking for change' conceptual model.

promising strategies for creating positive social bonds and reengaging unoused youth in traditional services like case management.

Yet, true empowerment programming will likely require openness to change in structure and philosophy within agencies serving homeless young people. A Critical Youth Empowerment framework, as proposed by Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger-Messias, and McLoughlin (2006), requires not only a warm and safe environment where young people can meaningfully engage services, but also opportunities to share power with adults and reflect critically on individual and societal issues. Thus, adults must develop their own critical consciousness and become more comfortable reflecting alongside young people. Finally, and perhaps most difficult, is the need for agencies to create real opportunities for young people to participate in change making at the individual and community level (Jennings et al., 2006). Although the increase in community awareness and reduction in stigma realized through community exhibits in our current study may be valued as social change, greater change through acting to address young peoples' recommendations would likely lead to greater benefits to the community and increased empowerment for the young people participating.

The current study did find the Asking for Change intervention was associated with positive preliminary outcomes, suggesting participation may be beneficial to young people staying in emergency shelters. Increases in youths' self-reported social connectedness, resiliency and personal well-being indicate that young people retained throughout the project felt more positive individually and as part of a social community as they exited the project. Such individual and interpersonal outcomes are important predictors of avoiding negative psychosocial outcomes like mental health and substance use problems (Begun, Bender, Brown, Barman-Adhikari, & Ferguson, 2016). Youths' reflections that they were able to communicate better with peers and adults and make decisions as a group could be helpful not only in coping with challenging living situations in the shelter but also in successfully navigating larger goals like seeking and maintaining employment or housing. Finally, youths' reflections in regards to changing their own stigma around homelessness and shifts in identity towards change agents could serve as

potential motivators for exiting the streets. These preliminary findings call for more rigorous testing of the Asking for Change intervention, using designs that allow for better assessment of causal effects as well as long-term outcomes.

Despite initial successes, implementing the Asking for Change intervention was not without its challenges. Although the intervention was feasible and acceptable for many of the youth participants, we still struggled to retain the full sample. Attrition not only reduced the potential impact of the project on the youth who left, but may also have negatively affected those who stayed involved by, at least temporarily, reducing morale. Despite feeling like more time with the young people would be beneficial in developing trust, skill-building, and planning for the exhibit, we also felt the need to shorten the project to 8 weeks to maximize participation. Much of the attrition was related to the chaotic nature of homeless young people's lives (appointments, job searching, agency restrictions, etc.) and thus is likely to be similarly experienced in future iterations of the project. Future iterations should continue to aim to increase retention by offering the project at convenient times (after bed checks for example) or building in flexibility for participants can continue to contribute to the project via online formats (upload photos and comments to a social media site). Paying young people \$20 incentives per group session attended, as was done in this pilot, was likely, at least partially, responsible for youth attendance; yet such payments may be difficult in many financially constrained youth service organizations. Researchers and/or agency partners are encouraged to seek additional funds to pay young people for their time, as this not only increases retention but also honors their contributions as equal partners in creating change for the agency or broader community. Philanthropic donations and foundation grants may be well suited to support these costs.

Asking for Change also introduced difficult decisions regarding role and aim of the project. First, privacy and confidentiality, often valued in service provision and research, were contrary to the concept of young people using their personal voices to advocate for change. When given the opportunity to choose whether to identify their captions and photos

using their names, all youth agreed they wanted to be identified. As facilitators and researchers, we grappled with long-held, potentially patronizing beliefs in protecting young participants from harm, to ultimately realize that such “forced” confidentiality conflicted with the program's philosophy.

Second, using a manual to guide a structured intervention while allowing for youth decision-making proved challenging at times. This tension, to provide facilitators with structured guidance while allowing them the flexibility to adapt to local contexts and groups of young people, is a well recognized in the literature (SAMHSA, 2002). Scholars have emphasized the importance of finding a balance in which manuals provide guidance for activities, objectives and philosophies while also providing explicit suggestions for where and how adaptations can be made to incorporate the needs and voices of the young people with which they partner (Durlak & Dupre, 2008). We recognized increased structure as important at the start of the project, as the group was creating norms and developing trust, but this structure was often relaxed over the course of the project, as young people became more comfortable guiding photo dialogues and decisions about the exhibit. Adherence to the manual also varied over the course of a session. Some structure at the start of every session, in which youth checked in with highs or lows from their week, or by answering a welcoming prompt, appeared to provide some consistency over the course of the project. Yet, facilitators intentionally allowed for time and flexibility in the structure of photo dialogues to allow for youth leadership and ownership. As the project advanced, facilitators provided a broad framework, resources, and assured intervention principles were upheld, but carefully stepped back from leadership roles. Such balance between manual adherence and incorporation of youth voice and facilitator adaptation will be important to incorporate in future iterations of the manual.

Finally, exhibit attendees unexpectedly offered to purchase young people's photos at the exhibit, creating a question of who owned the photos and where they should go after the exhibit. This created a tension in balancing our interest in having young people make decisions about their own work while also protecting the intention of the project, which was not entrepreneurial in nature. Ultimately, we provided young people with smaller prints of their work, gave larger portraits to those who moved into independent transitional housing apartments, and brought the remaining photos to traveling exhibits on the university campus.

5.1. Limitations

Several limitations should be noted when interpreting findings from this pilot study. Because youth participants were self- or staff-nominated, our sample may have included a particularly motivated or engaged group of young people experiencing homelessness. This could have maximized feasibility, acceptability, and preliminary outcomes. Thus, we cannot claim that this approach is likely feasible for all young people staying in shelters or for young people of different developmental stages, or those accessing other homeless service outlets or disconnected from services altogether. Because pre-post analysis and exit interviews were conducted only with youth who were retained in the study, results may reflect more favorable outcomes and experiences than those among the full sample, including those who left the project. Such attrition is common during group programming with young people experiencing homelessness; while it brings into question whether the effects of the intervention would be the same if greater retention were realized, one might also view leaving projects as a form of empowerment and choice on the part of young people. Additionally, although we intentionally had researchers who did not facilitate the intervention conduct exit interviews, observations, and data collection, it is possible that social desirability may have increased young people's favorable responses. Related, data was collected aloud to address concerns around limited literacy and to reduce missing data, but such oral report of perceptions and experiences may have further resulted in

social desirability bias. Finally, the pre-post design utilized here prevents us from drawing causal conclusions about the effects of the intervention. While participating in Asking for Change, youth were likely utilizing other shelter services (e.g., overnight stay, case management) so changes in preliminary outcomes could be due to factors outside of the Asking for Change intervention.

5.2. Future research agenda

Despite noted limitations, this study has implications for a robust research agenda investigating the utility of Photovoice, and more specifically the Asking for Change intervention, with homeless young people.

1. This pilot study should be replicated in additional homeless service settings to determine whether the Asking for Change intervention is feasible in drop-in centers or outreach work, where young people are traditionally more disconnected from services, and in transitional housing, where it may be easier to retain youth over time. This will give a better sense of the best context(s) for providing Asking for Change with unstably housed young people. Finally, the feasibility of incorporating online/social media connection should be investigated as means of increasing retention engaging youth not regularly connected to services.
2. Efficacy studies should more rigorously investigate the effects of the intervention on short- and long-term outcomes. Randomized designs (when feasible) should test whether the intervention causes improvements in skills, social connection, self-efficacy, and resiliency. Additional follow-up is needed to determine if intervention youth evidence better longer-term outcomes, including increased services use, securing housing, employment, education, and other forms of well-being following the intervention.
3. Future research should investigate the effects of involving other adults (beyond researchers) as facilitators and/or participants in the intervention. Youth participants developed strong connections not only to their peers in the project, but also to the adult facilitators. To our surprise, several youth made efforts to stay connected with adult facilitators after the exhibit and formal project ended, asking to present the work at other exhibits on campus, to contribute to academic presentations, and to stay connected informally through occasional cups of coffee or social media. While, as researchers, we were able to provide additional opportunities to share their messages with other community-based audiences, we were not well positioned to develop long-term relationships or to meet other social, emotional, and tangible needs that become evident through our interactions. As social connection nearly doubled for youth participants, future iterations should consider involving shelter staff, supportive family members, or prosocial peers in the project so that long-term relationships are built with extended formal and informal networks able to provide ongoing support.
4. Future iterations of Asking for Change should consider adding a social action phase after the community exhibit. Although not all youth participants appeared able to commit to a longer-term project, a subsample of each cohort attempted to stay involved long after the project ended. This may create an opportunity to extend social action beyond creating awareness through public exhibits to youth-led advocacy and organizing efforts. The current study focused on awareness raising and reducing social stigma based on youths' interests and timeframe constraints. With more time and resources, the group could have worked to identify specific recommendations for policy or organizational change, identified key stakeholders, learned advocacy methods, and advocated for change. In doing so, future research should assess the effect of the Asking for Change intervention on the broader community and host organization. Preliminary outcomes, evidenced through comments from adults attending youth-organized exhibits, suggest that attendees

increased empathy, understanding, and investment in, young people experiencing homelessness. Broader outreach to the public and local decision makers should be emphasized, so that a larger, potentially more ideologically diverse, audience hears the voices of these young people. Changing societal stereotypes and prejudices against this population may lead to increased financial support for organizations serving homeless young people and political support for progressive homelessness policies. Youths' advocacy for smaller-scale changes to policies or programs within the host agency should also be studied for contextual change outcomes.

While the current study provides preliminary evidence that young people experiencing homelessness can and will participate in a Photovoice intervention and may benefit from doing so, this work represents only the beginning of a robust research agenda to understand how Photovoice could benefit not only young people, but also the adults, organizations, and communities around them.

Conflict of interest statement

I declare that no authors listed on the manuscript entitled “Asking for Change: Feasibility, acceptability, and preliminary outcomes of a manualized photovoice intervention with youth experiencing homelessness” have a conflict of interest.

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