

# A Retrospective Examination of Child Protection Involvement Among Young Adults Accessing Homelessness Services

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## Highlights

- Administrative records were used to document child protection histories of homeless youth.
- Fully half of homeless young adults had been reported for abuse or neglect during childhood.
- The prevalence of maltreatment varied across demographic and child protection characteristics.
- Patterns of service use can be outlined for vulnerable populations through linked administrative data.

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**Abstract** Childhood maltreatment is associated with a variety of young adult adversities including homelessness. This study used linked administrative records to develop a population-level, epidemiological characterization of the child protection histories of young adults accessing homelessness services. The records of all 17- to 24-year-olds receiving homeless services between 2011 and 2014 in San Francisco County, California ( $n = 2241$ ) were probabilistically linked to statewide child protective service (CPS) records. Findings document that 50.0% of young adults had been reported for maltreatment at least once during childhood, yet the prevalence of past CPS involvement varied across demographic and child welfare characteristics. Homeless female youth were significantly more likely to have a CPS history than male youth (58.1% vs. 41.5%). Nearly twice as many Black clients accessing homelessness services had a CPS history as did White clients (59.8% vs. 31.8%). Roughly half (47.3%) of those with a childhood history of reported maltreatment

had been last reported for maltreatment in another California county. Targeting services that address past trauma and instability among homeless young adults may be justified given the prevalence of CPS history in this population.

**Keywords** Child maltreatment · Child welfare services · Homelessness · Transition-age youth

## Introduction

There is a growing appreciation of the relationship between adversities during childhood, particularly childhood abuse and neglect, and risk of homelessness during young adulthood (van den Bree et al., 2009; Fowler, Toro & Miles 2009; Shelton, Taylor, Bonner & van den Bree 2009). Homeless adults retrospectively self-report higher rates of history of maltreatment and foster care placements than the general population (Bassuk et al., 1997; Winkleby, Rockhill, Jatulis & Fortmann 1992). Prospectively, between 11% and 46% of maltreated youth who age out of the foster care system go on to experience homelessness during young adulthood (Dworsky, Napolitano & Courtney 2013; Fowler et al., 2009; Park, Metraux, Brod-bar & Culhane 2004; White et al., 2011).

Despite a well-established relationship between child protective service (CPS) involvement during childhood and homelessness services interactions during adulthood, identifying CPS-involved youth at risk of becoming homeless and aligning service to address their needs is challenging. Among a range of issues hindering prevention efforts and the coordination of public programs

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across sectors, one factor is the absence of data that would allow for an understanding of when, where, and for whom the risk of homelessness is greatest. Specifically, we are missing data assembled in a manner that can inform investments in programs and preventive interventions based on patterns of cross-sector involvement among different public service systems. Fortunately, the increasing availability of high-quality administrative case management data, coupled with advances in technology, allow for the systematic integration of records from CPS and other systems with records from homelessness service programs.

The current analysis used linked administrative records to provide a population-level, epidemiological characterization of the child protection histories of young adults accessing homelessness services in San Francisco, California. A politically liberal and wealthy city and county, San Francisco, has always been willing to dedicate resources to needy populations. Yet, it struggles to adequately align services with the demand for them, particularly with respect to homeless individuals. Furthermore, there is a lore associated with San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district as a haven for runaway youth from around the state and the nation. To better align homelessness and housing support resources with people who need them, policymakers need to understand who they are serving, including to what extent young adult service users may be migrating to San Francisco from other locations, ostensibly for these services.

Therefore, in an attempt to generate local knowledge, while also demonstrating the feasibility of linking these cross-sector records for other jurisdictions, we used administrative homelessness services records to define a population of young adult clients aged 17–24 years accessing services in San Francisco County between 2011 and 2014. We then matched these records to statewide historical CPS records to identify young adults who, during childhood, had been reported for alleged maltreatment, substantiated as a victim of abuse or neglect, or placed in out-of-home foster care. Unique to this analysis was our ability to examine past allegations of maltreatment with a level of granularity not always available in CPS data. Specifically, we were able to include all type of alleged maltreatment, regardless of whether the report was screened in for investigation or was subsequently substantiated by the CPS system. We set out to answer the following question: How often are San Francisco's homeless services utilized by young adults with a history of reported maltreatment or placement in foster care, and how often are these populations relocating to San Francisco with a history of CPS involvement in other counties in California? Our objective was to generate population-based information concerning the prevalence of past CPS

involvement among homeless young adults, in addition to providing an example of how integrated administrative records can be used to better understand the experiences of homeless populations.

## Background

### Self-Report Surveys

Retrospective, self-report surveys of adult homeless shelter populations indicate significantly higher rates of childhood maltreatment (Fowler et al., 2009; Herman, Susser, Struening & Link 1997; Shelton et al., 2009; Sundin & Baguley, 2015; Tyler, Hoyt & Whitbeck 2000) and foster care placements (Park, Metraux & Culhane 2005) among individuals seeking homelessness services compared to the general population (Sundin & Baguley, 2015). Research also suggests differences in the type of abuse reported among the homeless population. One meta-analysis of 28 studies reporting the prevalence of childhood maltreatment among homeless individuals in Western countries provides a preliminary estimate, suggesting prevalence estimates for childhood physical abuse are variable, from 6% to 94%, with an estimated average prevalence of 37% (Sundin & Baguley, 2015). While these estimates vary widely across studies, they are still likely larger than the estimated 18.2% in the general population (Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, Hamby 2013). In addition, in Sundin and Baguley's (2015) analysis, younger homeless individuals were more likely to report childhood physical abuse than older homeless individuals. These findings suggest that although age may be confounded with duration or frequency of homelessness, physical abuse may be one trigger for homelessness among young adults (Sundin & Baguley, 2015). In addition, White respondents in the reviewed studies had a higher prevalence of physical abuse compared to non-White respondents. In both qualitative and survey research with older homeless youth, physical abuse was the most commonly reported type of childhood maltreatment, with approximately 50% reporting a history of childhood physical abuse (Ferguson, 2009; Tyler & Cauce, 2002).

Although one study of the relationship between childhood sexual abuse and adult homelessness found non-significant results (Herman et al., 1997), Sundin and Baguley's (2015) meta-analysis suggested a positive relationship between a history of sexual abuse and adult homelessness. They noted that in the general population, estimated prevalence rates for childhood sexual abuse are 10% for women and 5% for men. Prevalence rates in samples of homeless individuals are much higher, at 32% and 10% for women and men, respectively (Sundin & Baguley, 2015).

We know much less about the relationship between childhood emotional abuse or neglect and adult homelessness (Sundin & Baguley, 2015). Qualitative research, however, has suggested that many homeless young adults have a history of verbal and emotional rejection in childhood, such as a caregiver telling them that they did not want them in the home anymore or wished that they were never born (Ferguson, 2009). Another study exploring relationships between homelessness and childhood experiences using a nationally representative sample found that young adults reporting neglect in childhood were 1.5 times more likely to report having ever been homeless (Shelton et al., 2009). Because homelessness was measured as ever experiencing homelessness rather than experiencing current or recent homelessness, it is unknown if the neglect occurred at the same time as the self-reported lifetime incidence of homelessness or whether it preceded or followed the homelessness experience.

Although most studies of childhood maltreatment among homeless adults report single types of maltreatment, typically physical or sexual abuse (e.g., Tyler et al., 2000), literature indicates that homeless individuals frequently report multitype maltreatment histories (Ferguson, 2009). In one qualitative study of 28 young adults aged 18–21, more than two-thirds of participants reported experiencing three or more types of abuse during their childhood (Ferguson, 2009).

Studies based on survey data are often rich in self-reported details about the nature of maltreatment and homelessness experiences. These data, however, are not without limitations, including that they often cannot discern the temporal order of maltreatment relative to homelessness, making it difficult to establish causal links. Administrative data systems, although limited to officially reported maltreatment and individuals who have accessed homelessness services, can track system involvement over time, allowing for the examination of service patterns both within and across systems.

#### Administrative Record Studies

Several innovative studies have demonstrated the potential of using administrative data to study homelessness. Metraux et al. (2001) successfully assembled Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) records from nine jurisdictions to enumerate the population size and characteristics of individuals using emergency and transitional shelter services. Another team of researchers recently identified the incidence of homelessness among US Veterans accessing health care from Veterans Affairs healthcare facilities by employing standardized diagnostic codes (Peterson et al., 2015). Still other researchers leveraged administrative records to examine the timing of

homelessness and CPS services relative to the receipt of inpatient and ambulatory mental health services (Park, Metraux, Culhane & Mandell 2012). Researchers have also used linked administrative data to assess the impact of homelessness and school mobility on a range of educational outcomes (Cutuli et al., 2013; Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, Chen, Rouse & Culhane 2012).

In the context of child maltreatment, a number of analyses have relied on administrative records collected by homelessness services and child protection agencies to study the relationship between childhood maltreatment and adult homelessness. Using records from the New York City Administration for Children's Services and the Department of Homeless Services, Park et al. (2005) analyzed the duration and number of shelter episodes among 11,401 young adult clients aged 18–25 at first admission to family and single-adult shelters. They also assessed differences according to childhood placements in out-of-home foster care or open in-home cases supervised by CPS after age 10. Of these homeless young adults, 29% had a history of an open CPS case and 21% had out-of-home placement during childhood (translating into 74% of all those with an open case). This history of CPS involvement was associated with longer shelter stays among family shelter users and higher odds of repeat stays in family shelters and single-adult shelters, compared to young adults who did not have a history in the child welfare system. Shelter utilization also differed by child welfare exit type; among those who were staying in a family shelter, those who aged out of care (compared to those who exited due to family reunification, absconded, or were adopted) spent the most days in shelters.

In an earlier analysis of the same administrative data, Park et al. (2004) prospectively followed youth who had been placed in out-of-home foster care or had an in-home CPS preventive services case to track risk of homeless shelter use in young adulthood. They identified young people who were discharged from the child protection system in New York City after age 16 and tracked entry into public single-adult or family homeless shelters in the city after leaving care. They found that within 10 years of exiting CPS, 19% had entered a public homelessness services shelter on at least one occasion. Those who had been placed in out-of-home foster care as children were two times more likely to enter a public homeless shelter than those who stayed with their family and received preventive services only. The authors also assessed rates of public shelter entry based on exit type and found that those who absconded from their CPS placement and those who were discharged to independent living had the highest rates of subsequent public shelter use, at 34% and 26%, respectively.

In another study, Shah, Albrecht and Felver (2013) tracked 1,116 youth aging out of foster care in

Washington State for the 12-month period after leaving care. Approximately 35% experienced homelessness, either staying in public shelters or staying temporarily with family or friends. Youth who experienced homelessness during this time were more likely to use other public services, including welfare, food aid, and medical services. They were also more likely to have a mental illness, substance abuse problem, difficulty obtaining a stable job, and to be arrested during this time.

In a follow-up study, Shah et al. (2015) further analyzed records from the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services Children's Administration and a statewide database of education, homelessness services system, public assistance, health, and behavioral health information from 2000 to 2012. They analyzed the records of 1,213 young people in the state who exited foster care at age 17 or older in 2011 or 2012 and did not return to care and assessed their housing stability in the 12 months following exit. Youth were identified as homeless if they were precariously housed or homeless in the department's Automated Client Eligibility System or the HMIS. Shah et al. (2015) found that about 25% of these young people experienced homelessness at some point in the 12 months after aging out of care.

### Current Study

The current analysis builds upon previous studies that have used linked homelessness services and CPS records, extending the literature in at least three important ways. First, the availability of data concerning all reported maltreatment allegations allows us to examine a more complete record of a homeless youth's involvement with child protective services. Previous studies have tended to use more restricted definitions consisting of foster care placements or open in-home cases (Park et al., 2004, 2005). In this study, and consistent with trends away from substantiation (Kohl, Jonson-Reid & Drake 2009) and research suggesting relatively small differences in outcomes of children with unfounded versus substantiated maltreatment allegations (Putnam-Hornstein, 2011), we examined how many homeless youths had been reported to CPS as an alleged victim of maltreatment, regardless of whether the allegation was screened in, substantiated, or a placement in foster care occurred. Second, we used historical CPS records to study the nature of alleged or reported maltreatment (i.e., sexual abuse, physical abuse, neglect) and to glean additional information concerning the child protection experiences of homeless youth. Finally, we used statewide data from California to conduct a simple, descriptive examination of the migration of youth with CPS histories into San Francisco County's homelessness services system. Specifically, access to statewide CPS

records permitted us to observe where youth who used San Francisco county's homelessness services system were last reported or last placed in foster care statewide. This is critical for strategic planning and understanding potential out-of-county migration patterns of vulnerable youth to urban areas.

## Methods

### Data

The current analysis was based on administrative homelessness services records linked to administrative child protection records. HMIS records were available through a data use agreement with the Human Services Agency of San Francisco County. Data were extracted by the county and reflected records concerning all county homelessness services shelter encounters dating from January 2011 to September 2014. Child protection records collected through California's Child Welfare Services/Case Management System were available through a long-standing university–agency research partnership with the California Department of Social Services. Data were based on an extract from the fourth quarter of 2014 and included information dating back to 1998.

### Record Linkages

Records from both data sources were coded and standardized in preparation for linkage. HMIS data were deduplicated and subset to records for the population of clients who were 17–24 years of age and had an encounter with San Francisco County's homelessness services system between January 2011 and September 2014 ( $n = 2241$ ). California CPS data were restricted to records concerning children who were born between 1989 and 1996 and reported as a victim of alleged maltreatment in California at some point before age 18 ( $n = 1,546,558$ ). CPS records were left-censored to 1998 because of California's transition to a new data collection system.

Records were probabilistically linked based on a combination of unique (i.e., Social Security number) and nonunique (i.e., first name, middle name, last name, date of birth, gender) personal identifiers. Record pairs were then subjected to clerical review to determine upper- and lower-bound weighted score thresholds for assigning pairs as matches or non-matches. Pairs falling between score thresholds were manually reviewed to assign final match status. After records were linked using confidential information, all identifiers were stripped and a de-identified dataset was constructed for statistical analysis. Record linkages and analyses fall

under state and university institutional review board approvals.

## Variables

### *Demographics*

Homeless Management Information System records served as the source file from which all demographic characteristics were derived. Gender was categorized dichotomously (male, female). Gender was missing for 1.4% of records ( $n = 23$ ). Race and ethnicity was derived from separately recorded fields in the HMIS data to create four categories (Black, Hispanic, White, and Other or Missing). Age was defined based on client age at the date of the first homeless shelter service encounter recorded during the 2011–2014 window (17–18 years, 19–20 years, 21–22 years, 23–24 years). Because the universe of clients included in the record linkage was conditioned on age between 2011 and 2014, there were no records in which date of birth was missing. In the overall extract of HMIS data ( $n = 52,780$ ), client date of birth was missing in only 0.62% of records.

### *Child Protection History*

A history of CPS involvement in California was defined at three levels. First, we examined whether the young adult had any history of alleged maltreatment, regardless of whether the report of maltreatment had been screened in for investigation or substantiated (no CPS record, CPS record). We then examined how many of these young adults with a CPS history had ever been substantiated as a victim of maltreatment but never placed in foster care (substantiated, but no foster care), and how many had been substantiated and placed in foster care at least once (substantiated, placed in foster care).

### *Maltreatment Type*

In the population of homeless young adults with a CPS history, we explored several dimensions of childhood encounters and experiences with the CPS system. For each young adult with a CPS history, we documented whether that history included any reported sexual abuse (no sexual abuse allegation, one or more sexual abuse allegations), any reported physical abuse (no physical abuse allegation, one or more physical abuse allegations), any reported neglect (no neglect allegation, one or more neglect allegations), or any reported emotional abuse (no emotional abuse allegation, one or more abuse allegations). Individuals were counted only once within a given allegation type category, but could be included in multiple

categories if they were reported for more than one type of maltreatment.

### *Geography*

The availability of statewide CPS records allowed us to examine the county in which a homeless youth's first report of maltreatment was received (San Francisco County, Bay Area County, Other County). Bay Area counties included Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, Solano, and Sonoma counties. Geography was only available for homeless youth with a CPS history. We also defined and examined geography based on the county from which the last report of maltreatment was received, but findings were almost identical to those based on the first report and therefore are not presented.

### *Homelessness Services*

Although our analysis included the full population of young adults accessing homelessness services, we also conducted a simple sub-analysis of the type of homelessness services accessed. We looked at the three largest service types based on the number of individuals served in our population and lodging designations and definitions within the HMIS data: (a) emergency shelter (i.e., temporary shelter or lodging); (b) homeless prevention and rapid re-housing (i.e., housing relocation and stabilization services); and (c) transitional and permanent supportive housing (i.e., temporary or permanent lodging designed to facilitate independent living) (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2014).

### *Analyses*

The final analytic dataset consisted of the full population of young adults with an HMIS record of a homelessness services encounter in San Francisco County between 2011 and 2014. For each young adult, linkages to statewide CPS data were used to establish a longitudinal record of childhood allegations of abuse and neglect, substantiated allegations of maltreatment, and placements in out-of-home foster care. For descriptive purposes, we calculated the childhood prevalence of alleged childhood maltreatment by gender, race/ethnicity, and age at homelessness service encounter and used Chi-square tests to assess the statistical significance of observed differences. We also stratified this population and assessed differences in the prevalence of specific allegations of maltreatment across demographic groups.

Among homeless young adults with a CPS history, we additionally examined demographic and maltreatment type differences based on whether the youth had ever been

substantiated as a victim and whether the youth was ever placed in foster care. We were also able to present findings based on the county in which the last maltreatment allegation was received. Finally, we ran a series of bivariate logistic regression models to estimate the odds that young adults in different homelessness service program types had a history of CPS involvement, after adjusting for gender, race/ethnicity, and age. Results are presented as unadjusted odds ratios (ORs) and corresponding 95% confidence intervals (95% CI).

## Results

### History of Alleged Maltreatment

As depicted in Table 1, 2,241 young adults aged 17–24 had a homelessness service system encounter in San Francisco County between 2011 and 2014. In this population, 50.0% ( $n = 1121$ ) had been reported for maltreatment at least once during childhood. Despite gender parity in our population of young adults accessing homelessness services, female youth were significantly more likely to have a CPS history than male youth ( $p < .001$ ). Among females, 58.1% (659 of 1,134) had been reported for maltreatment during childhood; among males, the percentage was 41.5% (450 of 1,085).

Consistent with well-established racial disparities in CPS reports in California (Webster et al., 2016), Black young adults accessing homelessness services were significantly more likely to have a history of CPS involvement

**Table 1** Demographic characteristics of clients aged 17–24 years accessing homelessness services in San Francisco County, California, 2011–2014 by childhood history of reported maltreatment

	Full population ( $n = 2241$ [100%])		No CPS record ( $n = 1121$ [50.0%])		CPS record ( $n = 1120$ [50.0%])		$\chi^2$ Test  $p$ value
	$n$	col. %	$n$	row %	$n$	row %	
Gender							
Male	1085	48.9	635	58.5	450	41.5	<.001
Female	1134	51.1	475	41.9	659	58.1	
Race/Ethnicity							
Black	926	41.3	372	40.2	554	59.8	<.001
Hispanic	493	22.0	248	50.3	245	49.7	.887
White	418	18.7	285	68.2	133	31.8	<.001
Other/Missing	404	18.0	216	53.6	188	46.5	.126
Age (in years)							
17–18	404	18.0	150	37.1	254	62.9	<.001
19–20	667	29.8	307	46.0	360	54.0	.014
21–22	837	37.4	474	56.6	363	43.4	<.001
23–24	333	14.9	190	57.1	143	42.9	.005

CPS, child protective services; col. %, column percentage.

(59.8%), whereas White young adults were significantly less likely (31.8%). Presented differently, we matched twice as many Black homelessness clients to a child protection record as we did White clients. Relative to the population overall, no significant differences in CPS histories were observed for Hispanic young adults ( $p = .887$ ) or those of Other or with Missing race and ethnicity ( $p = .126$ ). Although potentially an artifact of left-censored observations, significant differences in the prevalence of past allegations of maltreatment emerged within each age grouping ( $p < .05$ ). Younger age was associated with a CPS history; roughly two of every three young adults 17–18 years of age had been earlier reported for maltreatment. The percentage of 23–24 year olds with a history fell to 42.9%.

### Maltreatment Allegation Type

In Table 2, we examined the nature or type of alleged childhood maltreatment in this population. Neglect was the most common allegation of maltreatment (35.8% of all young adults), followed closely by physical abuse (29.5% of all young adults). Overall, one in every six youths had been reported to CPS as a victim of sexual abuse at least once during childhood, although this rose to nearly one in four among females (22.3%). Consistent with our overall prevalence estimates of a CPS report during childhood, a significantly higher percentage of Black youths in our population had been reported for sexual abuse, physical abuse, and neglect, while a significantly lower percentage of White youths had been reported for each of these maltreatment types. The only exception was emotional abuse, where no significant by race/ethnicity were observed relative to those in the population who had never been reported for this form of maltreatment. Across all maltreatment types no differences were observed for Hispanic or youth of Other/Missing race/ethnicity. Aligning with age differences overall as presented in Table 2, youth who were 17–18 years at the time they accessed homelessness services were overrepresented in each maltreatment allegation category. Notably, 40.6% had been earlier reported for allegations of physical abuse.

### Substantiation and Placement in Foster Care

In Table 3, we stratified our subpopulation of homeless young adults with one or more childhood reports of maltreatment into those: (a) with only uninvestigated or unsubstantiated reports; (b) substantiated as victims of maltreatment but never placed in foster care; and (c) substantiated and placed in out-of-home foster care. Overall, our population was concentrated among those whose allegations of maltreatment had never been substantiated

**Table 2** Demographic characteristics of clients aged 17–24 years accessing homelessness services in San Francisco County, California, 2011–2014 by childhood history of specific allegations of maltreatment

	Any allegation of sexual abuse ( <i>n</i> = 373 [16.6%])			Any allegation of physical abuse ( <i>n</i> = 660 [29.5%])			Any allegation of neglect ( <i>n</i> = 802 [35.8%])			Any allegation of emotional abuse ( <i>n</i> = 334 [14.9%])		
	<i>n</i>	row %	<i>p</i> value	<i>n</i>	row %	<i>p</i> value	<i>n</i>	row %	<i>p</i> value	<i>n</i>	row %	<i>p</i> value
Gender												
Male	116	10.7	<.001	272	25.1	<.001	323	29.8	<.001	126	11.6	<.001
Female	253	22.3		381	33.6		471	41.5		205	18.1	
Race/Ethnicity												
Black	181	19.6	.002	325	35.1	<.001	399	43.1	<.001	140	15.1	.811
Hispanic	79	16.0	.676	141	28.6	.639	163	33.1	.153	84	17.0	.132
White	55	13.2	.034	77	18.4	<.001	106	33.1	<.001	56	13.4	.337
Other/Missing	58	14.4	.173	117	29.0	.811	134	33.2	.225	54	13.4	.338
Age (in years)												
17–18	86	21.3	.006	164	40.6	<.001	197	48.8	<.001	96	23.8	<.001
19–20	131	19.6	.013	220	33.0	.017	270	40.5	.003	110	16.5	.169
21–22	111	13.3	.001	200	23.9	.002	239	28.6	<.001	90	10.8	<.001
23–24	45	13.5	.096	76	22.8	.004	96	28.8	.004	38	11.4	.052

SF, San Francisco.

Youth who were reported for more than one form of alleged maltreatment will appear more than once in the overall table, but have been counted only once within a given maltreatment category.

All row percentages reflect the percentage of youth with a given allegation of maltreatment among the full population of youth accessing homelessness services.

**Table 3** Characteristics of clients aged 17–24 years accessing homelessness services in San Francisco County, California, 2011–2014 with a history of reported maltreatment by level of CPS involvement

	Unsubstantiated maltreatment ( <i>n</i> = 472 [42.1%])		Substantiated, no foster care ( <i>n</i> = 185 [16.5%])		Substantiated, placed in foster ( <i>n</i> = 463 [41.3%])		$\chi^2$ Test <i>p</i> value
	<i>n</i>	row %	<i>n</i>	row %	<i>n</i>	row %	
Gender							
Male	200	44.4	80	17.8	170	37.8	.117
Female	265	40.2	104	15.8	290	44.0	
Race/Ethnicity							
Black	228	41.2	71	12.8	255	46.0	<.001
Hispanic	115	46.9	53	21.6	77	31.4	<.001
White	55	41.4	23	17.3	55	41.4	.962
Other/Missing	74	39.4	38	20.2	76	40.4	.312
Age (in years)							
17–18	113	44.5	42	16.5	99	40.0	.646
19–20	141	39.2	59	16.4	160	44.4	.308
21–22	157	43.3	65	17.9	141	38.8	.451
23–24	61	42.7	19	13.3	63	44.1	.512
Maltreatment allegation							
Any sexual abuse	92	24.7	65	17.4	216	57.9	<.001
Any physical abuse	224	33.9	114	17.3	322	48.8	<.001
Any neglect	259	32.3	136	17.0	407	50.8	<.001
Any emotional	103	30.8	60	18.0	171	51.2	<.001
County of last report							
SF county	245	40.8	90	15.0	266	44.3	.077
Bay county	106	40.8	44	16.9	110	42.3	.877
Other county	121	46.7	51	19.7	87	33.6	.013

CPS, child protective services; SF, San Francisco.

Bay Area County excludes SF, but includes all counties of Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, and Sonoma.

Other county includes all California Counties that are not SF or Bay Area.



**Fig. 1** California County of last reported maltreatment among young adults aged 17–24 years accessing homelessness services in San Francisco County, California, 2011–2014. Size of pin scaled to the relative number of individuals with a report originating in a particular county.

(42.1%) and those who had been substantiated and placed in foster care (41.3%). Relatively few youths had been substantiated as a maltreatment victim, but never placed in foster care (16.5%), consistent with a likely chronic pattern of CPS contacts. Overall, two-thirds of those with a past report of maltreatment had three or more separate reports (data not reported in tables).

*Demographic Differences*

No significant differences by gender or age were observed across the three levels of past CPS involvement among young adults seeking homelessness services. Black youth, however, were overrepresented among the population of young adults seeking homelessness services whose childhood CPS involvement included placement in foster care ( $p < .001$ ). In contrast, Hispanic youth were underrepresented among those placed in foster care ( $p < .001$ ).

*Maltreatment Type*

Significant differences by level of CPS involvement were observed for each maltreatment allegation type. Although only 16.6% of homeless young adults with a history of reported sexual abuse, more than half (57.9%) had a substantiated allegation and had been placed in foster care. A history of substantiated maltreatment and placement in foster care at some point during childhood was true of 48.8% of those with an allegation of physical abuse.

**Table 4** Characteristics of clients aged 17–24 years accessing homelessness services in San Francisco County, California, 2011–2014 by service type

	Emergency shelter ( $n = 887$ )			Homelessness prevention and rapid re-housing ( $n = 680$ )			Transitional and permanent supportive housing ( $n = 287$ )		
	col %	OR	(95% CI)	col %	OR	(95% CI)	col %	OR	(95% CI)
CPS history									
No record	57.3	ref	–	39.0	ref	–	46.2	ref	–
CPS record	42.7	0.61***	(0.52, 0.73)	61.0	1.67***	(1.30, 2.15)	53.8	1.25*	(1.04, 1.49)
Gender									
Male	66.6	ref	–	49.8	ref	–	31.9	ref	–
Female	33.4	0.29***	(0.25, 0.35)	50.2	0.96	(0.75, 1.23)	68.1	2.74***	(2.26, 3.32)
Race/Ethnicity									
Black	33.8	ref	–	48.5	ref	–	38.0	ref	–
Hispanic	15.2	0.78*	(0.62, 0.99)	24.7	0.93	(0.75, 1.17)	29.6	1.56**	(1.15, 2.12)
White	35.1	6.29***	(4.84, 8.17)	3.1	0.10***	(0.06, 0.15)	18.5	1.09	(0.77, 1.54)
Other/Missing	15.9	1.13	(0.88, 1.44)	23.7	1.20	(0.94, 1.52)	13.9	0.82	(0.56, 1.21)
Age (in years)									
17–18	14.8	ref	–	16.2	ref	–	24.7	ref	–
19–20	32.8	1.61***	(1.24, 2.08)	26.9	1.01	(0.77, 1.33)	33.1	0.78	(0.56, 1.08)
21–22	41.0	1.60***	(1.25, 2.05)	35.4	1.08	(0.83, 1.41)	32.6	0.59**	(0.42, 0.83)
23–24	11.4	0.90	(0.66, 1.23)	21.5	2.09***	(1.53, 2.84)	9.4	0.41	(0.26, 0.66)

CPS, child protective services; OR, odds ratio; col, column; CI, confidence interval.

Bivariate odds ratios and corresponding 95% confidence intervals are presented for CPS history and demographic characteristics.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

### *County of Last Reported Maltreatment*

Among young adults with a history of CPS involvement, 53.7% ( $n = 601$ ) had a history of reported maltreatment that most recently originated in San Francisco County, but nearly half had been reported in counties outside of where they were seeking homelessness services (see Fig. 1). Roughly equal percentages were first reported in one of eight neighboring Bay Area counties ( $n = 260$ ; 22.1%) versus another of California's 49 counties ( $n = 259$ ; 23.1%). A smaller percentage of young adults whose last report of maltreatment originated outside of San Francisco and the Bay Area had a history of foster care placement ( $p = .013$ ). No other geographic differences in the level of CPS involvement were observed.

### CPS History by Homelessness Services Project Type

In Table 4, we present unadjusted odds ratios reflecting the likelihood that young adults accessing each of three specific homelessness service projects (emergency shelter, homelessness prevention and rapid-rehousing, transitional and permanent housing) had a history of CPS involvement. We also descriptively examined the demographic characteristics of young adults accessing each of these homelessness service types. Findings indicate that the prevalence of past CPS involvement was significantly lower among homeless young adults accessing emergency shelter services and greater for those accessing homelessness prevention and rapid re-housing services, as well as transitional and permanent supportive housing services. Differences were also observed across demographic groups, with Whites and males observed more frequently among those accessing emergency shelter services and Hispanics and females among those accessing transitional and permanent supportive housing.

## Discussion

This study was developed in response to a local and timely policy question about the utilization of homeless services by young adults with a history of CPS contact and the geographic roots of those allegations of maltreatment and foster care placements. To investigate the issue, we developed a unique dataset, linking administrative records to characterize the child protection histories of young adults seeking homelessness services in San Francisco County. Understanding the CPS history among this population, including maltreatment and placement types, county of origin, and the types of homelessness services used can help social service planners identify the characteristics and circumstances of individuals accessing

homeless services. Combining data from two systems as we have done may also encourage child protection and homelessness programs to collaborate on both preventive and homeless service design.

Findings indicate that more than half of young adults seeking homelessness services in San Francisco had been reported for abuse or neglect during childhood, more than one in four had been substantiated as victims, and fully one in five had been placed in foster care. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to use administrative data to study screened-out reports of maltreatment in a population of homeless young adults, and the first linked study of its kind in California, home to approximately 12% of the nation's maltreatment reports (USDHHS, 2016).

Several recent studies help place our prevalence estimates into context. National estimates suggest that 37% of all children in the United States experience a CPS investigation by age 18 (Kim, Wildeman, Jonson-Reid & Drake 2017), 12.5% are substantiated as victims (Wildeman et al., 2014), and 5.9% are placed in foster care (Wildeman & Emanuel, 2014). Putnam-Hornstein, Cederbaum, King, Cleveland, and Needell (2013) found that 45% of adolescents who gave birth in California in 2009 had a history of alleged maltreatment prior to conception, 21% had been substantiated as victims, and 10% had spent time in foster care (Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2013). These studies suggest that young adults using homeless services may be even more vulnerable than teen mothers and, not surprisingly, than the general population.

These data also place a spotlight on key demographic differences among homeless young adults with histories of reported maltreatment, and also in the nature of alleged maltreatment and the homeless services accessed. Notably, young women were much more likely to have a history of child protection involvement—and were much more commonly observed among homeless individuals accessing transitional and permanent supportive housing. Among homeless young adults who were Black, prevalence rates were higher than other groups. Although this finding was not unexpected (Kim et al., 2017), it was still striking that 46% of homeless Black young adults had a history of foster care placements.

Finally, data from this study also document that among homeless young adults with a history of reported maltreatment, nearly half had last been reported in another county in California. Among those who also had a placement in foster care, 40.9% were last placed in a county outside of San Francisco. But in both cases, a significant share had past reports and past foster care placements regionally concentrated in local Bay Area counties. Homeless service data from a wider catchment area beyond San Francisco would allow researchers to prospectively measure the risk of

subsequent homelessness among children and youth involved with the child protection system. It would also allow policymakers to plan services and slots using a regional approach, armed with data describing who and how often young people with CPS histories go on to use homeless services in their own counties and who migrates to other counties.

### Limitations

All findings from our study must be considered in the context of limitations related to the quality of the underlying data, the universe of individuals we could observe in our data, and the generalizability of findings to other jurisdictions. First, findings should be viewed as conservative estimates of the proportion of youth in our population who had a history of CPS reports. Because CPS observations were left-censored to 1998 and restricted to California, there may have been youth who were misclassified in our study. In other words, there may have been youth who were reported for maltreatment, but we could not classify as such given that the report occurred before 1998 or in another state. Movement from out of state may be a particularly important dynamic for homeless youth.

A second limitation was the nature of the data available. Because we only had HMIS records for a single county, we were concerned that any attempt to prospectively assess risk of homelessness among youth involved with child protective services would be incredibly incomplete and dramatically understate the risk. We had no ability to look at youth who may have exited foster care in San Francisco County and then sought homelessness services elsewhere in the state. That said, available data did permit us to view the characteristics of young homeless service users in San Francisco County, and by virtue of viewing their CPS histories (available for the state overall), to better understand their need for supportive services and their within-California migration patterns as they transition to adulthood.

It is also worth noting that although the quality of administrative data collected during the course of service delivery often varies widely, the first step to improving that quality is to shed light on what the data source does and does not reliably track. It was through the iterative process of data cleaning, validation, and consultation with San Francisco County that specific weaknesses of their HMIS were identified. For example, the range of values in both closed and open-text fields showcased a lack of uniform definitions adopted for providers entering service-related information. Likewise, it was very clear that protocols for confirming whether a client had already been assigned a unique system ID were imperfect, leading to large numbers of duplicate client records spanning

multiple service encounters that required de-duplication prior to linkage. Other challenges included that during a past data system transition, not all service encounter date fields had been cleanly transitioned over leading to clearly errant values. That said, the clean-up work required for this analysis helped influenced the County's decision to pursue a new and improved data system and more standardized data entry protocols.

### Conclusion

The increasing availability of administrative case management data, coupled with advances in technology, now allow for the systematic integration of cross-sector or cross-system records. Although homeless individuals tend to experience high geographic mobility, there are limited data that can be used to understand the nature and magnitude of mobility to coordinate homelessness services and ensure the adequacy of local service capacity. Data from this study demonstrate how cross-sector patterns of service use can be created through linked administrative data to support the organization of prevention strategies, such as developing stronger economic and social supports among youth preparing to leave foster care for adulthood.

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