Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ysdh20

Psychological distress among young people who are couchsurfing: an exploratory analysis of correlated factors

Katie Hail-Jares, Rhianon Vichta-Ohlsen, Theo Butler & Anna Dunne

To cite this article: Katie Hail-Jares, Rhianon Vichta-Ohlsen, Theo Butler & Anna Dunne (2021): Psychological distress among young people who are couchsurfing: an exploratory analysis of correlated factors, Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness, DOI: 10.1080/10530789.2021.1967647

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10530789.2021.1967647

JOURNAL OF SOCIAL DISTRESS AND HOMELESSNESS
https://doi.org/10.1080/10530789.2021.1967647

Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group

BRIEF REPORT

Psychological distress among young people who are couchsurfing: an exploratory analysis of correlated factors

Katie Hail-Jares [a], Rhianon Vichta-Ohlsen[b], Theo Butler[c] and Anna Dunne[c]

[a]School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Griffith University, Mt Gravatt, Australia; [b]Brisbane Youth Service, Fortitude Valley, Australia; [c]Homeless & Housing Unstable Young People Research Consortium, Community Advisory Group, Brisbane, Australia

ABSTRACT

In this brief report, we explore the relationship between psychological distress and couchsurfing, with attention to the latter's transitory and cyclic nature. The Kessler scale of psychological distress (K10) was administered as part of a semi-structured interview to 63 young people who had couchsurfed within the past 18 months. A robust regression was used to explore the associations between demographic and couchsurfing factors and cumulative K10 score. Gender, cultural background, age when leaving home, and number of hosts stayed with during the last couchsurfing episode emerged as statistically significant factors. Our study finds that young people who are couchsurfing have much higher levels of psychological distress than their peers in the general population. We suggest, based on these results and others, that homelessness services should reassess how they prioritize and serve young people who are couchsurfing.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 12 April 2021
Revised 27 July 2021
Accepted 9 August 2021

KEYWORDS
Couchsurfing; homelessness; homeless youth; psychological distress

Introduction

From 2019 to 2020, more than 42,400 Australian young people (ages 15–24) were homeless or housing insecure (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021). This homelessness is not limited to "roof"lessness but instead is inclusive of those who lack a home, a place where one has security, stability and a sense of belonging (Chamberlain & Mackenzie, 1992). This sociocultural definition includes young people who are couchsurfing or staying temporarily with a friend, family member, acquaintance, or stranger (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018; McLoughlin, 2013; Terui & Hsieh, 2016). The number of young people who couchsurf has been steadily growing in Australia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018). Young people who couchsurf are not included on the lease, despite frequently making financial contributions, and therefore are highly vulnerable to both eviction and exploitation at the hands of their hosts (Moore, 2017). Without a legal right to reside, young people who couchsurf experience very high levels of transience and instability (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018; Curry et al., 2017; Moore, 2017; Vichta-Ohlsen & Hail-Jares, 2017). This instability may be linked to psychological distress; in one study, young people who couchsurf reported poorer overall mental health, and were more likely to report lifetime self-harm and suicidal behavior (Hail-Jares et al., 2020). This brief builds upon that previous research, modeling the relationship between mental distress, mobility, and number of couchsurfing episodes among 63 young people.

Methods

Data source

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with young people who couchsurfed in Queensland, Australia within a broader mixed-methods investigation into couchsurfing and mental health. A convenience sample was recruited between 2019 and 2020, through a local youth homelessness program (16%), educational institutions (11%), referrals (5%), and social media (68%). Young people were eligible if they were aged 15–25, had recent couchsurfing experience (within the past 18 months), and had couchsurfed for at least 2 weeks. Couchsurfing was defined in the consent form as:

> [T]emporarily staying somewhere that is not your usual home. This might be a friend, friends' parents/family, your extended family, someone you met recently, or strangers. You may be moving between places frequently. You do not need to be actually sleeping on a couch or sofa.

Participants received a $40 AUD grocery gift card. The project was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committees of Griffith University and the Queensland Department of Child Safety, Youth and Women.

CONTACT Katie Hail-Jares k.hail-jares@griffith.edu.au School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Griffith University, 176 Messines Ridge Road, Office M10.3.01H, Mt Gravatt, Queensland 4122, Australia

Measures

Kessler Scale of Psychological Distress (K10). The K10 is a validated tool used to measure the presence and severity of anxiety and depressive symptoms within the past 30 days (Furukawa et al., 2003; Flatau et al., 2015) The final, cumulative score indicates levels of psychological distress ranging from none or low (10–15), moderate (16–20), high (20–30) and very high (31–50).

Demographics. Participants were asked their age, gender (male, female, and trans or gender diverse), cultural identity (Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander vs. not Indigenous), and highest grade completed. Subsequently, we added a control variable indicating whether the interview was pre- or post- the initial COVID-19 national lockdown (Tucker et al., 2020). Though unintentional, the COVID-19 variable also doubled as a control variable for recruitment method; prior to the lockdown, no young people were recruited via social media and following the lockdown, young people were only recruited via social media (as schools and programming closed or limited attendance).

Couchsurfing history. Young people who couchsurf were asked their age of leaving home; number of couchsurfing hosts (mobility) and number of couchsurfing episodes, with the most conservative estimate used where ranges were provided. An episode was each distinct period of couchsurfing, as characterized by housing instability. Interviewers provided the following example to explain what an episode constituted: "For example, if you couchsurfed for a year then moved into your own apartment for a while then couchsurfed again, that would be two separate episodes."

Analysis

Stata 14.0 was used to calculate descriptive statistics. As small samples can be sensitive to influence from extreme cases, or outliers, three postestimation tests (Cook's distance, DFFITS and DFBETAS) were run to identify which cases may be influential (Crowson, 2018). These tests identified between 4 and 22 cases that warranted review. The authors reviewed the tagged cases, confirmed they were not data entry errors, and agreed there was no compelling reason to exclude them as all the cases did follow the estimated trendline. A robust regression, rather than a standard ordinary least square regression, was used to explore the relationship between the independent factors and psychological distress. Robust regressions assign weights to cases on the basis of their potential influence or excludes cases that have a Cook's distance greater than 1 (thus meeting the definition of an outlier) (Crowson, 2018). Age-gender controlled mean imputation was used to replace missing data for last grade ($n = 3$) and total places stayed ($n = 2$) (Jakobsen et al., 2017; Verardi & Croux, 2009). Appropriate weighting led to the loss of no cases in the final model.

Results

Description of the sample

The average interviewee within the sample was a young woman (57.1%; $n = 36$), who was between 18 and 20 years old (50.8%; $n = 32$), and had completed high school or its equivalency (68.3%; $n = 43$). Those who identified as gender diverse (trans and non-binary) (14.3%; $n = 9$) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (19.1%; $n = 12$) were over-represented within the sample, compared to the broader Australian population.

The largest proportion of participants reported leaving home between ages 16 and 18 (55.6%; mean: 16.9, SD: 2.3). Two-thirds (66.7%; $n = 42$) estimated that they had couchsurfed on five or fewer occasions; of those, 12 (19.1% of the total sample) were couchsurfing for the first time when interviewed. An equal proportion – 19.1% ($n = 12$) – could not estimate how many times they had couchsurfed in their lifetime.

When asked to estimate how many hosts they had stayed with, as an approximate measure of mobility, the largest proportion estimated that they had stayed with between 1 and 5 different hosts (46.0%; $n = 29$). However, eight individuals (12.8%) reported that they had stayed with over 20 hosts.

There was no relationship between the number of couchsurfing episodes and mobility ($F = 1.29$; Prob > $F = 0.26$). Among the 51 individuals who knew how many times they had couchsurfed, the average number of hosts per episode was 4.4 (SD: 7.3; min–max: 0.3–50).

Psychological distress

Nearly seventy percent ($n = 44$) of the young people in our sample met the threshold for very high levels of psychological distress on the K10. This was then followed by 22.2% ($n = 14$) who reported high levels; and 7.9% ($n = 5$) who reported moderate levels. No young person who participated in the project reported no or low levels of psychological distress. The average K10 score was 33.8 (SD: 7.5; min–max: 18–48).

Factors associated with psychological distress

The robust regression examined the relationship between total K10 score, 4 categorical or dichotomized variables (Indigenous heritage, gender, number of couchsurfing episodes, and whether the interview

happened post-COVID) and 4 continuous variables (age, last grade completed, age left home, and total number of places stayed during last episode) (Table 1). Number of couchsurfing episodes was broken into three categories: 1–5 episodes; 6+ episodes; and unable to estimate.

Age was correlated with lower K10 scores, while number of places stayed and being older when leaving home were associated with higher scores. Female, gender diverse, and Indigenous respondents were substantially more likely to have a higher score than cismale or Anglo-Australian peers, respectively (Table 1).

Three additional models were run, excluding the cases that were tagged as possible outliers using the various post-estimation commands (Appendix Table A1). The coefficients and the statistical significance of independent factors did not substantially change between models, suggesting appropriate weighting.

Discussion

On the National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, the average Australian youth reported low levels of psychological distress on the K10 (mean = 14.9) (Slade et al., 2011). Comparatively, our sample of young people who couchsurf reported alarmingly high levels of psychological distress (mean = 33.8).

Psychological distress was at least partially driven by the number of places stayed during the last couchsurfing experience; each additional move increased a young person's K10 score. Such transience suggests less stability and more time spent evaluating and vetting each (new) host (McLoughlin, 2013; Moore, 2017). While couchsurfing, then, hypervigilance may become the norm rather than the exception. Such vetting may partially explain why psychological distress was highest among female, gender diverse, and Indigenous young people who couchsurf. Previous research has found that these groups experience more hypervigilance while homeless, as they feel more vulnerable to policing, sexual and physical assault, and other forms of trauma (Bender et al., 2010; Browne, 1993; Budge et al., 2014).

We suspect that youth who left home later, between ages 18 and 25, were ageing out of existing support systems that prioritized those under eighteen (Bender et al., 2010). In interviews, older youth told us they had difficulty finding services to support them and faced additional barriers to receiving Centrelink benefits, Australian social security payments.

Information on relationship to the hosts was not systematically collected as part of the pre-interview survey, but coding the qualitative data indicated that the 63 participants described 144 unique couchsurfing experiences in detail. Young people were most likely to stay with friends or peers, friends' parents, family, some other known individual (e.g. work colleague or supervisor; fellow congregant; etc.), stranger, or partner. Future research may want to further consider the impact of host-couchsurfer relationship on mental health (Hail-Jares & Vichta-Ohlsen, 2021). Though only a small number of young people stayed with strangers, these young people may have exhausted existing social support systems, leaving them more vulnerable to exploitation and the resulting psychological distress.

Table 1. Robust regression results, illustrating potential relationships between demographic and couchsurfing factors with total K10 score.

Factor	Coef. (β)	SE	95% CI
Age, years (time of interview)	−0.9**	0.3	−1.5, −0.27
Gender			
Male	Ref	Ref	Ref
Female	4.5*	1.9	0.57, 8.3
Non-binary or Trans	10.4***	2.6	5.3, 15.5
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	4.1*	2.0	0.02,8.2
Last grade completed	−0.2	0.6	−1.5, 1.1
Number of places stayed during last couchsurfing episode	0.1**	0.05	0.5, 0.25
Number of couchsurfing episodes			
1–5	Ref	Ref	Ref
6+	−0.3	2.2	−4.7, 4.1
Unknown (could not estimate)	−3.3	2.7	−8.8, 2.2
Age that young person left home	1.0*	0.05	−0.03, 0.2
Interview happened post-COVID	1.7	2.3	−2.9, 6.3
Number of observations	63		
Prob > F	0.000		

Statistical significance: *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

Limitations

There are notable limitations; the sample size is small and based upon a convenience sample, with majority of participants recruited through social media. Small, convenience samples are common problems when working with a hidden population, such as young people who couchsurf. Recruiting on social media may introduce bias by oversampling young people who have access to technology or the internet, thus serving as a proxy for better socio-economic support. However, recent research suggests such concerns may be overstated. In three recent studies, between 80-and-97% of young people who were experiencing homelessness accessed the internet at least weekly, with between 58-and-85% using social media (Harpin et al., 2016; Rice & Barman-Adhikari, 2014; VonHoltz et al., 2018). Qualitatively, using the internet and school-based recruitment also allowed us to reach young people who did not view themselves as homeless, and therefore, were not engaged with services (Terui & Hsieh, 2016). In combination, then, these various recruitment sites may have led to a more diverse sample than depending upon only shelters or social services. Ultimately, this research is exploratory and indicative of relationships that warrant further investigation. Future research can improve upon

sampling and further consider how place-based recruitment may impact sample composition.

Conclusion

Since they are inside, young people who couchsurf are often a lower priority for independent housing than rough sleepers (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018). Our findings here, though reflecting a small sample, challenge this view. Service providers should implement comprehensive risk screening that moves beyond housing status at intake, and prioritize high-risk young people regardless of their roofed status.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author (s).

Funding

This work was supported by Queensland Department of Child Safety, Youth, and Women; and Brisbane City Council.

Notes on contributors

Katie Hail-Jares (she/her) is a lecturer in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Griffith University in Queensland, Australia. Her work focuses on how criminalising behaviour impacts the health of people, including sex workers, people who use drugs, homeless youth, and incarcerated communities.

Rhianon Vichta-Ohlsen (she/her) is the Research and Evaluation Manager for Brisbane Youth Service, leading practice research and outcomes measurement specifically adapted to the complex intersecting issues of young people who experience homelessness associated risks. She became a researcher and evaluator after spending more than 20 years delivering, designing, managing and working to improve social programs both in Australia and overseas.

Theo Butler (they/them) is an undergraduate student studying Psychological Sciences. They have lived experiences with homelessness as a queer individual. Their passion for contributing toward queer discussions has seen contributions at conventions, on panels, in organisation training programs, and within articles. They aim to work with diverse individuals and families upon the completion of their studies. They are a member of the community advisory group.

Anna Dunne (she/they) is an Accredited Social Worker with 8 years in the field supporting children and adults in group settings. She has lived experience of domestic violence and homelessness, and is a member of the LGBTIQAP+ community. This places them in a unique position to be able to genuinely understand client struggles and provide help that is not only evidence-based but empathetic. Anna currently works with young people experiencing complex mental health concerns and their families.

ORCID

Katie Hail-Jares http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3732-1935

References

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2018). *Couch surfers: A profile of Specialist Homelessness Services clients*. Australian Government. Retrieved March 22, 2021 from https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/couch-surfers-a-profile-of-specialist-homelessness/contents/table-of-contents.

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2021). *Young people presenting alone*. Australian Government. (Specialist homelessness services annual report). Retrieved March 22, 2021 from https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report/contents/young-people-presenting-alone.

Bender, K., Ferguson, K., Thompson, S., Komlo, C., & Pollio, D. (2010). Factors associated with trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder among homeless youth in three U.S. cities: The importance of transience. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, *23*(1), 161–168. https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.20501

Browne, A. (1993). Family violence and homelessness: The relevance of trauma histories in the lives of homeless women. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *63*(3), 370–384. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0079444

Budge, S. L., Rossman, H. K., & Howard, K. A. S. (2014). Coping and psychological distress among genderqueer individuals: The moderating effect of social support. *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling*, *8*(1), 95–117. https://doi.org/10.1080/15538605.2014.853641

Chamberlain, C., & Mackenzie, D. (1992). Understanding contemporary homelessness: Issues of definition and meaning. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, *27*(4), 274–297. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1839-4655.1992.tb00911.x

Crowson, M. (2018). Identifying influential cases. *YouTube*. (Multiple regression using STATA; vol. 5). Retrieved July 13, 2021 from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F6GRGq-HRVg.

Curry, S. R., Morton, M., Matjasko, J. L., Dworsky, A., Samuels, G. M., & Schlueter, D. (2017). Youth homelessness and vulnerability: How does couch surfing fit? *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *60*(1–2), 17–24. https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12156

Flatau, P., Thielking, M., MacKenzie, D., & Steen, A. (2015). The Australian youth homeless experience: Evidence from a longitudinal survey of homeless youth. *Parity*. Retrieved March 22, 2021 from https://search.informit.org/doi/abs/10.3316/INFORMIT.147744959521999.

Furukawa, T. A., Kessler, R. C., Slade, T., & Andrews, G. (2003). The performance of the K6 and K10 screening scales for psychological distress in the Australian National Survey of Mental Health and Well-Being. *Psychological Medicine*, *33*(2), 357–362. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291702006700

Häggman-Laitila, A., Salokekkilä, P., & Karki, S. (2018). Transition to adult life of young people leaving foster care: A qualitative systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *95*, 134–143. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.08.017

Hail-Jares, K., & Vichta-Ohlsen, R. (2021). *Child safety and couchsurfing: Identifying pathways and risks as a precursor to intervention*. Department of Child Safety, Youth, and Women.

Hail-Jares, K., Vichta-Ohlsen, R., & Nash, C. (2020). Safer inside? Comparing the experiences and risks faced by young people who couch-surf and sleep rough. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *0*(0), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2020.1727425

Harpin, S., Davis, J., Low, H., & Gilroy, C. (2016). Mobile phone and social media use of homeless youth in Denver, Colorado. *Journal of Community Health Nursing*, *33*(2), 90–97. https://doi.org/10.1080/07370016.2016.1159440

Jakobsen, J. C., Gluud, C., Wetterslev, J., & Winkel, P. (2017). When and how should multiple imputation be used for handling missing data in randomised clinical trials – A practical guide with flowcharts. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, *17*(1), 162. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-017-0442-1

McLoughlin, P. J. (2013). Couch surfing on the margins: The reliance on temporary living arrangements as a form of homelessness amongst school-aged home leavers. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *16*(4), 521–545. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2012.725839

Moore, S. (2017). *Couch surfing limbo: Legal, policy, and service gaps affecting young couch surfers and couch providers in Melbourne's West*. WEstjustice. https://www.westjustice.org.au/cms_uploads/docs/westjustice-couch-surfing-limbo-report.pdf.

Rice, E., & Barman-Adhikari, A. (2014). Internet and social media use as a resource among homeless youth. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *19*(2), 232–247. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12038

Slade, T., Grove, R., & Burgess, P. (2011). Kessler psychological distress scale: Normative data from the 2007 Australian National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, *45*(4), 308–316. https://doi.org/10.3109/00048674.2010.543653

Terui, S., & Hsieh, E. (2016). "Not homeless yet. I'm kind of couch surfing": finding identities for people at a homeless shelter. *Social Work in Public Health*, *31*(7), 688–699. https://doi.org/10.1080/19371918.2016.1188739

Tucker, J. S., D'Amico, E. J., Pedersen, E. R., Garvey, R., Rodriguez, A., & Klein, D. J. (2020). Behavioral health and service usage during the COVID-19 pandemic among emerging adults currently or recently experiencing homelessness. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *67*(4), 603–605. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.07.013

Verardi, V., & Croux, C. (2009). Robust regression in stata. *The Stata Journal: Promoting Communications on Statistics and Stata*, *9*(3), 439–453. https://doi.org/10.1177/1536867X0900900306

Vichta-Ohlsen, R., & Hail-Jares, K. (2017). "We are not all the same": Exploring difference in young people's experiences of couch surfing versus sleeping rough. *Parity*, *30*(9), 93–95.

VonHoltz, L. A. H., Frasso, R., Golinkoff, J. M., Lozano, A. J., Hanlon, A., & Dowshen, N. (2018). Internet and social media access among youth experiencing homelessness: Mixed-methods study. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, *20*(5), e184. https://doi.org/10.2196/jmir.9306

Appendix

Table A1. Comparison of coefficients (β) and statistical significance across five models.

		Models 2–4: Method used to identify influential data			
Factor	Model 1: OLS Model with no weights	Model 2: Cook's distance	Model 3: DFFITS	Model 4: DFBETA	Model 5: Robust regression (final model)
Age, years (time of interview)	−0.84*	−0.82**	−0.83**	−0.83*	−0.9**
Gender					
Male	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
Female	4.5*	5.5**	5.4**	4.8*	4.5*
Non-binary or Trans	5.8*	11.6***	11.9***	8.8**	10.4***
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	5.2*	4.1*	4.0*	3.7+	4.1*
Last grade completed	−0.04	−0.11	−0.32	−0.20	−0.20
Number of places stayed during last couchsurfing episode	0.16**	0.16+	0.26**	0.25**	0.1**
Number of couchsurfing episodes					
1–5	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref	Ref
6+	1.8	−1.8	−2.2	0.42	−0.3
Unknown (could not estimate)	−3.0	−3.3	−3.3	−1.4	−3.3
Age that young person left home	1.2**	0.91+	0.96**	0.94**	1.0*
Interview happened post-COVID	1.1	1.3	0.81	1.9	1.7
Number of observations	63	59	55	41	63
Adjusted R^2 of model	0.33	0.50	0.57	0.54	N/A

Three different methods were used to identify influential cases (or potential outliers). Between 4 and 22 cases were identified as influential. Three models were run which eliminated these cases. These models were similar in most respects and offered more explanatory value for determining cumulative psychological distress score than the OLS model with no weights (Model 1). The coefficients and statistical significance in Model 5, the robust regression model used in this paper, are similar to Models 2–4, where influential cases were eliminated. This suggests the weights used in Model 5 are appropriate to address the influential cases within a small sample. As no cases were lost once a weighted model was used, this also suggests the influence of individual cases may be a result of the small sample size [Statistical significance: $^{+}0.1 > p > 0.05$; $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}0.05 > p > 0.01$; $^{***}0.01 > p > 0.005$].