

Pathways through homelessness: Voices of Spanish-speaking immigrants in Boston

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Background

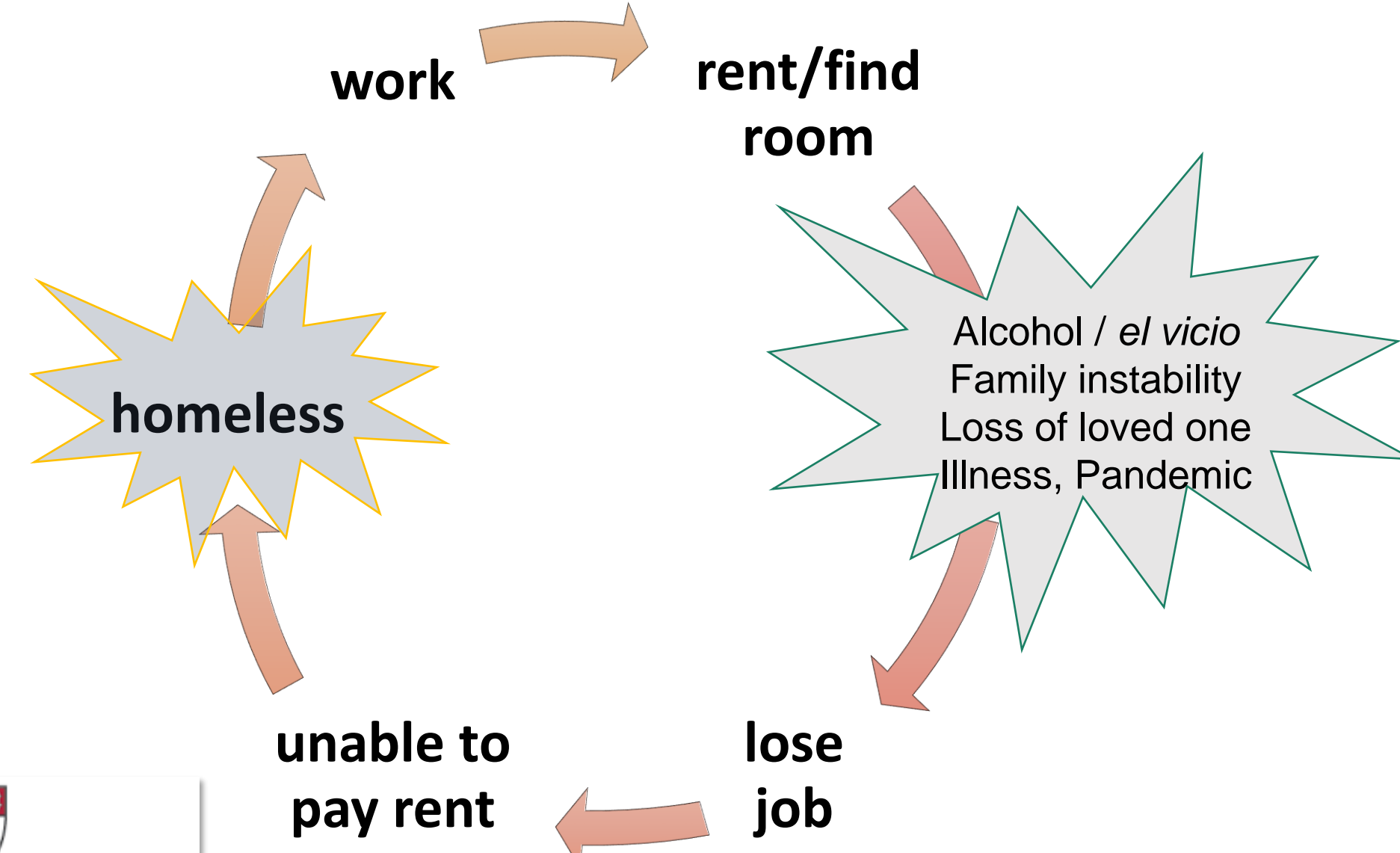
The Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program (BHCHP) serves 11,000 people each year. In Boston, most people who experience homelessness (PEH) are sheltered, and Hispanic/Latino people are over-represented among PEH. Little research on the intersection of immigration and homelessness exists. This study sought to elucidate the voices of Spanish-speaking immigrants and their pathways through homelessness.

Methods

This qualitative pilot study used purposive and snowball sampling to recruit 20 participants who were 18+ years old, Spanish-speaking and born outside the U.S., and seen at BHCHP within the past 12 months. 1-hour semi-structured interviews were conducted in Spanish. Transcribed data were coded using Nvivo software and analyzed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis to elicit experiences, motivations, values, and preferences.

Results

The individual cycle of precarity



"I have been working since I was little. I polished shoes, sold popsicles, those popsicles that come in trucks. I sold chewing gum. Anytime there was a fair, I helped out."

"...everyone has to pay and no one, not even your family and relatives, can have you sleeping for free. Here, everyone pays, everyone works."

"When you are used to living in your apartment alone, and you see yourself living [somewhere unfamiliar], with other people, you know that it is not yours. It's not easy... That you know that you lost everything."

"A whole year on the street. Because once I did go to a shelter, but I didn't like the shelter because I felt safer on the street... Because in the shelter they rob you... They want to beat you up, things like that."

"I had to try twice to come here. The first time I was deported from Mexico City... to El Salvador... And then I restarted the trip again. The second time I did make it here, thank God."

Work is paramount

"If you don't work, you don't eat. That's how it was [in the Dominican Republic]. You had to work to eat because there is no help there."

"I had found [a job] but... they saw me with my backpack. 'Do you have a house?' 'No.' 'I'm looking for work to pay my room.' Then, the gentleman told me 'we can't take you because you don't have a house and you can't walk around with your backpack here.'"

"I lived with [my son]. And, he could never get my medications... He didn't even buy me food anymore. I was... in a prison. I cried a lot, I was always alone."

The entire social network is precarious

"My mission was to help my mom... But I've been here for about 11 years. After my mom died, I entered a depression, I went downwards and that's where I started drink."

"In the journey from Honduras to here, passing those rivers while enduring hunger, thirst, without bathing, without anything, all burnt from the sun. Some of us are lucky, but others are not, we don't [all] make it here."

Twin aspirations of work and independence anchor stories of precarious journeys into and out of homelessness

Independence not the same as being housed

Migrating successfully is a source of gratitude

Who were our participants?

Country of Origin	Number & Gender (n = 20)
Mexico	5 male
Honduras	2 male
El Salvador	7 male
Dominican Republic	1 male, 4 female



Most participants had lived in the U.S. for 20-30 years, arrived as teens or young adults, and some had multiple trips between the U.S. and home country.

This cohort represents a subset of Spanish-speaking immigrants experiencing homelessness who are already connected to the healthcare system through BHCHP and who have, to date, survived the cycle of precarity.

Implications and Takeaways

Facilitating access to work is a core service (e.g., day labor programs) that promotes dignity, self-determination and wellness.

Workplaces are central catchment areas for health screening and linkage to primary care access points for Spanish-speaking immigrants.

Interventions should address not just individual precarity, but also the instability arising from one's social network.

Housing and treatment programs should be sensitive to the uniquely traumatizing experiences, strengths, and needs related to migration.

Many words used to describe homelessness:

mendingo no tiene casa
homeless
persona callejera sin vivienda
gente que vive en la calle
no hay palabra
que anda en la calle
pobre desamparado
desambulante sin hogar indigente

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