The Challenges and Issues in Caring for Homeless Families with Children

CORINNE A. WHEELER PHD, RN, CENP
Phenomena of Concern

- Homelessness is a national epidemic that is fueled by a complex mix of external and internal issues.

- In the city under study, approximately 1,783 individuals are homeless on any given night (CHIP, 2017).

- Families are among the fastest growing segments of the homeless population (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2016).
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to describe how leaders in homeless-serving agencies perceive the challenges and issues in caring for homeless families with children.
Research Questions

1. **What challenges and issues do homeless service providers face when caring for homeless families with children?**

2. **How do homeless-serving agencies envision appropriate systems of care and service?**
Context for Inquiry
(Preliminary Review of Related Literature)

- **Family homelessness**
  - Cause
  - Incidence

- **Affects of homelessness on children**
  - Physical health
  - Emotional health
  - Development

- **Implications for Policy**
  - Ideologies, values and beliefs drive policy
  - Past and current Federal policies
Methods

Qualitative Description

... is a non-theoretical design that usually uses interviews and allows relationships among attitudes, beliefs, motives and behaviors to be uncovered.

Instrumentation

- Researcher was the primary instrument for data collection

Data Collection and Recording

- One-to-one, semi-structured interviews
- Field notes taken during interview
- Interviews & field notes audio-taped
- Safeguarding participant identity
Participants

Sample size: 13

Sampling: purposive using “snow-ball” technique

Target population: individuals working in a director or equivalent level position from selected homeless service or planning agencies in a Midwestern urban area.

Participation voluntary with informed consent
Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis

Collection of data & data analysis were conducted simultaneously

Data were examined using a modified constant comparative approach, based upon the work of Glaser & Straus (1967) and Lincoln & Guba (1985)
Quality Criteria
(Lincoln & Guba, 1985)

1. Credibility
   - Saturation of data
   - Interviews & field notes
   - Member checks

2. Transferability
   - Reader is provided a wide range of information
   - Potential applications are suggested, up to the reader to decide its usefulness

3. Dependability
   - Use of a debriefer

4. Confirmability
   - Numerous & various perceptions of study participants
   - Presented participant belief & value systems without misrepresentation
Results of Study
Five Major Themes

1. Woman Alone
2. Woman as Mother
3. Children Pay the Price
4. Caring for Families
5. Getting the Community on Board
Theme 1: Woman Alone

The men that do come in here most of the time usually have their GED. I would say it’s more like 60% will have their GED or high school education; where as the women that we serve, only 20% will have a GED or high school degree. (Kevin)
Theme 1: Woman Alone

- Education/Training
- Mental Health & Substance Abuse
- Carry Excess Baggage
Many times we find the big parenting issue is parents don’t understand boundaries with children. And they, a lot of times, treat the children as, you know, partners—not necessarily in the sexual manner—but they expect the children to help them problem-solve, dealing with the issues that the family is dealing with when the child is young and really in all cases doesn’t have the coping mechanisms to deal with it.... (Donna)
Theme 2: Woman as Mother

- Living Crisis to Crisis
- Fear of Losing Their Children
- Extra Challenges as a Mother
- Parenting
- Parent Engagement in Schools
- It’s a Cycle
- Lack of Support Systems
Theme 3: Children Pay the Price

...you don’t know where your next meal is coming from or you don’t know [if] when you come home there’s going to be a note on the door telling you that the sheriff said you can’t come in your house. Children have a lot of gastrointestinal issues associated with that. They have a lot of mental health issues associated with that, a lot of anger issues. You see a lot of anger in the children. (Ellen)
Theme 3: Children Pay the Price

- Physical and Mental Health
- Education and Schooling
They know how to go out and apply for a job, but they don’t know how to keep it. They know they’re supposed to pay their bills, but they don’t know how to pay the bills... (Helen)

... We have to balance our budget. We have to be a financially viable organization for long term. Then it doesn’t matter what you do. I mean you could be Mother Theresa but if you are out of business so what? So where are we missing this piece? (George)
Theme 4: Caring for Families

- Families need supportive services
- More difficult to house
- Rules and restrictions
- Resources don’t meet the demand
- Keeping up
- Working together
Theme 5: Getting a Community on Board

We say homeless to somebody and the image that pops into their head is not of a child... it’s easier to focus on an image that somehow distinguishes that’s the guy in rags with a tin cup. (Bob)

The Blueprint makes it clear that a sizeable proportion of homeless or at risk persons are children and/or families with children, but this group has received very little attention so far. In general, Blueprint efforts have “followed the dollars” rather than reflected community needs... (Aaron)
Theme 5: Getting a Community on Board

- Different visions
- It’s political
- The public is not aware
- Judging poor people by middle class values
- The homeless as neighbors
- The Blueprint: Issues of funding and implementation
- Re-energizing
Limitations

- Except for two participants, each encounter was limited to one interview.

- Member checks were conducted on a sample of the participants.

- Perspectives of only two key stakeholders are described.
Recommendations for Future Research

Policy
- Perspectives of elected officials and political stakeholders
- Analysis of the relationships between federal public policy and its local adaptations in terms of meeting the needs of homeless families

Program
- Evaluation and outcomes of homeless programs and systems
Recommendations for Future Research

Education

► How schools can best identify near-homeless children (families) and what interventions can take place in the school

► Academic achievement with social and health variables among high-mobility students

Family

► “Lived experience” of both mother and child

► Unique needs and circumstances of homeless families with children as they exit homelessness into supportive or permanent housing with attention to racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds
Conclusion

- Local impact of homelessness on families with children coincides with existing literature
- Community stakeholders hold different values & goals
- Social programs are experiencing reduced public funding
- There is a need for an emphasis on prevention
- Further research is needed in the area of family homelessness with special focus on systems evaluation and outcome data
Questions ?