

Assisting Forgotten Fathers: Homeless in Rural America

Columbia University Center for Homelessness Prevention Studies
18 September 2008

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Homeless Families

In 2007:

Across the U.S.:

- Estimated 600,000 homeless families
- With 1.35 million children

In cities:

- 23% of those seeking shelter were families

In Kentucky:

- ~ 3,700 persons in households with children were homeless
- ~14.4% had life partners with them

This Study

- Before and after welfare reform
- Intensive interviews with adults in homeless families:
 - 86 families
 - 18 husbands/fathers
- In Lexington, Louisville, and rural Appalachia
- Semi-structured interviews, 2-4+ hours each

Predictors of Persistent Homelessness

- ▶ **Persistent Poverty:** family background; life growing up financially stressed in family of origin; years of education; work history – formal and informal; early fathering
- ▶ **Social Networks:** intimate relationships; circle of care; intimate partner violence; childhood abuse; childhood disruption and instability
- ▶ **Behavioral Issues:** mental health; substance abuse; imprisonment; risky sexual behavior
- ▶ **Survival Strategies:** looking for work; looking for housing; community connections; coping behavior; hopes for the future

Characteristics of Fathers

- Average age 32
- 17 of the 18 legally married
- More than half had earlier relationships
- Fathers of 61 children
- 41 children with them at present
- All but one had been in jail and/or prison

Physical and Mental Health of Rural Fathers

- ▶ Men rate themselves as having fairly good health
- ▶ Alcohol mentioned the major **past** health issue
- ▶ Use whatever help is available to pay for medical care, primarily for children, not themselves
- ▶ Medicines are out of pocket
- ▶ Fathers (parents) forego their own physical health needs in order to take care of their children
- ▶ Need for preventative health care, including regular check-ups; screening for infectious diseases including HIV and TB

Three Categories of Homeless Fathers in KY

Transients

Men and their wives and children who travel among states to find work and better times

Seekers

Men who came purposefully to Kentucky to seek work they heard was available

Place-Based

Men who came from rural KY (or other rural areas) and intend to remain rural and manage as best they can

Housing Distress of Fathers

Averaged 4 different living locations in the year prior to being interviewed, some as many as 8 or 9

All cited eviction or inability to pay rent as the cause of their homelessness

They had stayed in

- Hotels and motels

- Mobile homes/trailers

- Apartments of friends and relatives

- Church houses

- Cars

- Emergency shelters

Dimensions of Fatherhood

Providing economically for one's children

Sharing in the care and guidance of one's children

Maintaining a relationship with a partner that affords a good family climate with minimal conflict

(Lamb, 2000)

The Myth of The Good Provider

- All the men **WANT** to work
- The areas in which they find themselves have fewer jobs and higher unemployment than the rest of the U.S.
- Few of the men were trained or prepared for skilled work

Preparedness for work

- ▶ KY is 51st in state rankings for per capital expenditures on education; about ½ of teenagers drop out of high school in certain rural communities
- ▶ The men's education ranged from 6 yrs to community college
- ▶ The educational picture is not all discouraging -- seven fathers did finish high school or completed their general education degrees
- ▶ Hopefully, they are good role models for their children, encouraging them to finish high school.

Work Experience of Fathers

Low Wage Labor	Informal Labor	Illicit Labor
Restaurant waiter	Day-Labor	Sell drugs
Fast-food worker	Clean Apartments	Sell alcohol to minors
Kitchen work	Unlicensed Electrician	
Construction	Unlicensed nurse's aide	
Dry-wall installation	Find things, fix, sell	
House painting	Pawn things	
Brick laying	Drive people around	
Factory Work	Odd jobs	
Auto body shop work		

Work specific to Appalachia

- ▶ Pickering in *Welfare Reform in Persistent Rural Poverty* said it well: market economies do not exist. Instead, “distinct logics of socially embedded rights and obligations, driven by factors other than hours and wages, provide the essential ingredients for survival in these communities.”

Relationship with children

- ▶ 2nd dimension of “responsible” fatherhood
- ▶ Fathers are physically close to their children when they are in a shelter – perhaps too close
- ▶ Little opportunity to play with their children
- ▶ Little opportunity to care for children, e.g., cook
- ▶ Men are generally gone during the day looking for work
- ▶ Fathers can and do watch over their children
- ▶ Several reported that homelessness brought them closer to their children

Couple Relationships

- ▶ 3rd dimension of “responsible” fatherhood is to have a good relationship with your spouse/partner
- ▶ Men felt that their wives were very important to their well being
- ▶ Men felt that wives had helped them change their bad habits, settled them down
- ▶ 83% (15 men) each mentioned his wife as the person he was closest to
- ▶ 66% (12 men) mentioned that the most important positive change in their lives was meeting their wives

Women working

- ▶ While most of the men held “traditional” views of families, they also said that they recognized the need for their wives to work.
- ▶ A few said that it did not matter who works in the family, but at least one parent needs to work
- ▶ Finally, three of the men said that they would not allow their wives to work.

Quality of Life Perceived and Reported by Fathers

	Average Person	Your Life Now	Your Life Next Year	Your Life Last Year
N ¹	17	16	16	17
Average ²	5.8	4.1	8.2	6.1

1. Scale of 1-10: 1 is the worst condition; 10 is the best condition
2. Not incidentally, three fathers had difficulty answering these questions, resulting in “I don’t know,” or no answer.

Quality of Life “Right Now” Reported by Fathers

	1 About as Good as Could Be	2 Good Enough	3 Fair	4 Not So Good	5 Not Good at All	6 Terrible
N	6	1	4	4	1	1

Average rating = 2.76

One father did not answer.

Coping Approaches

- ▶ Belief in God
- ▶ Prayer
- ▶ Determination
- ▶ Having someone to share problems with, talk to
- ▶ Live and plan for children's sake

What will happen in six months?

- ▶ Men had some unrealistic ideas about what would happen to them and their families in the next six months
 - Get a home
 - Have a better job
 - Save money
 - Stabilize family

Principal Findings Regarding Rural Fathers

- Inability to provide economically
- Lack of preparedness for the workplace
- Personal barriers to work
- Unstable childhoods influenced their adult lives
- Substance abuse could be a problem in future
- Incarceration

Assisting Rural Fathers

- ▶ Problem is not simply insufficient income or housing
- ▶ Wide-ranging heterogeneous life conditions
- ▶ Multiplicity of factors:
 - Family and kinship support is emotionally strong
 - Circle of Care is weak with community but strong within family
 - Physical and mental health of family; low self-esteem
 - Social and cultural environments of community
 - Conditions for social integration
 - Needs of particular family members based on household composition, age of children
 - Opportunities for living-wage employment
 - Low-income housing
 - transportation

Assisting Rural Fathers, cont.

- ▶ Homelessness must be considered as *process* not as a crisis
- ▶ Often a temporal chain of events that pushes family to social marginalization, often making persistent poverty and/or homelessness a permanent condition
- ▶ Fair Market rentals 2005 for 2 bedroom apartment:
Lexington: \$575; in rural KY: \$455 – prices not attainable to these men
- ▶ My work: **Lack of skills and jobs are highest risk factors for men**

Coping Strategies: Theory

- ▶ Mothers with children:
 - Fighter
 - Dependent
 - Resigned
 - Fatalistic
- ▶ Fathers with children and partners:
 - Good Providers

Policy Issues

- ▶ Policy issues are many, broad, and complex
- ▶ Policies and programs must address structural, community, family, and individual needs
- ▶ Examples:
 - Training for true economic self-sufficiency, e.g., living wages
 - Conflict resolution
 - Integration into larger community
 - Housing Trusts