

Homeless Families and Children

A Review of the Research Literature on Who They Are and Interventions That Work

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Presentation Overview

- The Current Context and Research Base
- The Characteristics and Needs of Homeless Families
- The Role of Subsidies and Affordable Housing
- Housing and Services Interventions for Families and Children
- Preventing Family Homelessness
- Summary and Conclusions



Current Context and Research Base

Current Context of Family Homelessness

- Families comprise 34% of the homeless population on any given night:
- In a year, 420,00 families, including 924,000 children
- Involves 8% of low income households
- Structural imbalance in affordable housing explains both geographic and temporal differences in the rates of homelessness

Main Sources of Homeless Families Research in the 1990s

- Longitudinal Study of First-time Homeless Families and Comparison Families in NYC (Shinn, et al., 1998)
- Worcester Family Research Project (Bassuk, et al., 1996)
- RWJ/HUD Homeless Families Project (Rog, et al., 1995)
- NSHAPC (Burt, et al., 1999)

Homeless Families Research Activity Since the 1990s

- Small growth in homeless families research
 - Analyses of administrative data on shelter use, interconnection of homelessness with other systems (Culhane and colleagues)
 - CMHS/CSAT Multi-site Homeless Families Program
 - Secondary analysis of Fragile Families and Child Well-Being data set

Research and Evaluation Activity Homeless Children

- First studies in mid-to-late 1980s spawned a second generation of research studies focused on the impact of homelessness on children
- Compared to earlier studies, these studies had:
 - Larger sample sizes
 - Greater breadth and quality of assessment instruments
 - More advanced statistical techniques



The Characteristics and Needs of Homeless Families

Demographic Snapshot of Homeless Families

- 70-90% female headed
- Average age is late 20s
- Average of 2-3 children, most of them under 6 years of age
- Overrepresentation of people of color
- Overrepresentation of families with young children
 - The risk increases the younger the children

Family Homelessness is a Pattern of Residential Instability

- In the 9 city RWJ/HUD project, families:
 - Moved avg. of 5 times in prior 18 months
 - Spent: 7 months doubled up
 - 6 months in their own home
 - 3.5 months homeless
 - 53% had prior homelessness
- Similar patterns in WFRP

Human Capital

- Many have work experience, generally low-wage
 - 62% with job > 1 yr (RWJ/HUD)
 - 67% with job > 3 mos (WFRP)
- Few working while homeless
 - 13% (RWJ/HUD)
 - <1% (WFRP)
- Education levels are low
 - 25% of general population without HS/GED vs.
 - 42% (RWJ/HUD)
 - 46% (WFRP)
 - 53% (NSHAPC)

Health Care Needs

- More acute and chronic health problems than general population of females under 45 yrs old
- Examples (WFRP):
 - 22% report chronic asthma (>4x gen. rate)
 - 20% report chronic anemia (10x gen. rate)
 - 4% report chronic ulcers (4x gen. rate)
- In RWJ/HUD study:
 - 26% reported 2 or more health problems in past year
 - 31% characterized health as fair or poor
 - However, most (75%) had access to health services while homeless, typically through Medicaid

Violence and Trauma

- Many mothers report histories of childhood abuse
 - Physical Abuse
 - 67% (WFRP)
 - 33% (RWJ/HFP)
 - Sexual Abuse
 - 43% (WFRP)
 - 32% (RWJ/HFP)
- Majority report severe violence by adult intimate partner(s)
 - 63% (WFRP)
 - 65% (RWJ/HFP)

Mental Health Needs

- Depression, anxiety, PTSD are most common mental health crises
 - 35% had MH disorder (WFRP)
 - 44% MH problems (NSHAPC)
 - 60% were “currently distressed” (RWJ/HUD)



- Suicidality is troubling

- % who report attempting suicide

- 27% (WFRP)

- 31% (RWJ/HUD)

- Over half reported multiple attempts in both studies

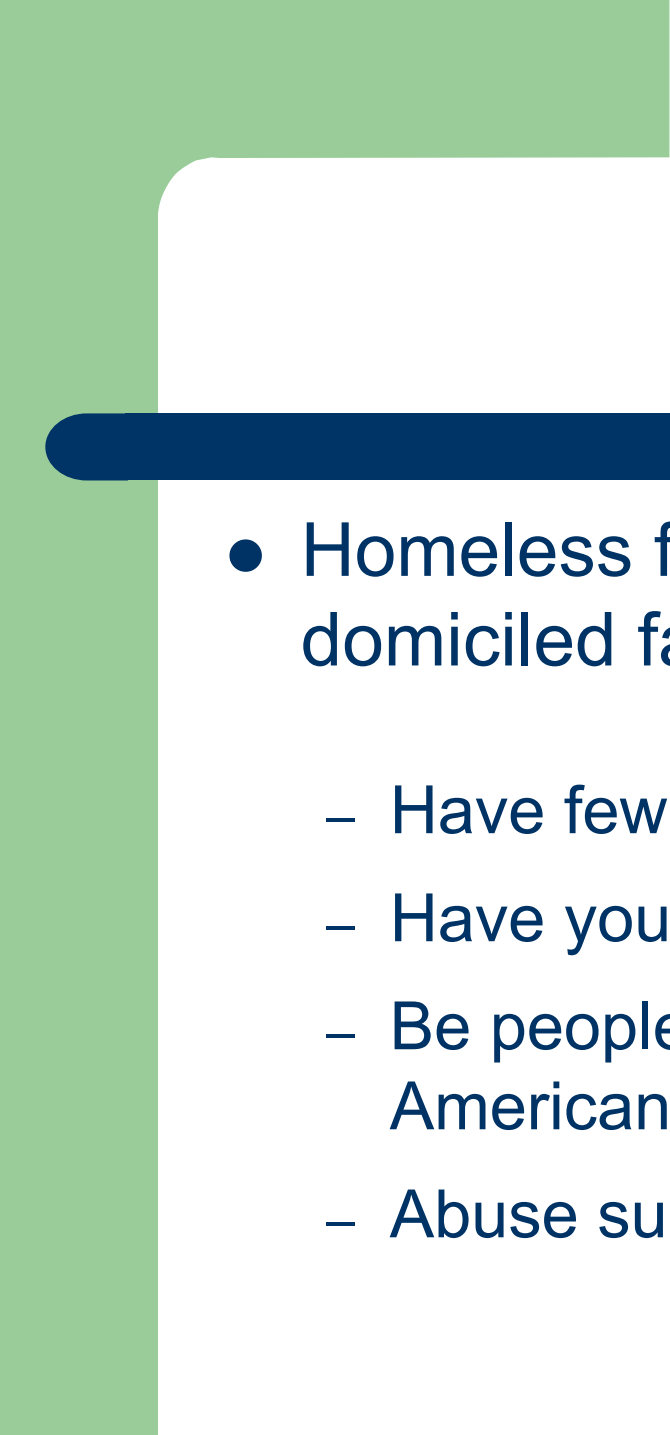
- 43% of recent attempts resulted in hospitalizations (RWJ/HUD)

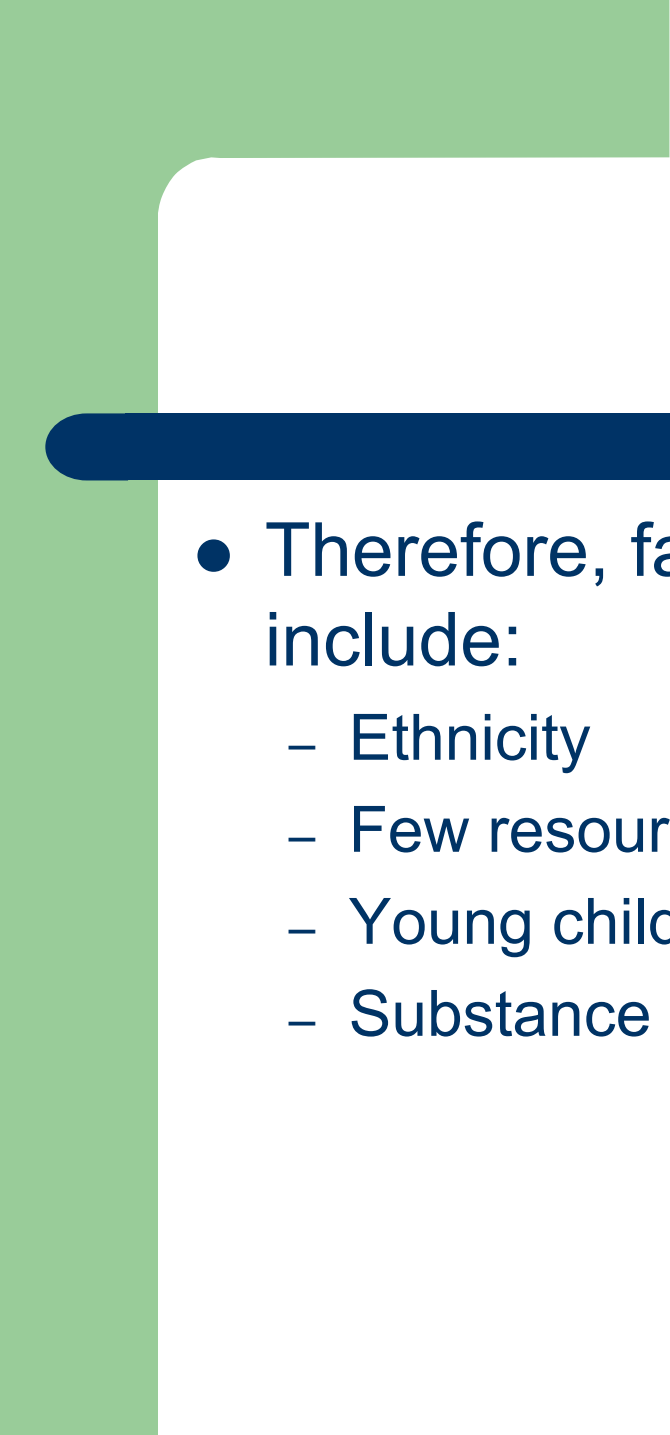
Substance Use Needs

- Lifetime Use
 - 41% (WFPP) – any substance dependence
 - 50% (RWJ/HUD) – ever used hard drugs
- Current Use
 - 5% (WFRP) – use in past month
 - 29% (RWJ/HUD) – “alcoholic”
 - 12% (RWJ/HUD) – hard drug use in past yr

Putting Homeless Families Needs in Context

- Studies comparing homeless and domiciled poor women find no differences in rates and nature of:
 - Mental health needs
 - Physical health needs
 - Educational and work history
- Majority of differences between homeless and other poor families have to do with resources and life stage

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- Homeless families, compared to poor domiciled families, are more likely to:
 - Have fewer economic resources
 - Have younger heads of households
 - Be people of color, especially African-American
 - Abuse substances

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- Therefore, factors that place families at risk include:
 - Ethnicity
 - Few resources
 - Young children and pregnancy
 - Substance abuse

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Homeless Children

The Toll of Homelessness on Children

- Most consistent finding:
 - Homeless children and low income housed children have elevated problems compared to children in the general population
- Less consistent finding:
 - Whether homeless children have additional elevation in problems compared to low-income housed children

Findings on Impact on Mental Health and Behavior

Publication		Hom = Hou = GP	Hom = Hou > GP	Hom > GP	Hom > Hou	Hom > Hou > GP
Ziesemer et al. (1994)	School-age		X			
Schteingart et al. (1994)	3-5 years		X			
Bassuk et al. (1997)	2-5 years					X
Buckner et al. (1999)	6-17 years					X
Buckner & Bassuk (1997)	9-17 years		X			

Findings on Impact on Development and Health

DEVELOPMENT

Publication		Hom = Hou = GP	Hom = Hou > GP	Hom > GP	Hom > Hou	Hom > Hou > GP
Garcia-Coll et al (1999)	0-3 years	X				

HEALTH


Weinreb et al (1998)	0-17 years					X
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Findings on Impact on Education-Related Problems

Publication		Hom = Hou = GP	Hom = Hou > GP	Hom > GP	Hom > Hou	Hom > Hou > GP
Masten et al. (1993)	8-17 years				X	
Masten et al. (1997)	6-11 years			X		
Ziesemer et al. (1994)	School-age		X			
Zima et al. (1994; 1997)	6-12 years			X		
Rubin et al. (1996)	6-11 years					X
Buckner et al. (2001)	6-17 years	X				
Rafferty et al. (2004)	11-17 years				X	

Homelessness and Family Separations

- **Homeless vs housed families are far more likely to become separated from their children**
 - **Separations are due to a variety of factors, including shelter policies, voluntary separations, higher scrutiny of the shelter environment, among others**

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- In one study, over a 5 year period:**
 - 44% of homeless mothers had become separated from 1 or more children compared to 8% of poor mothers in housed families**
 - Even if a housed mother was both drug dependent and experiencing domestic violence,**
 - she was less likely to become separated from her children than a homeless mother with neither of these issues**

Homelessness and Child Welfare

- **Homeless families also experience a greater risk of foster care placement and CPS involvement than other families**
 - **Studies have found that 6% to 26% of homeless children were in foster care or had CPS involvement**
 - **In a Philadelphia study, ‘ever homeless’ families compared to low income families had:**
 - **4X risk of child welfare involvement**
 - **5 ½ times the risk of out-of-home placement**

Homelessness and Reunification

- **Homelessness may impede reunification efforts**
 - **In a review of out-home-placements in Minnesota**
 - **Families with recent homelessness vs. those who had no recent homelessness had ½ the chance of being reunified**

Summary of Impact of Homelessness on Children

- Homeless and low-income housed children look worse on most outcomes compared to children in the general population
- Homelessness *can* have a detrimental effect, but not in all instances
- Homelessness is one of many stressors children living in poverty frequently encounter
- Homelessness, housing problems, and child welfare involvement are strongly linked



Subsidies and Affordable Housing

The Role of Subsidies and Affordable Housing in *Preventing* Homelessness

- *Subsidies act as protective factors*
 - Bassuk et al (1997) found 27% of housed families had subsidies compared to 10% of homeless
- Having *housing assistance* relates to stability
 - In a reanalysis of 3 years of data on an at-risk national sample of families (Rog and Holupka, 2007), among those living below 50% of the poverty level:
 - Homelessness related to having no housing assistance or having lost that assistance or public housing
 - Staying residentially stable (no risks, etc.) strongly predicted by having or gaining public housing
 - In the HUD evaluation of the Welfare to Work Voucher Program:
 - Receipt of tenant-based rental assistance greatly reduced a family's probability of being unstably housed or becoming homeless

The Role of Subsidies and Affordable Housing in *Ending* Homelessness

- By far, the *strongest predictor of exiting* homelessness over time was access to subsidies (Shinn et al, 1998; Zlotnick et al, 1999)
- Families *least likely to return to shelter* were those who received subsidies vs. other placements (Stretch and Krueger, 1992; Wong et al, 1997)
- Placing families in subsidized housing *reduced repeat shelter use* in Philadelphia (Culhane, 1992)



Interventions for Homeless Families

Examining Housing Interventions

- Up to recently, very little direct study of the effects of housing and/or services for families
 - Largely descriptive evaluations of demonstration initiatives
- Interventions examined include supportive housing, rapid housing, transitional housing
 - No studies compare the different housing approaches (TH, permanent SH, or permanent housing)
 - Also considerable variability within the different models

Sample of Supportive Housing Evaluations

The Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation Family Permanent Supportive Housing Initiative	Nolan et al, 2005; 2004	Families stay an ave of 2.2 years;
RWJF/HUD Program	Rog et al, 1995	88% remain housed up to 18 months
Family Unification Program	Rog et al, 1998	85% or > remain housed after 12 months
Edna McConnell Clark Foundation	Weitzman & Berry, 1994	Nearly all remain in housing after 12 months; less than 5% return to shelter

Housing First

The Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation Housing First Initiative	LaFrance, 2005	88% received Section 8 or market rate housing/ time reduced
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Transitional Housing

Sound Families Initiative	Northwest Institute for Children and Families, 2005	70% exiting TH did so with Section 8
Review of TH programs	Burt, 2006	35% leave with subsidy, range by community



- Despite variations in models, intensity of services and populations served, evaluations invariably find high stability rates
- A major gap in our understanding is the amount of services families need in addition to the housing
- Need to know:
 - *What families need what services, when, and at what level of intensity to get housing, stay housed, and achieve other outcomes*

Examining Services Interventions

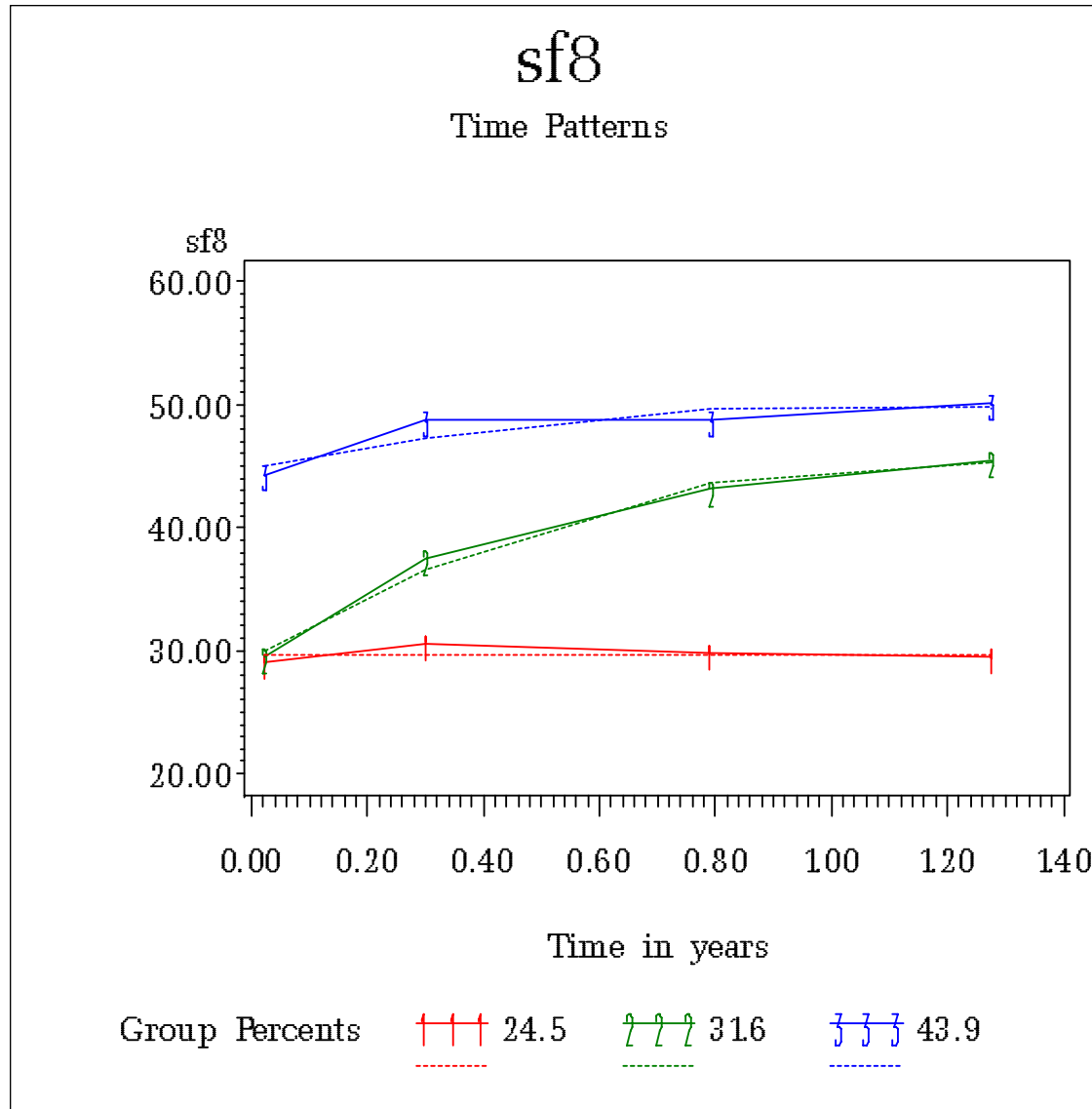
- Little research or evaluation on ameliorating families' problems
- CMHS/CSAT Homeless Families Program is notable exception
 - 5 year, multi-site initiative
 - Focused on homeless families in which mother had psychiatric/and/or substance abuse disorders
 - Compared effectiveness of innovative interventions to services as usual or alternatives
 - Innovative interventions were to be time-limited, multi-faceted, and aimed at MH, SA, or trauma needs
 - Target intervention models varied, though shared common parameters

CMHS/CSAT Homeless Families Program: Cross-site Evaluation Findings

- No effects for the interventions compared to services as usual on range of outcomes
- For substance abuse and mental health outcomes, having more onsite services in these areas related to greater improvements for families, especially those with clinical levels of the problems

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- Examining trajectories of change over time indicated:
 - Different patterns of change over time, though on average all progressed
 - Less improvement on a number of outcomes was related to reports of conflict and network conflict
 - More improvement related to employment (lesser degree to own home)
 - Findings suggest need to screen families early on and to understand continuing struggles that interfere with ability to progress

Patterns of Change Over Time – HFP Illustration



Interventions for Homeless Children

- Few interventions or studies of interventions for homeless children
- Part of CMHS/CSAT Homeless Families Program examined effectiveness of interventions on children's behavior
 - Overall, no treatment or programmatic emphasis associated with change
 - Mother's psychological distress and parenting practices were independent predictors of child behavior problems
 - Study did identify a significant portion of children at the clinical level on emotional behavior
- Need for more intervention research targeted to children with greatest needs



Preventing Family Homelessness

Difficulties in Targeting

- Broad targeting likely to be inefficient
 - Reanalysis of Fragile Families data set indicated that even among high risk set of families living $\leq 50\%$ of poverty level:
 - Somewhere between 8 and 23% experienced one night or more of homelessness in a 3 year period
- Others (Shinn et al, 1998: Bassuk et al, 1997) found that even with numerous predictors models were not very predictive and no one risk factor stood out

Preventing Homelessness Among Families: Strategies

- HUD funded study of community-wide prevention strategies (Burt & Pearson, 2005)
 - cash and in-kind assistance
 - mediation services
 - rapid exit strategies
 - using data and research to target highest risk families
- Authors also noted importance of housing subsidies as prevention strategy based on research evidence

Preventing Homelessness Among Families: Strategies

- Elements of successful community-wide strategies are those that:
 - Help target families effectively
 - Reflect community motivation/commitment
 - Maximize resources, such as collaboration
 - Demonstrate community leadership and vision



Summary and Conclusions

What We Know About Homeless Families and Children

- Greater understanding of the factors that increase families' vulnerability to homelessness
- The problems faced by families, though not always unique to homelessness
- The “poverty-related” impact on children and homelessness as an important marker of risk

What We Know About Interventions That Work

- Subsidies have a strong role in reducing and ending homelessness
- Less is known in dealing with risk factors or struggles families cope with daily
- Less is known on the right match of services and housing to family needs

What We Know About Preventing Family Homelessness

- The low incidence of family homelessness (even among those with limited means) suggests secondary vs. primary prevention
- Strategies such as conflict mediation, financial assistance, and other context-specific efforts warrant more study

The Course of Homelessness and Its Effects

- Need more study of the course of homelessness and its effects, especially on children
- Need broader population focus in studies to allow understanding of the various segments of the population and how best to match interventions with needs