

# The Challenges and Issues in Caring for Homeless Families with Children

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# 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

## Theme 2: Woman as Mother

*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



# Theme 4: Caring for Families

*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 ?

