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Mothers With Children and Mothers Alone:
A Comparison of Homeless Families

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Researchers usually define a homeless family as those parents accompanied by minor children. This study compares a sample of homeless mothers accompanied by their children to homeless mothers who report that their children are elsewhere. While there are some differences between these two groups such as age and number of children, there are also a number of similarities. Both groups of mothers report that they rely on family members and friends as sources of instrumental support. These networks are especially useful for housing children. The findings from this investigation suggest a need for a more inclusive definition of homeless families so that services can be geared towards all families affected by a loss of stable housing.

Homeless families compose the fastest growing segment of the homeless population (Rossi, 1994; Burt, 1992). Most studies on homeless families focus specifically on parents accompanied by minor children in public or private shelters. "When mothers seek emergency shelter alone, they are considered single regardless of their possible contact with children and their own self images as part of a family network" (Brickner et al., 1990:140). This operational definition of a homeless family excludes those adults who resort to homeless shelters while their children reside elsewhere thus limiting our understanding of the process families go through upon losing stable housing. The present study relies on a sample of homeless mothers both with and without their minor children in a public shelter. Two questions are addressed by this comparison of types of homeless mothers: (1) Are these two groups significantly different from one another? (2) If there are differences between them, do these differences suggest that

mothers who resort to the shelter alone are in need of different services than those accompanied by their children?

Studies comparing homeless individuals without children to homeless parents accompanied by children and those comparing housed mothers to homeless mothers suggest that homeless mothers accompanied by children resemble a housed population more so than homeless women without children. For example, homeless women are older and tend to have more psychological problems than homeless mothers with children. Some authors conclude that these two groups are indeed different and in need of different types of services (Johnson and Kreuger, 1989). Comparisons of housed mothers in poverty and homeless mothers find that these groups are similar in age, education, number of children and number of social ties (Goodman, 1991). It appears that homeless mothers are less likely than housed mothers to have the resources to maintain independent housing but are just as likely to have social contacts. While there is some evidence that homeless adults with children are different from those without children, few studies ask about the existence of minor children not in the shelter system (Burt and Cohen, 1989). Consequently, if we rely on the types of studies discussed above, our perception of the extent to which families are affected by homelessness and the needs of such families will be limited to those in which parents and children remain together. By using information on the location of children who are not in a shelter with their mothers, this study can describe the array of strategies used to cope with the loss of stable housing.

Methodology

The data for the study is drawn from a population of homeless families taking shelter in Austin, Texas. The shelter offers a variety of services for those needing assistance and is therefore conducive to collecting a sample of homeless families from a variety of backgrounds and situations. As with many investigations of homelessness, this sample is limited in scope and may not be generalizable to the national population of homeless families. Files of social workers' interviews with homeless women were utilized to create a quota sample of 168 family units with children present or women with dependent children elsewhere. The

sample includes women seeking shelter over a recent 18 month period. There were 46 mothers without accompanying children and 81 mothers with at least one child present at the shelter. These groups will be referred to as unaccompanied mothers and accompanied mothers respectively.

Findings

The homeless families in this sample are similar in many ways to the homeless families found in other major studies (Rossi, 1989; Burt and Cohen, 1989). However, the suggestion that homeless families are, for the most part, composed of young mothers leaving their parental home, temporarily homeless and awaiting Public Assistance funds to allow them to set up their own home is not supported (Rossi, 1989). The characteristics of the Austin sample defy this image. The average age and education levels of the mothers in this study, for example, are higher than this image of teen mothers with few skills. There are some differences between the two groups of mothers in this sample, however.

The accompanied homeless mothers are younger (30 vs. 33 years), have younger children (4.1 vs. 8.3 years) and have fewer children (1.9 vs. 2.4) than those unaccompanied by their children. In addition the accompanied mothers are less likely to have completed high school. Nonetheless, half of the accompanied mothers had a high school degree or its equivalent and sixty-six percent of the unaccompanied mothers had at least this much education. The t-tests (not shown) for these demographic characteristics indicate that these are significant differences but neither group fits the stereotype of the young mother leaving her parental home for the first time. A comparison of the work and residential history of these two groups illustrates several similarities between the two groups of mothers.

Few of the accompanied or unaccompanied mothers in this sample are currently employed upon entering the shelter, although many indicate that they have previously worked and gave the reasons for leaving their last place of employment. Table 1 presents the reasons given for leaving employment. Of those specifying a reason, accompanied mothers are more likely to report that they left their jobs due to family responsibilities, pregnancy, child care constraints and illness. The greater likelihood

that women accompanied by their children lost their jobs due to family responsibilities suggests that the role conflict of breadwinner and care giver may lead to homelessness. These mothers have younger children on average. The difficulties single mothers face in the job market and in finding adequate and affordable child care make this population particularly vulnerable to homelessness (Milburn and D'Ercole, 1989). Since neither group of women is likely to be employed, job programs may be of use to both. Public child care and sick-child care are also needed, especially by those mothers who do not or cannot rely on family and friends for these services and therefore cannot maintain employment.

Table 1

Employment Status and Reasons for Leaving Last Place of Employment

	Unaccompanied Mothers		Accompanied Mothers	
	N	Percent	N	Percent
Employed On Entering Shelter	5	10.9	10	12.4
Reason for Leaving Last Employment				
Move or transportation Problem	5	10.9	7	8.6
Job Related (ie. temp job, etc.)	3	6.5	7	8.6
Conflict at work/ Fired, quit, etc.	5	10.9	5	6.2
Family/Illness, Preg., childcare	4	8.7	15	18.5
No reason given/ No previous job	24	52.2	37	45.7
Number	46	100.0	81	100.0

Source: Emergency Shelter, Austin, Texas

It is common for families to share living quarters with friends or other family members before resorting to public shelters. As seen in Table 2, accompanied and unaccompanied mothers who came to the Austin shelter are both likely to have come from a family or friend's home. Interestingly none of the unaccompanied mothers came directly from a home shared with a spouse or partner. These mothers are more likely to be formerly married, however, suggesting the availability of a former spouse to house their children when the mothers are unable to do so. The accompanied mothers are more likely to have come directly from a home shared with a spouse. In other words, when marital break-up and homelessness occurred simultaneously, children became homeless with their mothers. Clearly, both unaccompanied and accompanied mothers are likely to have relied upon other social contacts for assistance and housing before resorting to the public shelter.

Table 2

Previous Residences of Unaccompanied and Accompanied Homeless Mothers

	Unaccompanied Mothers		Accompanied Mothers	
	N	Percent	N	Percent
Own Home	9	19.6	19	23.5
Home of Spouse/Partner	0	0.0	8	9.9
Parents'	4	8.7	10	12.3
Other Relatives'	3	6.5	7	8.6
Friends'	13	28.3	18	22.2
Other (tents, shelters, etc.)	5	10.9	6	7.4
Unknown	12	26.1	13	16.0
Number	46	100.0	81	100.0

Source: Emergency Shelter, Austin, Texas

That social networks are important resources for homeless mothers is also demonstrated by the living arrangements of the children not found at the shelter. Table 3 looks at the living arrangements of all of the children of both groups of mothers. Parents, grandparents and other relatives are important sources of care for these children. Older children are more likely to be in the "other" category which includes the few children in foster care as well as children who moved in with friends' families.

As the above discussion illustrates, the biggest difference between the accompanied and unaccompanied mothers is the presence or absence of their minor children. Looking only at the 46 mothers who came to the shelter without their minor children, two things are clear. First, the experience of having their children removed from their care by a social service agency is very rare. The reason mothers separate from there children have much more to do with their financial need rather than abuse or psychological distress. The second observation from these unaccompanied mothers' situations is that family members and friends are important sources of housing and care for their children. A large

Table 3

Location of The Children of Unaccompanied and Accompanied Mothers

	Children of Unaccompanied Mothers		Children of Accompanied Mothers	
	N	Percent	N	Percent
Present at Shelter	0	0.0	179	88.5
Other Parent	30	37.5	8	4.0
Grandparent	28	35.0	8	4.0
Other Relative	12	15.0	3	1.5
Other (Foster care, self care, etc.)	10	12.5	4	2.0
Number	80	100.0	202	100.0

Source: Emergency Shelter, Austin, Texas

minority of all mothers (41.3%) report their children are in the care of their other parent. This means, however, that the majority of the minor children not at the shelter with their mothers are not in the care of either parent but are more likely to be in the care of a grandparent or other relative. Some of the mothers keep their youngest children with them when they move to the shelter but leave older children with others so they can remain in school. For example, one mother came to the shelter with her two toddler children but had left her older son with her parents so that he could stay in school. With only limited resources at their disposal, the mother's parents were doing all they could to help her by housing one of her children.

It is not clear at what point mothers separate from their children, but those who do leave their children in the care of others appear to do so when their social networks become stretched and doubled-up living arrangements become crowded. For example, some unaccompanied mothers report that they did not come directly from the place they left their children but had lived with other family members or moved in with friends for as long as they could. The mothers may move through their social networks before resorting to the public shelter, while using the most secure of their social ties (ie. their own parents or siblings) to house their children. These situations are frequently intended to be temporary. One mother describes leaving her six year old daughter with her grandparents in another town while looking for permanent housing in Austin. She then intends to be reunited with her daughter once she can afford to care for her. Had this women been included in other studies of homelessness, she would not have been counted as a homeless family because her child was not with her in the shelter. Nonetheless, the ties between parent and child still exist and the services needed by this woman and those like her are similar to those needed by mothers who bring their children with them to the shelter. Designing programs to support families clearly needs to include families temporarily separated by housing needs.

Summary and Discussion

There are several small differences between those women whose children are housed elsewhere and those who bring at least

one of their children to the public shelter in Austin. Unaccompanied mothers are older, have higher educations and older and fewer children. In addition, accompanied mothers are more likely to report that they lost employment due to the need to care for family members. Thus, the precipitating events to homelessness may be different for some of the mothers who bring their children to the shelter than for those unaccompanied.

These two groups of mothers are quite similar in terms of their contact with friends or family suggesting that homeless mothers are not isolated from their social networks. The unaccompanied mothers may have networks with more resources available. For example, the fact that their minor children are not with them reflects the capacity of some mothers' networks to provide instrumental support. In addition, their separation from their children represents choices mothers make in the interest of their children. The fact that some mothers can find friends or relatives to provide care for their children in times of need does not indicate that these mothers have different service needs than those whose friends and family members are unable or unwilling to provide housing.

Including single adults in analyses of family homelessness illuminates the manner in which a lack of stable housing affects all family members, not just those found in emergency shelters. Broadening the analysis of family homelessness to include absent children illustrates the importance of social networks for homeless mothers and the variety of ways families may adapt to a loss of permanent housing. Many homeless mothers have others they can turn to for support and housing for their children and for temporary housing for themselves. The fact that some mothers do not come directly from the same location as their minor children suggests that there are many steps on the route to becoming homeless. Some findings suggest that leaving a stressful, doubled-up living arrangement is the last step before resorting to public shelters (Burt and Cohen, 1989). Apparently another part of this process for some mothers involves establishing secure housing for their children. Such strategies are useful in the face of obstacles for self sufficiency such as low paying jobs and long waiting lists for subsidized housing.

The data of this study call into question the conventional definition of a "homeless family" and suggest that excluding mothers

alone in public shelters from services aimed at supporting families without stable housing ignores a significant segment of the population of families affected by homelessness. The findings also have important implications for public policy reforms. For example, the viability of proposals for reform of the welfare system are called into question by the fact that so many mothers indicate that they lost their employment due to family-care needs. Reforms that include job requirements for welfare recipients are untenable without affordable, reliable child care.

The findings of this study also indicate that programs for homeless families are providing services needed by families where only the adults are technically homeless. Many mothers have no one to house them or their children or they must choose which children to leave with relatives. Mothers in the dire economic conditions that lead to homelessness may have friends and family members who wish to help them but cannot afford to do so forcing separations of mothers from their children. A more behaviorally accurate definition of a homeless family would include those adults who lack a fixed permanent address and have minor children dependent upon them, regardless of where their children are located. By including all families in services for homeless families, it may be possible to reunite these children with their parents.

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