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DO THE HOMELESS CHOOSE TO REMAIN HOMELESS?

A Project

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Social Work

by

Miranda Dawn Robinson

September 1997


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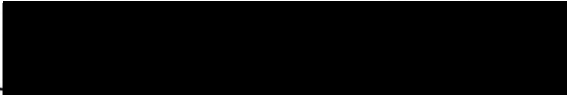
by
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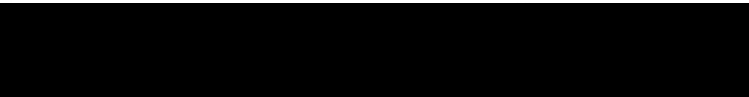
September 1997

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this constructivist research study was to examine the topic of homeless families in shelters and to explore the possibility that the homeless choose to remain homeless. The author felt this was an important consideration in making the appropriate decision in regard to the continued use of shelters to remedy “homelessness”, the appropriate operational model, as well as how to fund them. Eleven adult residents of local homeless shelters were interviewed. It would appear that the advantages of shelter living encourage residents to remain in temporary living situations.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
DO THE HOMELESS CHOOSE TO REMAIN HOMELESS	1
RESEARCH QUESTIONS	9
METHOD	10
LIMITATIONS	11
SAMPLE	12
FINDINGS	12
DISCUSSION	24
CONCLUSION	24
REFERENCES	28

Do the Homeless Choose to Remain Homeless?

Family homelessness began to be recognized as a major social problem during the 1980s. At that time members of homeless families constituted as much as 37% of the homeless population (Burt & Cohen, 1989; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1989). Reyes and Waxman (1989) estimated that 80% of all homeless families were headed by single parents, primarily women. With the increase in family homelessness, research has focused on how families become homeless, characteristics of homeless family members, and the impact of homelessness on parents and children.

✕ Many reasons have been given to explain why "homelessness" occurs. Families may be evicted for nonpayment of rent. This may occur as a result of inability to manage funds. For example, money may be used to purchase drugs rather than to pay rent. The household's income may be insufficient to pay rent. As a result of AFDC reductions, a single mother may no longer have enough income to pay her rent. Some families are evicted because of conflicts with landlords. For example, Lori, a mother of three, did not pay her rent on time because the landlord had agreed to fix the plumbing and had not yet done so. Therefore, she decided to hold onto the rent until repairs were completed. In the interim, there were clothes and personal items that the family needed so Lori used some of the money to purchase them. She received an eviction notice and was told on her court date that she'd have to pay the back and current rent in order to remain in the house. Lori was forced to go to a shelter as she no longer had the funds to pay her back rent.

Some families become homeless as a result of residing in unsafe housing. A home may be without running water, heat, or electricity. Fire can render homes uninhabitable. For one family, a fire made it impossible for the mother to provide birth records, immunization records, and school records necessary to obtain assistance from the Department of Social Services.

Families may become homeless as a result of conflicts with other family members or friends. Single mothers and their children may become homeless following the mother's decision to leave an abusive husband or boyfriend.

Vulnerability to homelessness came to be seen as, in part, due to human capital deficits (Sutherland & Locke, 1936). As the United States moved out of the Depression, writers continued to emphasize the importance of deficient education and training in vulnerability to homelessness. In their overview of studies on the attributes of homeless people, Burt and Cohen (1989) found correlations consistent with this argument in eight of nine investigations reporting relevant data.

Relative to the general population, homeless people have a higher incidence of alcoholism and drug use (Fischer, 1989). These addictions severely restrict job opportunities, which, in turn, increase the probability of chronic unemployment and vulnerability to homelessness. The use of alcohol or other drugs result in disinhibition which may lead to sexual risk taking, increased chance of pregnancy or exposure to sexually transmitted disease.

Problem Being Studied

The response to the dramatic increase of homelessness among families during the past decade has been the establishment in community after community of special shelters for that group. The latest U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development shelter survey, conducted in 1989, estimated that in 1988 there were more than 5,000 shelters in the United States in areas with populations over 25,000. The department's previous survey, conducted in 1984, produced a national estimate of 1,900 shelters. The contrast between the two surveys indicated more than a doubling in the number of shelters over a four year period. There is every reason to believe that the number of family shelters has increased since 1988, although probably at a lower rate of annual increase.

Across the nation, family shelters outnumber any other shelter type, constituting 39 percent of all shelters (Weinreb & Rossi, 1995). Shelters provide temporary housing at little or no cost to the family. In addition, shelter staff attempt to help families to improve their coping strategies and to connect them again with the housing market. In addition to restricting admission for certain behaviors or conditions, many homeless family shelters impose other restrictions. Shelters may limit client's length of stay. Most require clients to sign contracts which spell out rules and regulations for residents. Many shelters require clients to receive counseling and to participate in parenting education groups. Shelter programs typically require residents to perform housekeeping tasks. Program requirements also ask clients to refrain from certain behaviors including use of obscene

language, use of alcohol, use of drugs, and physical disciplining of children. Most prohibit visits with “partners”.

Genesis Shelter is one such shelter designed to provide temporary housing at little cost to the family. It has a number of rules designed to insure the safety and privacy of its residents. Use of alcohol or drugs is prohibited both on and off the premises. No weapons of any kind are permitted at Genesis. No violence, threats of violence, or harassment is allowed. No damage to property is allowed. Inappropriate sex or physical contact among residents or visitors is prohibited. Only residents assigned to a unit are permitted in that unit. No one else is allowed in that particular unit, including other residents and visitors. Visitors are permitted to visit outside the unit. Each resident is assigned a chore which must be completed by 9:00 a.m. each day. Curfew is at 9:00 p.m. during the week and 10:00 p.m. on the weekends. Overnight passes are not allowed. Residents may not spend the night off the premises for any reason.

In addition to rules designed to insure the safety of its residents, Genesis Shelter has several other program requirements. Each adult resident is expected to attend weekly case management meetings with their assigned case manager. During these sessions, residents and case managers work together to determine goals and activities needed to accomplish goals. Employment activities may be addressed in the resident's contract. For instance, the resident may be required to turn in a certain number of job applications during the course of a week. Housing, finances, group attendance, and appointments are other activities which may be addressed in the resident contract.

Residents with a history of substance abuse must be actively involved in an approved substance abuse treatment program. Residents are expected to attend all groups not in conflict with substance abuse programs or job-related activities. Genesis staff provide the following groups for the residents of the shelter: Self-Esteem, Alternatives to Domestic Violence, 12-Step, Co-Dependency, Money Management, Parenting, Cooking, and Employment Workshops. Teenagers participate in a Parent-Teen Communication group. There are groups for younger children as well as older children.

* Residents are required to provide proof of their income and to pay 25% of their income for program fees. Residents are expected to open and maintain savings accounts. They are required to save 45% of their monthly income. They are allowed to spend 30% of their income. However, they must show receipts to their respective case managers to demonstrate how their money was spent.

*Explain as
Reasons
not to
attend
shelter*

Educational testing is done at the shelter. Some residents may be referred to agencies such as Adult Education to complete their general education requirements. Others may be referred to agencies such as J.T.P.A. which provide on the job training. Determinations are made on a case by case basis and are based on the person's level of education and ability to secure and maintain adequate employment.

Genesis Shelter has a Housing Specialist on staff to assist residents in securing permanent housing. As most residents have limited income, primarily Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and poor credit, the Housing Specialist's task is somewhat difficult. The Housing Specialist actively recruits potential landlords. Prospective landlords are told

about the services provided by Genesis and are reassured that residents continue to receive case management services for up to six months after securing permanent housing.

Genesis accepts single mothers with children, single fathers with children, and two-parent families. Single persons are not accepted. Women who need shelter to escape abusive relationships are referred to domestic violence shelters. Homeless persons with significant mental illness are referred to the Department of Mental Health's Homeless Program for assistance. Genesis is not equipped to safely house such residents.

I Care Shelter provides temporary shelter for single women, single mothers and their children, and two-parent families. I Care Shelter does not have accommodations for single men with no children. Single women stay in a dormitory type setting. Some private rooms are available for families. The primary focus of I Care Shelter is on recovery. Many residents participate in Recovery Operation Center (ROC) or in My Family Incorporated (MFI), both substance abuse programs. Although the primary focus is recovery, I Care Shelter also accepts persons with no substance/alcohol abuse histories. Food, furniture, and laundry facilities are provided. Fees are based on family size and size of accommodations. There is no pre-determined maximum length of stay for residents. Exit dates are determined on a case by case basis. Residents are required to attend house meetings nightly at 7:00 p.m. Failure to attend a meeting may be grounds for being asked to leave the shelter. The purpose of these meetings is to discuss concerns and problems which may have arisen during the day. Counseling is provided only if specifically

requested by the resident. Residents are required to sign out when leaving the premises and to abide by the curfew (11:00 p.m. on weeknights and 2:00 a.m. on the weekend).

An important purpose of transitional shelters is to get families into decent permanent housing as quickly as possible. However, despite the best efforts of shelter staff, residents frequently end up remaining at shelters for extended periods of time. Are these residents choosing to remain homeless by failing to follow through on permanent housing available?

Piliavin, Wright, Mare, and Westerfelt (1996), developed hypotheses linking homelessness to institutional disaffiliation, human capital deficiencies, personal disabilities, and acculturation to the homeless lifestyle. As initially employed by Howard Bahr and Theodore Caplow (1973), institutional disaffiliation refers to the weakening of an individual's bonds to conventional society. Bahr and Caplow argued the importance of this condition from their findings that homeless men were much more likely than those who were domiciled to have severed or never experienced relationships with members of a broad range of social institutions. They suggested that the disaffiliated - devoid of significant others, property, responsibility, and status - no longer responded to the expectations of conventional society and, thus, were beyond its reach. Piliavin et. al. hypothesized that those whose attributes and experiences reflect greater disaffiliation will have lower rates of exits from current homeless spells. *"Bum" mentality.*

During the Great Depression, vulnerability to homelessness came to be seen as, in part, due to human capital deficits (Sutherland & Locke, 1936). It was believed that

deficient education and training increased vulnerability to homelessness. Burt and Cohen (1989) found correlations consistent with this argument in eight of nine investigations reporting relevant data. Piliavin et. al. hypothesized that the rate of exiting homeless spells is lower among individuals who have less education, have no vocational training, and have spent a greater part of their adult life unemployed.

Arguments that people become and remain homeless because of personal disabilities have had an exceptionally long history in the United States. Recent discussions argue that various physical and mental health conditions, as well as addictions, severely restrict job opportunities, which, in turn, increases the probability of chronic unemployment and vulnerability to homelessness (Katz, 1986). Data from many studies are consistent with this thesis: relative to the general population, homeless people have a higher incidence of physical disabilities, alcoholism, mental illness, and drug use (Straus, 1946, Rossi, 1989, Cohen, 1981, Morse, 1985). *Because of Situation: ?*

The concept of acculturation holds that to survive on the streets, individuals must assimilate a street culture - the information, values, associations, and lifestyle preferences that support and give meaning to life on the streets (Anderson, 1923, Wallace, 1965). According to Caplow, in acquiring the knowledge, values, and friendships required for life within the homeless society, individuals are pulled toward that society and find it difficult to leave (Caplow, 1970). A recent empirical study that examined the role of acculturation in remaining homeless found that a measure of individual comfort with and knowledge of

street life was positively associated with the duration of homeless careers (Piliavin, Sosin, Westerfelt & Matsueda, 1993).

Research Questions

This research focused on the topic of homeless families in shelters and the cause of homelessness. It addressed pros and cons of living in a shelter in comparison to independent living. It explored the possibility that the homeless choose to remain homeless.

Prior to beginning the research, the author observed an interesting phenomena at her internship, a local homeless shelter. It seemed as if many residents did not want to leave the shelter. Shelter staff may have secured permanent housing for the resident, but the resident would refuse housing for one reason or another. The resident might complain that the housing was too small, too far, etc. Alternative locations would be declined for similar reasons. Or, if a resident agreed to accept housing, s/he would delay the move in date for up to several months. Was the shelter too comfortable (for whatever reason) to leave?

In order to establish a knowledge base that centers on contemporary homeless shelters, the major research questions addressed in this study were as follows: How did you become homeless? How long have you been at the shelter. What are the advantages of living in a shelter? What are the disadvantages of living in a shelter? What are the advantages of independent living? What are the disadvantages of independent living? Are

there advantages to shelter living that don't exist in independent living? What obstacles impede progress toward securing independent living? If you had money to move before the date you had to be out of the shelter, would you move or would you wait until your termination/exit date? Why?

Method

The Constructivist method was the best approach for obtaining the much needed knowledge on homeless families. Erlandson, Harris, Skipper and Allen (1993) stated that the purpose of a research inquiry was to seek to resolve the problem by accumulating pertinent knowledge and information. This was accomplished through collaboration with the various stakeholders in the social context being studied. For this study on homeless families, the Constructivist Paradigm collected the opinions and experiences of stakeholders such as homeless parents. Jankowski, Videka-Sherman, and Laquidara-Dickinson, (1996) stated that qualitative research methodology was naturalistic and oriented to discovery rather than hypotheses testing.

As was previously stated, the goal of the author was to establish a knowledge base centering around homeless families in shelters. In order to accomplish this goal, the author performed the first round of the Constructivist study. This entailed interviewing homeless men and women at Genesis and I Care Shelter. The length of each interview varied, ranging from thirty minutes to one hour. The author took notes during each

interview. All data was compiled, coded, and then sent back to the respondent(member-checking) for accuracy. Interviews were conducted by a graduate social work student.

Constructivist studies are usually comprised of several rounds. In this study, the first round consisted of homeless residents of shelters. To obtain a thorough understanding of the topic, additional rounds of research are necessary. Former shelter residents should be interviewed as well as line and administrative staff. Based on the results of this inquire, the appropriate decision can be made in regard to the continued use of shelters to remedy “homelessness”, or utilizing other alternatives. Decisions can then be made as to the appropriate operational model as well as how to fund them.

Limitations

The researcher worked at Genesis Shelter as an MSW intern from September, 1996 through June, 1997. During the course of her internship, the researcher provided case management services to shelter residents. The researcher acted as case manager, advocate, educator, consultant, gatekeeper, and counselor. In addition, the researcher led and co-led group sessions for residents.

These dual roles of researcher and shelter staff may have caused a response problem. Respondents did not separate the researcher from the staff member. As a result, they may have responded the way they thought the researcher wanted them to.

The researcher worked at Genesis Shelter for twenty hours a week over a ten month period. The researcher was able to observe the behaviors of shelter residents on a

day to day basis. However, the researcher failed to record these observations in a journal. As a result, the researcher was not able to fully utilize this additional set of data.

Sample

The research sample consisted of eleven adult residents of homeless shelters. Eight of the eleven are residents of Genesis Shelter, located in Riverside, California. Three of the eleven are residents of I Care Shelter, also located in Riverside, California. Nine of the eleven participants were adult females, two were adult males. Eight of the eleven residents have one to five children with them in shelter. Two of the eleven participants had children residing elsewhere. One of the eleven participants did not have children. Five of the eleven participants were African-American, five were Caucasian, and one was Hispanic.

Participants were chosen from a convenience sample on the basis of input from shelter providers, who spent many hours with the researcher before the study describing the services, referral sources, and shelter guests.

Findings

How Did You Become Homeless?

Five of the eleven respondents became homeless as a result of eviction proceedings. Two of the eleven respondents used their money to purchase drugs. Neither had enough money left over to pay their bills and were eventually evicted for non-payment

of rent. One of the eleven respondents quit paying her rent after her five year old son was shocked as a result of faulty wiring. This respondent thought that her manager would make the needed repairs once she began withholding her rent. However, that was not the case. The manager never did make the needed repairs, opting instead to evict the respondent, her boyfriend, and her three children. One of the eleven respondents reported she almost had a nervous breakdown when her boyfriend went to jail. She couldn't handle it. She wanted to fight the manager, who eventually began procedures to evict her and her children.

Two of the eleven respondents voluntarily left their living situations. One of the eleven respondents was renting a room from a gentleman and his son. She was trying to overcome drug addiction. However, her landlord's son was an active addict. This respondent decided she could no longer live in that environment so she left. After not receiving an AFDC check for two months, one of the eleven respondents decided to move in with a friend to save expenses. This respondent decided to leave her shared housing situation after her friend vandalized her belongings.

Two of the eleven respondents worked as apartment managers. They received free housing in exchange for managing the complex. When the complex was sold by the company that owned it, these respondents were not kept on by the new owners. As a result, they became homeless. They had nowhere else to go.

One of the eleven respondent's house caught fire. It was uninhabitable once the fire was contained. The respondent, her boyfriend, and her children moved into a motel,

where they had to pay daily. They had been living at the motel for three months when the boyfriend was arrested and sent to jail. The respondent didn't have enough money to pay for the motel without her boyfriend's income so she contacted a shelter for temporary assistance.

One of the eleven respondents was asked to leave by the person with whom she resided. The respondent was living out of state at the time. Her roommate gave her a bus ticket and sent her to California.

Length of Stay at Shelter

Most of the respondents had resided in a homeless shelter for six months or more. Seven of the eleven respondents had resided in a homeless shelter for at least six months. Three of these respondents had been in shelter for six months, two had been in shelter for seven months, and two had been in shelter for eight months. Of the four respondents who had been in shelter for less than six months, three had been in shelter for less than one month.

Advantages of Living in a Shelter

According to study participants, there were numerous advantages to living in a shelter. The majority of participants agreed that the main advantages were having a safe place to live, being able to save for permanent housing, participating in and learning from group sessions, and having supportive staff.

Five of the eleven respondents indicated they felt safe and secure at the shelter. One respondent had resided in a drug infested apartment complex which was raided by police frequently. This respondent and her family got “jumped” many times by other residents of her complex. She reported she didn’t have to worry about such things at the shelter. Another respondent had resided in a similar neighborhood. She too felt secure at the shelter and was able to regain her peace of mind as a result. A third respondent indicated she was able to sleep at night because she knew she was in a safe place at the shelter.

Five of the eleven respondents mentioned saving money as an advantage of living in a shelter. Two of the five learned how to save while at the shelter. Both reported they planned to continue to set aside savings for emergencies on an ongoing basis. One of the five was able to pay off creditors as a result of saving money at the shelter. Another two indicated their savings would help them get on their feet again.

Five of the eleven respondents indicated they benefited from groups held at the shelter. Two of the five said that they were able to process issues they had suppressed for years. One of the five especially benefited from the Co-Dependency groups. Prior to her boyfriend’s incarceration she had relied on him for everything. As a result of her participation in Co-Dependency groups, she learned to become more independent and self-sufficient. She also learned a lot about parenting in the Parenting classes. Another of the five respondents who appreciated the groups learned a lot from the Money Management groups. She learned to stretch her income by using coupons when shopping.

Four of the eleven respondents appreciated the support they received from shelter staff. One of the four stated she received a lot of support from the Assistant Director of one of the shelters. According to this respondent, the Assistant Director had been through some of the things she was experiencing. The Assistant Director knew what it was like to be addicted to drugs and she knew how difficult it was to get off drugs. Therefore, the Assistant Director was better able to relate to and be supportive of this particular resident. One person felt that shelter staff were very helpful. One person felt that shelter staff were nice, compassionate and loving toward the residents.

Four of the eleven respondents felt grateful to have shelter. One of the four expressed that it was good for her to keep off the street, to have a roof over her head. She was able to get her son out of foster care and returned to her custody because she had shelter. Another person was grateful to have a place to shower, shave, and eat three meals a day. A third respondent was thankful to have a roof over her and her children's heads. A fourth respondent was glad her family didn't have to leave the shelter during the day as some other shelters required. She was thankful to have a one-bedroom apartment at the shelter. This enabled her family to be together and have a measure of privacy.

Five of the eleven respondents felt that living in a shelter aided them in their recovery. The structure required residents to focus on and demonstrate sincerity about recovery. Two of the five indicated the environment at the shelter was conducive toward sobriety. One man said he knew he had to remain sober in order to remain at the shelter

so he didn't even think about drinking. Furthermore, he wasn't being tempted by his friends since he was no longer in that type of environment.

Other advantages of living in a shelter included meeting and learning to care for new people. One person liked not being alone. Another said the female residents were like sisters to her. Some mentioned peace of mind and ability to have a stable home life with family members. Others appreciated donations received. Residents received food, clothing, toys, and furniture from donations given to the shelters. Some appreciated assistance received with legal matters, with securing job-training and assistance in securing permanent housing. Others expressed that their sense of responsibility, self-respect, and self-esteem increased as a result of having "worked the program" of a shelter.

What are the Disadvantages of Living in a Shelter?

Most felt the primary disadvantage of living in a shelter was having to abide by all the rules. Seven of the eleven respondents didn't like the rules at the shelter. Three didn't like the fact that visitors could not visit in their room/apartment. Three did not like the fact that the shelter enforced a curfew for all residents. Two did not like the fact that they could not have overnight passes to spend time with family. Two didn't like the fact that each resident was required to perform a chore on a daily basis. One said she "couldn't stand" doing chores. Another "wasn't in the mood" to do her chore at times. Two respondents complained about not being able to parent as they'd like because of rules regarding disciplining children. One person complained about having to pay 25% of her

income for program fees. She was of the opinion that shelters should not charge residents to stay. She thought residents should be allowed to save all their money for permanent housing.

Would they save it?

Other disadvantages mentioned included not getting along with other residents, lack of privacy, and having to share facilities with other residents. One resident stated it was difficult to deal with different people from the streets. This resident didn't get along with one of the other residents and worried about getting into a fight with this person. Another respondent related that arguments and misunderstandings were more likely to occur in a shelter as a result of the stress people were under. One person complained about having no privacy. According to this respondent, other residents or staff were always around. This same respondent complained he had to wait for up to half an hour to use the restroom if someone else was taking a bath or shower. Another respondent stated it was difficult to share the restroom and kitchen facilities with other residents.

Two people complained about their physical settings within the shelter. One of the two had five of her children with her at the shelter. The family had to share a one-bedroom apartment. This respondent complained that the apartment was too small and cramped. The other complained about not being able to have a telephone and cable in her one-bedroom apartment.

What are the Advantages of Independent Living?

Eleven of the eleven respondents agreed that the main advantage of independent living was freedom. Each of the respondents liked the idea of being independent, being responsible for their own choices, setting their own limits, and being in full control.

Respondents discussed being able to come and go as they pleased. Two respondents stated they could have overnight guests if they so desired. Another two said they could have anyone they wanted over to visit.

Two of the eleven respondents related that having a place of their own would boost their self-worth. Another respondent related that having a place of her own would give her a sense of pride because she would have “worked for it”. Another respondent related that having a place of her own would demonstrate growth on her part.

Four of the eleven respondents indicated independent living brings with it a sense of ownership. Respondents said independent living means “it’s mine”, “it’s my own place”, “the kitchen and bathroom are mine”, and “I can fix up my place however I want”.

What are the Disadvantages of Independent Living?

Seven of the eleven respondents agreed that expense was the greatest disadvantage of independent living. Five people had concerns about being able to pay the rent, three people had concerns about paying for utilities, two persons had concerns regarding keeping up with bills, and two were concerned with the expense of independent living in general.

Three of the eleven respondents felt that a disadvantage of independent living was loss of contact with shelter residents. One respondent indicated she'd feel lonely in her own place. Another said she'd miss the camaraderie with other residents, who were like sisters to her. The third respondent said she'd miss speaking to the people at the shelter. She related "they're like family to me".

Two of the eleven respondents felt that a disadvantage of independent living was not having a safety net. According to one, "there's no one to catch you if needed". One person was concerned that she wouldn't have anyone to help her handle situations. She was concerned about her ability to handle things on her own.

Two of the eleven respondents felt that the loss of the structured environment of the shelter was a disadvantage. One was afraid of going back to drinking. One was not sure how she'd handle the temptation of being offered drugs in her own place.

Other disadvantages mentioned included concerns about safety in own home, not having a man to share it with, and not having access to groups such as those held at the shelter.

Are there Advantages to Shelter Living that don't exist in Independent Living?

Six of the eleven respondents identified receipt of donations as the major advantage available in the shelter as opposed to independent living. One person appreciated receiving food donations at the shelter. Three people appreciated receiving food, clothing, and other donations at the shelter. One person said, "You never go hungry

at the shelter.” One person stated she received her necessities for free. In addition, she got pillows, pillowcases, blankets, sheets and pots. According to this respondent, it was good knowing she got all that stuff for free and didn’t have to pay for it. Two respondents felt it was easier to get needed items such as clothing at the shelter because the shelter received a lot of donations.

Three of the eleven respondents related it was cheaper to live in a shelter in comparison to an apartment or house. One person had to pay \$182 per month in shelter as opposed to \$535 she’d have to pay for her own apartment. Another paid \$201 in shelter as opposed to \$525 she’d have to pay for a two-bedroom apartment. Furthermore, shelter residents didn’t have to pay for gas, lights, or telephone. In addition, they received free bus tickets for appointments and could do their laundry at no charge.

Three of the eleven respondents felt that they’d have more support in the shelter environment as opposed to their own place. All three agreed that in a shelter, people are always available to talk to during bad times. Talking to others usually helped the person to find other options or solutions to the problem. Two of the eleven respondents viewed groups as another source of support which wasn’t easily accessible from an “own home” setting.

Additional advantages of shelter living not available in independent living included feeling safe and protected from the outside world and the close ties which developed between shelter residents.

What Obstacles Impede Progress toward Securing Independent Living?

The primary obstacle to securing housing was saving enough to pay move-in costs. Five of the eleven respondents reported this to be their biggest obstacle. Poor credit and insufficient income were also obstacles to securing housing. Four of the eleven respondents reported their income was insufficient to rent most places. Most apartment complexes required the person's income to be three times the amount of the monthly rent. Two people reported the monthly rent was too high considering their limited incomes. One had outstanding utility bills she'd have to pay in order to have utilities turned on in her own place.

Three of the eleven respondents reported location was an obstacle to securing appropriate housing. Apartments available were either too far from schools, too far from the bus routes, or too far from a grocery store. The neighborhood was an obstacle at times. Many times the only places willing to accept shelter residents were located in drug or gang infested neighborhoods.

One person felt that landlords didn't want to be bothered with people who lived in shelters. She felt that landlords automatically assumed that people in shelters didn't have money. This person expressed that lack of assistance from shelter staff was an obstacle to securing housing. She also reported how difficult it was to take the bus to look at places with four children in tow. In her words, "Tagging along all four children with you to look for a place ain't nothing nice, especially when one has taken a crap, one is hungry, and one is thirsty."

If You Had Money To Move Before The Date You Had To Be Out Of The Shelter,
Would You Move Or Would You Wait Until Your Termination/Exit Date? Why?

A slight majority reported they would move out of the shelter as soon as they had the money. Six out of eleven respondents stated they would move if they had the money to do so. Three people said they'd move if they had the money in order to open space for other needy families. As one person put it, "You come here to get on your feet. Once you get on your feet, you move to make room for other people that need to get on their feet." One person thought she'd move as soon as she had the money because she'd grown so much during her stay at the shelter. She stated she would probably wait until the last minute to leave if she hadn't grown so much. She related shelter staff had been very supportive of her and her family during their stay. One person thought she'd move as soon as she had enough money, but she was unable to explain why. One woman said she'd move as soon as she had the money because she wanted privacy. Also, she didn't like the curfew enforced at the shelter and had difficulty parenting her sons in the way she felt necessary at the shelter.

Five of the eleven respondents indicated they would wait until their termination/exit date to leave the shelter. Three said they'd wait so they could save more money. People related they could have gone shopping for clothes, shoes etc., with the extra money. One person said he liked it at the shelter. He liked the schools, he liked receiving free clothes for his children, and was in no hurry to leave. One woman stated

she had lived on her own with her kids only once. She stated it would be scary for her to step out into the world on her own.

Discussion

All eleven respondents agreed that the main advantage of independent living was freedom. Most didn't like the rules at the shelter and reported they would move out of the shelter as soon as they had the money rather than waiting until their exit date. Yet most stayed the maximum length of time.


The results of this study revealed that this homeless sub-culture chose to remain in the system. By choosing to remain in the system, respondents had the opportunity to receive a number of benefits. They were able to have a safe place to live. They had the opportunity to pay off creditors and save money for permanent housing. They had the opportunity to participate in and learn from group sessions. They were able to receive support from shelter staff. They were able to make new friends. Their needs were taken care of. Respondents received free food, clothing, hygiene items, bedding, utensils, furniture, toys, and bus tickets.

Conclusion


During the course of her internship, the researcher observed behaviors that were contrary to the responses given during formal interviews. These additional data suggest that the interview responses should not always be taken at face value.

Although residents wanted maximum benefits, they felt they should only have to exert minimum effort. For instance, most residents reported they benefited from group sessions. However, at the time scheduled for group, few or no one would show up. The researcher observed shelter staff physically knocking on the doors of residents to remind them that it was time for group. Residents frequently offered a variety of reasons for why they couldn't attend group. Some would say they couldn't attend group because they were expecting visitors. Some would say they couldn't attend group because they had to cash their checks or foodstamps. They would also have reasons to explain why such tasks couldn't be accomplished before or after group. Many who attended groups did not participate or attempted to get the group leader to end sessions early. Many expressed resentment for having to attend group sessions. Many denied a particular group topic applied to them.

Residents reported that one of the advantages of living at a shelter was the ability to pay off creditors and save for permanent housing. Yet, many did not take advantage of this opportunity. Residents had the opportunity to make payments on outstanding fines, utility bills and so on. However, few actually did so. During the course of her internship, the researcher observed that residents were resistive toward providing bank books to verify savings balances. Because it was so inexpensive to stay at the shelter, residents had extra money to spend. Some would go on shopping sprees. Some would use the money to purchase drugs. By their exit date, few residents saved what they could have for permanent housing.

 Residents indicated they wanted the freedom of independent living. Yet, many had given up their independence to begin with by making poor choices. Their actions or lack of action often led to their becoming homeless. This history of making irresponsible decisions is evidenced by the widespread history of substance abuse among residents.

In addition, by choosing to remain in the system, respondents did not have to take responsibility for themselves. They had a safety net. They didn't have to worry about paying for rent, gas, electricity, telephone, or laundry because they had shelter and laundry facilities. They didn't have to worry about transportation because they received free bus tickets. They didn't have to worry about budgeting for food because free food was available for those who ran out. In fact, most respondents agreed that expense was the greatest disadvantage of independent living. By choosing to remain in the system, respondents didn't have to worry about solving problems on their own because staff was always available to assist and intervene.

 The shelter program could be improved in several ways. Shelters have begun to shorten the maximum length of stay for residents due to funding problems. Many residents are accepted into these shelters with current or recent substance abuse problems. As sobriety takes quite some time to achieve, it is unreasonable to expect such residents to achieve sobriety and stability within a period of as little as three months. Shelters should fine-tune their screening process. Potential residents with current substance abuse problems may be better served by referrals to in-patient substance abuse programs. Such agencies are better equipped to address substance abuse issues.

Shelter residents receive a number of donations. They receive food, clothes, furniture and so on. However, they are not expected to do anything in return for receiving such items. Perhaps residents could be required to do some type of volunteer work in exchange for receiving donations. This practice could teach residents responsibility.

Shelter residents often resent having to attend group sessions. These groups would be more beneficial if participants had more input in regard to what they wanted to get out of the group and issues to be addressed. Group would be more meaningful if successful ex-residents returned to co-facilitate groups. Group members would be able to identify with someone who had “walked in their shoes” and made it through.

A critical piece of shelter programs is the transition into independent living. Often, once the resident secures permanent housing, she no longer receives support from the shelter. Shelter residents should be tracked in the community for at least six months after securing housing. This is the time when extra support is needed. It can be scary to be “out on their own”. Ex-residents should be eligible to receive donations as needed. In addition, counseling and groups should be available to them in an after-care program.

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