FAMILIES AND CHILDREN: THEIR EXPERIENCE OF HOMELESSNESS

HUMBOLDT STATE UNIVERSITY

By

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ABSTRACT

This is an exploratory and ethnographic study that looked at five families in Stanislaus County (California Central Valley) that experienced homelessness. For the purpose of this study, a family had to include a father, mother, and at least one child under the age of 18 years.

Through in-depth one-on-one interviews of each single parent, the study found a huge sense of embarrassment that both parents carry during a homeless experience. With embarrassment came the feeling of shame, guilt, anger, sadness, fear, and the feeling of worthlessness. Due to those feelings, parents tended to “other” their experience from the rest of the homeless population. In other words, “My/our situation is difference than theirs (‘other’ homeless people).” Parents strongly felt they did not deserve to be in their current situation because they are not “alcoholics/drug addicts, lazy, dirty, filthy, undeserving and unappreciative.” Parents believed that they never asked to be homeless; instead they strongly believed that “those other” homeless people did ask for it.

Gender roles also played a big role in making each parent feel some type of pressure. Fathers felt and took on the responsibility and pressure to be the “breadwinner” of the family. And because of their given stage he and his family faced, he felt responsible in figuring out whatever needed to be done to get out of homelessness. Mothers also faced a huge pressure from society as the “caretaker” and “nurturer” of her children. They felt like an “unfit mother,” “shame,” “guilt,” and “sadness” because a “good” mother does not allow this kind of thing to happen to her children.
Recommendations are made to develop a better understanding on the complexity of homelessness and all its subpopulations (veterans, families, single men/women, mentally ill/disabled, domestic violent survivors, youth and transients) facing this country. The study suggests that laws are reformed/written by politicians, service providers, churches, advocates and communities to keep up with the understanding and awareness of this social problem called homelessness.
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DEDICATION

This thesis and degree is dedicated to my children, Rachel “My baby Girl” and Malique “Pops.” I leave this piece of work for **YOU**. Love, Daddy!

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Rachel: Since the day I knew I was to become a teen father, I promised YOU that I would teach you the way towards accomplishment – I hope I have because you have been my motivation and inspiration. Never give up “Baby Girl!” Always respect yourself!

Malique: My son: YOU taught me to learn how to love a boy – something I felt I could never do, but YOU have. Thank you!

Melanie: My Love! Thank you for everything you have taught me – especially for helping me in believing in myself and uncover all of my capabilities. YOU will NEVER be forgotten.

Parents: Mama y Papa, muchas gracias por todo lo que han hecho por mi, se los agradezco muchísimo! No hay palabras que puedan describir todo lo que han hecho por mi.

Family: I want to thank my brothers and sisters for all of the support you have given me.

Peter: Thank you for being such a dynamic therapist! You helped me get through one of the most difficult times of my life.

Dr. Virnoche: Thank you for helping me in becoming a better writer, pushing me to do better in academia and most importantly, thank you for your patience and sticking with me this long.

Dr. Clark: Thank you for constantly reminding me of my thesis and allowing me to become your graduate T.A., and your commitment in staying as a member of the thesis committee.

Ancestors: To all my ancestors who have come before me faced with struggles, resistance, and who fought back to provide me with this opportunity – Thank you!
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

I still remember my first experience with homelessness. Early in the fall of 2000, as a senior at Stanislaus State University, I was required to complete internship hours for my degree. As a last-minute “desperate” measure, I accepted an internship at an agency serving the homeless. Little did I know advocating for people who are homeless would become my life’s work and focus for many years to come.

Since that first internship I have worked as a service provider, helping to start a private nonprofit for families and now as an advocate and researcher for the homeless. My passion for this work and my commitment to the social justice for the homeless has had a psychological, emotional and physical impact on my own life. Ever since I have taken on working with homelessness, my passion for helping the underserved/unserved has got to be stronger and higher. I stored great memories from many individuals and families who have shared and thought me a lot about their life experience. I listened and taken these teachings so that I would be able and help the next person who faces the same or similar event. The irony with this has been the issue of dealing with the stress this type of work has put on me. Along with success, I have felt many times the feeling of “failing.” There have been many times where I felt like I did not do enough for the single-mother with her two small children escaping domestic violence, or the single man with a dual diagnosis suffering from substance abuse and a form of mental health illness. The huge pressure of heading a nonprofit agency for families and having to hear negative
criticism from the community such as: “Why can’t you take just one more family into the shelter? What can YOU do for this family? Why is this family still homeless?” All these questions and experiences, lead me to an emotional and psychological break-down. I reached the point of needing professional medical help. I was advised by my doctor that it would be best for my health to leave my job and the field of homelessness. I took half of my doctor’s advice, I left the homeless family agency that I helped build, but I have continued to be involved in the field of homelessness.

On a quantitative level, one of the most commonly asked questions is: Who are the Homeless? According to the National Coalition for the Homeless (2007), most early studies have been concentrated on single men and women. It was not until the early 1990’s that families with children were also beginning to receive attention from advocates and politicians. These studies have been lumped into one population, the general homeless. The general homeless population has now been studied as subpopulations that include age, gender, families, ethnicity, victims of domestic violence, veterans, mentally ill and addiction disorder. In the U.S., a study done by the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty (2004) found the following statistics on age:

- Children under the age of 18 years experienced homelessness (39%)
- Of those children experienced homelessness under the age of five years old (42%)
Adults between the ages of 25-34 years old experienced homelessness (25%)

Adults between the ages of 55-64 years old experienced homelessness (6%)

Gender - In another study done by *U.S. Conference of Mayors* (2007), found that homeless adults are more likely to be male than female. The overall general homeless population is, 76% male.

Families – Within the homeless population, families have been the fastest growing segment. During the 1990’s and early 2000’s, families consisted of close to 50% of the homeless population and in recent studies, it has found similar numbers (Rog and Buckner, 2007; National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009). These homeless families are predominantly headed by single mothers.

A study done in 25 cities by the *U.S. Conference of Mayors* (2006) found that the homeless population is estimated to be:

- 42% African-American
- 39% White/Caucasian
- 13% Hispanic
- 4% Native American
- 2% Asian
Victims of Domestic Violence – The primary cause of homelessness for single mothers is due to fleeing domestic violence. According to the *National Coalition Against Domestic Violence* (2001), nationally half of all women and children experiencing homelessness is due to domestic violence.

Other demographics include veterans. This subpopulation makes up 11% of the homeless population. Individuals that suffer some form of mental health illness are at 16% and individuals suffering from some form of addiction disorder are at 30% (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2005; Rosenheck et al., 1996).

My research for this master’s thesis focuses on the homeless subpopulation of intact families (mother and father) with minor children. There has been little research on homelessness with this focus. Mine is a qualitative, exploratory investigation of these families where both parents were present in constructing the everyday activities and family structure. I ask “How do families experience and interpret a collective homelessness?”
CHAPTER 2
THE NEW FACE ON HOMELESSNESS; FAMILIES

Homelessness is a social problem that exists today in the United States. It is a problem that has risen in the past decade. Many experts predict that it will continue to grow because it is a symptom that is not being addressed properly and accurately. As research continues to find evidence of the symptoms, politicians continue to sidestep systemic causes and long-term solutions.

The system and issues beneath the problems of homelessness include: a lack of affordable housing, rising costs of living, lack of living wage jobs, inadequate welfare system, barriers to healthcare access, as well as inadequate public transportation, drug and alcohol rehabilitation and quality child care. These all contribute to a cycle of poverty. These issues describe a societal structure that must be addressed systematically. The federal government has not been engaged in a systematic effort to solve the homeless problem. The approach has been to treat homelessness as a temporary situation that deserves no more than emergency relief in the form of temporary shelters and other assistance (Choi and Snyder 1999).

Bridgman, Glasser, and Drozdow (2001) suggest politics has not been able to address homelessness due to its breadth and complexity. They note that homelessness is a “tangled complex of interrelated personal problems, housing market dynamics, social policies, labor-market structures and deeply rooted social values” (Bridgman et al. 2001: 293). Whether or not the general public looks at homelessness as a social problem to
them because of their personal and social attitude towards this stigmatized population many general views tend to blame this population for “their own wrong doing.”

Definition of Homelessness

The American Homeless Society (AHS) defines homelessness as “any person, family or other group of persons without housing, or living in illegal or substandard housing conditions” (Springer 2000: 479). There are various factors that influence the definition of homelessness. Such factors may include climatic patterns, traditions, culture, social infrastructure, welfare systems, financial structures, gender, and “doubled-up” (Springer 2000).

Warmer or colder climates in certain geographical areas in the United States impact when and how the homeless will get some form of assistance. For example, in warmer areas, politicians do not consider the need to open an emergency shelter for the people experiencing homelessness because they “feel” that it is not cold enough outside to provide haven. In colder areas, emergency shelters are seasonally open from early fall until late spring because the cold temperature is considered to be a dangerous health risk to the people on the streets (Springer 2000).

Societal traditions and culture made it almost impossible for people experiencing homelessness to receive any type of assistance from government and the general public prior to 1986 (Springer 2000). Now, due to the McKinney-Vento Act of 1986, every state, county and city official must provide some form of “care” and “assistance” to the homeless (Springer 2000). Even with these legal regulations, people’s perception on
homelessness continues to be uninformed or disinterested. The welfare system has a “homeless assistance program” that must provide services to families that meet certain criteria, but the definition of a homeless family has been left up to the state (Springer 2000; National Coalition for The Homeless; and Burt, Aron, Edgar and Jesse 2001). Therefore, many families are left to experience homelessness without the help of the welfare system. And when gender comes into play, homelessness services often state that the individual seeking those services must either be a male or female. For example, one emergency shelter may provide haven for single women with children but not for single men even if they have a child.

Other concerns regard the debate over the “physical element” of whether or not having a roof over their heads defines homelessness. For example, the “double-up” circumstance is when an individual and/or family has lost their home and found a friend or relative to live with on a temporary basis. According to the definition under the California Welfare System, if that individual or family were to apply for the “homeless assistance program” they would not qualify because they have a roof over their heads, even though it is a temporary living arrangement (Springer 2000). Homeless advocates consider the “double-up” living arrangement to be part of the experience of homelessness because that individual or family’s circumstance can take a sudden turn and they will end up out in the street or in a shelter.

Legal definitions for homelessness are frequently political and bureaucratic: definitions tie directly to arguments for resource needs and resource allocation. For example, every year the federal government allocates funds for state homeless service
providers. Although a family is “doubled-up” with another family, according to the service provider’s definition, that family would not qualify for assistance because they are not living on the streets.

There are further complications to providing services that stem from legal definitions. For example, a service provider that helps families with children must navigate legal definitions of “family.” Many families may not qualify for assistance because their family does not fit a legal definition. A family with mom, dad, child, and grandma will not likely qualify for full assistance: Grandma does not fall under the service provider’s definition of “family.” Through legal constructs, struggling families from some cultures with typical extended family formations are further disenfranchised. It is a disturbing dilemma faced by homeless people. It is important to expand and be open to how states define homelessness, because without consensus on the problem, there will never be a solution for or control of the problem. Definitional issues bring up another complex, political and debatable question: Who actually are the homeless?

Identifying the Homeless

The Reagan era deinstitutionalization of people with mental health issues led to an explosion of thousands of people seeking shelter out on the street and/or skid-row. Under President Ronald Reagan, thousands of mental institutions throughout every state in the United States closed in the 1980s (Crystal 1984). With very little internal support and no external assistance from the government system other than a few dollars and vouchers for motels, this population had no other choice other than to live on the streets. A famous
term surfaced following the massive closings of mental institutions: “Hotel California,” which was the subject of a classic song by, “The Eagles.” The song is a tribute to all mentally ill homeless individuals. The Reagan era also proliferated the image of every homeless individual as an alcoholic or substance abuser and/or street “bum” who “chooses” not to get a job.

Number Census on Homelessness

Since homelessness reached national attention, the question that has always appeared is, “How many are homeless?” The Census Bureau counts homeless people around homeless shelters, at soup kitchens, on the streets and at other places identified by local governments. Cities and service providers argue that the Census Bureau counting method seriously underestimates the need for services. Cities and service providers have worked together, independent from the federal government, to attain a more accurate count of people experiencing homelessness. With their own count, they are able to provide their independent records to the federal government in hopes of achieving higher and better funding for their cities and homeless service providers. Although cities and service providers have spent an enormous amount of time gathering numbers on the people who experience homelessness, very little change toward higher funding has been provided at the federal level. The strong push and urging from cities and service providers, today, the federal government has appointed the United States of Housing and Urban Development to direct and lead the homeless count in partnership with cities and service providers. The count and number on homelessness continues to be conservative
by the federal government leaving federal funding at a minimum (National Coalition for The Homeless; and National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty).

The Rise of Families Experiencing Homelessness

More recent iconography has focused on families and single women with children. Attention was noticed and given to this subpopulation in the mid 1990’s, but research suggests a 1980s rise in families making the streets their home (Herman, Struening, & Barrow 1994; Liebow 1993; Anderson & Koblinsky 1995). Not only are families the most recent subpopulation, but they are the fastest growing segment of the homeless population. From 1990 thru 2007, they made up roughly 50% of the general homeless population (Liebow 1993; Herman, Struening, & Barrow 1994; Calsyn & Morse 1990; Wasson & Hill 1998; Anderson & Koblinsky 1994; Lindsey 1998; Kelly 2001; and Washington 2002). Today, families make up 25% percent of the homeless population (National Coalition for the Homeless 2007; National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty. 2007).

The general public does not like to see or think of children sleeping on the streets, thus, they are quick to blame the caretaker mom for the situation. Social assumption places blame on mothers for the family’s situation. Social assumptions prejudges mom as an incapable caretaker who is irresponsible and is spending the rent money on drugs or alcohol. The societal assumption begins to ask questions like, “Why doesn’t she have a job?” or “Where is the father?” Not realizing that mom may have escaped a violent relationship which is why she and her kids are homeless. More than half of the mothers with children are homeless because they have escaped a domestic violent relationship
Mothers are aware of all the negative motherhood labels placed on them; emotional shame and guilt is deeply embedded internally, a result, they try to hide the embarrassment from society. Labels, internalize “self-blame” that brings further shame and guilt. In the field of homelessness, mothers with children are known as the “hidden population.” Although homelessness is recognized as a social problem by scholars and advocates, the general public sees it as a problem they are not willing to fight due to all those negative misconceptions and stereotypes of “throw-away” and “bums.” Real efforts and effective solutions to try and tackle homelessness lack the strength to succeed because of personal and social policies.

Women with Children

The majority of literature on homelessness investigates comparisons and contrasts among homeless men versus homeless women, but not among integral parent families. An area of homelessness that was closely related to this study was the abundance of research done on “women with children.” The role of a mother is cited as a critical gender issue that brings a qualitatively different experience of homelessness to women, factoring dissimilar origins and potential solutions. In 1990, over half of poor families were headed by women (Shanne 1995). Families headed by single women are the most vulnerable to becoming homeless (Choi and Snyder 1999). Historically, poverty has played a major role in determining whether a single mother will have enough basic life necessities to support her and her children and avoid living on the streets. Many single
mothers are forced to take on low-paying wages, unskilled and unstable jobs and are left to make a choice of using the little money they make to pay for child care, food, or rent. For single mothers, life no longer is about choice, it is about survival. As mentioned before, half of the women with children who are homeless are escaping or have escaped an abusive relationship. Single men with children generally are not homeless because they had to escape a violent domestic relationship. This is a clear difference of study that can be agreed upon in the field of homelessness. This rise in attention on the homeless family created shifts in addressing homelessness. These shifts included the development of the concept of “transitional” housing and proliferation of programs that embraced that approach.

The Rise of Transitional Housing

When the homeless people of the 1980s and 1990s are compared to those of the 1950s and 1960s, some important differences are found. Few of the homeless people of the 1950s and 1960s had to sleep in the streets, while today it is very common. Prior to the mid 1970s, the majority of homeless were older single males with substance abuse and physical or mental health issues who lived on skid row – a strip (street) place where the homeless called home (Choi and Snyder 1999). Skid row was a strip of impoverished, run-down, substandard, condemned apartments or motels that “housed” the single men experiencing homelessness. Today homeless people include many more women and an increasing number of families with children (Choi and Snyder 1999; Mehr 1998).
An interesting factor that comes along with women with children is that they tend to experience a shorter duration of homelessness than their counterparts of single men and women (Shanne 1995). More than half of women with children report living in emergency shelters or welfare motels before becoming what they considered homeless. Studies have found that children are the/or are one of the main motivating factor in escaping homelessness for families headed by single mothers. Patience, positive thinking, personal strength, focus, and determination have proven to be effective for single-mothers in asking for help and assistance (i.e., cash-aid, shelter, transportation, health care, job development, etc.). Studies have found that women with children are able to escape homelessness in a shorter period of time (Herman et al. 1994; Wasson and Hill 1998; Benda and Dattalo 1990; Anderson and Koblinsky 1995; Lindsey 1998; Russo et al. 2001; Crystal 1984; Tessler et al. 2001; Washington 2002; Grimm and Maldonado 1995; Hagen 1987; Maurin et al. 1989; and Browne 1998) than single men because of gender socialization that overcomes the struggle in asking for help and/or assistance. Single males experiencing homelessness seek less shelter, job skill development, cash-aid benefits and concentrate more on substance abuse recovery programs.

In an effort to address the needs of the growing number of homeless people, transitional housing programs have been developed over the last twenty years. In 1983, The Los Angeles Family Housing Corporation (LFHC), a private nonprofit corporation, developed the first “modern” transitional housing programs for low-income families (Washington 2002). From 1987 to 1990, 338.5 million dollars were awarded to 534 transitional housing programs by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban
Development (HUD 5-13). The goal was to provide supportive services to homeless families who were capable of making the transition to independent living in less than twenty-four months. Transitional housing programs continue to develop across the United States. They go beyond the emergency shelter model and provide up to twelve months of structured housing and support services to prepare homeless people to move into permanent housing.

These programs aim to empower individuals through comprehensive services such as education, job development, leadership skills, resources, and referrals. Homeless people in many of the programs meet with their case managers to develop goals they hope to achieve during their time in the program. Families who are in these programs are required to work, attend school and meet weekly with their case managers for “follow-ups.” Case managers make routine inspections to ensure that families are keeping their homes/rooms “neat” and “clean.” Families are not required to pay rent, but a certain percentage of their monthly income must go into some kind of savings. The goal of this savings requirement is to teach responsibility and address past and future basic financial needs: first month’s rent, security deposit, utility deposit, and moving expenses.

The most helpful services in transitional housing programs are budgeting, job training, and leadership skills training (Washington 2002). Budgeting classes have helped individuals by teaching them how to develop a list of bill payments, prioritize their responsibilities and make the most of their low incomes. Job training classes focus on helping individuals make both career choices and plans to work toward their chosen careers. The class also prepares participants for job interviews, résumé writing, and other
skills to secure a job. Leadership skill classes provide opportunities for the individuals to lead various programs. The goal of this class is to help individuals gain the confidence that is needed for sustained financial independence.

Transitional housing programs are susceptible to funding fluctuations (Washington 2002). In an era of declining funds for social services, the ability of these programs to serve populations is compromised.

Escalating Risks and Barriers for Escaping Homelessness

Bridgman, Glasser, and Drozdow (2001) note that lack of shelter also contributes to a longer duration period of homelessness. Even though the federal government tries to “solve” homelessness with emergency shelter, these authors point out the important fact that there are not enough shelters of any type, emergency, temporary, or long-term/transitional, to support the high number of people who are homeless. Without this type of critical support, it becomes difficult to try and “solve” the homeless problem and the risks faced by the growing homeless population increase drastically over time. Besides losing hope, the longer homeless people stay on the streets, the more they face other escalating risks related to health, employability, loss of benefits, assault and educational handicaps as children miss school days (Liebow 1993; Irene-Wong, Piliavian, & Entner-Wright 1998; Tessler et al 2001; & Russo, Cecero, & Bornstein 2001). These experiences are related to mental health issues like depression and other psychological disorders (Bridgman, Galsser, and Drozdow 2001). Substance abuse and domestic abuse also contribute to the problem and escalate throughout the homeless experience (Thomas 2002).
Health Care Access

Healthcare costs push many people onto the streets and escalating health issues associated with street life make it hard to transition to secure housing. A high number of homeless people face unemployment (50%) and of those employed (50%), the majority do not have medical insurance to get treatment. The context of daily living makes it difficult for people on the streets to remember and get to appointments since they do not have a phone for a doctor’s office to call and remind them about their appointment (Glomm 2002). Poor hygiene associated with living on the streets, coupled with the lack of preventative care services, contributes to a downward spiral of health. Mental illness, alcohol abuse, drug consumption, tuberculosis, AIDS and STD’s (Springer 2002) are all serious factors inhibiting transition off the streets once someone finds themselves homeless, making it close to impossible to sustain affordable housing.

Affordable Housing

Some economists strongly believe that creating more affordable housing is the solution to homelessness (Park 2000). A study by United States Housing and Urban Development – Congressional Information Services (2001) analyzed the housing market between 1996 to 1998 and found evidence of a lack of affordable housing. The housing market leaves many low-income renters to compete for little affordable housing while at the same time waiting in vain to obtain housing vouchers that make existing higher cost housing more affordable. Waiting lists for low-income renters increased dramatically from 1996 to 1998. Nationally, the average waiting period for the largest public housing assistance rose from 22 to 33 months, a 50% jump during those two years (U.S. Housing
Low-income renters in large cities like New York are on an eight year waiting list; in Oakland for six years; and in Washington, D.C. and Cleveland for five years. The 40 waiting lists that were examined for this study included almost one million families; an average of almost 25,000 households on each list (U.S. Housing and Urban Development 2001).

People who fail to see the whole picture of our society may ask why the families do not look for something else that they can rent. These families have nowhere else to turn and that is why they are on the waiting lists. The United States Housing and Urban Development (2001) study identified four key factors that explain major obstacles for overcoming homelessness. First, rents are outpacing income for poor Americans. From 1995-1997, rents increased faster than income for the 20% of American households with the lowest incomes. The Consumer Price Index for Residential Rent rose 6.2% during 1996-1998. Second, the decline of affordable housing. During 1996-1998, the number of units with rent below $300 (adjusted for inflation) declined by 13%, a loss of almost 950,000 units. Third, and not surprising, was the cut in federal support for affordable housing. In 1995, there was a freeze on new housing vouchers that continues today. With rising rents and the deterioration of units over the past four decades, the nation must continuously add new units or vouchers just to stay even with the crucial need.

The last factor has to do with private owners who “opt-out” from the subsidy contracts. In the housing market, there is a “business” relation between owner and renter/buyer/leaser. With subsidy contracts, the city or service provider helping the homeless or low-income families takes the place of renter/buyer/leaser and the owner
agrees to hold a small number of housing properties strictly for this business relation. So a legal contract binds the property owner and the city or service provider. The city or the service provider then provides those housing properties to the homeless and/or low-income families through strict income level qualification and other criteria. Because of the purpose for how the housing properties are going to be used, owners frequently rent/sell/lease them below the market value. The majority of owners are in the housing market for business and profit-making, consequently, they go to a higher market of rental rates if economic opportunities appear. In 1998 alone, almost 13,000 units were lost due to the result of property owners “opting-out” from city and homeless service providers. Private owners are in it as a business and profit-making, consequently, they go to a higher market of rental rates.

A different study done by The Coalition for Affordable Rental Housing (2001) showed that affordable housing has disappeared (U.S Newswire 2002). In several large cities (New York, Boston, San Francisco) there were no new units of FHA-insured multifamily housing built in 2000. In Dallas, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. there was only one new multifamily development in each. In each of these cities, working families are paying more than 50% of their monthly income for rent.

The Fair Housing Act passed in 1968 and strengthened further in 1998, provided protection against housing discrimination for people with disabilities regardless of familial status. Yet there continues to be housing discrimination against families headed by single parents, unmarried couples and same-sex couples (Cartee and Ruegger 1999). According to HUD, from 1990-1997, 53% of complaint cases alleged racial
discrimination, 26.3% were cases with discrimination against families with children and 82.3% of all cases involved rental properties (Cartee and Ruegger 1999). Discrimination in housing rentals continues to represent the largest percentage of the total caseloads (75% in 2001) and HUD estimates that 2 million Americans actually experience housing discrimination every year (Cartee and Ruegger 1999; U.S. Newswire 2002). To make matters worse, the amount of federal funding to fight housing discrimination continues to remain low.

My Study

Recognizing and understanding what and how homelessness has been analyzed and applied today, is important in looking at the “new face” of homelessness, integral families. Like the many other homeless subpopulations experiencing homelessness, it is important to understand how and what integral families experience through homelessness. How is their transition from homelessness to permanent standard housing different/similar than the rest of the homeless population? How does having two parents differ from families headed by single mothers? Is the length of transition shorter or longer? How does homelessness and a two-parent household affect family relations? All these questions are important in understanding how to prepare for intervention and prevention in helping and assisting today’s integral family experiencing homelessness and what type of programs will be most beneficial for the families themselves.

This research is a qualitative, exploratory investigation of “integral families” involving two-parent families with children. In my study both parents were present in the
everyday activity of the family structure. I explored the subjective experience of families within the context of homelessness and how mothers and fathers interpret and make meaning for that experience.

As an advocate and professional homeless service provider I work with integral families. As a graduate student, I found little evidence of their existence in the literature. The closest literature discussed above pointed to work involving single mothers with children. As a homeless service provider and advocate, I know that research is part of the process of framing problems and solutions for homelessness. We follow reports to get a sense of likely state and federal level funding and a deeper understanding of homelessness. In turn through examination, it provides government, advocates, and service providers a clearer understanding on how and what is lacking in services when assisting such a complex population. The absence of work on integral families is significant for political and resource reasons.
CHAPTER THREE
METHODS

Locating Myself in the Field

Strong emotions have influenced my choice for this study. Every researcher has a story behind his or her choice of focus study. As human-beings, we are touched, moved and persuaded to head in a certain direction in life. I want the reader to have a clearer understanding of me as a person and researcher.

It was the beginning of the school year in 2000 and also my senior year as an undergraduate student at Stanislaus State University, a small college located in the heart of the California Central Valley. Up to that point in my life I was blind to what life had in store for me. I was only sure that I was majoring in something called, “Sociology.”

Some of my thoughts were about decisions that I had to make soon: What am I going to do in life after college? Was I going to continue pursuing a higher education? Was I going straight into the workforce? What kind of job did I see myself doing and in what capacity? I felt I had to act fast.

To complete my degree in sociology I was required to participate in a full-year internship in a social services setting. Well into my third week of my senior year I still had no idea of what to do for my internship. I networked with professors and colleagues in hopes of getting placed somewhere soon. Every day I called around town and waited to hear from someone, but it seemed that either agencies were not taking any interns at the time or they were filled to maximum capacity. I also experienced a common
occurrence in social services – no one was returning my phone calls. This was something I soon experienced for myself once I was part of this field. There is a huge demand of services from clients in the community and not enough service providers to keep up with the demands therefore returning telephone calls to clients is very difficult to do because there is not enough time in the work day.

Finally there was hope for a placement! The local newspaper had an advertisement for an internship position at a local nonprofit agency that worked with the homeless. At first, I asked myself, “Do I really want to deal with the homeless people?” It was not particularly interested in the homeless. I also did not think that I would enjoy the work. Partly out of self interest, I decided to take a chance. I applied for the internship position. Soon thereafter, I received a call from the agency for an interview. A few days after the interview I received a second call from the agency offering me the internship position. From that point on my life path was changed.

After just a few months as an intern, I was offered employment with the agency. I told myself, “What more could a college student ask for?” I went to school full-time, had a wonderful part-time job and at the same time completed my internship hours. After graduation I accepted full-time employment with the agency and was soon promoted to supervisor and directed the service program department. I took advantage of my power as a supervisor to make changes within the agency, community and the target population. The two years that I spent with the agency gave me the opportunity to gain the experience, tools and an analytical perspective to further explore the complex issues that surround homelessness today.
These wonderful experiences have lead me to become a researcher, service provider worker and advocate for those who are homeless. My perspectives and emotions linked to homelessness are directly shaped by these experiences and have informed my research and analysis for this project.

Gaining Entrance

When I first decided to take on this study using in-depth interviews, I was not quite sure of how to find participants. I had moved away from the area where I had worked in the field and lost immediate access to those networks. The beginning stages of this project were difficult and frustrating. I had no clues or leads. This whole process of creating a new network in Humboldt County was particularly exasperating because of the strength of the network I had left behind in Stanislaus County, California – There, if I needed something done, I knew who to contact and how to get it done.

I placed one phone call after another to local agencies to let them know that I was interested in any possible volunteer work they may have to offer to college students. From my experience working in the nonprofit world, I assumed that this approach would probably give me the best shot at “getting-in.” My first plan was to gain entrance through volunteer work and after some time, I hoped my chances of gaining direct access to working with people who were homeless would increase. Many of the social service agencies did not return my phone calls, some claimed that they were either filled with volunteers or were not interested at the time.
After some time, I received a solid lead from my *Qualitative Method’s* Professor who became the chair of my thesis committee: There was a meeting on campus for students who were interested in volunteering for a homeless agency in the community. That particular program is called, *Youth Educational Services*, also known as the *YES HOUSE*. The program is divided to help a wide variety of populations around the local community. It is made up of groups of students who volunteer their time to provide different set of curriculums that lend a hand to numerous populations. At the *YES HOUSE*, each program has its own name which best describes the target population that is being served. For example, the program that organizes students who volunteer with the homeless population is called, *The Homeless Network*. By volunteering, I was certain I would be much closer to potential participants.

After weeks of putting in hours of volunteer time, I became comfortable enough to approach one of the directors from the homeless agency to find out if I could possibly interview their clients for my study. At first, it seemed that there was not going to be any kind of problem. After all, I did mention my background experience that I had in this field and the importance of confidentiality. The director said she would get back to me very shortly. Time went by and I did not hear from the director or anyone in the agency. I anxiously continued to wait. The next thing I knew the semester had come to an end.

When the next semester had arrived, I knew I could not continue to be so passive. I decided to take the initiative of approaching the agency instead of waiting for them to approach me. The agency’s board members were worried about confidentiality. Instead
of making any argument or further having to explain my case, I just accepted the board and the director’s decision and moved on.

Although I felt robbed from the research opportunity, I continued to volunteer for the remainder of the school year. I continued to volunteer because of my passion for working with the homeless. My work was no longer about gaining access. I had experienced firsthand the difficulty of what many researchers are faced with during the process of “getting-in.”

Regaining Entrance

A researcher must have different options to choose from during the process of “getting-in.” After some time, it clicked in me, “Why not use the agency where I had worked before returning to school?” I thought to myself, “Why would it be such a problem?” The only problem I could foresee was the location issue at the time. It is located roughly seven hours southeast of where I was attending graduate school. Then I figured that I could possibly do my research study over the summer. Before I could make that an option, I had to face the issue of finding a place to live in the Central Valley for that summer. I asked myself, “Where can I stay?” I did not have any family members in that part of the state, so that was not an option. What could I possibly do? After a failed attempt at working to acquire housing for the summer through an old roommate, I went right to the agency.

The week before spring-break I emailed the executive director of the agency where I worked before leaving for graduate school. I asked to meet during my spring-
break and discuss something important in-person. I felt o.k. asking the executive director for the meeting as I had kept in contact and visited numerous times. I liked the agency. As an employee I was treated with great respect. And I wanted to keep doors open for a potential return. At the same time, I felt anxious about asking for the meeting. I felt this way about the executive director because she had an “assertive” personality that I misinterpreted as “mean.” Within a day, I received a reply from the executive director who informed me that she would be more than happy to meet with me.

The day I arrived to meet with the executive director, as usual, I was welcomed with open arms by all the employees. There were smiles, laughter, and huge hugs all around. Some employees asked me questions such as, “Are you done with school?” “Are you coming back to work for the agency?” “Are you going to be our boss again?” And of course, my respond was, “I’m just here paying a visit.” I felt that it was not appropriate to disclose any other information before discussing it with the executive director first.

After a while of chatting with my former employees I decided to head to the executive director’s office. The door was open. She was sitting down going over some kind of paper work while waiting for my arrival. I slowly walked in front of the office door:

ME: “Excuse me... Is it okay to come in?”

ED: “Well...yes. Of course...make yourself comfortable.”

ME: “Thank you!”

ED: “How are you doing? How is school going for you?”
ME: “I am hanging in there...trying to make it through a day at a time.”

ED: “Good...Good...What is the “big secret” you would like to talk about?”

ME: (A short pause while I gathered my thoughts. For some reason I begin to get nervous and I felt the whole inside of my body beginning to boil up. It was difficult for me to begin to speak.) “Ummm...Ummm...yes,” (Finally, a word came out of my mouth.) “…there is a research project...as part of school...that I will be working on regarding...ummm...I don’t have the specifics at this time, but it will generally look at homelessness...yes...that’s it...and I am here to ask if I may have your permission to utilize your agency to collect my participants?”

ED: “Ruben!!! Is that it?”

ME: “Well...yes...basically for now.”

ED: “Of course...there is no problem. I told you before you left that you are welcome back here anytime and that I would help you in every way possible...just like you helped this agency get to where it is now. When will you begin your research?”

ME: “After the semester...during my summer vacation.”

ED: “Sounds okay to me...and Ruben...What are you going to do regarding money? Do you have somewhere to stay?”

ME: “That is the next thing I wanted to let you know...more than likely since I don’t have a place to stay around here...for the summer I think I’m going back home and stay with my parents...I figure I will make trips up here every week...I also figure that I find a job down there for the summer.”
ED: “Okay…but that sounds like a lot of hassle.”

ME: “Yes…I know it will be…but…”

ED: “Ruben…here’s an offer and you don’t have to give me an answer right now...If you like you can work here for us over the summer...and you can have certain days to work on your research...How does it sound?”

ME: (I felt a big smile coming on me that I couldn’t control.) “Oh...you don’t know what that means to me...thank you...I don’t know what to say.”

ED: “We can also help you find a place to stay for the summer...and if possible we can help you with some kind of rent money.”

As the meeting came to an end I felt great. It all seemed too ideal. All I had to do was find a place to stay for the summer. I knew it was not going to be easy being so far from the area and having so little time from school, making it difficult to do some house searching. I was happy knowing where I would have access to participants for my research study. But things did not work out as well as I hope for that very summer.

The year was 2003, the year of huge budget cuts for service providers that impacted many people and I was one of them. Just before that summer vacation, I heard bad news from the executive director telling me that they had been hit hard from the budget cuts and would be unable to offer me employment.

Somehow I managed to make it through that summer, but not the way I first hoped for. That summer I did not find a stable job, but did manage to find odd jobs here and there like landscaping, painting houses and other minor repairs around homes. Overall, it paid some bills and I was able to gather a few families for interviews for my
research study. It was not until later that same year during Thanksgiving break and winter vacation from school that I headed back to the Central Valley to wrap up the rest of the interviews.

The Setting and Membership Role

My membership role was strictly a researcher. Staff and volunteers had been aware of my role beforehand. Case managers asked existing (already sheltered) clients (families) if they would like an opportunity to be part of a study. During the invitation to the study, every case manager was required to also detail my background and experience in the field of homelessness. Every family had been informed by their case worker that I was strictly a researcher and all information would not be shared with agency staff. At the beginning of each interview, I made sure to remind the families that I was solely a researcher and had no (paid) working relation with the agency. I spent the interviewing time with the subjects during my school breaks (Thanksgiving and winter break). I spent four hours of the day at the shelter agency.

The agency mission was to provide transitional shelter for families (and individuals) that experience homelessness. Three ways families were referred to the shelter agency were 1) the county welfare department referred a family through the state’s “Homeless/Temporary Assistance for Needy Families” (H/TANF) called a “homeless voucher.” Through this type of referral, the family was guaranteed shelter for up to 16 days as long as they did not break any of the shelter rules. The H/TANF assistance is a county program that reimburses the shelter agency those 16 days in which
the family is temporarily “housed;” 2) families were also referred by community organizations (nonprofits, congregations, schools, businesses, and the police department). This is where and how the shelter agency received its majority of its referral numbers. Referrals from these outside organizations did not guarantee families temporary shelter. In fact, the agency’s ratio of providing temporary shelter from these types of referrals had been 15:1; and finally 3) self referrals. Self referral families were labeled as the “drop-ins,” a code word within the shelter agency staff as highly likely “those” families will not be “housed.” Regardless of the type of referral, the agency’s policy was, “no matter how late or how heavy the caseload, every family is promised with an intake.” It was the agency’s way of protecting itself from any complaint and/or discriminatory lawsuit by families. In other words, it was the agency’s goal to make every family feel as if they received an equal chance to shelter. There was a “hidden” agency policy in how it determined that a family would be provided with temporary shelter. The “hidden” policy was, “house those families that have a job; in the process of landing a job; have money saved, or are in the transition of moving into permanent housing (this meant a family that had found housing, but needed temporary shelter until their housing became available). The reason for this “hidden” policy was so the agency looked successful to the rest of the community in transitioning families from homelessness to permanent housing. What the community did not know was that out of every three families who had “successfully” been placed into permanent housing by the shelter agency, there was always one family that ended up returning to the agency for temporary shelter because they had become homeless once again. I have to conclude the reason for this happening has to do with the
lack of attention given to families by the agency staff (services like, housing counseling, budget workshops, credit counseling, and other skillful tools that have proven to help families/individuals from experiencing a second homeless episode).

Methods

I conducted my research using a qualitative approach that included face-to-face interviews. I interviewed five homeless families. I interviewed each parent separately and then compared their accounts of the experience of homelessness. My goal was to understand both the experience of families during their homeless transition, as well as gendered accounts of those experiences.

At the motels, families temporarily resided for an extended period of an average of 60 days. The motels were not owned by the shelter agency, they were independently and privately owned. On a yearly basis, the motels contracted with the local shelter agency to “house” their clients. Financial payment to the motels were directly paid by the agency from their grant funds from local, state, government and private funding or through the county’s welfare department of homeless services; which is a federal fund program to assist families with children who experience homelessness. The federal fund program is a “once in a lifetime” service for families used anywhere in the U.S. The exception to this federal fund program is when a parent (overwhelmingly the mother) and their child/ren become homeless again due to a domestic violence relationship. Every family provided temporary “housing” at the motel is legally bound to obey and follow strict rules placed by the shelter agency and motel(s). According to the shelter agency,
on average there are at least three families a month who are “evicted” from the motel(s) due to breaking the rules. Some of the rules consisted of “no illegal drug paraphernalia;” “no alcohol;” “no visitors without permission from case worker;” “keep room clean at ALL times;” and “save 70% of family’s income.” At times, when a family broke a rule, they were given a second chance depending on their “effort” to try and “get out of homelessness.” The two years of conducting my research, there was only one motel company that decided not to renew their contract with the shelter agency, due to “business dissatisfaction.” During my research, none of the five families who volunteered in the study were in anytime in jeopardy of being “evicted.”

Access to subjects was through my former employer in Stanislaus County, California (Central Valley). I worked at the agency for over two years, starting off as a “Housing Counselor/Case Manager;” and working my way up to management, as a “Housing Services Supervisor.” During this time period, I gained much experience working with homeless families and individuals, providing counseling and assisting clients on becoming “independent” and “self-sufficient.” The agency provides numerous support services to homeless families and specific homeless individuals (disabled, mentally ill, veterans, HIV/AIDS diagnosed, transients.

Participants

A total sample of five homeless families were included in the study, five men and five women (N=10). For the purpose of this study the term “homeless family” refers to the existence of both mother and father (legally married or not married) with one or more
children under the age of 18 years old who were homeless during the time of the study. Both parents had to be present during the family’s transition. It is also important to point out that transition in this study does not equate to long-term transitional housing as mentioned in the literature review, which provides extensive services to the homeless population. Instead, I refer to transitional housing in this study as homeless families who had emergency shelter of no more than 60 days, and less extensive use of social services. The participants who were selected resided at the shelter agency’s motels while they went through their housing transition. Out of the five women included in the study three were Caucasians, one Pacific Islander, and one Mexican-American. For the men, 3 were Caucasians and two Mexican-Americans. Out of the five families, 1 was married, one was engaged to be married and three were domestic partners. All families had currently been provided with shelter by the local agency where this study was conducted and families were working closely with a case worker.
Table 1.

Participants & Family

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Father Ethnicity/Age</th>
<th>Mother Ethnicity/Age</th>
<th>Relationship Status</th>
<th># of Children</th>
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<td></td>
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<td>Female, 4</td>
</tr>
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Setting

The shelter agency consisted of 16 paid staff: one shelter director, three administrators, four Housing Counselors, three life skills coaches, and five Case Managers. Along with paid staff, there were volunteers that came and went; usually 5-8 in a given time period. The shelter director provided me with my own office. The shelter staff understood that I was a full-time researcher and I introduced myself that way to potential participants.

Given the field of homelessness and the time commitments required, there was a high turn-over with both paid staff and volunteers. Specifically, the receptionist position went through a very high turn-over. This position was unpaid and served as the front line within the crisis and “chaos” of the waiting room also known as the “INSTITUTION ROOM.” From the time the shelter agency opened its doors at 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. in the evening when the doors closed, the waiting room was always filled with clients. It was loud and filled with emotion. Most of the conversations were among the clients as they exchanged stories of becoming homeless and the many struggles they faced.

Although I had my private office to use with minor interference from staff, it was difficult not to hear or think about all the people and children crying who were out there with fear and sadness in the waiting room. They waited not knowing if they (parent) and their children would have a roof over their heads for that night and for how long their situation would go on. In my office I was able to interview people with no physical interruption. Yet there was always the emotional energy required to stay focused when
so close to the everyday trauma. I believe that my office and explanation of my work provided some sense of security to the participants knowing that their information was not going to be heard by staff or other clients.

Confidentiality

I assured confidentiality to all the participants. Each was asked to read and sign a consent form (Appendix X) that provided information about the study and how I would protect their information and identity. Each was informed that their participation was voluntary and that their decision would not affect the services that they received from the agency. They were assured that their stories would not be shared with their social worker, another service agency, clients, or any other third party.
CHAPTER 4
FAMILIES NEGOTIATING HOMELESSNESS

Meeting the Families

Family #1: The Andersons

According to the Andersons, they had been homeless for about two months with two children. This was the first time as a family they had experienced homelessness. Scott had experienced homelessness “many years ago” before meeting Sandy. At the time of the interview they had an eleven year-old son and a nine year-old daughter; both children from mom’s (Sandy) previous marriage. Sandy was a 45-year-old shy Caucasian woman diagnosed with depression that never made eye contact with anyone or really spoke to anyone unless spoken to, and even then, it was hard for her to keep a conversation going with another person. Sandy seemed to lack confidence and self-esteem as she rarely walked or stood up with her head held up high, and rarely did she put her arms straight down. She looked most comfortable when she had her arms crossed. Sandy always maintained her hygiene and fashion. It seemed like she always made it a point to have mascara on, hair always done to one side in a pony tail, her favorite brown dress and a perfume that smelled like honey and flowers. Staff always knew that Sandy was either close by or had been in the room because of her distinct smell of perfume. But how I remember Sandy was how quickly she always stood up from her chair and walked away as soon as the interview or her appointment meetings were over.
with her Social Worker. Without looking you in the eye and with a soft voice, Sandy always made it a point to say, “thank you and excuse me.”

The father (Scott) did have a biological son of 15 years old from his previous marriage. Scott disclosed that his son had done some “not-so-good” things in life and began to get out of control. He was now in juvenile hall and was scheduled to be released by the court until the age of 18. Scott was an interesting individual. He was a 40-year-old Caucasian man who was diagnosed permanently disabled from a back injury he suffered at his last employer as a forklift driver. Permanent disability government support was the only source of family income. Scott was also struggling to recover from methamphetamine drug use. With Scott, I had to conduct the interview into small sections -- it was impossible for him to go an entire fifteen minutes without having to take a restroom break. He did not have the physical and mental ability to concentrate and answer in-depth questions. He suffered withdraws from the drug and was in so much pain that it disabled him almost completely. Because they were in the motel as part of the shelter program, Scott had to stay clean for as long as they were receiving assistance for shelter by the agency. Besides trying to stay clean, Scott was enrolled in the shelter’s “clean and sober” program as a condition of receiving services. I never had a chance to find out if Scott ever completed the program or stayed clean.

Scott and Sandy throughout the interview referred to themselves as “husband” and “wife,” although they were not legally married and had no intentions of doing so. When asked the “cause of their homelessness” they both answered the same thing by saying that they were “forced to move out” by the landlord, but gave different reasons for
why they were “forced to move out” from their previous home. Scott mentioned that they “were renting from a property management and they wanted us to move out because they were going to remodel.” Sandy on the other hand said, “We had to move out because an aunt of the landlord was sick so our landlord wanted the house for her to live in.” Regardless, the Andersons were homeless because they had been forced to move out by the landlord and were now homeless and sleeping in a motel.

Family #2: The Grays

The Grays were a family of four who had just arrived to the California Central Valley from the state of Hawaii and experiencing homelessness for the first time. Mark, the father was a 45 year-old Caucasian man and Linda, the mother was a 40 year-old Pacific Islander (self identified) woman. Out of their six children, only two came along with them to California. The other four children had stayed with Linda’s mother in Hawaii. Mark and Linda were married and already grandparents—their oldest daughter had a son. Mark and Linda gave different reasons for their “cause of homelessness.” Mark said that the reason for their homelessness was that “the landlady decided to sell the house and (we) had nowhere to go and (we) couldn’t afford a place to live because the rent in there (Hawaii) was just too high.” Linda, on the other hand said, “I tell you why…’cause it was my husband’s idea. I lost land in Hawaii. Two weeks before we came I was told that I had some land given to me by my father when he passed away, and all I had to pay was $99 dollars a year…and build our own home.” According to Linda,
Mark believed that it was not the right time in their lives to buy the land. Mark believed that there would be more of an economical opportunity for his family in California.

I can still recall the moment and feeling when Linda responded to this question, she was very upset and in tears. Linda was a very petite, tan woman who never had a paying job. She worked throughout her childhood helping her parents farm and keep up their land. What Linda lacked in physical size she made up for with her loud and assertive voice—she clearly made her presence known. She was an emotional and expressive person. Linda was obviously upset, angry and sad that she was now in California away from her native land, her children and the rest of her immediate family. Throughout the interview Linda simultaneously cried and laughed. At first I didn’t know what to think of it, but through time I realized this was Linda’s way of coping with her emotions and the confusion of the entire situation (homelessness).

Mark was also a short man who obviously had lifted weights throughout his life: He was husky with arms the size of a full grown male python. Yet Mark’s voice and presentation of self did not match his body: His voice was low and soft and he had a difficult time making eye contact. Still, just like his wife, Mark was also an expressive person with always something to say. During our interview, Mark looked completely mellow with one leg crossed over the other and his arms crossed over his chest, but every time he responded his arms unfolded and he used them as part of his story telling.
Family #3: The Robles

The Robles were familiar with homelessness. In 2000, nine years ago, was their first time they had experienced homelessness when they had lost their home. During that time they used family and friends as a resource. They said: “(we stayed) here and there because we never wanted to stay in one place for a long time because it put a burden on people.” The Robles had two children, a two-year-old boy and a one-year-old girl. The couple was not married and referred to themselves as “partners.” According to Cassidy, the mother, their homelessness was a result of “miscommunication” between them and a future landlord. Yet as she told her story, the definition of “miscommunication” appears better replaced with an account of victimization and fraud.

The Robles had been living in a studio with two children and hoping to move-in to a larger unit. A potential new landlord had promised to have the new unit ready for them. They even paid a security deposit. According to Cassidy, the landlord gave the family “the run-around” telling them that it would definitely be ready in a week, then ready the following week and so on. Believing they had a new place soon to move into, the Robles had given their 30 days notice on their studio. Yet when 30 days had passed, and they had to vacate the studio the new unit was not ready and the family ended up homeless.

The family realized too late that they had been “played” by the landlord of the promised larger unit: He was a “scum” landlord and made off with their $1,000 security deposit, never to be found again. The family was not aware if the landlord was a legit business man because they never pursued any further investigation. This sort of scam is
more common than not. The practice is aimed more at low-socioeconomic families/individuals because “scum” landlords are aware of how desperate many of them are in wanting permanent housing. “Scum” landlords also know that the possibilities of anyone investigating them are slim-to-none because many homeless families/individuals are unaware of the law and legal procedure. And when landlords are forced to go to court, they know that the system is in their favor.

Cassidy was a medium size built, 5’ 11”, 35 year-old Caucasian woman who looked closer to 50 years-old. Cassidy described her life as “one big awful nightmare.” She had a rough childhood marked by going through a foster care system that broke her hopes and dreams.

Similar to other homeless women in my study, Cassidy quickly distanced herself from other homeless people. During her interview she reaffirmed this technique of neutralizing the stigma of homelessness by using “us” versus “them.” She used victim blaming language when talking about homeless people in general, but she positioned her family as different – having reasonable or worthy explanations for their homelessness. In fact, she distanced her family from the label of “homeless” itself. She rarely said, “I’m homeless or my family is homeless” and when she did, she downplayed it by trying to convince me that they were the exception because “we do not beg or expect things from the system.”

Cassidy was a huge believer in God and during the interview, she always asked, “Why God? Why me? Why us? When are you going to provide us with a healthy lifestyle?” It seemed obvious it was difficult for Cassidy to be asking her God. Every
time she did, she covered her face with both hands and began to let out a big cry. I had to remember that I was wearing the hat of a researcher, and not a social worker or any other type of service provider. This was difficult for me as I had been used to using tools of comfort as a service provider, like peer counseling.

Paul, Cassidy’s boyfriend was a 36 year-old Mexican man. He was employed through a temporary agency, which meant that every day did not promise work. Paul did attend a vocational school for nine months before dropping out. The reason he stated for dropping out was at the time his girlfriend got pregnant and felt like he had no other option but to work full-time. Paul had hopes of returning to school to finish his education. This dream made homelessness even more difficult for Paul. He had a lot of pride.

Paul presented himself as a caring father and partner. He expressed many times his wishes to be there more for his girlfriend and kids and to help out when it came to the everyday things that a father is supposed to do for his family. He cried when he had to tell me that he worried everyday thinking what his kids and girlfriend were going to eat for dinner that night and not knowing how much longer they would be able to stay in the shelter program at the motel.

Unlike Cassidy, Paul did state the length of time of their homelessness – it had been two months. But like his girlfriend he also distanced his situation from the rest of the homeless population. The only difference was that Paul did consider himself to be homeless, but not the “stereotypical” manner. For example, when asked the question, “What is your view on homelessness,” he responded by saying, “When I look at them
(other homeless individuals), they look healthy and I say to myself, I don’t know why these people are out here? They should be doing something! They are either alcoholic, drink all day and don’t want to do anything to try and get out of the situation.”

Family #4: The Jones

The Jones’ were a family of five. Ron (father) and Sally (mother) had three children together: a 15 year-old daughter and a set of seven year-old twin girls. From what the family could remember, they had been homeless for approximately one month. Their homelessness relates to more general problems with Section 8 Housing.

The Jones’ were a low-income family and had been approved by the local Housing Authority for Section 8 (a government subsidized program that helps low-income families, seniors and individuals with permanent disabilities). The Section 8 program is a very helpful federal program for low-income families and individuals. The downside of Section 8 is the long waiting list – one to six years. When a family or individual is approved, it is often difficult to almost impossible to find a landlord or property manager willing to accept a section 8 voucher. Landlords and property managers often say that bad payment experiences of the past make them not willing to work with the Housing Authority that handles the section 8 program. Historically, the Housing Authority has not been on time in paying landlords/property managers the federal government share of rent. Some say they never got paid. The Housing Authority has their “hands tied” because they rely on the reimbursement money directly from the federal government. The Housing Authority also runs into the same problem as
landlords/property managers do of not receiving their federal funds on time or never receiving the funds at all.

Both Ron and Sally provided the same account of their onset of homelessness. They had moved into a three-bedroom rental house that cost $1200 per month. Once the Jones’ moved in to the house, the Housing Authority next had to inspect the unit and approve it for “suitable living.” The landlord never made the repairs he had promised the Jones’ that were needed to pass the housing inspection. With cash aid (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families – TANF) as their only source of income, the Jones’ could not afford the regular rent without Section 8 assistance. They only had one choice: look for other affordable housing. But even with a 30 day notice from the landlord, they could not find housing within their income range.

At first, the Jones stayed with family members. Later they moved out because of conflict between the families. There was not enough sleeping space. Food sharing was a problem. And it was hard to have many small children under one roof. Many families face similar problems when trying to live with relatives or friends.

Ron, a 40-year-old Caucasian man, had always held a job and as he said, he could “provide for the family.” Ron had been in the construction business of drywall for the last 15 years. Recently he experienced a serious back injury when he slipped and fell. According to Ron’s doctor, this left him permanently disabled. Ron was adamant to take his injury as a lawsuit to court. Although Ron was in the process of applying for disability, in his words, “this leaves me and family with nothing!”

Sally, a 35 year-old Caucasian woman, had not been in the workforce in 14 years,
since a year after her first daughter was born. Sally decided to stop working because she wanted to take on the role of a “stay-at-home-mom.” Unlike popular, stereotyped beliefs, Sally did have a college education. She never thought of putting it to use until now. When Sally and her family find permanent housing, she wanted to go into the work force and prevent her family from facing homelessness ever again.

Family #5: The Garzas

The Garza family experienced family homelessness for the first time. Yet Cynthia, the mother, herself had experienced homelessness in the past when she fled a domestic violence relationship. Sal, the father, also had been homeless on his own. His solo experience with homelessness was due to illegal substance abuse. Sal identified himself as a recovering drug user.

Together as a family, again Cynthia and Sal found themselves homeless and struggling to save enough money for move in costs. The family’s only source of income was cash aid (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families – TANF). The Garzas were a family of six, with four small children, ages nine, seven, six, and four. Sal and Cynthia were a couple who had been engaged for an “unknown” number of years. When asked, neither one could remember the length of time. When asked how long they have been homeless, they each gave a different amount of time. According to Sal, they had been homeless for one year and two months. According to Cynthia, they had been homeless for two months. This was a great disparity, one year, although I did find it interesting, I decided not to further investigate.
Cynthia was a 37 year-old Caucasian woman who presented herself as an intimate, shy, withdrawn, lost soul. I can remember the very few times she made any eye contact with me during the interview. Cynthia was always looking down and speaking with a soft, low tone of voice. It may have been because she was still living in fear from her ex-husband who was a parolee for domestic violence. Cynthia was living in fear because her ex-husband had already tried to “kill” her and the kids when he was first released from prison. He had failed to report to his parole officer for three years and was now wanted by the law. Cynthia was clinically depressed and on rigorous antidepressant medication. Although she lived in fear and displayed low-esteem behavior, she was more than willing to talk about her current situation.

Sal, a 35 year-old Mexican-American man was medium size in build with tan skin and dark facial features. Sal had experienced homelessness in his previous marriage because of drugs that were introduced to him by his “close friends.” It was not the experience of homelessness that cost him his marriage, but rather the addiction was the factor that drove his ex-wife away. Talkative, yet somewhat shy, Sal was able to keep a conversation flowing. Although not comfortable in making eye contact, he was able to keep his head up, but mostly always had his eyes somewhere else in the room. The only time he made eye contact was at the beginning and the end of the interview.

Although Sal was not the biological father of Cynthia’s children, he saw and treated the four children as his own. In return, the children considered him their father. Sal had always worked as a laborer. Recently, he had been laid off from work. His last employer had promised him unemployment insurance benefits (UIB), plus severances
pay. At the time of the interview Sal had yet to collect a dime. He had thought about getting a lawyer involved but could not afford one at the time. Every morning Sal woke up before sunrise to report at the local temporary agency in hopes of landing a day job, but recently had not had any luck. Sal was filled with frustration. He knew that having a job could change his family’s life and help them get out of homelessness.

Constructing Homelessness and Managing Stigma

Within the field of homelessness, including service providers, advocates, professionals, politicians and scholars, no consensus or universal definition is established to define “What is homelessness?” Much debate and disagreement continues. To some, homelessness means something as simple as “no home.” To others, it can be as complex as “any individual who has experienced unstable standard housing for at least 30 days within the past three months and has experienced an overnight ‘accommodation’ in a public or private park and/or property and has NOT ‘doubled-up’ with another individual or family living in standard housing.” While a consensus on a definition for homelessness may never be reached, homelessness is a major social issue experienced by at least 5 million people in the United States (National Coalition to End Homelessness 2007). I was interested in understanding how families experiencing homelessness construct meaning to homelessness and their current experience.

With the exception of one individual, the remaining participants defined homelessness using terminology that many of the people in our society use to describe a “homeless person.” Participants used terminology to define homelessness such as,
“someone pushing a cart, sleeping out in the streets/park, digging through trash, and standing in a corner with a sign.” Participants used these common stereotypical words to try and distance themselves from the “homeless population.” In an effort to distance themselves from the “other” homeless population, the participants in the study labeled them as “they had a choice” -- the “choice” between becoming homeless and not being homeless. The participants also labeled the “other” homeless population with “blame” – blaming them for choosing to become homeless, then turning around and asking for assistance from the system. According to a consensus among participants in the study, “no help or assistance should be given to ‘those’ who choose to be homeless.”

Participant definitions of homelessness generally involved othering the homeless. Participants constructed the homeless as people other than themselves in a form of stigma management (Goffman 1956). They distanced themselves (self) and family from the constantly reproduced negative images of homelessness. In fact they reproduced these same images that required their negotiation and engaged them in practices of “blaming the other/victim.

It seems “not really homeless.” At the time of this study the families had shelter provided through social services – providing more evidence to support the account that they were not really homeless. Yet of course this process of “othering” also illustrated how narrowly defined images of homelessness are recreated even by the people themselves, to make the experience easier for the participants to think they were homeless. For example, Scott, the 40 year-old Caucasian man that once owned property, defined homelessness as “not really homeless”: 
I’ve worked with homeless before. There was a time when I worked in a soup kitchen. I saw a lot of homeless people. A lot of poverty…and I saw what that was like. I said…I never want to be like that! I never want to be down to that level. I don’t want to be pushing a cart wearing rags. I can honestly say what it is to be homeless…even if I haven’t been. I don’t think our situation is so bad. I think more services should be made for people who are less fortunate than we…

Scott continued to further distance himself from the “other” homeless by using the “choice” technique, resulting in the meaning of “blaming the other”:

If a guy wants to sit and drink and lay in the gutter…well…that’s his own fault! If you are willing to take those steps to improve your life then do what you need to do to make you life better…so to speak. Some choose to live that way…on the streets. They don’t care about anything and want a free-hand. They are those you see everywhere in the streets doing nothing! That’s homeless, not really us.

Even though Scott had worked side-by-side with the homeless population by volunteering in the local soup kitchen, he did not realize that he had already internalized the stereotypes that society had constructed in placing on the homeless population. Scott had distanced himself from the homeless population through “othering.”

Sandy, the 45 year-old Caucasian woman married to Scott, followed her definition with stereotypes by generalizing and distancing the “self” and family from the homeless population:

I don’t know. I guess people without a home sleeping in the streets sometimes pushing carts. Someone that looks like they need a shower, smell sort of bad, dirty, and not looking that well. People in soup kitchens or begging for money for their bad habits…See…that’s what I don’t understand. People are giving them money for drugs, but then there are those who really need it like us with kids. It gets me mad!

Sandy’s construction of definition for the “other” population of homelessness had been apparent. Sandy did not want to affiliate her-self, family and experience to the same
category constructed by society when it came to homelessness. Sandy and other participants described their meaning/experience of homelessness as separate through “othering” the homeless:

That is what we used to tell other people...we are not homeless...we have money, we just can’t find a house to rent.
Umm...not having anybody at all. That’s why I can’t really say ‘am homeless or ever been homeless because we always had a family and they sometimes take us in.
You know, I can’t say I really experienced it...experienced it! You know, I really haven’t...the kind the real homeless people have.
It’s not good! At least we have a roof over our heads. We are not out there in the street.
I would have to say not having a roof over my head.

Linda, for example, the 40 year-old Pacific Islander native to the state of Hawaii, had an interesting construction of “homelessness.” Her definition relied on cultural understandings unique to Hawaii that were not victim blaming. To Linda and the native people of Hawaii, this type of event was considered, “houseless.” Linda defined “homelessness” as “having nowhere to go and not having anything.”

In Hawaii that is not how we look at it...We don’t consider anyone homeless because if you homeless then you are not living on the “rock” (state of Hawaii) and you have nowhere to go. We call it “houseless” because you are still living on the rock...even though you don’t have a house...that rock (Hawaii) makes you “houseless” not homeless. Homelessness to us means that you got no land, no home...you have nothing! That’s how I see it.

Linda and the native people of Hawaii have a completely different definition and view on homelessness versus the rest of the United States. It is safe to point out that culture plays a definite influence on Linda’s definition of homelessness. Nevertheless, houseless or homeless carries the same meaning and consequence; no roof over someone’s head and the subsequent support to rely on public services for assistance. As
much as Linda tried to distance her current experience from the “OTHER” homeless population, her construction of definition continued to go back to her and her family’s reality - no home, shelter, money, food, health insurance, and a lack of support from friends and family. Linda was so frustrated that she internalized and connected “OTHER” to self. As we continued with the interview, tears began to fall.

This being homeless is totally hard for me. Most of the time I feel like this ain’t real…it’s an imitation…fake…this is all fake to me. I cannot handle this. What’s the word I’m looking for? Artificial. That’s how I feel. It’s like taking away your faith and getting a new one.

Linda had her own definition of what is “homelessness.” Regardless of how Linda viewed it or defined it, it was obvious that she carried and experienced the similar emotions as many mothers and/or individuals facing homelessness.

Sal is the 35 year-old, medium size build, Mexican-American man who experienced homelessness in the past. For Sal, like many others in the general public, he defined and believed that homelessness was a “choice” made by “OTHERS” of the homeless population. Sal had no idea that his construction of the homeless definition connected himself and his family back to the “OTHER.”

I would have to say not having a roof over my head. It doesn’t feel good. Sad a lot…Not having a roof over our head makes me feel the way I do …sad …unhappy…angry…frustrated…I don’t know (puts his head down as he answers taking a short pause). I don’t know what else to say.

But before Sal was done with his definition on homelessness, he took a twist by defining it as a “choice”; a way of distancing from the “OTHER” homeless population.

Well, there are those who actually aren’t doing anything…just sitting there and doing nothing! I think that’s their choice…they don’t want to do anything…just want to live this lifestyle. They don’t have no bills…no
other stuff…you know? If they want to live that life then that’s fine, but if you are going to choose to live that way, then don’t go out and ask for help because that help can be helping people like me and my family…you know? There are those people like me who really need it. I don’t think it’s fair what they are doing!

Sal may believe that homelessness is a choice because of his situation of how he and his family ended up homeless due to job loss. What Sal did not realize or consider was that many of the “OTHER” homeless people ended in the same place that he did because of a similar situation…job loss. The majority of the participants in this study defined homelessness as a “choice” using mythical and stereotypical terminology. By defining homelessness in the manner that they did, participants created a “distance” between themselves and the “OTHER” homeless populations. All the participants used their current experience to construct a definition of homelessness.

As a service provider for the homeless, I can recall how many of my “clients” were quick to “distance” themselves from the next individual and/or family that were in the waiting room, waiting for the same services as they were, but I was not aware of it to this degree of what I found in this study. I realize now that at that time, I was “wearing” a different hat (a service provider) and with this study I realized that I am looking at this social problem with a different lens.

Gender and Constructing the “Homeless Parent”

While the homeless identity itself carries great stigma (Goffman 1956), its effect is amplified as parents experience and manage failed identities as providers and caretakers for their families. A hegemonic gender dichotomy shapes parenting
expectations: father as provider; mother as nurturer and caretaker. This system of gender is embedded in culture and in social institutions (Kimmel 2008; Lorber 2002) and shapes differently the experiences and responses of homelessness for mothers and fathers.

When asked to describe their feelings and emotions “as a father or mother” while experiencing homelessness, the most apparent pattern evident was “pressure” as a parent. For the mothers, expressing emotions from their current experience of homelessness was difficult. Mothers expressed emotions of “guilt, shame, blame, sadness, anger, denial, and worthlessness.” For the fathers, their experience came more in the form of feelings of “failure, provider, protector, and breadwinner.”

The Failed Provider

Experience of Scott

Scott, the husband described his experience as “pressure” as a father and husband. The pressures led to feeling like a “failure” who failed to provide for his wife and children. When asked to describe his feelings and/or emotions as a father faced in his current crisis, he explained it by saying (and looking embarrassed):

Unusual to say the least...As a man, it’s not something that I’m used to. I’ve always provided for me and my family. I’ve always had a place to live...and to tell you the truth; I used to own my own property right of the highway. I had three-quarters of acres of land out there with a house and huge garage.

Scott seemed to have a lot of pride as a man, so it was not to my surprise that throughout the interview he made sure to remind me that he had once owned land and ALWAYS provided for his family. In this way he also frames this experience as the exception to his
identity in that historically he has indeed met social expectations as “man as provider.”

Feeling like he failed, Scott currently was failing as “provider”, he also expressed failure as a father, specifically to his oldest son of 15 years of age:

Well…they (children) were all living with us but my oldest son got us in trouble because of our situation and now he’s in juvenile hall living in a group home. I gave him several chances…I tried to help him the best I could…I can’t no longer help him…He needs help that I can’t no longer provide him. He needs to help himself so now he’s at a group home where he’ll be in a control environment where he can get the help that he needs.

When asked what kind of trouble his oldest son had put them through, Scott would not go into specifics, but kept stating, “He just got us into a lot of issues due to his out of control behavior.” Scott did make a point to let me know that he did try to visit his son as often as possible. When asked what kept him from seeing his son on a more constant basis, he stated that it was due to transportation. The Anderson’s relied first on public transportation and then on their social worker to help them get around town when needed. Transportation was a daily barrier for the Anderson family and is a central problem with other families/individuals that experience homelessness.

Experience of Mark

Mark, the 45 year-old, short, husky, Caucasian man was married to Linda. The pressure he felt was put on him by society and by his wife. He described his feelings as a father as follows:

Well, first of all, society puts a lot of pressures on the father because he is suppose to be the provider, caretaker, breadwinner, and role-model. Plus, my wife doesn’t make it any easier for me, like, a couple of days passed by and then she turns around and ask me, “So what now? What are YOU going to do about it?” Then I turn around and tell her, “NO! What are WE
going to do about it?” But then she continues to put it on me by telling me that it’s up to ME to get this family out of this. You know…I have been working all the time and she’s ONLY taking care of the kids, but now, I tell her it’s time to work because the kids are getting old enough to take care of themselves and be able to go to school alone. It seems at times that she would like to work, but then pushes it aside by telling me that it’s my responsibility to go to work, and take care of the family. I then tell her that I know I have to work, but she has to help too! She puts it all on my shoulders and she has to realize that in order for us to survive we both have to work…The male can’t be the ONLY one taking care of everything at once. Those days are gone where the male does everything for the family…It ain’t the 50’s anymore (jokingly laughing about it). But then she gets tired of being home, so she’s thinking of going back to school. I tell her that it’s better to go to school here (California) anyways. She wants to get into accounting…she’s been wanting to do that for a long time now. I try to motivate her by telling her to take a night class and work during the day, but then she blames me for this and that.

By this time, I can tell Mark’s blood was boiling from inside. With every other word, he used strong body movements. I felt like he was doing this so that he was sure that I understood and felt his experience as a father being in this situation. As hard as he was trying to make me understand, I knew that I couldn’t unless the experience of homelessness happened to me. Even though I cannot relate to Mark as a father experiencing homelessness, I could in a way relate to him when it comes to feeling the pressure as a father. Although my wife or family does not directly put that role of the “man, breadwinner/provider, or protector,” I cannot help it but feel it by how I have been socialized in our society.

But, I can’t let it get to me because then it’ll get to them (rest of family)…I have to be strong and be the “man” of the house and try not to show it…take it one day at a time…you can’t change it all in one day…it’s hard!

Obviously, Mark did not like the fact that his wife (Linda) was putting all this “gender” pressure on him, but at the same time, he clearly articulated his own negotiation of masculinity. Above, while he rejects traditional “man as only provider,” I thought that it would be of great interest to catch-up with Mark after they got out of homelessness.
and see if he still would want that pressure as a father as the “rescuer” and “hero” of the family for getting his family out of homelessness.

Experience of Paul

Cassidy’s partner, Paul the 36 year-old Mexican-American had similar views on what homelessness should look like, but when asked to describe his experience as a father during this difficult situation, he was not afraid to admit the hardship he and his family have experienced. Paul instead described his current experience with a lot of embarrassment and the feeling of a failure:

I feel bad because I have my kids you know? They are probably thinking irresponsible dad or whatever…but everybody goes through struggles. It has been a lot of stress! I have my parents but they have their problems too…and umm…they can’t afford taking care of me plus my kids and my girlfriend. You know the best thing is go to work and try to put everything behind me…try to come up front…try to succeed…get ahead…and that’s what I want to do. Although most of the time I feel really bad ‘cause I’m the “man” and I suppose to be taking care of my family…and that’s what I want. I want to show others that I can make it in life and that I can support my family…you know?

As man myself, I felt like Paul was speaking to me and asking for approval or some kind of answer from me by consistently asking, “You know?” As I probed by asking him if he felt it was his sole responsibility for what has happened to his family, he continued by saying:

Yeah! I have to take care of my family and never let them down…you know? Where am I going to leave them? Out in the streets? At least I have a car to put them in and keep them inside where it’s warm…you know? If I have to sleep outside, I’ll sleep outside instead of them…you know?

Obviously, Paul felt the pressure of being a father, homeless or not. With the pressure came the feeling and description of feeling like a “failure” as a father. Paul never used the words, “guilt,” or “shame,” in his response.
Experience of Ron

Ron, the 35 year-old Caucasian man and Sally’s boyfriend felt and expressed his failure as a “provider.” Besides society’s pressure of feeling like having to live up to the expectations of a father and a “man,” Ron also received pressure from his girlfriend, Sally, who reminded him that he is the “man” of their family and that he is basically not doing what a father or the “man” of the house is supposed to do, which is to “provide.” Ron received another external pressure, which came from Sally’s father who also made an effort to point out that he is supposed to be the “man” of the house. This is how Ron described his experience as a (homeless) father:

I feel real bad for my kids…yeah…I feel real bad…and my lady (Sally) says to me, “Well, you the MAN!” Or her dad also tells me, “You the MAN! You suppose to be taking care of them!” I tell him, hey, everything happened so fast (snaps his fingers), out of nowhere. It’s like everyone says, you have to be prepare for thinks like this…one day you may be enjoying your home and everything, and then all of a sudden...BOOM!...Everything is gone. You lose everything. Now, I’m thinking more…I gotta hustle…and I should’ve saved money. My thing now is about saving. You gotta save. I was just spending everything on my girls…giving them what they want. Now I gotta cut down and make sure I have money just in case it happens again. No! No! It’s not gonna happen again!

Ron had to deal with the pressure of being a father on a day-to-day basis. But he also had to deal with the pressure of being a “homeless” father. It seemed he could not easily forget what was expected of him as a father or the “man” of the house because he was constantly reminded of it by Sally and her father. There was an indirect and direct pressure pushed from society and family of what a father or the “man” of the house is required to do during these tough events in life.
Experience of Sal

Cynthia’s partner was Sal, the 37 year-old Mexican-American who at the time of the study had been laid-off by his employer. On top of what his former employer had promised him (unemployment benefits and severance pay), Sal was also dealing with the pressure of being a father during their difficult time of homelessness. With all the frustration he had built inside, Sal appeared ready take it out on someone (and that someone appeared to be me). His body language portrayed similar behavior that a male gorilla displays when feeling threatened by his enemy – ready to attack and defend:

Down! Depressed all the time…Can’t do nothing…Can’t take the kids anywhere…Can’t do this with them…Can’t do any stuff with them. They want to do this and that but you don’t have the money for it…Or too far of a walk or something! I don’t mind taking them. I just don’t think it’s fair but what can I do? I’m doing what I can (Sal appeared guarded as if ready to attack, again)? I can’t do anything for them or her (Cynthia)! I wake-up early every morning to find a job, but I can’t seem to find anything…And I feel like shit!

I realized that Sal had a reason to feel angry and frustrated. His situation and being a father did not make it easy for Sal or any parent to feel good about themselves or their circumstances. Sal appeared to be taking the first huge step of trying to get him and his family out of homelessness by searching for a job.

Blame, Guilt, Shame, Sadness, Denial, Worthless, Anger

Experience of Sandy

Sandy the shy 45 year-old Caucasian woman, who never made eye contact with me during our interview, carried and expressed a lot of her guilt and shame as a mother. Like the other mothers in the study, most of their guilt and shame derived from their
children having to experience homelessness. Sandy expressed her experience as a (homeless) mother this way:

It’s been really hard. I feel real bad that my kids are in this situation. I feel that they shouldn’t be going through this hardship in life. All the time I feel like it’s my fault…shameful (by this time, Sandy could not hold back her tears – she would cry for an entire five minutes straight before we moved forward with the interview). I’m sorry for crying. I just feel terrible for my kids. Just like everyone else, you probably think I’m a horrible mother! (The only thing I replied was, “No, I don’t think that.”) That’s okay, I’m used to it. I have tried to tell my kids, but they don’t really know what’s going on. Maybe a little. I have tried to tell them but it’s too hard for me. It just continues to get more depressing and more difficult. It seems like we are never going to find a place to live, but I hope it’s soon for the sake of my kids (stops to speak and begins to cry while putting her head down. I walked out of the room to give her some time alone. When I returned, Sandy described the difficulty of finding a home has been). They (landlords/property managers) say we have bad credit and don’t want to rent to us. They especially don’t like the fact that our income is from social security, but how can you get a job if no one is willing to give you a chance to get our life back-up. It would be much easier if we had a place to live first and then Andy (husband) could go out and get a job!

Evidently Sandy felt the pressure as a mother and the role that comes with it from the external pressure of society.

Experience of Linda

Remember Linda, the 40 year-old Pacific Islander woman and mother from Hawaii? When asked to describe how her role as a mother has been during this stage in her life, she had a lot of anger mixed with deep negative emotions:

Very hard! Sad! Angry! Especially as a mother (pausing for a moment with tears)...I feel like I have nothing to give to them...Nothing back to them. I just don’t know what to do for them. I have nothing! I have nothing to show and that makes me feel bad. I don’t like that feeling...’cause I want my kids to look at me and go, “its okay mom,
everything is okay. You did it! You a good mother and all that.” But I don’t blame them for not saying it…That’s the reason my other kids didn’t want to come here (California) because they wanted to see if their mother can make it in life. They want me to show them that I can…I know I can make it, I just need to do something different in life…trying to find that goal is hard. Now I want to go back to school…want my property in Hawaii…be better than what I’m just to make my kids happy. I don’t care if I’m not happy, as long as they happy, I don’t care…that’s all it matters to me. They are my motivating factor.

It occurred to me that Linda took a lot of the blame and guilt as a mother because as she put it, at 40 years of age, she felt like she had nothing to show or give to her children. And the anger appeared to stem from her husband because it was his “idea” to relocate to California from Hawaii and, due to his lack of planning; he put her and their family in the situation (homelessness) they were now facing.

Experience of Cassidy

There was one mother in the study who did not consider herself or family to be homeless. Cassidy, the aging 35 year-old Caucasian woman who appeared to look more like in her 50’s was in denial of her situation. Throughout the interview, she never did state that her or her family were homeless or had EVER experienced it. This is how Cassidy described her experience as a (homeless) mother:

I don’t know…Maybe nurturing…I don’t know. I try to be strong. Maybe ‘cause we were able to stay with family and stuff, it hasn’t really hit me. I don’t know how to explain that one. I couldn’t really say it because I really haven’t been homeless, homeless! I really don’t know how to answer that one. I really don’t know. I think I have to pass on this one…umm…like…I always had food for my kids. They never suffered, suffered…or anything like that! I don’t think so.

*When I heard Cassidy respond in such a manner, I could only think of the alcoholic who seems to be in denial of his/her addiction and it doesn’t matter how many times people around them point it out. I have to admit I was caught off guard for a moment when I*
heard Cassidy’s response. As we continued with the interview, I waited, or at least hoped that Cassidy would “admit” to her current experience; but just like hoping for that alcoholic to change, the time never seemed to come:

I never really felt like I failed my kids or something…you know…I don’t think…I never let them go a day without food or anything like that. Well, one time when we were living off welfare, we felt like it was like homeless ‘cause we didn’t have enough money to pay everything. We were living day by day…didn’t have enough money to go buy stuff for the baby. We would always run out of food the week before the first of the month came around and then like that, I felt I failed my kids ‘cause I didn’t have any food to feed my kids or anything like that…that would feel bad…like damn…I should have done better.

In comparison to the rest of the mothers in the study, Cassidy did not show or express the same or similar type of guilt and shameful emotions during the interview. Cassidy seemed aware of what she and her family were experiencing, but instead, did not allow herself to believe it; instead, as I learned more about Cassidy later, she continually distanced herself from “homelessness” and other homeless populations. Cassidy had her own definition of what homelessness should look like.

Experience of Sally

Along with guilt and shame comes the feeling of feeling worthless as a mother.

For instance, Sally the 35 year-old Caucasian woman who has not been in the labor force in 14 years felt and expressed her guilt, shame and worthlessness this way after being asked how it is to be a “homeless mother”:

Worthless! I could have done better for my kids (voice crackling and tears begin to fall)...they shouldn’t have to be here. They shouldn’t be here, it’s not their fault! Certain stuff happens in life… but I don’t feel like a good mother. I feel that I should be taking better care of them and they should have a roof over their head (I give Sally a moment to organize her thoughts). I just want this to be all over (starts to cry, again). I haven’t
cried much but it’s getting to me…finally (uses her right hand to wipe off her tears from her face). I try to be strong for the kids you know? I want to give the best life to my kids. That’s all I can do and want to do…be something better than I’m you know? Like go to college. I had the opportunity but I messed it up. I start thinking that if I would have gone to college we wouldn’t be in this situation. Thinking of all this makes me feel like shit! Worthless! We’d had a home of my own, but I dropped out. Very foolish thing to do! I keep telling my kids, don’t do this…go to school…go to college…make something of yourself!

Sally was in so much pain that she could only put her head-down and cover her face with her hands. I gave Sally a few minutes to cry and reorganize her thoughts. The only thing I was able to tell Sally was, “it’s okay, take all the time you need.” After some time, Sally continued speaking:

I just don’t want them to suffer anymore. As God is my witness, this will never happen again!

I suddenly found myself jumping off my seat. Sally was so emotional that she pounded the desk that we were using with both hands.

Even if I have to take a job and have to work nights, days, weekends, holidays, whatever, I’ll do it! I’ll have my oldest daughter take care of the youngest…but I also haven’t work ‘cause then I won’t have time for my kids. That’s why I haven’t worked. I want to be around them all the time. I haven’t left them since they were babies. Now that they are older and understand what’s going on, I’m going to get a job. I have to do it if I want a better life for ourselves you know? TANF isn’t just working out for me.

I could only imagine what Sally must be feeling and going through as a woman, mother, girlfriend and human being. From a distance, I could only have sympathy, but could not feel what she is experiencing.

I want to get off TANF! I want to be self-sufficient to support myself and my kids and not having to go to the store and be on a budget. It’s hard because my kids want stuff all the time and I can’t get it for them ‘cause I don’t have enough. I want to be able and get them what they want, but not to the point where they get spoil…just enough to be able to get what they want. Not having to tell them that they have to wait ‘til next month. I want to be able to take them where they want. I don’t have anything as a mother and that’s why I feel worthless and guilty!

Apparently, Sally felt like she was not living up to her or society’s standards of
being a mother. Sally recognized her “mistakes” that she had made in the past. She felt
had put her and her family in the situation of homelessness. Sally would never know if
her past had caused her to be where she currently is now.

Experience of Cynthia

Cynthia, a 37 year-old, shy, Caucasian woman, was at the time of the study hiding
and living in fear because of her ex-husband. Cynthia’s ex-husband had come “close” to
killing her and her children in the past. Regardless of what Cynthia had and continued to
face, one way or another, she seemed to find the inner strength needed to carry on and
when asked to describe her role as a (homeless) mother, she did not have much to say,
but what she did say was enough to know that motherhood was very important to her:

It’s hard! They are kids and sometimes you just have to deal with it…its hard! I still have to make sure they are clean. Make sure they have
something to eat. Make sure they have clothes. I have to do all this with
their father’s child-support. I have to take care of my kids. Yeah…I want
to be a good mom! I’m not a bad mom!

I had an interesting interview with Cynthia. I say this because she was not one to
say much when asked a question. Cynthia appeared to say just enough to let me in to her
life experience as a mother and individual.

Mothers

The mothers’ responses in the study provide and tell us about the guilt and shame
they felt and experienced. It also explains the effect that homelessness and mother-hood
brings on to them. Like most mothers, they only want their children to be happy, safe
and healthy. With their current situation, it is close to impossible to provide the basic life
necessities and a healthy mental state of mind for their children. The difficult thing for the mothers in this study to realize was the wonderful job they have done and continued to do for their children under the given circumstances. Even for parents who are not experiencing homelessness and have a roof over their children’s heads, it is difficult when it comes to parenting and being a good role model. Given what these mothers have, they are fighting for their children’s survival and keeping them alive with the limited resources that they have had access to, such as food, water, shelter, clothing, and medical attention and most importantly, the love and nurture that come with being a mother.

Fathers

Fathers in the study also expressed guilt and shame. They expressed how difficult it had been for them as fathers. Some fathers shared the embarrassment they felt as a man. They believed society had tagged them with specific gender roles on what a man should be and do as a father. All of the five fathers in the study felt a huge weight of pressure from their defined roles. The pressures that the fathers sensed were not just from the direct responsibilities of fatherhood, but also, from common social norms about what it meant to be a man, father, and stigmas against being homeless. As Scott, the 40 year-old Caucasian man, described his experience as a “homeless father”:

As a man, it’s not something I’m used to. I’ve always provided for me and my family. I’ve always had a place to live, and to tell you the truth, I used to own my own property right off the highway. I had three-quarters acres of land out there with a house and a garage.
As Scott spoke of his past on owning property, I can see and feel how proud he must have felt during that time before being homeless.

As mentioned, Scott also spoke about the guilt and shame he had for his 15 year-old son’s situation. When asked if all of the children were together with him and his wife, Scott looked and mentioned how embarrassing it was for him. This specific topic was apparently difficult for Scott. He needed to excuse himself from the interview. He walked away and headed straight inside the restroom. As hard as he tried not to cry out loud, he wasn’t successful. His cry could be heard across the entire hall. After a good 15 minutes locked in the restroom, Scott returned wiping his tears off his face and then continued the interview.

Experience the “Typical Day” in a Homeless Shelter

What does a “typical day” look like for the homeless family? For the fortunate family not experiencing homelessness, a “typical day” may seem or feel difficult with getting the kids ready for school, preparing lunch, day care, after-school curriculum, work, dinner, sorting bills and last minute preparations for the next day. But what does a day look like for the family that experiences homelessness?

I was interested in finding out what a “typical day” looks like for a homeless family through the perspective of a researcher, instead of that of a service provider. I must admit the differences were apparent. I found myself to be in a more relaxed role as a researcher, therefore allowing me to pick out smaller details of emotion and to
concentrate without having to think in the back of my head, “How can I help this family, now, at this very moment?” as I did as a service provider.

Gender division of “emotion work” between parents is found in my study. The two gender divisions are that men expressed pressure as “provider” and women expressed “stress, frustration and scared” of the daily “things to do” to try and escape homelessness.

The “typical day” also brought the feeling of “burdening.” Families throughout their transition expressed that they tried to limit the help (shelter) they asked for from families, friends, and the community. They were torn with asking for help because of the children. Throughout the transition, parents at times had to put down their “pride” in order for their children to be in a safe haven of shelter.

With all the mixed feelings of emotions, parents also faced the struggle of overcoming “boredom” on a daily basis. When parent/s completed their “to-do” list for the day, most had to find other things to “kill time.” Without (or lack of) transportation, no income or very little income and shelter rules to follow, parents experienced and dreaded “free time” because that meant “boredom.” The last pattern of the “typical day” for parents was the “exhaustion” they faced, day-in and day-out. For mothers, the responsibility of “getting the kids ready” and for fathers, it was pressure of the “daily things (roles)” that needed to be done. In other words, role conflict appeared between the specified roles as a father and mother.
Emotion Work of Homeless Parenting

Sandy and Scott described and experienced the same typical day very differently. Sandy’s typical day was one of unpredictability and worry. Scott noted the regular structure of the day and was satisfied for the moment with how things were going.

Sandy, the 45 year-old Caucasian woman with two children, began describing her day as a frustrating and unexplainable experience, but after reflection she provided these details:

To tell you the truth…I don’t know what a typical day is for me…I guess it changes, but I guess I don’t think about it. I just want to forget it! I know it’s hard to get around town. My kids get picked up by Robin (School Liaison) like today…you saw that I’m not able to pick up my kids from school and sometimes Scott may go with me to other appointments. We walk or take the bus depending how far it is. He (Scott) may call once in a while for places that are for rent…we depend on my social security for the month. I don’t know…I can’t tell you a typical day…it just continues to get more depressing and more difficult. It seems like we are never going to find a place to live…but I hope it’s soon for the sake of my kids (stops and begins to cry, putting her head down. I give her a moment before continuing with the interview). It’s so damn difficult to get a place because of our credit! They (landlords/property managers) say we have bad credit and don’t want to rent to us…they especially don’t like the fact that our income is from social security, but how can you get a job if no one is willing to give you a chance to get our life back up? It would be much easier if we had a place to live first and then Scott could go out and get a job!

Sandy described her “typical day” with frustration, confusion, and anger. These emotions made it difficult for Sandy to realize that she had described her emotions as a (homeless) mother. She stated that transportation, lack of income, house searching and appointments were obstacles faced on a daily basis as a (homeless) mother.

Scott, the 40 year-old Caucasian man and the once proud property owner, described his “typical day” much differently than that of his domestic partner, Sandy. A
typical day for Scott at the shelter and the homeless life was “not bad.” He went into
detail about how “wonderful” the shelter staff had treated him and his family. This is
what a “typical day” was like for Scott:

A typical day here at the shelter, it’s not bad. We get up in the morning to
send our children to school. My wife and I usually go back to sleep for a
couple of hours…and get up…we clean our room because they (shelter
staff) have room check from 11:00 – 11:30am…and so we clean our room.
They have stipulations and rules here. They want their rooms clean…no
drugs or alcohol…things of that nature. If your room is not clean, you get
a citation. Three citations they ask you to leave. Actually, it’s nice
here…I like it…it’s not bad. The people here are wonderful! They treat
us very good. They help us in any way they can. Robin (School Liaison)
has helped us enroll our kids in school. Brenda (Social Worker) is
working with us. They been tremendously good to us! So for as long as
we are here, we are very happy to be here…of course…we don’t want to
be here forever. We want to get out and get our own place…until that
happens I say that everyday life here is great…I can’t complaint.

It was apparent that Scott’s daily experience as a (homeless) father was the
opposite from that of his domestic partner, Sandy. The apparent difference with Scott
was that he did not describe the daily “things to do” that his domestic partner Sandy did
to try and get out of homelessness. Sandy had talked about the everyday worries of
house searching, transportation and the “rejections” from landlords/property managers.
At the moment, it had appeared that Scott was “satisfied” because he and his family were
not out in the street; instead, they had a bed and room to provide them with temporary
haven. Sandy “took” on or was “given” the daily responsibilities and worries of taking
the steps of trying to get out of homelessness.

Linda, the 40 year-old Pacific Islander from the state of Hawaii, also experienced
a great deal of emotion work in her daily routine. Her “typical day” was “stressful,
frustrating and scary.” Linda’s frustration stemmed from her anger of leaving her native state and carried over to the family’s experience of homelessness. Often it was difficult for Linda to concentrate and focus on planning actions to help her family escape homelessness. Even things as important as appointments with landlords and social workers were challenging to complete. The routine of Linda and her husband included almost daily meetings at the welfare office with their assigned social worker. These meetings were required in order to keep their cash-aid benefits active. Linda said:

Right now…well, stressful, hard, scared…especially for me because I’m from Hawaii. This is totally different for me – being houseless here (California) it’s nothing like being in Hawaii. I’m more scared than ever…I feel lost…especially when I have kids. It makes it harder…we don’t know where to go or who to turn to. We don’t want to be in this position…we worse here than in Hawaii…nowhere to go.

At this point Linda has described how different it is in California than in her native state of Hawaii, and in turn, making her scared and lost. Linda continues describing her day:

It’s just hard to when you don’t have a place to go…and you know, we only have eight more days left (referring to their “homeless assistance program” being paid by the county welfare). I’m hoping that my welfare worker…oh no…even thinking about going back there (to welfare office) kills me thinking about it…sitting all day there. I don’t even want to think about it. And all you do is grab a piece of paper and there…you done…take it home…sign it…take it back…make an appointment…go inside…figure out how much you make…nothing…all that time for nothing! No way, I have no patience…everywhere we go is sit, sit, sit…man! It’s hard to look for places here…nothing easy…I have to go through so much. Sometimes I feel like “just give it to me!” Sometimes I feel like saying that to people…you know? Give us a try. There is nothing wrong with that…we are good people you can rent to.

Linda is not unique when it came to expressing and describing what a parent goes through when experiencing homelessness. Linda was very talkative and not afraid to
state how and what she felt. The feelings of being scared frustrated and stress is not uncommon among the population experiencing homelessness. The experience of homelessness is already overwhelming and when parents like Linda have other huge responsibilities making and keeping appointments can and do become too much for parents throughout the transition.

This gendered division of “emotion work” has been found in other research not related to homelessness. Yet the male partners in this study also experienced worry and frustration. While women felt heavily the fear and sadness for their children, men were more likely to feel responsible for their partner. In this way, the men articulated an internalized role of “father as family provider.”

Mark, the 45 year-old Caucasian man married to Linda had a similar “typical day” to describe as his wife, but with Mark, although filled with frustration and stress, he appeared to realize that things had to be done in order to escape homelessness. Mark also expressed the “extra” frustration on how his wife, Linda, seemed to bring on top of their homeless experience. This is what a “typical day” was like for Mark:

I have to drive her (Linda) around and that makes it difficult for me to go to work and do my own thing. That creates a problem, plus try to put the kids in school…find a house…it starts to get to you after a while. A lot of driving (smiling from frustration)…just going back and forth to the welfare office and then going around looking for places that I can’t find…getting lost…I’m trying to get familiar with the area again…my wife freaking out…other than that it’s been a lot of paper work just to try and get some help. I been just taking it one day at a time. I know the last couple of days have been like we are going to do this…we are going to do that…what else do we have to do? It’s been like that…we drive around…it gets tiring that we have to stop…I haven’t been here for a long time now…so it gets frustrating to get familiar with the area…it has grown so much…I don’t remember it like this…people are driving fast and are in
hurry to get nowhere…then I see signs for rent and the prices are so high compare to when I used to be here. There are so many people (pausing and taking a deep breath)!

It was apparent that Mark had described a roller coaster experience as an individual, father, and husband. Mark’s apparent stressors were the daily things that had to get done in order to keep his family in the shelter, familiarize him-self again with the area and work on his relationship with his wife.

Paul was the 36 year-old Mexican-American father. The “typical day” for Paul consisted of going to work early in the morning and returning with his family late in the afternoon. He experienced the stress of providing for this family. He described his “typical day” as a father experiencing homelessness, he also was thinking about his wife and how her day was going with the kids. Paul expressed sympathy and care for his wife while at his job working to earn enough money to get him and his family out of homelessness. This is what a “typical day” was like for Paul:

Well…we first wake up…take a shower…get ready to go to work…go to work…come back after eight hours of work…my girlfriend usually picks me up from work…we drive around just to waste time…see what we can afford for dinner…and then most of the time we don’t have money, we have the lunches that are passed out during lunch time at the motel (shelter)...since I’m not there for lunch ‘cause I have to be at work, the workers (shelter staff) give my girlfriend extra (sandwiches) to give to me when I come from work. We go to sleep and wake up to another day. It’s difficult…you know…with kids…we have two kids…and then having our stuff in the “Blazer” (SUV vehicle)...all our clothes…blankets…kid stuff is in the back…and then being put up in that motel (shelter)...it’s hard because I have to go to work in the morning…wake up early…and I’m not able to help my girlfriend with the kids because of work (puts his head down and tears slowly begin to fall from his eyes). I think it’s harder for her because she has to get the kids ready…be ready by a certain time to go where she needs to go…and still be able to get back on time for any appointments…and take care of our two kids. I feel bad, but at the same
time, I have to work to earn money to get us out of this shit!

For Paul, his typical day consisted of going to work full-time. At the same time, he could not help think about all the struggles his girlfriend was dealing with during the day. Paul appeared sympathetic enough to acknowledge the hard work his girlfriend was doing without a home and two small children. For Paul, the luxury of returning to a place called “home” after a day’s work to relax and enjoy his family was at the moment just a thought.

Begging Without Burdening

Cassidy, the 35 year-old Caucasian woman with a two year-old boy and a one year-old girl described her “typical day” as survival. She tried hard to get the needs of her kids met without burning bridges with social workers or friends. She concentrated on how her children were going to have a roof over their heads the next day. This type of survival thinking put a lot of pressure on Cassidy as a mother experiencing homelessness. This is what a “typical day” was like for Cassidy:

Well, just going from family to family…like all day…staying here and there…trying to find somewhere to go and stay…but we really don’t like to stay anywhere for a very long time…like, you know…put burden on people…’cause we were homeless before we had kids…we couldn’t find a place to live so we were just staying here and there or in our car or whatever. But now that we have kids, I always worry about the next day of finding a safe place for my children. I feel like very low ‘cause I have to beg my social worker to provide us another day or more. And when those days of shelter are over I have to beg again and again! Sometimes we call other people to see if we can possibly stay with them, but I feel like we are a burden…and I have to remember that I’m doing this for my children. They don’t deserve to be sleeping in the car. And at times I feel alone because Paul is at work. Every day is about the next day…thinking where we going to sleep?
Every day she appeared to get in the mind set of survival, with clear focus on the safety of her children. With Cassidy’s mindset, it was apparent that homelessness brought stress and other negative emotions to her role as a mother.

Longing for Something to Do – Somewhere to Be

Sally, the 35 year-old Caucasian woman with three children described her “typical day” as awful, depressing, and filled with boredom. All the “things to do” on a daily basis were not enough to keep her mind occupied from boredom. She expressed that the “shelter life” was at times “very boring.” This finding is not new. Other research has found that many homeless individuals have expressed “boredom” during their experience.

Many of the homeless individuals have connected “boredom” to the rules and regulations that comes with the shelter life. For Sally, she also expressed boredom the most during their time inside their hotel room. With boredom and all the responsibilities that the family faces, emotions of fear, frustration, worry, and despair were attached to their experiences. As one parent put it, “We do what every normal family does, but without a home (we need to) plan additional things.”

For someone experiencing homelessness boredom is common due to their daily routine. For many, spending or “wasting” time throughout the day is challenging when there is nowhere to go. For Sally, boredom, along with feeling depressed was part of her “typical day:”

We get up early…the kids get up at six in the morning. We take them to school…come back to the motel and I clean up. If we have appointments
we go there…if not, we just stay in the room…maybe we go get something to eat. That’s about it. That’s all we do. Or we go check if we have mail and then come back to the shelter and then the kids eat…watch a little television…rent some movies…go to sleep and then do it all over again. I’m so depressed that all I do is sleep. I’ve talked to other families at the motel (shelter), but when they are not around and I’m by myself, I just sleep. It’s not like I’m tired…I just can’t cope with it anymore that I just want to sleep and for it to go away (Sally starts to cry)! That’s what a day is. I rather have something to do like an appointment or something to motivate me…I look forward when I have an appointment or something and not be in that motel (shelter) room. I can’t wait to have a job so I can be out…make money for us…I’m not talking about being rich or anything like that…enough to survive. It’s awful! Not knowing where we are going, like tonight. We are always thinking about how can we get a place to live soon? You know? The kids are sick and tired don’t want to listen…they just want to sleep as soon as we get somewhere. We are always homeless…on the streets…and hungry…it’s hard…really hard! I mean…I wouldn’t mind if it was just me and him (boyfriend), but we have kids and they can’t play outside or enjoy themselves. It’s not safe and they are missing their friends…I don’t know…I don’t know. All I can say is awful (Sally lets out a sudden laugh, but quickly turns to a cry). That’s the only way I can describe it. I’ve never been through this in my life! You know…never planning on doing it again!

Sally’s “typical day” filled with sadness, frustration, anger, and boredom are the effects of experiencing homelessness. As a mother experiencing homelessness, there was an extra emotion Sally was faced with; the guilt and frustration when thinking of her children who were also experiencing the same event as her. This extra thought appeared to affect Sally more than she realized.

Losing All Energy

Cynthia, the 37 year-old shy, intimate, Caucasian woman with four children described her “typical day” as “get the kids ready.” Answering the question, Cynthia apparently was frustrated and exhausted from her daily routine as a mother experiencing
homelessness. The combination of homelessness and being a mother had definitely taken a toll on Cynthia and it showed when she answered the question of describing a “typical day.” This is what a “typical day” was like for Cynthia:

I have to take care of the kids. Get my seven year old off to school. It’s hard! All day I’m taking care of the kids (puts her head, takes a deep breath, and stays quiet for a minute. As she lifts up her head about to say something, she begins to cry. Another minute passes before she is able to say anything.). Is it bad to say as a mother that you are so tired of taking care of your own kids because I don’t know how much more I can do this! (This was the only time throughout the interview that I heard Cynthia raise her voice – a voice of frustration and exhaustion). I feel bad for saying that, but all I do is take and take and take and take care of those kids! I don’t mean to say that but I’m just tired of everything that’s been going on with me and my family. I know I have to take care of my kids, but… (Cynthia stayed quiet and was unable to say another word).

Cynthia, who appeared to be a very loving individual, had reached her breaking point as a woman and mother. Homelessness had temporarily conquered its next victim. Filled with frustration and exhaustion, this made Cynthia misdirect her emotions toward her children and begin to question her motherhood. Without safe haven, permanent stable housing, and suffering from depression, Cynthia appeared to be doing the most she can as a mother under the circumstances, but could not escape the reality and the harsh life homelessness brings onto people.

Sal, the 35 year Mexican-American man also described his “typical day” as “hard.” Sal had the responsibilities of job and house search, along with making necessary appointments. Throughout the day Sal never really was around his fiancée and kids. The responsibilities he had “assigned” made it difficult for him to be around his family. Sal did not have means of transportation, so he had to rely on his bicycle to get around town.
Hard! Hard! Hard! Really hard! I try to get my stepdaughter into school and my stepson to school which is in the other side of town. It’s been really hard! We have to get up and get my son ready for school. Take him to school in the bike. I come back and either go to the park or the library…or just go for walks. I also go look for houses and other places to find for rent…Or I’m looking for jobs. I sometimes wake up early in the morning to be at the temp agency and hope there is work. I have to think of all the other damn appointments I have make or go to…and I have to do this in the crappy bike I have…that’s all I have…nothing else. I don’t have time to be with family or anything else. Then I either come back do whatever we can and put the kids to sleep and wait for the next day.

Just like his fiancée, Cynthia, he had some huge responsibilities (appointments, job and house search) to do throughout the day with limited mobility. The responsibilities took Sal away from his family, but he knew that all those things had to be done in order to have a chance of escaping homelessness and succeed in finding stable, permanent housing. Sal was aware that by getting his family out of their current situation, he would be able again to spend the time he desired with his family.

A family experiencing homelessness has extra emotional struggles in comparison with a family who has permanent, stable housing. In this study, I found that every single family faced barriers like; 1) get children ready for school; 2) house and job search; 3) lack of food; 4) transportation; and 5) making and keeping appointments. With these everyday barriers, parents were faced with specific emotions like fear/scare, frustration, worried/stress, depression/sadness, and hard work.

Even though Sally (mother #4) was the only participant in the study to express boredom from experiencing homelessness, I believe other parents felt the same way many times, but for them, boredom was not their first emotional feeling. Linda (mother #2) and Cassidy (mother #3) described their “typical day” as feeling worried and stressed.
from their daily responsibilities of experiencing homelessness. For Linda, making and keeping appointments and not knowing what was going to happen tomorrow when it came to shelter created a lot of worry and stress. Cassidy also expressed feelings of worry and the feelings were similar to Linda’s thoughts about going from “place to place” and not knowing if her family would have shelter tomorrow.

Sandy (mother #1) and Sally (mother #4) expressed emotions of sadness and depression. Sandy had clinically been diagnosed with depression, but her experience of homelessness did not help ease her thoughts about her future and escalated her depression. Sandy really was sad and depressed from their daily responsibilities of getting the kids to school, finding housing, making and keeping appointments, and needing income. For Sandy, the only thing she wanted was to “forget” about everything. Sally suffered from boredom that brought on the feelings of sadness. The lack of communication with the outside world from being in a motel (shelter) room, made it difficult for Sally to escape her thoughts that reminded her about her situation of homelessness.

Linda (mother #2) and Cynthia’s (mother #5) “typical day” with homelessness brought frustration. Linda, besides the feelings of stress and worry, also suffered from the feeling of frustration. Her frustration stemmed from the reminder of having to leave her native state of Hawaii. Linda’s frustration was directed to her husband, Mark. Linda “blamed” her husband for their situation of homelessness. Cynthia, on the other hand, her frustration was rooted in her role as a mother during the tough times of homelessness. Cynthia felt exhausted and frustrated from “taking care” of her small children. But her
exhaustion and frustration were a misdirected emotion towards her children because of her crisis of homelessness. With months of experiencing homelessness and no place to call home, Cynthia had been a victim of their unfortunate social circumstance.

Scott (father #1) and Mark (father #2) were the two parents that expressed “calmness.” Scott described his homeless “typical day” as “not bad.” He also spoke of how appreciative he was for the shelter that was provided during the study and the dedication of the shelter staff in helping him and his family. For Mark, his calmness was his way to stay focused in order to plan what was needed (like, house and job search and making and keeping appointments) to escape homelessness and be successful in doing it.

Mark (father #2), Paul (father #3), and Ron (father #4) expressed feelings of worry and stress throughout their “typical day.” Mark was reminded by his wife, Linda, on a daily basis that it was his fault for being where they were and that if they had stayed in Hawaii, they would not be homeless. For Paul, his worry and stress were from going to work every day to try and save enough money to get out of homelessness and stressing about his girlfriend and how she was doing with the kids. Paul felt this way because he thought it was not fair that his girlfriend, Sally, had to watch over the children while he was at work, but he knew it had to be done. Ron also expressed the feelings of worry and stress. His emotions were from the pressure of thinking about where to find shelter for his family tomorrow.

For Sal (father #5), he described his “typical day” marked by feeling “awful” and “hard.” Sal was aware that in order to escape homelessness that it required constant work, searching for a job and a home, but at the same time, he felt “awful” because it
kept him away from his family. Sal wished that he could only have a little more time to spend with his family.

Making Meaning of Family in the Homeless Experience

Participants in my study understood the role of their family in two ways. Some participants, both men and women, defined family as a lifeline helping them make it through homelessness. Yet men, some of the fathers, imagined and felt the entire experience would be a lot easier if they were just alone. It is likely the latter stems from the burden they felt as provider. Others experienced both the burden and support of family. Mothers, on the other hand, found it difficult to impossible to imagine life without their family during their homeless experience. The difficulty of imagining their experience without their family was due to the strong sense of motivation they developed from their family (especially children) in helping them make it through the day.

I asked each parent “If you had no children and/or partner, how different, if at all, would your situation be? And would you do anything differently?”

Sandy, the 45 year-old Caucasian woman, married to Scott believed that her homeless experience would be “a lot easier” with no children. At the same time, it was her two children that she used during her homeless experience as a motivational factor. This is what Sandy had to say:

First of all, it (homelessness) would be a lot easier. My children make it difficult...although by having my children makes me want to get out of this situation. They are a motivational factor to me. I don’t know about Scott...every day I think about them. Sometimes they are the ones who push me…tell me to get out of bed and do something. If it wasn’t for
them I don’t know how it would be. (As tears begin to fall from her eyes, she said one last statement.). They are good kids and I have to remind myself of that.

Answering the question was apparently difficult for Sandy. Looking into her eyes while she responded to this question, for a moment, I was somehow able to feel her pain. For probably the first time as a mother, Sandy had appeared for a minute to imagine her life without her children, and it would probably be her last time.

Scott, Sandy’s partner, answered the question straightforward saying that his homelessness experience would not be different without a family and that he would do things the same. True or not, this is what Scott had to say about experiencing homelessness without children and/or partner:

No Sandy and no kids I probably visualize it the same way…here…just doing my own thing. You see I’m in disability. I have a split disk on my back…so my back is well gone out. I was a logger most of my life…I would just live here…save my money until I be able to move into a little studio or something.

Scott then moves on and makes reference that with or without family, he is still a motivated individual.

Oh yeah…I’m a motivated person! I don’t give up easily. I always keep my hopes up. Now, Sandy, she gets down…she gets depressed…she suffers medical problems…she suffers anxiety attacks, panic attacks, phobia…gets depressed very easily. These are other things I have to deal with too! I have to be the backbone…keep her spirits up and tell her we are going to be okay, don’t worry about it (homelessness), so that kind of keeps her going.

According to Scott, the experience of being homeless with or without Sandy and/or children, he would not do anything differently. He made sure to point out that he is a motivated person and does not rely on someone or something else to help him get
through these difficult times. Scott also made sure to note that he was helping his wife
through these difficult times, but did not mention or realize that it was probably because
of his family ties that he was able to stay motivated throughout.

Remember Linda, the 40 year-old Pacific Islander from the state of Hawaii? She
truly believed that if she had no children she would “probably be dead” or be a “junkie”
and “lonely.” To answer this specific question was difficult for Linda. She appeared to
really try and imagine her life without her children. This is Linda’s response:

I wouldn’t be here…no…I wouldn’t be here today. Here in this
situation…I probably be somewhere and be some kind of junkie or
something all messed up. I be worst…I can see myself that’s why I say it.
I be lonely like other people I see on the road…it’s hard…I see other
people from here (California) and they all lonely in the beach. I ask them
what the hell they are doing here…What? No family? They say yes. But
no one want them…they lonely…but if I had no family, I be honest with
you…I be dead today…not to put it in a weird way or crazy way, but
that’s where I be…”cause I’m the person that can’t be lonely…it catch up
to me…I can’t be lonely and I don’t like that…

As Linda pauses and looks up at the ceiling I can see tears falling from her eyes. I
decided to give her some time before continuing with the interview. When Linda was
finally able to move on with the interview, I asked her a follow up question, “Do you feel
that your husband and kids have been helpful?”

Yeah…definitely…I got someone to support my butt! You know? My
kids help me get up in the morning. If I tell them that my feet or head are
hurting, they say, “oh no mommy! You getting up!” I need it…I’m lost
without them…like my kids back home (the older children Linda had back
in Hawaii), I haven’t heard their voice for a week and I need to hear their
voice…”cause when I go through this kind of problems, I need to hear
their voice. I miss everything. I don’t care if I’m not happy, as long as
they happy, I don’t care…that’s all it matters to me. They are motivating
factor ‘cause if I did not have any kids, then I probably be out in the
streets or dead by now, but my kids are much stronger…they my
strength…they keep me going. I told my daughter back in Hawaii that every time she cries to think about mommy ‘cause every time you do, you only make mommy stronger. Keep your chin up because you only make me stronger…you put your chin down, you make me go down…don’t do that, you a beautiful girl and you stronger than any other person…that’s all I ask from you.

For Linda, life or her homeless experience without her husband or children was difficult to imagine. When Linda did imagine her life without any husband or children, it appeared to only be negative (a substance abuse addict, lonely, or dead). She truly believed her life would be empty.

Mark, married to Linda had not much to say about the scenario of no wife and/or children while experiencing homelessness. Mark felt that with children and a wife, the experience of homelessness was that much more stressful for him. This is what Mark had to say:

Oh yeah…If it was just me, it be a lot easier. I guess as long as you have a vehicle to get from one place to the other and being single and living at the beach in Hawaii would be no problem. You can live at the beach all year long. There’s no winter over there…just put a tent. Yes, if it was just me it wouldn’t bother me as much, but with the kids and all, it’s hard. She (Linda) wants a house…wants to cook…wants to bake…it puts a lot of stress on me…and like I said, I get stressed out but I try not to show it and I won’t.

From Mark’s response, I could not help but guess that he had probably already had thought about this question during his homeless experience. Unlike his wife Linda who described the scenario with a pessimistic outlook, Mark described it as less stressful and easier. For Linda, family equated to motivation and strength. For Mark, it equated to more stress.

For Cassidy, the 35 year-old Caucasian woman with two small children, she
believed that if she had no children or boyfriend, she would not be homeless and would probably be living at home with parents. Since she is homeless, imaging her experience is hard because it is her children that she uses to motivate and keep her moving forward.

This is how Cassidy described her scenario:

Oh yeah…very different! Actually my kids are a lot of motivation for me…my kids really make me think…make me push more for my kids…I want to do better for them and stuff. I don’t want them to go through this. If they don’t have to, they shouldn’t it…that’s why the parents should be more responsible. Why should the kids not be able to eat all day you know? Or not be able to sleep on a bed…that’s how I see it. My kids motivate me ‘cause if we didn’t have them, we would just lag on it…we wouldn’t put all of our energy into finding a place…we probably would just go back to his (Paul) mom or something. Now that we have our kids we have to do it, we’re a family, we have to do it. We can’t be living with his family or my family. We got to get our own house and be our own family now…so yeah…my kids are my strength.

At this point, Cassidy appears to be exhausted from having to deal with her experience and having to be a mother at the same time. Cassidy then goes on to explain further with the scenario:

I be living at home (Cassidy lets out a loud laugh – more like a sign of frustration than anything else)…I be living at home…that’s how I look at it…yeah…I be living at home. I wouldn’t be here. If I was single, I be living at home. I wouldn’t be thinking about getting my own place. I would just work and live at home. I don’t think I be homeless (laughs again).

Cassidy described her “what if’s” well. For Cassidy, the children are her strength too and they are the reason she continues to move forward with trying to get out of homelessness. At the same time, she was able to imagine her life without any children and partner. Cassidy believed that if she had no children and partner, she would not be homeless, but rather she would be at home with her parents holding a job.
Paul, Cassidy’s Mexican-American partner, believed that his homeless experience would have been much easier if he had no children and partner. At the same time, he has used his children as his driving force to want to move forward and escape homelessness. This is what Paul had to say:

Well, alone…I think I could do it better, you know? I think it wouldn’t happen to me ‘cause you know I’m a man…I could go anywhere…see an empty old car and just go in there and go to sleep…wake up, go look for a job or do something. You know? My kids…just for them I have to do something that I never had as a child you know? We had five kids in our family growing up and my dad never had an education…always working in the fields or the store and he only made enough money to pay bills and the rent…and now I see a lot of open doors that if you want to do something better, you could do it and get paid more instead of working out in the fields. My parents grew up working in the fields and stuff. This way, by working hard, my kids will have better than what I had. You know? I have two kids and I only plan on staying with two. To have my boy and my girl…I think if I go more right now, that’ll put more pressure on us. That’s why I have to push myself to get out of this (homelessness) ‘cause I want more for my kids.

For Paul, imagining his homeless experience without a family was obviously much easier. Paul remembered what his life as a child had been like and applied that to his (fatherhood) and wanting to do “better” for himself and his children. Paul used the past and his children as his motivation.

Sally, the 35 year-old Caucasian woman with three children described her scenario as “easier,” “children are my motivation,” and “I would have done it differently.” Sally was the only mother in the study to imagine her homeless experience as “easier” without any children and/or partner. And was the only participant to mention that she would have done everything differently. But just like all the mothers in the study, she used her children as her motivation.
If my kids weren’t involved I be alright. I would be able to make it. It would be much easier without my kids. They won’t have to suffer. I put their happiness before my happiness. All that it matters is them…if they are not comfortable, I’m not happy. They eat before me to make sure they don’t go hungry. I make sure that they have shoes and clothes. They come before me. Again, without them it wouldn’t be so hard! I feel awful because I should be giving them more and feeding them better and I can’t right now. My kids are a huge motivation for me…that’s what keeps me going. Without them I don’t know where I be. I would have done it differently. Yeah…a lot differently! Starting back with my education…I would have done a lot better and different. I would have stayed in college. I had my first child when I was in college so I had to drop out and never went back. It was too hard! I would have done everything the opposite…go to school first and then have a family. Nothing I can do now…my kids are here now and I believe they’re here for a reason.

Sally, obviously disappointed in how her life had turned out up to this point, wished she could have done things differently before having become a mother. She also believed that if she would have stayed in college and finished that the circumstances she is currently faced with would have never happened. And like all the mothers in the study, she is using the children as her strength and motivation.

Ron, like all the fathers in the study, imagined his homeless experience as “easier” without family responsibilities. In addition, Ron also imagined himself relocating to another city. This is how Ron described his scenario:

If I was alone...I be back in the Bay Area (California). I have a job just like that in five minutes. I have wouldn’t be like this. I was thinking of the same thing the other day too. Now, I have kids and a family. When I was single, I had a car and everything. I had a job and everything. When you have a job, it’s different…it’ a lot easier…’cause you know…you don’t have to rent a motel ‘cause you don’t have a family…you can just save up enough money to move in. Like I said, don’t wait until your money runs out. Times just flies by too fast!
In addition of imagining homelessness with no family as “easier,” Ron also appeared to put some “blame” on his family. For example, he used family as a “hinder.” Without them, he would be able to accomplish the things needed to escape homelessness, like get a job in “five minutes,” and be able to save money to move into housing.

Remember Cynthia, the 37 year Caucasian woman who throughout the interview kept her answers short and really simple? Well, her answer to this question was not any different. Besides using her children as her motivation to escape homelessness, she also made sure to point out that she couldn’t imagine her life without her children. With a soft tone of voice and looking straight at the ground, this is what Cynthia had to say:

I don’t know… I can’t imagine (shaking her head side to side). I don’t know. My kids keep me going every day. Another reason I keep going. They (children) keep me going every day. They are a motivation to me (suddenly, Cynthia stops speaking, closes her eyes as if she is crying inside).

Cynthia appeared exhausted from imagining her life and homeless experience without her children. Besides the experience of homelessness, I had to remember that Cynthia was also dealing with hiding from her ex-husband because of the domestic violence she had experienced with him. Cynthia was never able to imagine her homeless experience without her children.

Sal was very similar to his girlfriend Cynthia when it came to answering this specific question - short and simple. Sal was the only other father in the study, besides Paul, to mention that his children were his motivation in continuing to try and escape homelessness. This is what Sal had to say:

I wouldn’t be pushing as hard. I would just be down there hanging out
with some of my friends and be saying, “no bills, no payments…heck with it!” So my family is very importantly in pushing me. I do it for them. Very important…all four of them! They are making me push harder to get something going.

Sal definitely appeared to care and want to push forward for his children. Sal, in an indirect way, seemed to imagine his homeless experience “easier” with no children when he referred to “just hanging out there with friends.” He noted that his life would not consist of paying for any bills or any other form of payments.

The participants’ responses to the question of “what if no parent and/or partner,” had apparent differences between the fathers and mothers. Fathers imagined their homeless experience as “easier” with no partner and/or children, as did two mothers (Sandy #1 and Sally #4). The difference is that Sandy and Sally, on top of imagining their homeless experience as “easier,” also found it difficult for themselves to imagine their experience without their partner and/or children. It was their children that they used as strength and motivation.

Each and every one of the mothers in the study revealed that it was their partner and/or children that they used as their main motivational factor in moving forward in escaping homelessness. In imagining their homeless experience as “easier” without their partner and/or children, Paul (father #3) and Sal (father #4) were the only two fathers in the study to also add that their children were their main motivation in escaping homelessness.

In imagining the experience of homelessness without a partner and/or children, Linda (#2) and Cassidy (#3) added that they would not be where they are because they
would be somewhere else. For Linda, she imagined herself back in her native state of Hawaii with her family and the rest of her children. And if she had not been a mother, she imagined herself as a “junkie,” or probably “dead” and “lonely.” For Cassidy, if she had not become a mother, she imagined her life living back at home with her parents holding a job. Sally (#4) was the only other mother (or participant) in the study to add to the scenario of no partner and/or children. Sally added that she would have done everything in her life differently before becoming a mother. She wished of finishing college and starting her career. Sally believed that by doing this, she could have prevented the experience of homelessness.
CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION

Redefining homelessness must be a continuing priority. New definitions of homelessness must be developed to better serve the diverse populations who are homeless -- From the federal level down to local government; policies need to adapt to the changing demographics of the homeless and the needs of services these diverse groups. It is important that policy makers listen to homeless service providers, advocates and the people experiencing homelessness as they address inequities and shortfalls in services. As evidenced in this research, these policies should pay special attention to the unique challenges faced by homeless families.

Families are the fastest growing segment of the homelessness population; therefore, it is crucial for policy makers and service providers to develop definitions and linked plans that match the diverse forms of the American families who experience homelessness. Families experiencing homelessness do not only include moms and dads and children, they can also include extended family members such as grandmas, grandpas, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Service providers and advocates must continue to put pressure on government and homeless institutions in fine-tuning definitions of homelessness that encompass this diversity of family formations and match policies and services to meet the needs of real American families in all their forms.

Families and individuals who experience homelessness may feel victimized and powerless as they seek help from the institution that are meant to help them. Institutions
providing services to homeless populations must raise their consciousness and hold themselves accountable for the mistakes they make. Institutions have to realize they are not always right or be wary of assumptions that they always know what is “best” for the client. In order to truly understand the plight of homelessness, actors across many institutions must start listening carefully to the people experiencing homelessness. Rules and policies are often written to fit a single type of family or individual seeking shelter and/or another emergency service.

In this study I provided examples of rules and policies that further hindered families during their experiences of homelessness. Because of shelter rules and policies, families were affected psychologically, physically, and emotionally during their stay at the shelter. As a result of policies, families faced added difficulties in remaining intact and were further hindered from escaping homelessness.

Policy makers, service providers, advocates and the general public should pay closer attention to their usage of language: Victim blaming verbiage and stereotypes on homelessness are still too common even in groups who are supposed to be advocating for the homeless. Labeling a family or an individual experiencing homelessness as “lazy,” “mentally ill,” “alcoholic,” “crazy,” “worthless,” “disgusting,” “less than human” caused a psychological negative effect on the people experiencing homelessness. Families in this study internalized these negative labels and were – hindered in their transition.

The negative labeling of the homeless produces incredible stigma. Families shared many of their feelings and were able to describe the shame and guilt they felt.
everyday during their experience of homelessness. It was difficult for the parents in this study to share their experience as a “homeless parent” because of the stigma that comes with being homeless in society. Historically, homelessness is and has not been socially accepted, carrying a negative connotation of worthless, second-class citizens.

Gender differences were also apparent in this study. For fathers, “pressure” appeared to be relevant as the “the family provider” of the family. They carried the pressure of feeling responsible not just for their children, but a high-level of responsibility for their partner. Mothers also expressed “pressure,” not due to head-of-household, but due to “being a good mother.” Every mother in this study disclosed feelings of shame, guilt, embarrassment and worthlessness. These emotions led back to feeling like a “bad mother” for “allowing” her children to be homeless. As one mother said, “I’m a mom and a good mom does not let this kind of thing happen to her children…no matter what! I always try to hide ‘cause I don’t want people to see me like this…”’cause when they do, they just stop and stare at you like you did something wrong.” And that is why single mothers with children experiencing homelessness have been labeled the “hidden population” because of the stigma that comes with being a “homeless mother.”

Assigned roles were also prevalent in this study depending on gender. Some fathers worked or looked for jobs and mothers provided the “domestic work.” Along with work the pressure of bringing in money for the family carried a huge pressure for the fathers. Fathers felt the pressure to provide money in order to get their families out of
homelessness. Mothers, on the hand, felt the pressure of household management without a house: getting the kids ready for school, feeding them (sometimes not knowing where the next meal would come from), and remembering and attending mandatory appointments assigned by the shelter.

Recommendations

In order to effectively assist the homeless population in this country, policy makers and service providers should formally structure their work with the diversity of the homeless and the unique needs of families in mind. Some strategies to accomplish this include the following:

Homeless service providers should be required on a yearly basis to revisit their mission and all policies and make changes to better serve their clients.

Homeless service providers should develop evaluation plans for their services that include collecting data from people they have served.

Service provider agencies should make training on diversity mandatory and accessible for staff. Trainings including cultural sensitivity, self-care, changes in trends and governmental laws, and the introduction to new strength-based programs being developed in other communities that are making effective change in working with the people experiencing homelessness.
Since its groundbreaking plan in 2000, the United States is now on its ninth year to end homelessness, a “National Alliance to End Homelessness” (NAEH). To date more than 300 communities nationwide have engaged the plan to end homelessness. This plan encompasses the national partnership needed to address an immense social issue. In addition, there must be continuous research in order to understand the kinds of services each subpopulation requires to make the transition from homelessness to safe and stable housing.
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