



Parental preschool choices and challenges when young children and their families experience homelessness



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ABSTRACT

Encouraging stable preschool enrollment is a critically important policy response for ameliorating the negative impacts of housing instability and homelessness on young children. To contribute to the evidence base for preschool and family support policies, this article investigates how housing instability and homelessness influences parental preschool choices. Using a modified grounded theory approach to analyze transcripts of interviews and focus groups with 28 families who had experienced homelessness, we find that for formerly homeless parents, the most important factors influencing preschool enrollment are housing stability, social networks, attitudes about preschool education, history of trauma, and the type of support received during interactions with social service systems. We integrate these findings into a socio-ecological model that can guide the development of policy responses that encourage preschool enrollment among families experiencing homelessness.

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1. Introduction

On a single night in 2013, there were over 70,000 families and 130,000 children experiencing homelessness across the country. Eighty percent of these families were headed by single mothers, and 40% had at least one child under the age of one (HUD, 2013). While poverty and homelessness present similar risk for adverse effects on child well-being, research has shown there are critical timing effects with homelessness that exacerbate the negative impacts of poverty (Fantuzzo et al., 2013; Shinn et al., 2008).

A child's age at first entry into homelessness determines additional risk for developmental delays beyond the influences of poverty. This was seen in a study of over 10,000 third graders where the first childhood experience of homelessness in infancy or toddlerhood was associated with lower academic achievement levels and decreased task management capabilities. Children who experienced their first episode of homelessness in toddlerhood had a 60% increase in the odds of *not* meeting proficiency standards in math, compared to children who experienced their first episode of homelessness in elementary grades (Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, Brumley, & Perlman, 2013). Researchers have concluded that children who enter homelessness as an infant or toddler exhibit lower academic achievement, and increased

problematic behaviors than housed poor children (Fantuzzo et al., 2013; Sandel, Sheward, & Sturtevant, 2015). This increased risk in children who experience homelessness at earlier ages was also documented by researchers finding significant developmental delays in four to six year olds who experienced homelessness as an infant or toddler, while children who experienced homelessness at a later age showed similar levels of academic achievement as housed low income children (Rafferty, Shinn, & Weitzman, 2004; Shinn et al., 2008).

And why did you want him in preschool?

"Because I know that the sooner they get in [to preschool], the better it is. I feel the better it is. The more likely he is to succeed or grasp onto something that sparks something there for him. And being in the inner city and stuff like this, and being around a lot of poverty and crime and everything like that, I tell him now, I say—he'll say what he wants to be when he grows up. And of course, there's something different every other week. And this week, we're going to the moon. But I always tell him. I say, "Baby, just always remember this, don't never forget it, you can be anything you want to be as long as you put your mind to it."

(Cheryl, Single Mother, 37)

Additional studies have linked the experience of childhood homelessness to increased emotional distress and decreased academic achievement (Briggs et al., 2013; Grant, Gracy, Goldsmith, Shapiro, & Redlener, 2013; Obradović et al., 2009). Research also indicates that the majority of mothers in homelessness have experienced trauma as a child and/or as an adult. A recent study conducted in four cities in upstate New York found that 93% of all mothers in homelessness had a history of trauma, with most describing long histories of family and intimate partner violence (Hayes, Zonneville, & Bassuk, 2013). Trauma,

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stress and poverty are significant influences in the lives of young children experiencing homelessness (Cutuli & Herbers, 2014).

Poverty is traumatic and stressful for children, and the experience of homelessness at a very young age appears to exacerbate the impacts of poverty on behavior and school readiness. Researchers Clancy Blair and Cybele Ravel have recently focused attention on the link between stress in very young children living in poverty and the ability to self-regulate and organize information, concluding the stresses of poverty directly affects future classroom performance (Blair & Raver, 2012). These researchers state that, “in sum, early stresses in the lives of children living in poverty affect how these children develop executive functions that are important for school readiness” (Society for Research in Child Development, 2011); these researchers also found that the fostering of play and peer experiences promotes effective self-regulation and early learning (Blair & Raver, 2012). Together, these findings suggest that children experiencing homelessness at an early age are at higher risk of developmental delays that limit lifetime potentials, and support the need for increased access to quality preschool environments to moderate early risk in children.

Multidisciplinary studies have also weighed in on the importance of early childhood education, demonstrating the long-term socioeconomic impacts of investing in children from low-income families. The nation's leading researcher on the benefits of preschool is Nobel laureate economist, James Heckman. Heckman's decades of research point to early childhood as the most critical time period for development of brain capacities necessary for future success in later childhood and adulthood (Rolnick, 2014). For very young children, Heckman determined that adverse environmental factors such as financial stress, poor parenting, single-parent homes, and low parental education increase the risk of early childhood deficits that define future health and productivity (Heckman, Masterov, & National Bureau of Economic Research, 2007). Heckman's studies reveal the significant economic benefits for disadvantaged children who attend quality preschools in poor communities, as these children are more likely than their peers to graduate high school, find employment, and own their own homes, and are less likely to use social services (Heckman, Moon, Pinto, Savelyev, & Yavitz, 2010).

Heckman and other early education researchers point to the critical need for a national commitment to the provision of quality early intervention and preschool connections for disadvantaged children (Heckman et al., 2007, 2010). Under the *McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act* and the *Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007*, policies were established to expand access to early childhood education and services for children in homeless households. Past studies that focused on the voices and perceptions of homeless parents facing preschool decisions found that homeless mothers with young children are often dealing with a great amount of stress, adapting their child care approaches in relation to shelter settings (Powell, 2012). Public policies have not removed significant barriers faced by homeless families when enrolling children in early education programs, as they do not fully address the multiple obstacles faced by parents experiencing housing instability as they seek to enroll and engage their children in preschool (Swick, 2010). Other researchers have identified stigma, parental guilt and depression associated with being homeless as affecting family well-being; revealed that parents in homelessness did often not understand the value and importance of early education, and that shelters are often not equipped with caring staff supports that might be helpful addressing these needs (Averitt, 2003; Hinton & Cassel, 2013).

In this context, this qualitative study adds to the base of research knowledge by investigating how families with young children who experienced homelessness make decisions about accessing preschool. Expanding our current understanding of the complex relationship between childhood homelessness and parental decision-making about preschool, this study explores the link between housing stability, social support networks, and systemic supports or barriers that facilitate preschool enrollment. This study specifically investigates to what

extent and in what ways housing instability influences parental preschool choices. It also seeks to advance understanding of the socio-ecological determinants (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) that influence preschool decision-making for families who have experienced homelessness.

2. Materials and methods

This research explicitly employed qualitative methods to give recently re-housed homeless parents a direct voice in illuminating their individual and collective experience. The overall purpose of interviewing each parent was to directly explore their views and experiences about preschool enrollment in the context of their own lived experience. Without imposing any expected outcome, the research team posed questions to prompt sharing of personal accounts of how each parent experienced and felt about their time during and after homelessness in regards to their choices associated with preschool enrollment. These open-ended methods produced more intimate information and understanding emergent from the direct experiences of each parent enrolled in the study. In light of the paucity of prior research addressing the challenges of preschool choice and enrollment among families who have experienced homelessness, as well as the special complexity of housing instability, this study provides an opportunity for parents to define, in their own voice, the issues and circumstances that had the greatest influence on preschool enrollment.

The study drew on interviews with 28 households enrolled in two varied geographic areas: Atlanta, Georgia and the Bridgeport/New Haven region of Connecticut. All study households were previously enrolled in the *Family Options Study*, a randomized control study funded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) that included 2307 homeless families across four different housing/service interventions in 12 research sites across the United States (*Family Options Study Interim Report Abt Associates, 2013*). This particular research study is a smaller companion investigation, focused on increasing knowledge of how families who experienced homelessness make decisions about preschool enrollment and participation.

Our qualitative approach focused dialogues with a small subsample of this larger research effort on increasing knowledge of how families with preschool-aged children made decisions about preschool enrollment and pursued preschool participation. All study protocols were approved both by the authors' and *Family Options Study* Institutional Review Boards, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

For the purpose of this preschool enrollment study, only families with children under six years of age at the time of their enrollment in the *Family Options Study* were recruited to participate. As national study enrollees were not immediately accessible to the research team due to privacy protections, staff from the national study lead research team were utilized to recruit voluntary participants. Multiple invitations to participate in initial focus groups, the first step in the data-gathering process, were mailed to all eligible households in the two targeted geographic areas.

A summary of characteristics of those heads of household who ultimately responded and agreed to participate in this study is presented in *Exhibit 1*, below.

Exhibit 2 (below) provides a summary of the distribution of types of settings in which study participants had placed their preschool-aged children. While a majority of study households (61%) had enrolled their children in formal preschool programs (including Head Start), more than a third either relied upon childcare settings or informal childcare arrangements.

2.1. Data collection

Focus group dialogues and individual interviews were designed to gather study participants' perspectives on opportunities and barriers

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