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Circumstantial Disconnection: Homelessness and Parental Relationships with Children

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Circumstantial Disconnection: Homelessness and Parental Relationships with Children

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Introduction

The fight against homelessness has not been won. However, significant advancements have been made to alleviate the problem. In June of 2010, the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) released *Opening Doors: the Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*, and in 2012, the plan was amended to focus on homeless youth. Since its inception, the federally funded program has invested more than \$30 billion to alleviate homelessness. The Department of Housing and Urban Development reports that between 2010 and 2015, family homelessness decreased by 15% and chronic homelessness decreased by 31%, with 23,000 formerly homeless people given permanent housing.¹

Statistics show that this decrease was especially significant in two groups: military veterans and children. Homelessness among veterans declined every year between 2009 and 2015, decreasing by 35% during that period.² The decrease in the level of homelessness for children was also dramatic. Between 2007 and 2015, there was a 12% decline in the number of homeless people in families, with the number of homeless family households dropping by 18%. In addition, the rate of homelessness among children dropped 11% from 2014 to 2015.³

Making policy and working hard to help military veterans and children find permanent homes has produced positive results. Nevertheless, a substantial portion of the population still lives without a home. Making policy that helps these people is difficult. Although people are willing to give time and public resources to help children and veterans, the public has less sympathy for homeless men and women outside these groups. Their homelessness is often thought to be the result of drug and alcohol abuse or of mental illness, an issue that is often wrongly attributed to drug abuse and seen as incurable and not worth treating.⁴

Among the far-reaching undesirable consequences of homelessness is the negative impact that it has on family structure. Homelessness, without intervention, often breaks up families. It is not unusual for homeless families to be broken up forcibly so that they can enter emergency shelters.⁵ Shelter policies often make it impossible for families to stay together, especially when older boys or fathers are involved. The placement of children into foster care may also cause separation, with homeless parents finding it difficult to regain custody or acquire visitation rights. In addition, when parents leave their children with relatives and friends so that the children can be spared the ordeal of homelessness or can continue to attend their regular school, the children may be cut off from government assistance.⁶ Therefore, although children are often provided with shelter when their parents face homelessness, they still face the unwanted side effects of

homelessness because of their parents' economic and residential status. Many find themselves in homes without their parents and in environments that do not promote their best interests.

The consequences of a child living in a home without a parent are well documented. It is especially important for young children to know that they can depend on a parent to respond to their emotional needs. Such affection helps children build confidence in difficult social settings and better handle traumatic circumstances.⁷ These benefits extend into maturity, helping them to develop healthy adult relationships and a career, and to raise a family.^{8,9} Income and education level are also negatively affected by the absence of parents. Children living without a biological parent have significantly less lifetime income than do children who are reared in a home with their parents.^{10,11} In addition, educational attainment is a bigger challenge for these children. Parents serve as a connection between home and school that allows their children to better adapt to unfamiliar circumstances.¹² This is especially true when the children are underperforming.¹³ Children who grow up living with both biological parents are more successful with their education than children who do not,^{14,15} and they have more access to economic and socio-emotional resources.¹⁶

Children living in homes without their biological parents also pose discipline problems, becoming sexually active at an earlier age and more likely to face pregnancy at an early age.¹⁷⁻¹⁸ The lack of direct discussion about sex with a parent present increases the likelihood of risky sexual behavior that can have dire negative consequences.¹⁹ Children without fathers present are also more likely to value a quantity of sexual relationships, whereas children with a father present are much more likely to value quality and have sex at a later age.²⁰ As stated by Sanborn and Giardino,

The child's social environment is populated with adults and other children. What we are learning is that these interactions can have a tremendous impact on children and their development. Positive, constructive interactions make for a nurturing environment built on a strong sense of well-being; whereas negative, destructive interactions, especially over an extended period of time, are toxic, disempowering, and damage the child's sense of safety and predictability – often with devastating consequences.²¹

Homeless parents are simply not able to do what society expects of them when it comes to rearing children. Today's parents are expected to

spend a significant amount of time with their children. Only 17% of today's parents say they spend less time with their children than their parents spent with them.²² Expectations of parents are high in today's society, and fathers are just as important in these expectations as mothers. It has been shown that 97% of Americans believe it is important for a father to provide income for his children,²³ and 93% of Americans believe that it is very important for a father to provide emotional support for his children.²⁴ Guidance in making decisions is also thought to be crucial, with 95% of Americans believing that it is very important for a father to provide values and morals to his children.²⁵ Fathers are also expected to take the lead in disciplining their children, with 90% of Americans believing that it is very important for a father to provide discipline for his children.²⁶ In addition, expectations of parents do not end when a child reaches adulthood. Among parents with adult children, 46% report that they have given financial support to an adult child sometime in the last year.²⁷

Finding a way to bring parents and children together in homeless situations appears to be a worthwhile goal. Even partial approaches to the problem may be extremely beneficial. Research shows that fathers who leave and enter residential relationships have a more positive impact on their children than do fathers who have no contact at all.²⁸

Although children with missing parents have been well studied, as has homelessness, a focus on children with homeless parents has been lacking. This study is designed to fill a gap in that literature. In particular, it has been designed to assess the impact of homelessness on parent–child relationships from the prospective of the homeless parent. The data for this study are responses to interviews with homeless individuals who frequent a shelter in Houston, Texas. The situation of homelessness in the Houston area has evolved in much the same way as it has in the rest of the nation. Homelessness in Houston decreased by 46% in the period between 2011 and 2015, and a random individual was two and a half times less likely to be homeless in 2015 than in 2011.²⁹ However, in Houston, as in the rest of the country, many of the recovery efforts have focused on military veterans and children, and although these intervention programs have made great progress,³⁰ homeless individuals outside these groups often find themselves seeking refuge in shelters.

Methods

To determine the impact of homelessness on parent–child relationships from the perspective of the homeless themselves, data were collected from homeless individuals at a homelessness resource center in downtown Houston, Texas. The data were collected in the spring of 2016 through a

developed parent survey answered by clients of the shelter. Authorization for the survey was given by the chief executive officer of the nonprofit facility who was appointed by the 21 member Board of Directors for the organization. The survey was conducted by employees of the facility. The names of the respondents were not collected, and the survey forms gave no indication of the identity of the respondents. This day shelter serves any man who matches the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's definition of chronically homeless,³¹ any self-proclaimed homeless woman, transgender persons, and any veteran documented in the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). The study surveyed individuals that fit into one or more of these categories. The goal of the study was to gauge the effects of homelessness on relationships between homeless parents and their children who reside elsewhere, and to learn what homelessness does to the parent-child relationship from the perspective of homeless parents who are separated from their children.

Clients were approached by the persons conducting the survey as they entered the facility and were asked if they would care to participate in a survey designed to increase the understanding of relationships between homeless individuals and their children. Although homeless individuals without children were similarly surveyed, only those with children are included in this analysis. No one was encouraged or discouraged from participating in the survey based on his or her parental status. No personal identification, such as name, date of birth, or social security number, was requested during or after administration of the survey. The survey questions were read to each client, and each response was recorded on paper. This method does not adhere to typical rules regarding random sampling, which is traditionally done by phone with random digit dialing, and perhaps stratification. However, the traditional approach is not viable for garnering data from homeless persons. Telephone surveys are not feasible for evaluating the perspective of homeless individuals, and the homeless comprise a small percentage of the population. The only cost-effective way to collect data from the homeless community is to take advantage of a place where they gather as a group. This alternative is viable for sound reasons and is similar to other approaches used to gather data from homeless parents.^{32,33}

Homeless Impact on Parent/Children Relationships

Survey Questionnaire

Please read to the clients: "Your name will not be used. This survey will help advocate for you in future policy decisions regarding the homeless and their children."

Demographics:

Age _____ Gender _____ Race _____
 Veteran Status? _____

Survey Questions:

- | | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1) How long have you been homeless? | Less than 1 year | 1-3 years |
| | More than 5 years | 3-5 years |
| 2) Do you have any children?
(If no, end survey) | Yes | No |
| 3) If yes, how many children do you have?
(Please collect the # of boys, girls and their ages. If unknown an estimate or unknown is fine) | No. of Boys: _____
Ages? _____ | No. of Girls _____
Ages? _____ |
| 4) When was the last time you saw your children?
(If unknown please indicate unknown) | _____ | |
| 5) How are your children doing?
(If unknown please indicate unknown) | _____ | |
| 6) In one or two words, how would you describe your current relationship with your children? | _____ | |
| 7) If you were not homeless, how do you think it would affect your relationship with your children? | _____ | |

Figure 1. Survey questionnaire used to ascertain the opinions of homeless individuals about parent–child relationships.

After 2 days, 134 viable surveys had been completed. The survey instrument, displayed in Figure 1, was developed for the study. For purposes of data collection, closed questions were first asked to attain demographic information, such as age, gender, race, veteran status, and length of time homeless. Then, the survey continued with four open-ended questions:

1. When was the last time you saw your children?
2. How are your children doing?
3. In one or two words, how would you describe your current relationship with your children?
4. If you were not homeless, how do you think it would affect your relationship with your children?

Categorical responses to these questions were coded to see how the survey participants felt about their homeless situation and how it affected their relationships with their children. To reduce coding bias, the two persons conducting each survey had to agree on each response. The respondent also had the option of declining to answer, and “NA” was recorded as a response selection whenever a question did not apply to an individual.

The research hypothesized that the data would reveal that homeless individuals feel that their homeless status has a negative impact on their relationships with their children, and furthermore, that specific circumstances, such as the ages of the respondents’ children, the length of time that the respondents have been homeless, and the respondents’ ability to visit with their children, would affect their opinions about the significance of having a home in their personal parent–child relationships.

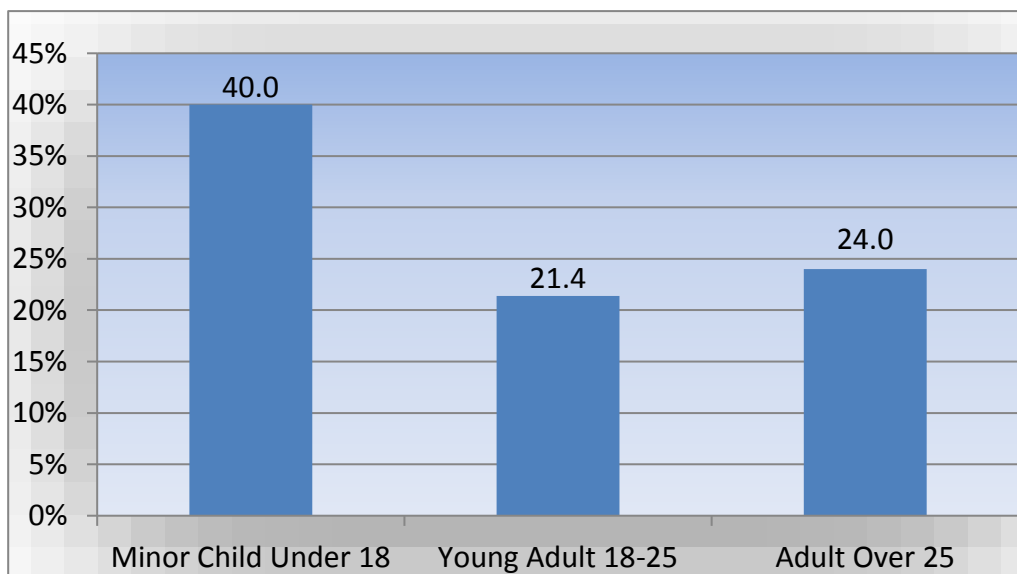
Survey Results

The survey was designed to determine the impact that homelessness has on the parent–child relationship from the perspective of the homeless parent. Responses were also obtained to see what circumstantial factors affected the respondents’ attitudes on the subject. Of the 134 respondents, 75 reported that they had children. Table 1 shows the demographic information of the 75 parents surveyed. The average age of the homeless parents was 50.7 years. Of those parents who reported the ages of their youngest children, 24 had minor children 17 years of age or younger, 14 had young adult children ages 18 through 25, and 26 had only children who were older than 25 years of age. There were 11 parents who did not report the ages of their children.

Table 1. Demographic Data of 75 Homeless Parents Surveyed for the Analysis

Average age	50.7
Male, %	82.7
African American, %	45.3
Hispanic, %	10.7
White, %	37.3
Veteran of armed forces, %	12.0

Of the respondents who reported having children, 12 were female and 62 were male. Gender status was not reported by 1 respondent. Of the 62 males, 10 said that they were military veterans. There were 6 males who refused to give their status. Of the females, 1 reported that she was a veteran. Of the respondents who had children, 71 reported the number of children they had. These respondents reported having 144 children in all, for an average of 2.03 children per person.

**Figure 2.** Percentage of homeless parent respondents reporting a positive relationship with their children, by age of the youngest child.

A wide range of answers was given to the question asking how long it had been since the respondent had seen his/her children. Of the 73 who responded, 37 said they had seen their children within the last year. This included 13 who said it had been less than a month since they had seen their children. However, 27 of the parents said they had not seen their children in more than 5 years. Of the 68 who answered, only 25% reported having a positive relationship with their children, and 38% said their relationship with their children was non-existent. Categorizing the data by the age of each respondent's youngest child revealed that those with younger offspring were more likely to have a positive relationship with their children. Figure 2 shows the results. Those homeless parents with minor children were considerably more likely to report a positive relationship with their children than were those with adult children. The data indicate that as the children of homeless parents grow older, it is more difficult for parents to maintain a good rapport with them.

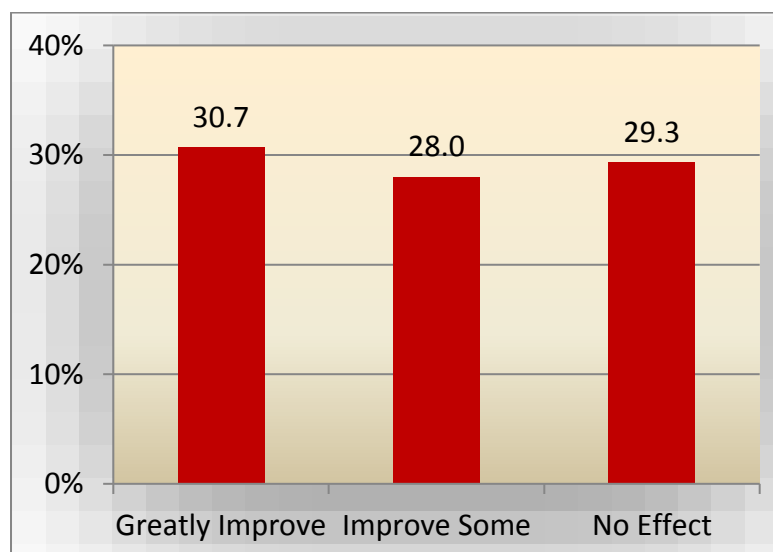


Figure 3. Homeless parents' opinions on how having a home would impact their relationships with their children. *Note:* Nine respondents declined to answer. Those who declined to give the ages of their children or their opinion on this question are not included in the percentages.

As was hypothesized, the descriptive presentation shows that most of the homeless parents surveyed expressed the opinion that their residential situation was detrimental to their relationship with their children.

When asked how having a home would impact their lives, most said that having a permanent residence would improve their relationship with their children. Figure 3 shows the breakdown of the respondents' replies to the inquiry. Overall, 44 of the 66 homeless parents who answered the question said that having a home would improve their relationship with their children. This included 23 respondents who said that having a home would greatly improve the parent–child relationship. There were 9 respondents who did not answer the question. The respondents were also more likely to see the importance of a permanent residence if they had minor children. Figure 4 shows the percentages of the respondents who thought that having a home would improve their relationship with their children by age of their youngest children. Of those with minor children, 84.2% were more likely to say that a home would contribute to improving the parent–child relationship. However, those with older children were also likely to say it would help; of the respondents with adult children, 62.5% said that having a home would improve their relationship with their children.

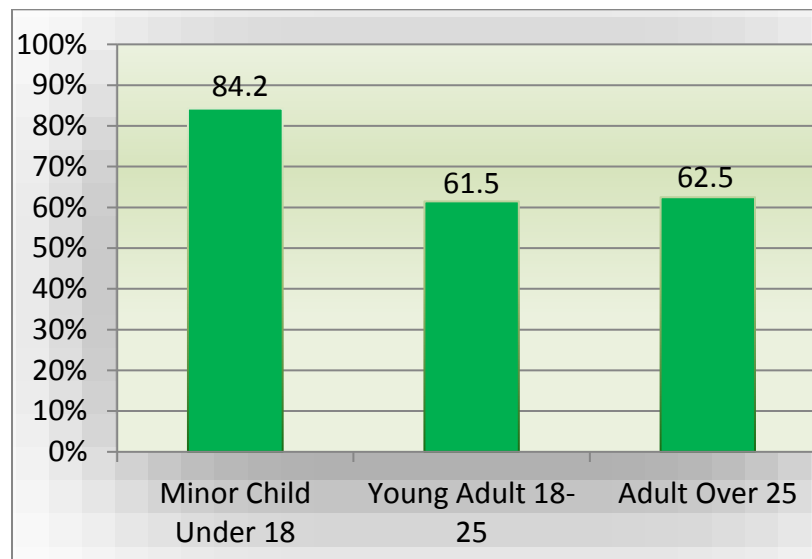


Figure 4. Percentage of homeless parents surveyed who said having a home would improve their relationship with their child, by age of the youngest child.

The data in Figure 3 support the perception that respondents feel that being homeless has a negative effect on parent–child relationships. To take this a step further, it is important to understand why respondents feel

that this is the case. In other words, what specific circumstances have an impact on the significance of having a home in parent–child relationships from the perspective of homeless parents? To investigate this question, an ordered probit analysis was performed. Ordered probit is the optimal statistical method, instead of ordinary least squares regression, when the dependent variable is ranked on an ordinal scale.³⁴ In this case, with three ordinal-level replies (as previously outlined in Figure 3) to the question, “If you were not homeless, how do you think it would affect your relationship with your children?” ordered probit is the preferred method. The analysis first looks at whether short-term homeless status has a significant impact on the respondent’s attitude, then whether parents have visited the children during the last year, and (Figure 2) the age of the youngest child.

Table 2. Ordered Probit Predictors of Homeless Respondents Saying That Having a Home Would Improve Their Relationship With Their Children

Variable	Coefficient (SE)
Homeless less than 1 year	1.20 (.52)**
Saw children in the last year	–.21 (.31)
Children age 25 or older	–.60 (.35)*
Youngest child age 18-25	–.16 (.42)
Cut 1	–.88 (.34)
Cut 2	.13 (.32)
N	55

SE, standard error.

** $P < .05$, two-tailed test.

* $P < .10$, two-tailed test.

Note: Listwise deletion was used to conduct the analysis.

The results of the analysis are presented in Table 2. The statistical model shows that parents who have been homeless for a short time are significantly more likely to say that changing their homeless status would improve their relationship with their children. This indicates that parents who have been homeless for an extended time (longer than 1 year) are less likely than those who have been homeless for less than 1 year to think that changing their homeless status would have a positive impact on their

relationship with their children. The results also indicate that parents who have seen their child within the last year are no more likely than those who have not to think a home is important. Homeless parents in this study believe that simply seeing one's children is not enough to make up for the relationship deficit that exists because of homelessness.

The analysis also confirms that respondents believe that acquiring a home would provide less improvement in the parent–child relationship if the children are older than 25. However, with control for other attitudes, a statistically significant coefficient does not extend to children in the 18- to 24-year age group. The coefficient indicates that respondents in this survey believe that acquiring a home would have a positive impact on their relationships with their young adult children almost as much as it would with their minor children.

Discussion

The research on the negative impact that living without a parent has on children has been reviewed in this analysis. Previous research has shown that children living with a parent absent are less safe and more likely to be sexually active at an early age. They are also likely to make less money and be less educated. This analysis fills a gap in the literature showing that homelessness is often a factor in the absence of parents, and that many of these parents feel that it is important to regain a personal residence to properly develop relationships with their children. This is particularly so for parents who have recently faced homelessness and who have children who are of college age or younger. The data in this research reveal that parents who are homeless for a short time are more likely to feel that getting back into a home is very important in restoring relationships with their children. Homeless parents do not view surrogate fixes, such as visiting with their children while the parents are homeless, as viable ways to re-establish important parent–child bonds. Policymakers noting the results of this research should seek ways to help newly homeless parents get back into homes as soon as possible, not just to help these homeless adults but also to help their children, who need their guidance. Parents who experience an extended period of homelessness feel that they will have a much more difficult time restoring parent–child relationships when they re-establish a residence.

Policy changes and a heavy investment of tax dollars over the last 5 years have resulted in progress in the fight against homelessness. This progress has been especially helpful in getting military veterans and children into homes. Public policy is easier to implement when the policy is thought to produce a more just situation and public opinion favors the

policy.^{35,36} When veterans are homeless, the public views the situation as unjust because persons who have previously committed to fight for their country have not been given the ability to thrive in the country they have defended. When children are homeless, it is easy to see that they are the victims of circumstances beyond their control and that society has a responsibility to intervene. But when a person outside these categories is left homeless, there is less sympathy and more scrutiny about the decisions that led to the situation. When this occurs, it is important to understand that others, like the homeless person's children, are also negatively affected by the situation.

One of the biggest problems facing today's homeless is mental illness. Although mental illness is rare among homeless parents,³⁷ it is certainly important to intervene when the circumstances warrant it, not only for the homeless person but also for the children who depend on that person. The same is true for other homeless individuals. Homeless families have many different circumstances, and policies and programs must be responsive to these situations, considering both individual needs and community conditions.³⁸

This study does have limitations. The population of homeless individuals in this inquiry is generally classified as chronically homeless, meaning that these people have been on the streets for a long time or intermittently for the last several years. A survey of homeless individuals conducted in emergency shelters, such as those of the Salvation Army, might be a source of important information not acquired in this analysis. These emergency shelters typically have a "low-barrier" or "no-barrier" policy to offer services in their organization and have a larger number of individuals who are not chronically homeless. In some instances, these organizations also may maintain family shelters, which could be a source of intriguing data. Furthermore, to complete the full circle of homelessness, it might prove interesting to study people who are literally living on the streets and not accessing services via an emergency shelter or any other type of service provider.

A look at hard data might also show that parents with homes have a different opinion on the value of a home than homeless parents. A quasi-experimental design comparing children in families with restored residential status vs those who have a parent with a continuously homeless status should provide better insight. In addition, opinion studies of adults who had homeless parents when they were children could shed light on this important subject. Although the design and collection of data in such analyses might be expensive and time-consuming, they could provide very

valuable information and make the lives of many children much more productive.

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