

PATHWAYS TO AND FROM HOMELESSNESS:

WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN CHICAGO SHELTERS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For the past several years, the number of women and children seeking shelter from the City of Chicago's Department of Human Services (CDHS) during the warm weather months has far exceeded the supply of shelter beds. Officials at CDHS wanted to know whether this increase was related to external factors, such as the demolition of public housing units, or to public policies, such as women reaching the 60-month time limit for receipt of TANF (cash assistance).

The City of Chicago is determined to end homelessness by 2013 with a "housing first" policy, significantly reducing the number of shelter beds and creating interim housing and increasing permanent housing linked with the necessary social services. By providing more stable housing along with linkages to mainstream resources, the City believes that it can better prevent recurring homelessness. Current information about the causes of family homelessness, as well as the needs of homeless women and children, is critical to the City as it implements its new programs.

To better understand the situations of the women and children currently homeless, CDHS, in collaboration with the Ounce of Prevention Fund, commissioned the Center for Impact Research (CIR) to undertake a study focused on this population. CIR conducted structured interviews with 45 homeless women living in emergency shelters in Chicago during May, June, and July 2003. Shelter supervisors and staff were also interviewed for their observations on the needs of shelter residents. The study provides critical information and insight that can inform CDHS policy and practice vis-à-vis homeless families in Chicago within the limitations of the scope of the study.

The Sample

- A majority of the women had four or more children and were less than 20 years old when they had given birth to their first child; 36% did not have all of their children under 18 with them in the shelter. The mean number of children was 4.3; 40% of the women had five or more children.
- The majority of the women were born in and lived all their lives in Chicago, or had moved to Chicago while young.
- The majority of the women (56%) did not have a high school diploma or a GED certificate.
- Over one-third of the women reported serious health problems.
- The majority of the sample (89%) reported that they did not have a criminal record.
- Over one-half (56%) of the sample disclosed that they had been victims of domestic violence, twice the prevalence found in national research samples.
- Over one-third of the respondents (36%) stated they had suffered physical or sexual abuse in their childhood home.

- Three-fifths (60%) of the women were not receiving child support or TANF (cash welfare assistance) at the time of the interview.
- All of the school-aged children were in school and only a small minority of those eligible for Head Start or preschool were not enrolled.
- The majority of the mothers reported that their children were not suffering from serious physical or mental health problems, but that being in the shelter was traumatic for their children.
- The majority of the women had been in homeless shelters on more than one occasion, with a mean number of stays in a shelter of 1.6. Women with six or more children experienced more shelter stays, with a mean of 2.3.

Factors Contributing to Homelessness

- In approximately one-half of the cases (48%) the women's housing arrangements that had broken down involved living with others, mostly extended family members or husbands, partners, or boyfriends. These women had never lived independently.
- In about 29% of the cases, loss of employment was the immediate cause of homelessness. Most of these women had not been employed at any one job for a substantial length of time, but rather cycled among low-paying entry level, temporary, or seasonal jobs.
- In 22% of the cases, domestic violence was the immediate cause of homelessness. In many of these situations the abusers had prevented the women from working, with the result that when they left the abuser they had no money or work history.
- In 13% of the cases, increased rents, buildings going co-op or being sold, condemned, or destroyed by fire or natural disaster disrupted housing arrangements.
- In 13% of the cases, illness, hospitalization, and high-risk pregnancy caused loss of employment leading to homelessness.

Recommendations

Our research finding of five general types of situations leading to homelessness indicates that effective approaches to interventions must be designed to address these different conditions. For this reason, the recommendations are organized around the needs of the specific groups of women identified in our research.

The many large families contained in our sample challenge Chicago's social service delivery system. Subsidized housing and housing units of sufficient size for these families are currently lacking. We recommend that the City Department of Housing and the Department of Human Services establish a task force to further study and plan how to meet the needs of these large families for subsidized housing.

Women who have never lived independently need TANF benefits and assistance with child care so that they can participate in job training programs and look for work. Without benefits these women are at risk of becoming trapped within the shelter system. The City and the State Department of Human Services should work collaboratively to ensure that all women in shelters who are eligible for TANF have access to these needed transitional cash benefits.

Women who are domestic violence victims need specialized assistance for themselves and their children and should be housed in domestic violence shelters where their needs can be met.

All the types of situations found in our sample demonstrate the need for social services to intervene at critical points before the families arrive at a shelter. The interviews revealed the many times that women's housing arrangements deteriorated and they then took other steps, such as boarding with family and friends or renting apartments they could not afford, before turning to a shelter. Intervention at this early critical point might help to avoid a shelter stay. Families living on the edge for years before they come to a shelter can be assisted much earlier if the services were available and women trusted that they would not lose their children to the child protective system if they accessed them.

Children in shelters understandably suffer trauma due to the fears, insecurity, anger, depression and upset about their situation. The needs of these children are currently going unmet. We recommend that the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services and the Chicago Department of Human Services work collaboratively with experts in child development to determine how best to help the children while their family is in crisis.