Child Care Needs of Families Experiencing Homelessness in Los Angeles County

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About the Study

In April 2019, the Child Care Resource Center (CCRC) hired HMA Community Strategies to lead a mixed-methods research project to understand the needs of families experiencing homelessness with children ages zero to five living in Los Angeles County Service Planning Areas 1 and 2 (San Fernando and Antelope Valleys).

This study draws on multiple sources of data including a literature review, publicly available data on homelessness in Los Angeles County, interviews with national and local experts, and focus groups with families experiencing homelessness.

Acknowledgements

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About HMA Community Strategies

To address the social needs that affect public healthcare, Health Management Associates (HMA) formed HMA Community Strategies (HMACS) in 2014. HMACS helps communities tackle problems that impact health outside the walls of hospital, provider, and payer offices, such as inadequate housing and food access, education, violence, discrimination, the built environment, unemployment and underemployment.

About The Child Care Resource Center

The Child Care Resource Center’s (CCRC) mission is to cultivate child, family and community well-being. CCRC helps meet the early childhood education and development needs of 50,000 children, families, child care providers and community members in its 22,500 square mile area of Northern Los Angeles and San Bernardino Counties. For over 40 years, the agency has provided services through a diverse mixture of subsidized child care programs, child development, and workforce training programs which work together to enhance the quality of life for their clients.
Brief Summary

Background and Purpose  | In April 2019, the Child Care Resource Center (CCRC) hired HMA Community Strategies (HMACS) to lead a research project to better understand the role of child care in supporting and lifting families out of homelessness, and the ways in which child care should be delivered to these families. Key partners to this effort included members of the Research Advisory Board as well as several community-based organizations who helped recruit and coordinate focus groups throughout Los Angeles County Service Planning Areas (SPAs) 1 and 2 (San Fernando and Antelope Valleys).

Identify the top needs of families experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles County SPA 1 & 2
Better understand the role of child care in supporting and lifting families out of homelessness
Identify new models of child care delivery to better serve families experiencing homelessness

Specifically, the research questions were:

- What are the top needs of the families experiencing homelessness and the greatest barriers to permanent, stable housing?
- How does child care play a role in assisting with those needs and overcoming those barriers?
- Compared with other needs, how critical is child care?
- What are the child care services available to families experiencing homelessness?
- What are the barriers to using child care?
- What types of child care are needed and for which types of families experiencing homelessness (sheltered, those who are non-sheltered but meet the McKinney Vento definition of homelessness) and does this depend upon certain factors such as the child’s age and others?
- What child care program designs would be most effective for the various subgroups of families experiencing homelessness?

This study draws on multiple sources of data including a literature review, publicly available data on homelessness in Los Angeles County, interviews with national and local experts, and focus groups with families experiencing homelessness.
Scope of the Problem | Los Angeles County is home to more than 10 million residents, of which nearly 60,000 experience homelessness. Individuals from families comprise 8,799 of these individuals. More than one in four families experiencing homelessness in LA County live in SPA 1 and SPA 2. Thirty-four percent of individuals experiencing homelessness are families in SPA 1 compared to 13% in SPA 2. Approximately one in ten of these families is unsheltered.

In LA County, there are approximately 3,000 children below the age of six that are homeless on any given night and roughly 11,000 are homeless at some point during the year. Homelessness can contribute to health, developmental, behavioral, emotional, and learning challenges for children. For example, children who experience homelessness get sick at twice the rate of those who do not experience homelessness. These children go hungry twice as often, have twice the rate of learning disabilities, and three times the rate of emotional-behavioral problems than children not experiencing homelessness. Homelessness is also a barrier to participation in early childhood education (ECE) programs. Lack of access to ECE programs is detrimental to children experiencing homelessness due to the brain development that occurs during the first three years of a child’s life.

The Interconnected Needs of Families

Safe and stable housing is the greatest need for families experiencing homelessness. Housing stability is difficult to attain due to both availability and affordability. In SPA 1 and SPA 2, there is a need for more housing resources to serve families from transitional to permanent housing, and more affordable housing. It is also important to note that the needs of families experiencing homelessness differ depending on their race and ethnicity, citizen status, health care needs, family structure, and available social supports.
The Role of Affordable Child Care in Overcoming Barriers to Housing

In order to secure housing and maintain housing stability, parents experiencing homelessness must be able to look for and maintain work, participate in job training, education, and other supportive programs, and attend appointments to be connected with public assistance and community resources. Without access to affordable child care, this was found to be virtually impossible.

Because zero to five years of age is such a critical time for social, emotional, and cognitive development, high quality early care and education can be considered the number one need for children experiencing homelessness. High-quality, trauma-informed care for children experiencing homelessness is crucial to achieving equitable outcomes for children.

Child Care is a Foundation for Families

Families ranked child care as very critical in the context of all their needs. Child care is a pre-requisite for successfully taking advantage of opportunities and resources to both prevent and exit homelessness. Many families said that since they often did not have anyone they could rely on to watch their children, they were not able to attend job interviews, go to school, or look for housing.

The study found that the type of child care provided should be responsive to the stability needs of families experiencing homelessness. At all levels of child care, programs serving families experiencing homelessness must prioritize designs that incorporate flexible hours, including drop-in care and multiple shift coverage. Services and resources provided at any level should be able to meet nutrition and hygiene needs of the children. Resource literacy – or the capacity of providers to connect families to resources that meet their needs – is also an important attribute of child care providers that has benefits to families as they become increasingly more stable.

Child care is essential. You cannot do anything without it... Work and child care for single moms go hand in hand.

- Key Informant Interview
Barriers to Child Care for Families Experiencing Homelessness

While a number of subsidized programs and resources for early care and education exist, due to the unique experience of homelessness, families experiencing homelessness face many barriers to accessing child care resources. Fear of and lack of trust in child care was a predominant theme among families who worry about leaving their children with someone, or at some place, they do not know.

Challenges with Providing Child Care for Families Experiencing Homelessness

Caring for children experiencing homelessness is as challenging as it is critical. Because children experiencing homelessness have extremely complex needs, providers may be called upon to play a variety of roles including emotional support for parents, problem solving, and social service navigation and coordination. However, many providers do not have access to the knowledge and training required to be able to provide much-needed trauma-informed care.

Families and children experiencing homelessness often do not have:

- Standard work hours
- Access to reliable transportation
- Access to resources
- A stable residential location
- Average social/ emotional/ cognitive development

“It takes a village to raise a child, but nowadays that village seems a little shaky.”
- Focus Group Participant
Recommendations

Shaped by a review of best practices, the perspectives of national experts, community leaders, and—most importantly—families experiencing homelessness, several recommendations were developed corresponding to these considerations to improve the system of child care delivery.

Recommendations specific to families experiencing homelessness are made in regards to system funding, child care subsidy access, place, transparency/trust, trauma-informed care, and data collection:

Women have so much strength, but in situations like this we feel stuck...we need things like child care to allow us to be strong and excel.

- Focus Group Participant

Affordability, Subsidies, Awareness of Resources

Cost
- Explore opportunities for collaboration and layered funding between ECE and homelessness systems of care
- Reduce eligibility and paperwork burden for child care
- Navigation (tailored support) for child care, paperwork, and services (similar to Emergency Child Care Bridge)

Accessing Subsidies

Awareness of Resources

Offer support to families without making them jump through a bunch of hoops.

- Key Informant Interview
Fear/Lack of Trust, Lack of Supply, Transportation

- Support opportunities for pop-up or mobile child care, particularly at shelters and similar locations
- Support opportunities for co-located child care at shelters and Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH)
- Support child care providers to pick-up children from shelters and PSHs
- Identify best practices for co-located child care including space for training, meeting, resources, allowance for informal providers, flexible schedules, minimal paperwork, etc.
- Identify and support policies that incentivize child care space in shelter/housing plans
- Facilitate parent-provider relationships; allow observations

Stigma, Fear, and Trauma

- Trauma-informed care training and coaching for child care providers
  - Help children cope with trauma
  - Maintain predictable routines
  - Help children learn to exhibit well-being
  - Learning to appropriately deal with challenging behaviors
  - Deal with own trauma triggers
  - Cultural sensitivity

If I have someone I trust to watch my kids, I can breathe, I can think—I can think in my own mind instead of always thinking in theirs.  
- Focus Group Participant
Time/Availability of Child Care

- Promote non-standard hour child care (evening, weekend, summer) including unlicensed care
- Define quality for non-standard hours care
- Incentivize non-standard hours care
- Encourage predictable hours in employment
- Identify and support space for care networks in shelters and PSHs

New Collaborations and Prevention

- Collaborate with organizations that assist with eviction defense for families
- Collaborate with LAHSA regarding the use of HMIS to track child care access, referrals, subsidies and enrollment and pilot with some providers

There should be more compassion in the system; treat families as a unit and strengthen us together.

- Focus Group Participant

Conclusion

For families experiencing homelessness, access to quality, affordable, and trauma-informed child care is critical to take the steps needed to secure and maintain stable housing.

This research has undoubtedly underscored the need to develop and expand access to child care resources that are specifically tailored to families experiencing homelessness, and it is our ultimate hope that it serves as a springboard for more conversation and cross-sector collaboration in order to achieve equity of opportunity for children and families.
Definitions of Homelessness

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines an individual experiencing homelessness as “an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence,” who resides in “supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations,” or “a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.”

The U.S. Department of Education’s definition, as expressed in the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, is broader and includes HUD’s definition as well as “children and youth who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason… abandoned in hospitals; or awaiting foster care placement.”

Definitions of Housing Programs

Rapid Re-Housing rapidly connects families and individuals experiencing homelessness to permanent housing through a tailored package of assistance that may include the use of time-limited financial assistance and targeted supportive services.

Interim Housing provides short-term places for people to stay temporarily; meet basic needs such as food, safety and hygiene, and provide support to seek and obtain permanent housing.

Services Only includes prevention and diversion assistance and may include a combination of financial assistance, mediation, housing navigation, or other supports.

Homeless Prevention includes services offered through Family Solution Centers to assist families with housing retention or transitioning to other permanent housing.
Street Outreach aims to locate, identify, and build relationships with individuals experiencing homelessness who are street based/unsheltered in order to engage them and provide immediate support, linkages to services, and connections with housing navigation resources aimed at ending homelessness.

Transitional Housing programs provide temporary residence combined with intensive services — usually up to 24 months—for people experiencing homelessness.

Permanent Housing is long-term affordable housing and includes Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) with ongoing services for families with disabilities and high levels of need, such as those who have experienced homelessness repeatedly or are frequent users of other systems of care.

Day Shelter with stabilization services provides immediate safety for a family and addresses immediate crisis needs, including specialized domestic violence shelters and services.