Exploration of Stability Factors in Families After Participating in the Family Promise Programs

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Abstract

Family Promise of Greater Chattanooga is a 14-year-old faith-based 501(c)3 non-profit organization in Chattanooga, Tennessee and is an affiliate of National Family Promise organization, which has helped families in need transition to self-sufficiency for 25 years[1]. Family Promise of Greater Chattanooga has four programs[1]. The Interfaith Homeless Network faith-based overnight shelter program collaborates with local churches and synagogues to host families overnight so that they have a safe place to sleep[1]. The Family Promise Day Center Program provides case management, transportation, basic necessities such as shelter, food, and shower and laundry facilities, vocational and educational classes, and resources to help families develop resumes and apply for housing and employment[1]. The Centralized Intake Program provides intake, assessment, and case management services, as well as links families to outside resources and supportive services[1]. The Going Home Program partners with the Chattanooga Housing Authority, local builders, and property owners to screen and select housing placements for families and includes one year of case management services[1]. The purpose of this study was to follow up with previous participants of the Family Promise programs to assess their current stability. In this study, a qualitative approach utilizing phone interviews was used. The researchers explored the factors that are crucial for maintaining stability of participants who went through the Family Promise programs in 2013-2014. This study used purposive sampling, as all participants from 2013-2014 were contacted. The sampling frame was the case files provided by Family Promise. The stability rate was measured by four factors, which were: obtaining and sustaining available/affordable housing, employment or income support if disabled, supportive services (i.e. transportation, child care, counseling, etc.), and follow-up. All information collected was given to Family Promise so that the program may be adjusted and bettered to meet a higher stability rate based on the four factors previously mentioned.

Keywords: Family, Homelessness, Stability

1. Introduction

Family homelessness is a problem that can be seen throughout the United States. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development approximated that there were 754,147 sheltered and unsheltered homeless people in the U.S. in early 2005 and that between one half and one third of those people are part of families which have children.[2] Eighty percent of those children are under age 11.[2] According to Fertig and Reingold, families (and especially women and children) are more vulnerable to homelessness and economic hardship due to the changes of family structure such as the rise of single-parent households, divorce, and separation of marriages.[2]

When discussing the topic of family homelessness, it can be viewed as a personal matter or a community problem[2]. Some personal factors that can be included in contributing to homelessness are family structure and size, educational

attainment, exposure to domestic violence, history of drug abuse, a lack of non-economic social support, access to economic resources, health related problems, a history of mental illness, childhood abuse, eviction, recent pregnancy or birth, and hospitalization.[2,3] Others believe that homelessness is a community issue, citing local housing market conditions, limited space in shelters, climate, and the degree of criminalization of the homeless in the given community.[2] One of the main problems noted is a lack of resources in communities to deal with homelessness and housing needs.[4] According to Fertig and Reingold, lack of access to affordable housing has been found to be positively associated with homelessness in urban environments.[2]

Stability is frequently defined in different ways. In many studies, stability is defined as having housing. Some researchers find that social support is an important factor in escaping family homelessness and attaining stability, especially for families involving children.[5] Social supports can be both formal and informal.[5] Formal social supports include agencies and organizations that the family receives services from during and after homelessness, while informal supports include friends and family members from inside or outside of the shelter.[5]

In a study of twenty-eight mothers in a faith-based shelter program, time in the shelter was found to be a major predictor of stability in housing status after leaving the shelter.[5] Those who were in the shelter for a longer period of time were more likely to find a place of their own to live after leaving.[5] Informal support systems were able to provide emotional, personal, and/or tangible support throughout the family's shelter stay.[5] According to Bassuk and Geller, the amount of services and support that the family receives after leaving the shelter is directly related to their future stability.[3] After-program services allow families continued support as they try to stabilize themselves.

There are three factors the literature looks at when talking about helping families overcome homelessness. These main services are housing vouchers, case management, and support.[2] The combination of housing subsidies and services has been proven successful in helping families continue stability.[4] Families using housing vouchers were less likely to reenter into homeless shelters.[4] According to Fisher et al., "evidence suggests that access to housing vouchers seems to increase residential stability and that case management and other services also contribute to residential stability and other desirable outcomes, including family preservation and reunification."[4]

While housing subsidies are regarded as a necessity in helping homeless families, case management has mixed reviews on its success with homeless families. Case management being used alongside housing subsidies had more success than just case management alone.[3] On the other hand, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Homeless Families Coordinating Center found that case management in general did not have a significant impact; however, when it was focused on retaining housing, it did seem to help.[6] Programs often try to find the best way to combine these factors to best serve their clients and their communities.

2. Methodology

This qualitative study used purposive sampling, as all participants from the years 2013 and 2014 were called. In the beginning of the data collection process, the agency provided a total of 31 case files from participants who were in the program in 2013. The study utilized phone interviews with past participants of the programs at Family Promise of Greater Chattanooga (FPGC). These case files were divided between the two researchers to call. The researchers developed an interview script along with Family Promise to address the four factors that the agency feels leads to stability: 1) obtaining and sustaining available/affordable housing, 2) employment or income support, 3) supportive services (i.e. transportation, child care, counseling, etc.), and 4) follow-up. Once developed, the researchers met at the Family Promise agency for a few hours a week to complete the phone calls from the Family Promise agency phones in a private office. Before beginning the interview, the researchers addressed confidentiality and obtained participants' consent for the interview to be used for research. Permission to use the demographic information listed in the participants' charts was also requested.

The researchers numbered the case file on the interview script and on the chart review form. The most recent phone number listed in the case file was called. Then the interview questions were asked and answers were hand written on the interview form. Once the interview was complete, the chart review form was filled out using the participant's chart. The interview sheet and chart review form were left in the case files at Family Promise and later were typed up on the researchers' password-protected computers using only the case numbers and no names or phone numbers.

There were many disconnected phone numbers in the 2013 case files. In an effort to reach the participants who did not answer the most recent phone number, the researchers called all other phone numbers previously listed in the file. If the participants did not answer but had a working phone number, the researchers did not leave a message but called back at a later time. These phone numbers were called no more than two times. Files were divided into three piles: those who had answered, those who did not answered but needed to be called again, those who had been called twice and did not answer, and those that were not yet called. The researchers attempted to call the emergency contact listed

in the file for participants who could not be reached by the phone numbers in their file after two attempts. The researchers did not explain any confidential information to the emergency contacts, but asked for an updated number. If one was provided, the researchers attempted to contact the participant at the new number and noted it in the case file. For participants who still could not be reached, a search in ServicePoint (a database with information on homeless individuals, including phone numbers, throughout the city entered by various agencies) was conducted, where no additional numbers could be found.

Of the 31 case files from 2013, only 4 (12.9%) responses were obtained. Due to this, researchers decided to expand the sampling frame to include participants from 2014. Nineteen cases files for participants from 2014 were called and the researchers repeated the methodology. In total, 50 case files were provided to the researchers. Of those 50, the researchers obtained responses from 14 participants (28%). The remainder either refused to participate or could not be contacted.

After the data collection was finished, the answers were analyzed through a modified grounded theory method with two independent coders. In using this method, the researchers worked separately to look for themes and create open codes from the answers of each participant. The researchers then collaborated to agree on axial codes. Initially, the coders had a 96% agreement rate on the axial codes but worked to obtain consensus on the axial and final selective codes. Frequency distributions were utilized to analyze the demographic data from the chart review forms.

3. Data Analysis

All 14 (100%) participants were female. Out of the 14 participants, 10 (71.4%) were African American, 2 (14.3%) Caucasian, and 2 (14.3%) did not specify. Participant's ranged from 19 to 44, with a mean of 29.93, ($sd = 6.91$). Of the 14 participants, 10 (71.4%) were single, 1 (7.1%) was married, 1 (7.1%) was separated, 1 (7.1%) was divorced, and 1 (7.1%) did not answer. Family size ranged from 2 to 5 people with a mean of 3.35, ($sd = 1.15$). The number of days in the program ranged from 1 day to 189 days, with a mean of 77 days, ($sd = 56.28$). Participants who were considered to be stable were in the program on average 29 more days than those who were considered unstable. Stable participants were classified as those with a combination of consistent housing, a source of income, and support services. Finally, participants' level of education ranged from 9th grade with no GED, to some college with additional technical classes.

According to previous literature, the three most important factors that lead to stability after homelessness are housing vouchers, case management, and other support.[2] This study found that the most important factors were housing stability, income stability, and social support.

Having the same address as previously reported and having their name on the lease, having a new address with their name on the lease, and same address with name not on the lease evidenced housing stability. One participant stated, "Yes I am living at the same place. It is my grandmother's house." Another participant demonstrated housing instability, stating, "No, I am still homeless. I am currently living in my car."

Income stability was evidenced by having a stable job and/or receiving benefits that provide income (i.e. government assistance, child support, etc.). One participant stated, "I receive income from child support, and I just got a job working for Amazon." It is important to note that income alone does not assure stability. The same participant that stated that she was still living in her car also stated, "Yes, I work part-time every once in a while with Select Staffing. They just call me when they have a job for me."

Social supports were evidenced by a variety of resources, including mental health, childcare, and other community support. One participant who did not have a stable job but had a new address with her name on the lease stated, "I am receiving a Section 8 voucher, as well as help from a children's mental health center for my child, an adult mental health center, and different churches in the area." These social supports helped her to remain stable while looking for employment.

Theme	Subtheme	Quote
Housing Stability	Same address, Name on lease	"Yes, I am living in the same place and my name is still on the lease."
	New address, Name on lease	"I have a new address and my name is on the lease."
	Same address, Name not on lease	"Yes I am living at the same place. It is my grandmother's house."
Income Stability	Job	"I just got a job working for Amazon."
	Government assistance	"My income is what is left of my Section 8, and I am currently looking for a job while I collect metal and cardboard scraps for resale for a little money ."
	Child support	"I receive income from child support…"
Received Support	Housing voucher	"I receive a Section 8 voucher ."
	Utilities	"I have resources that pay my utility bill. It's confidential."
	Mental health	"… as well as help from a children's mental health center."
	Child care	"I receive a childcare voucher but I still pay part."
	Social supports	"I received help from… different churches in the area."
	Food vouchers	"I am receiving food stamps."

4. Conclusion

This study corroborated past research on the vulnerability of women and children and homelessness. According to Fertig and Reingold, women and children are more vulnerable to homelessness and economic hardship due to the changes of family structure, such as the rise of single-parent households. [2] This was directly reflected in this study. It is important for service providers and prevention agencies to understand which populations are in the biggest danger of becoming homeless and remaining unstable. One participant stated, "I need help finding another shelter because I lost custody of my son because someone reported me not living in a safe environment and I am trying to get him back."

There are a few limitations to note in this study. First, the small sample size in this study was due to agency size, allowing for a small sampling frame. The researchers were not able to get in contact with more that 50% of the sampling frame, creating challenges for the study. It is unknown if the participants that could not be reached are currently homeless. Second, the demographic information was outdated in some of the participants' charts because it was filled out when they entered the FPGC program. This makes it difficult to assure the accuracy of some variables, such as household income or family size. Finally, follow-up was not clearly defined as case management or another type of contact in this study, making it difficult to assess this factor as it relates to stability after leaving the FPGC programs. About half of participants said they had been followed up with, defined it as different things, such as speaking with a case manager or receiving a phone call to come pick up his or her mail.

This ties into a future implication for agencies serving the homeless population. The researchers suggest that agencies should clearly define follow-up when participants enter the program in order to know what to expect when they leave. It is also recommended that agencies implement a method for updating past participants information to assess their current stability. Additionally, social workers serving the homeless population need to be mindful that many roles are necessary, such as acting as a broker or advocate to secure housing stability, income stability, and social support for families transitioning from homelessness. Finally, this study used formal support, such as agency help and organizational services. Future studies may need to explore the impact of informal support, such as human relationships and emotional support.

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