

Formerly Homeless Families' Experiences with Preschool Enrollment: Policy and Practice Implications

CHARLES H. KIEFFER, PH.D.

LINDSEY BARRANCO, PH.D.



THE
CLOUDBURST
GROUP



Research Background

- Qualitative study supported by HUD's Office of Policy Development and Research (*Grant #H-21616RG*)
- Research directly linked to *Family Options Study: The Impact of Housing and Services Interventions on Homeless Families*
 - Population in Cloudburst study resided in Atlanta, GA & Bridgeport/New Haven, CT
- Motivation for Research
 - Over 130,000 children under age 6 experiencing homelessness in one night (HUD PIT, 2013)
 - Only 16% of preschool-aged children in homeless families are enrolled in early educational settings
 - Critical importance of brain development in early childhood
 - Concern for linkage of housing stability and educational success

Key Study Questions

How do homeless families describe their experience in pursuit of preschool enrollment?

What challenges and experiences do recently homeless families face in accessing early childhood education for preschool-aged children?

What can we learn from parental reflections on facilitative factors and/or barriers that, as practitioners and policy leaders, we can apply to support increasing success in preschool participation?

Motivating Factors in Preschool Choice

Frequently mentioned parental concerns in selecting preschool included:

- Location and Proximity to Home and to Work
- Availability/Accessibility of Transportation
- Availability of Extended Hours
- Educational Quality of Settings
- Costs of Enrollment and Availability of Subsidy
- Sense of Safety and Security in Setting

Impact of Housing Stability on Preschool Enrollment

- For many families, frequent moves meant switching preschools, and then having to go through repeated search & enrollment processes
- Some parents made efforts to keep child[ren] in same school despite residential moves – even if traveling long distances
- As locating affordable housing was most families' understandable priority, few parents could make housing choices based on access to preschool
- Transience complicated difficulty of addressing systemic and personal challenges of program entry

Barriers to Preschool Enrollment

- Parental interviews identified key barriers that included:
 - Insufficient availability of subsidized slots
 - Long waiting lists for program entry
 - Complicated processes for enrollment
 - Need for access to transportation
 - Absence of access to quality information about programs
 - Preschool programs unresponsive to consumer contact

Absence of Outreach by Homeless Programs and/or Educational Services

- Few parents reported meaningful:
 - Support from homeless programs or related service providers
 - Outreach by Head Start programs into shelter settings
 - Outreach regarding early childhood education through McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Liaisons
 - Outreach by other early childhood programs into housing crisis settings

Facilitative Factors for Preschool Enrollment

Key factors referenced by parents in facilitating preschool enrollment included:

- Persistence (as a parental quality) in seeking out quality programs -- e.g., school visitation; aggregating needed documentation
- Geographic proximity of the school of choice to home location
- Ease of access to transportation
- Access to accurate/updated program information
- Access to centralized referral systems
- Access to informal social supports

Implications for ECE Policy and Practice

- Address systemic barriers to preschool enrollment (e.g., increase transportation support, access to subsidies, and preferences or set-asides for limited slots)
- Increase use of homeless preferences in state and federally funded early childhood initiatives (e.g., CCDF slots, Preschool Development slots, IDEA Part C, MIECHV)
- Develop strategies that help reduce the impact of housing mobility (e.g., ability to port early head start subsidy slots)

Implications for Cross-Systems Policy and Practice

- Increase investment in building consumer knowledge/awareness of preschool options and requirements for enrollment
 - Expand peer-to-peer supports and information-sharing
 - Increase shelter in-reach by ECE providers (including Head Start providers)
 - Include early childhood providers in community-wide Coordinated Entry
- Increase attention to preschool access in shelter case management protocols
 - Providing information on resources in “new” housing locations
 - Providing post-shelter follow-up
- Increase homeless and ECE provider collaboration and joint training

Contact Information

Chuck Kieffer

chuck.kieffer@cloudburstgroup.com

734-645-0810

Lindsey Barranco

Lindsey.Barranco@cloudburstgroup.com

678-812-0279

Full report can be downloaded at:

<https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/parental-preschool-choices.pdf>

