



## **BrainGain@PEC**

Produced by the PEC Policy Department

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BrainGain@PEC provides brief summaries of research or publications on family homelessness and related issues. Previous issues of BrainGain@PEC can be found at <http://www.pec-cares.org/publications.html>. Much of the following text was taken verbatim from the source document.

## **Marginalized Mothers: Parenting without a Home**

Source: Cosgrove, L., & Flynn, C. (2005). Marginalized Mothers: Parenting Without a Home. *Analyses of Social Issues & Public Policy*, 5(1), 127-143. doi:10.1111/j.1530-2415.2005.00059.x

### **Overview**

- If research on homelessness is to be of use to participants, they need to be included more fully in the research process.
- Researchers should continue to work collaboratively with individuals experiencing homelessness so that their experiences can be heard and used to inform public policy.
- Policymaking is often the domain of experts who decide how to best “solve” a social problem, thereby ignoring the perspectives of the disenfranchised groups most affected by the problem. The data gathered from interviewing mothers experiencing homelessness challenge unfounded stereotypes about them and provide information about coping behaviors and resilience. The recommendations for public policy, housing programs and universities that are included at the end of the document were collaboratively developed by women experiencing homelessness, housing program staff, and administrators.

### **The Study**

- The aim of the study is to explore the lived experience, strengths, coping strategies, and challenges of mothers experiencing homeless within the context of negative cultural stereotypes that are placed on them.
- This study took the form of participatory research, which is when researchers collaborate with participants using qualitative methods.
  - Researchers work closely with members of a community in an effort to make sure that findings are useful and relevant to the participants.
- Women in the study were provided the opportunity to define coping, strengths and

challenges in their own terms.

- This allowed for a more complete picture of the information than what is typically gleaned from studies that use only quantitative methods.
- 15 participants
  - Ages 20-32
  - Their children ranged in age from three months to 12 years
  - Families ranged in size from two to five persons
  - 12 had at least a high school degree
  - Resided at one of two strengths-based shelters that were selected for the study

### **First Topic: The Lived Experience of Parenting without a Home**

- The aim of this component is to explore the experience of parenting in a housing program and to provide participants with the opportunity to identify problems of navigating bureaucracies and state-funded agencies.
- Focus question: How do cultural representations about motherhood and homelessness affect participants' lived experience of parenting in a housing program?
  - Theme One: Living the stigma of being a mother experiencing homelessness
    - Every woman interviewed described at least one incident of interpersonal discrimination by service providers.
    - "It's not by the words, it's like they don't even look at you."
    - Women feel respected by housing program staff, but some women express concerns that their parenting behavior is constantly judged.
      - These feelings may be related to participants' interpretations of the mandatory nature of parenting classes and groups when they enter housing facilities.
  - Theme Two: Conflict engendered by parenting rules
    - Most women report that parenting in a housing program is extremely difficult because of the conflicts that arise between one's previous parenting rules and the program's rules.

## **Second Topic: Participants' Identification of Their Strengths and Coping Skills**

- All participants identified numerous strengths and coping strategies.
- All participants identified both short- and long-term goals for their families.
- All participants explicitly stated that they planned to be either employed, enrolled in school, or be in a training program in the near future.
- Coping skills identified by participants include: reading, writing in a journal, staying focused, going to church, and talking to supportive people.

## **Third Topic: Recommendations for Social Policy and Housing Programs**

- All participants stated that policy makers do not understand the needs of those experiencing homelessness, nor do they understand the experiences of those experiencing homelessness—the day-to-day struggles.
- “I don’t think [policy makers] know this *isn’t* what we want. We don’t want to be in this situation...if you work forty hours a week you should be able to pay your rent and bills.”
- When asked about how to improve life within the housing program, women identified access to day care and more space for families as the most important areas for improvement.

## **Recommendations for Public Policy**

- Develop federal and state policies on homelessness based on a social analysis of homelessness rather than on negative stereotypes of the poor. Individuals who experience homelessness should be included in policy creations, reviews and discussions.
- Increase the supply of low-cost housing by keeping it out of the private sector, raise the minimum wage, and provide more quality state and federally subsidized child care.

## **Recommendations for Housing Facilities/Programs**

- Systematically document racism and sexism in the welfare system by encouraging women to report incidents of discrimination and educating women about their rights. Documentation will increase public awareness.
  - Encourage women to discuss these occurrences and share their coping strategies.
- Increase collaboration among researchers, activists, policy makers, and families

experiencing homelessness by instituting routine roundtable discussions.

- Give women opportunities to participate more fully in decisions affecting their lives.
- Collaboration among various stakeholders will facilitate the development of policies based on a social analysis of homelessness and will assist in the development of strengths-based models of intervention.
- Provide training to new staff on the pervasiveness of negative stereotypes of families living in poverty and the impact of interpersonal discrimination.
- Encourage women living in housing facilities to provide feedback about the curriculum of parenting classes and groups.
  - Curricula should include information on parental rights and how to advocate for a child's educational needs.
- Provide opportunities for women to discuss the conflicts that arise from communal living situations.
  - Offer training to line staff on the flexible implementation of parenting rules.
- Train line and professional staff that work with women to avoid using deficit-oriented, victim-based models of intervention.

## **Recommendations for Universities**

- University administrators and housing program administrators must work together in order to identify and respond to the specific needs within their communities.
  - Universities could provide tuition waivers to women experiencing homelessness, or some courses could be offered off-site at housing facilities.
  - University administrators could encourage faculty to teach off-site by "counting" such courses as part of a service requirement.
- Increase awareness about the limitations of current psychological theories and assessment tools designed to measure "effective coping" in women experiencing homelessness.
  - Researchers and clinicians need to be more open to the myriad ways that resilience can be manifest. Behaviors that are typically seen as evidence of dysfunction may be highly adaptive in some contexts. Often ideologies of coping assume a certain amount of privilege and conflate effective coping with taking control, despite the fact that opportunities to take control are limited.

