

More than Just a Roof: Solutions to Better Support Families from Homelessness to Healing



What this research is about

Family homelessness is a complex issue that involves both personal and larger social problems. It can be made worse by family violence or relationship breakdowns. When families become homeless, they may need help from many different services, such as immigration, child welfare, health, housing, and financial support services. These services are run by different agencies that work in silos, making it hard for families to navigate. Moreover, families of Indigenous and racialized backgrounds often face discrimination and structural racism.

This study explored the experiences of 15 parents who had been homeless when they had at least one child with them and 18 staff working in the homeless service sector. The goal was to develop recommendations to improve access to and coordination within the current systems.

What the researchers did

Participants were 15 parents who had experienced homelessness and 18 staff who worked in homeless service organizations in Calgary, Alberta. Thirteen parents were female and two were male. All were recruited through social service agencies. Parents were interviewed individually, while staff participated in one of three focus groups. The interviews were designed to understand parents' lived experiences, while the focus groups focused on service barriers and ideas for improvement.

What the researchers found

Four themes emerged from the data:

1) Housing as a foundation for success in other domains. Both staff and parents said that safe and affordable housing is the biggest concern, as it is the

What you need to know

Families experiencing homelessness often need to access a range of supports. They also face more difficulty finding appropriate and affordable housing than single adults. Homeless families have often experienced trauma in the form of violence or broken relationships. Navigating the different services and fulfilling the housing requirements of Children's Services can be confusing and challenging, especially for families of racial minorities.

This study examined the experiences of 15 parents and 18 homeless service sector staff. Four themes emerged: (1) Housing as a foundation for success in other domains; (2) Challenges with system navigation: a door within a door within a door; (3) Services' contributions to trauma, and (4) Exposure to social bias and stigma within services. Recommendations were made for changes to the current systems and policies to improve access and address structural barriers.

foundation for dealing with other problems. Staff often have limited time or resources, yet they are under a lot of pressure to help families stay together. Shelters have restriction on length of stay. This makes it hard for families, who often have unique housing needs, to find appropriate housing before they end up homeless again. For parents trying to regain custody of their children, housing must meet specific standards set by Children's Services, limiting their options. Many parents said they felt stuck. Parents also stressed the importance of finding a "home" and not just a roof to live under.

2) Challenges with system navigation: A door within a door within a door. Both parents and staff said that the current systems are confusing, hard to understand, and difficult to use. Many felt that the burden of navigating different social services, which work in silos, is placed almost entirely on the recipients. Not being able to access certain services can also block people from getting other types of help. Parents also said the financial support from the governments is not enough to lift people out of poverty. Both parents and staff agreed that changes are urgently needed to the current systems.

3) Services' contributions to trauma. Staff said that most families experiencing homelessness have been through a lot of traumas. Yet, accessing support services can be traumatizing itself. Parents described feeling that support services do not really care and lack empathy. Many said they were treated in ways that made them feel like they were bad parents. Moreover, there is high staff turnover, which makes it hard to receive continuous support. Staff said that the training they received on trauma is very basic and does not fully address larger system-level issues.

4) Exposure to social bias and stigma within services. Parents said they often face discrimination because of their race, culture, disability, mental health challenges, or criminal record. They felt judged for needing help from support services. Both staff and parents pointed out examples of racism in the housing market, especially from landlords. Many said there is a strong need for more cultural support. Parents felt that it is very important to have access to both Western and traditional forms of support. Staff stated that most organizations understand how important anti-racism is, but there is often a gap between recognizing the value of cultural and spiritual support and actually providing it.

How you can use this research

It is recommended that trauma-informed supervision in social and government services be implemented to better support families who have experienced trauma. Policies to improve collaboration between service agencies, landlords, and community services could be created. Housing First programs could be improved for better access and service delivery.

About the researchers

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The Vanier Institute of the Family has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots.

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