

The Intersection of Families Experiencing Homelessness and their Use of Children's Services

“How might Children Service's and the non-profit sector improve collaboration in order to better serve families experiencing homelessness?”

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Introduction

The issue of homelessness is a unique, wicked, complex issue. The causes of homelessness can be attributed to various factors such as large systemic forces (macro-level systems), like economic changes, or one's own individual and personal circumstances (micro-level systems), such as addiction. Likewise, it is common for homelessness to be a result of both macro and micro-level systems. Homelessness can affect anyone – men, women, and children. One specific population that will be discussed in relation to homelessness is families. When families become at-risk or experience homelessness, interaction from Children's Services may occur to ensure that the safety and well-being of the children within these families are protected. In some cases, these involvements may result in the apprehension of children by Children's Services. Apprehension is a traumatic event for both the child and the parents. Ultimately, keeping families together is one of the main priorities and apprehension should occur only as a last resort. How can we prevent these apprehensions from occurring? Supporting families through this difficult event by providing them with adequate resources is one of the primary ways to prevent child apprehension. Nonprofit organizations are one of the first points of contact for families, many of whom provide services that assist families during these challenging times.

This report aims to explore how systems within the social service sector can be improved for families experiencing homelessness.

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Methodology

This research explores the topic of the intersection of families experiencing homelessness and their use of Children’s Services. This research utilizes both academic, government, and nonprofit reports for data and information surrounding the issue of family homelessness and Children’s Services involvement. Furthermore, support from my community partner, Jocelyn Adamo from Trellis, and my faculty mentor, Harpreet Aulakh aided in the development of this report.

Additionally, insight from my community conversation helped guide my research of this topic. All of these systems and stakeholders played a significant role in the development of this final report. Lastly, resources and support from Mount Royal University’s Institute of Community Prosperity Catamount Fellowship highlighted the importance of systems-level thinking in order to open up and shift my perspective on how I view the world.



Aspects of Family Homelessness

Causes of Family Homelessness:

- Economic changes
- Poverty
- Colonialism
- Personal Trauma
- Lack of affordable housing

(Calgary Homeless Foundation, n.d.)

Groups that are overrepresented in family homelessness:

- Single female HOH
- Indigenous families
- New immigrant and refugee families
- Families with disabilities
- Racialized families

(Turner et al., 2018)

Families seek to fulfill the basic need of shelter by staying in:

- Precarious housing
- Emergency Shelters
- Housing support from non-profits
- Provisional accommodation

(The Homeless Hub, 2013)

The issue of homelessness is traumatic for all parties involved, making it difficult for families to cope and survive. Many families may be experiencing a cycle of homelessness, where they previously were homeless at another point in their lives. In order to help break the continuation of this cycle, it is essential to provide proper resources and support that help and uplift these families.

What are the Effects of Children's Services Involvement on Families Experiencing Homelessness?

- 1. Children's Services involvement can be correlated to the issue of youth homelessness** → 73.3% of youth who become homeless before the age of 16 reported involvement with Children's Services (Nichols et al., 2017)
- 2. Children's Services involvement can increase the rate of a child/youth's adverse childhood experiences (ACE) leading to negative consequences on an individual's physical, emotional, and mental health** → 63.1% of youth [in Canada] who are homeless report childhood trauma, abuse, and/or neglect – a key cause of involvement due to Children's Services (Nicholas et al., 2017)
- 3. Child apprehension leaves children without natural supports, which negatively impacts a child's wellbeing** → Gaetz et al. (2016) identified that youth experiencing homelessness who were in constant contact with family members and had stable family relations reported improved relationships and more positive reports in their well-being (as cited in Borato et al., 2020)
- 4. Gaps within the Children's Services system can have detrimental and, even fatal, effects on the children they are supposed to protect** → The Office of the Child and Youth Advocate (OCYA) released a review that criticized the policies and structure of Children's Services, after there were 3 incidences of children dying due to the effects of being in government care (Government of Alberta, 2017)
- 5. Involvement can continue to promote intergenerational trauma within families, many of whom are dealing with the effects of trauma from past generations**

A criticism behind Children's Services involvement is that the actions and policies of this system are not similarly aligned with nonprofit organizations, many of which are the first point of contact and primary support center for families experiencing homelessness. As a result of this disconnect, families become broken, displaced, and endure more trauma by being caught in the middle of these two systems.



Successful and Innovative Programs

Non-profit organizations have seen success in providing innovative services that help address the issue of homelessness, whilst keeping families together. These services have led to a reduction in Children's Services involvement, further decreasing the number of child apprehensions. This highlights the importance of non-profit organizations in providing an integral role within the homeless sector. The services they provide are essential in assisting families during these difficult times.

Housing First Programs

Provides housing immediately to families without any conditions. These programs accept families as they are. These programs have demonstrated success in reducing Children's Services involvement and are known to be cost-effective within the system (Gaetz, 2013).

Indigenous Support Programs

These programs provide culturally relevant Indigenous teachings and practices (Baskin, 2007). Also addresses the issue of intergenerational trauma due to colonialism that is prevalent within the Indigenous population.

Diversion Programs

Avert families from staying at shelters, thus reducing the number of families staying at emergency shelters. These programs provide transitional housing and financial assistance to families (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2011).

Key Findings

Revise and update government policies that dictate the structure of the Children's Service system

Power creates change. Advocating for change within this macro-level system to policies that more appropriately reflect the issues that families experiencing homelessness face (as well as other adversities) is a step towards progressing the Children's Services and the non-profit sector's relationship with one another. Policies should reflect and be founded on research-based principles which can help guide Children's Services in providing services that is appropriate and best for the family (Government of Alberta, 2017). Similarly, this research-based framework is used commonly within the non-profit sector. As a result, a common foundation will lead to improved collaboration between the two systems.

Increased funding towards non-profit organizations to help develop and source more resources support into innovative initiatives.

Allocating more funds towards non-profit resources, leads to the implementation of innovative programs that help families experiencing homelessness (ex. Housing First initiatives). These programs have demonstrated success at reducing Children's Services involvement and preventing child apprehension from occurring. However, the number of resources available limits the number of families that can be served. By adequately funding non-profit organizations, Children's Services interactions decrease as both the child and family's well-being are being protected and supported.

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