

Family Homelessness

John Sylvestre, Nick Kerman and Alexia Polillo,
Housing First Forum

January 25, 2018





Overview

- An overview of the issue of family homeless
- A profile of homeless families in Ottawa
- Experiences of family homelessness
 - From heads of households
 - From youth
- Implications for Housing First



Family Homelessness and Shelter Use (ESDC, 2016)



- Over 135,000 individuals used emergency shelters in Canada in 2014, excluding VAW shelters
- About 5670 of whom were between the ages of 0 and 16 and accompanied by an adult.
- 5% of all shelter users were not Canadian citizens
- Nearly 90% of families headed by single females.
- Average length of stay for families was 20 days in 2014
- Average occupancy rate at family shelters was 86.3% in 2014
- 8.9% of families used a shelter more than once





Family homelessness

- These observations exclude:
 - Families in VAW shelters
 - Families “doubling up”
- Family homelessness is the visible tip of the iceberg of family poverty and precarious housing Canada (Gulliver-Garcia, 2016).





Family Homelessness is a complex social phenomenon



Family Homelessness is not a discreet event

- We tend to think about family homelessness as an event bounded by clear starting and end points
- Family homelessness is often the most visible part of
 - a process (e.g., growing instability, loss of social support, frequent moves) that precedes and follows visible homelessness
 - a broader problem of poverty, marginalization, violence
 - Instability may persist even after families find housing

Family Homelessness is not a homogenous event

- Families have potentially different experiences of homelessness
 - Families have taken different routes to homelessness
 - Families are very different from another
 - Family composition
 - Age of heads of households
 - Age/Developmental stage and number of children
 - Histories and experiences
 - Strengths and challenges
 - Differences in settings (doubling up, family shelters, VAW shelters, hotels/motels)

Family Homelessness Intersects with Developmental Time

- Developmental time of parent
 - Younger versus older parent
- Developmental time of child(ren)
 - Younger versus older children
- Developmental time/stage of family
 - New versus established family
 - Intact versus non-intact
- Other considerations: immigration experiences, violence

Family Homelessness and Social Time

- For parents
 - Transition from school to work
 - From early work experience to established work trajectories
- For children/youth
 - Progress from grade to grade; from school to school; from school to work
 - Participation in informal, leisure, and sports activities
 - Friendship development; dating experiences; personal independence

Implications

- Challenges in prevention of homelessness; variability in pathways to homelessness
- Challenges observed in shelters may be associated with the instability that preceded homelessness
- Families may vary in their experiences of shelters
- Families may vary in their needs for support to leave shelters and find stable housing

Family Homelessness and Housing First

- Are there chronically homeless families?
- Would Housing First reduce length of shelter stays?
- What elements of Housing First are needed?

Family Homelessness in Ottawa: A Closer Look

Family Homelessness in Ottawa (ATEH-Ottawa, 2017)



- In 2016, an increase in the number of homeless families
 - 879 family units.
- 1,577 dependents 17 years of age and under.
 - 56% of all clients in family shelters
 - 22% of all emergency shelter clients
- These counts do not include families from the violence against women sector





Family Homelessness in Ottawa

- Average length of stay – 93 nights
- Average length of stay for single adults: about 60 days
- Stays are long because families cannot afford private market housing
 - Families wait for social housing units
 - Larger families wait longer for appropriate sized units



Findings from a study of 75 families, 2013-2014



- About 73% of participants were women and 65.3% of these families were single parent families.
- Most participants were unemployed (84%), but over a third (34.7%) had completed post-secondary education, and another 28% had completed high school.
- About half of the participants were Canadian citizens. A quarter of participants were permanent residents and immigrants, and another quarter were refugees. Overall, about two thirds were born outside of Canada.



Findings from a study of 75 families, 2013-2014



- Half of the sample reported that they were living in couple relationships (41.3% married and 9.3% cohabitating)
- of this group, 21.3% reported having either a spouse or partner who was not currently living at the shelter with them.
- Children: 107 (56.3%) were boys and 76 (40.0%) were girls.
- 5.3% were less than a year of age, 21.1% were between 1-3 years of age, 18.9% were between 4-6 years of age, 22.1% were between 7-10 years of age, 10.5% were between 11-12 years of age, and 17.9% were 13-17 years of age.



Findings from a study of 75 families, 2013-2014



- Individual incomes in the past year were \$12,807.91 on average
- Family incomes were \$17,718.10.
- Overall, the average annual family income was approximately half of the 2013 after tax low-income cut-off for a family of four living in a city the size of Ottawa (\$36,504; Statistics Canada, 2014).



Findings: Most Common Housing Barriers



Barrier	Big Problem (%)	Small Problem (%)	Not a Problem (%)	Missing(%)
Insufficient income to pay rent	61 (81.3)	5 (6.7)	9 (12.0)	0 (0)
Inability to pay a security deposit or first/last month's rent	46 (61.3)	8 (10.7)	18 (24.0)	3 (4.0)
Lack of transportation to look for housing	26 (34.7)	11 (14.7)	35 (46.7)	3 (4.0)
Poor credit history	26 (34.7)	12 (16.0)	33 (44.0)	4 (5.3)
Not being currently employed	44 (58.7)	11 (14.7)	18 (24.0)	2 (2.7)
No rent history at all	14 (18.7)	10 (13.3)	45 (60.0)	6 (8.0)
Recently moved to community and No local rent history	15 (20.0)	4 (5.3)	49 (65.3)	7(9.3)
No reference from past landlords	13 (17.3)	13 (17.3)	42 (56.0)	7 (9.3)
Past eviction(s)	13 (17.3)	1 (1.3)	58 (77.3)	3 (4.0)





Findings: Mental Health

- Heads of Families reported their mental health to be poorer than that of the general population
 - Subscale of the SF-12 measuring mental health (MCS): mean 44.66 (SD = 11.78; n = 68); approximately half a standard deviation below the norm for the general population.
 - low levels of problematic substance and alcohol use noted





Experiences of Adults living in Emergency Shelters



Experiences of Parents (n=18)



- **How did families become homeless?**
 - Financial difficulties
 - Interpersonal conflict
 - Social isolation
- **Perceptions of Shelters**
 - Institutional nature of the shelter system, including rules
 - Small bedrooms/motel rooms
 - Communal living: share spaces, noise, and lack of privacy

“I didn't wanna come here. Right? That was like my last option ... I actually cried when I knew I was coming to live in a shelter. Like, nobody wants to live in a shelter with their baby ... I had to do the best thing for the child, and it was coming here.”





Impacts: Parents

- **Negative Shelter Impacts**
 - Parenting practices
 - Relationships with friends/family not in shelter
 - Health and well-being
 - Isolation

- **Positive Shelter Impacts**
 - Families gained access to services and resources/Helpful and friendly staff
 - Increased stability
 - Improved family relationships





Relationships and social support:

“If you’re down and out then that’s exactly what you are. My mom used to call them 'fair-weather friends' and I never understood the expression until lately. When my skies are blue and sunny, I’ve got all the friends in the world, but if there’s a cloud over my head, I’m dealing with it on my own.”





Experiences of Youth living in Emergency Shelters





Experiences of Youth

Youth (n = 16; 6 males, 10 females, 17.1 yrs of age)

Perceptions of shelters:

Positive

- Cleanliness
- Size
- Feelings of safety
- Access to food and resources
- Social Activities
- Shelter staff
- Youth Coordinators

Negative

- Small room sizes
- Noisy environment
- Limited space
- Lack of privacy
- In-shelter programming
- Internet/Cable
- Issues with heating & air conditioning





Impacts: Families

- Family cohesion & communication
 - Increased communication
 - Family bonding

“There’s like more moments of truth. ... like when you’re in the room and someone’s doing something wrong and you tell them, they can’t go anywhere. They have to listen to you unless they agree or disagree with you. But they still have to listen to you.”

- Family roles
 - Adult responsibilities





Impacts: Youth

- Emotional well-being
- Social support and friendships
- Coping with shelter life
- A sense of identity

“Well, it kind of contributed to a better me because somehow it teaches you how to be patient, how to deal with people, you know, you can’t always get what you want in life.”





Discussion & Implications

- Unique to the experiences of unaccompanied youth
 - Families were a main source of support
 - Experiences similar to any youth in this developmental phase (e.g., education, work, activities)
 - Needs and services
- In-shelter resources (e.g., peer support groups)
- Initiatives → Collaboration & Positive Environment
- Accessible and permanent housing accommodations
- Evidence-based initiatives that support immigrant youth





Family Homelessness and Housing First



uOttawa

Centre for Research on Educational
and Community Services



Centre de recherche sur les services
éducatifs et communautaires



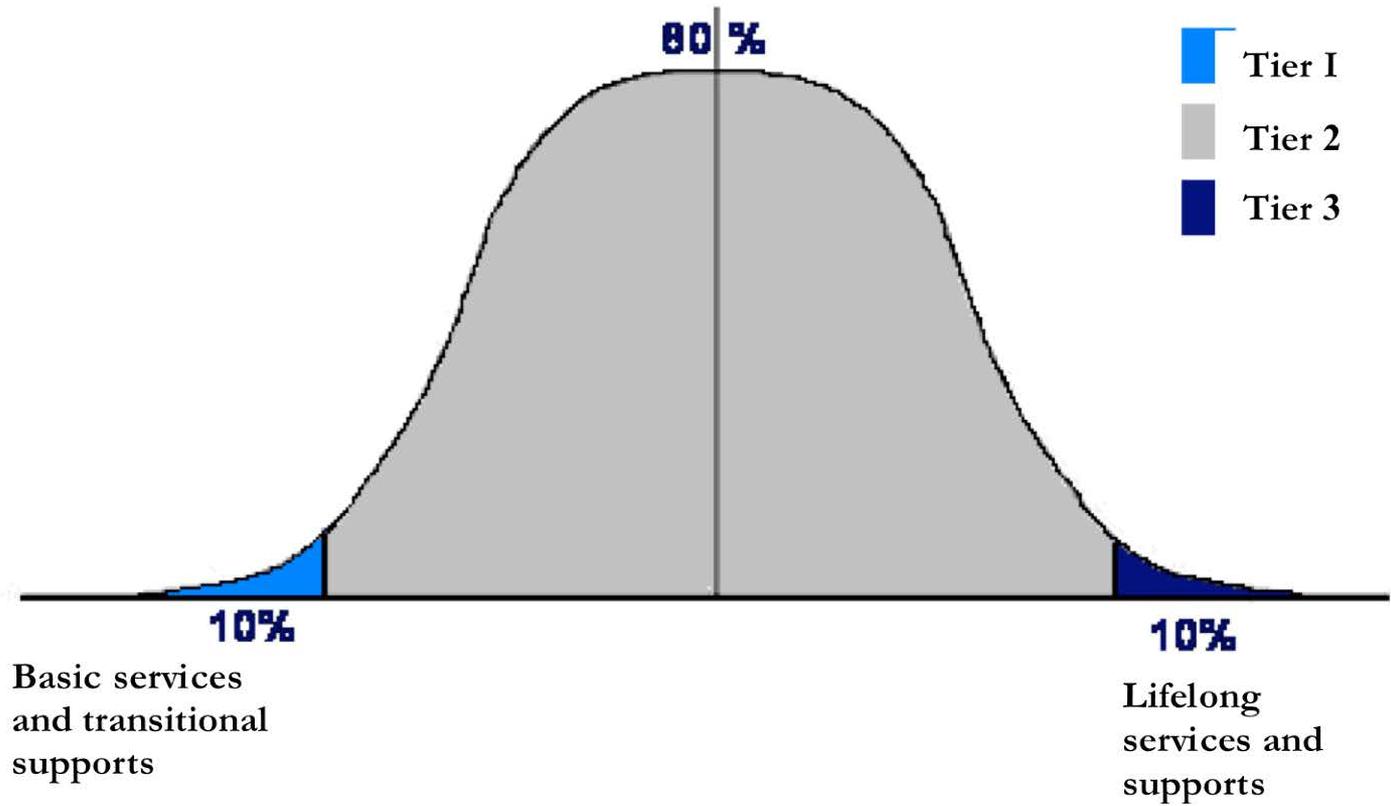
Observations

- Little evidence of individual and family dysfunction
- Challenges are primarily economic
- Little recidivism
- However, cannot deny that homeless is destabilizing, isolating and stressful.
- Unclear long-term impacts on parents, children, and families as a whole.





Continuum of Service Needs of Homeless Families (Bassuk et al., 2010)



Continuum of Service Needs of Homeless Families (Bassuk et al., 2010)



- Tier 1 (10%): All families regardless of their socioeconomic status, need the following basic combination of supports and services to survive and maintain their families
 - Affordable housing
 - Jobs that pay a living wage
 - Child Care
 - Health Care
 - Transportation
 - Basic child services (e.g., play groups)



Continuum of Service Needs of Homeless Families (Bassuk et al., 2010)



- Tier 2 (80%): Need all services in Tier 1, and additional ongoing, specialized services. May include:
 - Education and Job Opportunities
 - Services for Traumatic Stress and Mental Health
 - Family Supports (e.g., home visiting)
 - Services for Children (e.g., mental health screening and treatment)



Continuum of Service Needs of Homeless Families (Bassuk et al., 2010)



- Tier 3 (10%):
- Require income supports as well as lifelong ongoing, often intensive, services and supports in order to maintain their families in housing and ensure the well being of all family members



In Canada



- Need for greater access to Housing Subsidies
- Appears to be biggest barrier to shelter exit
 - US Family Options study has shown that housing subsidies were the most successful intervention for gaining access to housing and keeping families intact
- Newcomer families may need a variety of supports to adjust to life in Canada





In Ottawa: Families First

- The program began in August 2011.
- It was developed and implemented by the Pinecrest-Queensway Community Health Centre and our Community Partners.
- It is funded by the City of Ottawa under the Housing and Homelessness Investment Plan and the Government of Canada's Homelessness Partnering Strategy.





Vision and Goal

- Vision:
 - To provide a short term bridging service to integrate families from the Ottawa Family Shelter system or other referral sources into their communities and assist with retention of housing.
- Goals:
 - To help families retain and maintain their housing.
 - To integrate families into their communities and to promote social inclusion.
 - To increase their autonomy and to support self sufficiency.



Families First



Coordinator

Case
Workers

Housing Search
and Stabilization
workers

Child and Youth
liaison workers

Survivors of
Domestic
Violence worker

PSYCHIATRIST

Multicultural worker

Administrative
Support Worker

Mental Health
and Addictions
worker

Intensive Case Management Approach

- The program supports families for a 9 to 12 month period.
- It employs client-centred and holistic approaches.
- The intensity of support provided from intake to discharge is based on the family's needs
- Provide strengths-based, culturally competent, and trauma-informed services.
- Clients participate actively in the development of a individualized service plan.
- Support the client to integrate into their community.
- Includes a discharge plan, a comprehensive review of accomplishments, and resources for long term supports connected with housing retention.

Successes

- 99% of families referred to the program have remained housed.
- Close to 5,000 individuals including children have been referred to the program.
- More than 1,400 households have been referred to the program from August 2011 to December 2017.
- The program has developed strong partnerships with various partner agencies.
- Clients have been referred to more than 80 services across the city.
- There are over 6,000 direct or indirect interventions with any given client in the program per year.

For more information

- John Sylvestre – jsylvest@uottawa.ca
- Families First
 - Ofelia Levoir – o.levoir@pqchc.com