

# FAMILIES AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

## THEIR PERCEPTIONS AND NEEDS WHEN EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

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# INTRODUCTION

When one thinks of homeless persons, the first instinct is to picture a single adult who has fallen on hard times, engaged in substance abuse or suffers from mental illness. This picture stands in significant contrast to the realities of homeless persons in the United States at this time. In their 2011 report, the National Center on Family Homelessness identified families as the fastest growing segment of the homeless population at nearly one-third of the total homeless population. The numbers are startling, as “approximately 1.6 million children will experience homelessness over the course of a year. In any given day, researchers estimate that more than 200,000 children have no place to live” (2011, p. 1). The National Alliance to End Homelessness has similarly estimated that families with young children comprise 41% of the entire homeless population (Powers, 2010). Other organizations have found similar results. The United States Conference of Mayors 2014 report on hunger and homelessness in twenty-five cities noted that “the number of families experiencing homelessness increased across the survey cities by an average of 3 percent, with 43 percent of the cities reporting an increase, 35 percent reporting a decrease, and 22 percent saying the number stayed the same” (p. 2). Performing a count of homeless persons in an annual one-night event is also a way to determine the extent of families affected by homelessness. The 2014

results reported 37 percent of the homeless population (216,261 people) were homeless families. Alarming, one third of the U.S. homeless population are homeless children and youth numbering 194,302 people, and 76 percent of this quantity are composed of homeless families. Most of the homeless families were sheltered, but many also lived on the streets, under bridges, or in cars (United States Conference of Mayors, 2014, p. 23). It should be noted that due to the transient nature of the homeless population the above numbers only represent a portion of the homeless population, as many were not included in the one-night counts or surveys.

The main causes of family homelessness are a lack of affordable housing, high unemployment rates, poverty, low wages, and domestic violence (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2011; United States, 2014). The recent economic recession forced many families into homelessness. After losing their homes and jobs, many families could no longer find affordable housing (Biel, Gilhuly, Wilcox, & Jacobstein, 2014; Shinn, 2009).

Homeless families are often comprised of single mothers with two or more young children (Bassuk, Volk, & Oliver, 2010; Biel, et al., 2014; Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, 2012; Lindsey, 1998; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2011). The majority of these

mothers are young women in their twenties or thirties. Many have not completed high school, have experienced housing instability previously, may have grown up in the foster system, and rely on government assistance. Over ninety percent of young homeless mothers have experienced physical or sexual abuse during their lifetime (Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, 2012). Homeless mothers also may suffer from mental illnesses, substance abuse issues, or poor physical health (Bassuk, et al., 2010; Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, 2012; Lindsey, 1998; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2011).

Children in homeless families are often young, and some sources identify the average homeless child is under six years of age (Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, 2012; Lindsey, 1998). These young children have often been exposed to domestic violence and are more likely to have physical and mental health issues and nutritional deficiencies than housed children. Children in homeless families have often been uprooted from their normal routines and support systems and are more likely to exhibit antisocial, aggressive, or disruptive behaviors (Bassuk, et al., 2010; Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, 2012; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2011).

This report summarizes selected researchers' findings on the perceptions and needs of families who are homeless with regard to the facilities they inhabit. While most remarks here refer to shelter environments, many of

these concepts are also applicable to other project types such as permanent supportive housing/ housing first residences and also day service uses.

# EXPERIENCES OF FAMILIES

Homeless families may experience significant amounts of stress related to being homeless including the effort of finding jobs or permanent housing, staying in overcrowded conditions in family members' homes or homeless shelters, or sleeping in cars or outdoors. Many parents also face a constant threat of separation from their children, either by choice, placing their children with a family member to avoid shelter life, or from child services intervening at shelters or through various organizations (Bassuk, et al., 2010; Mayberry, Shinn, Benton, & Wise, 2014; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2011). One researcher described the significant and enduring struggles of homeless families this way:

*Homelessness is a life altering experience, which can have profound, long-term impact on family members. The hallmark of homelessness is not only the loss of one's home, but disconnection from neighborhoods, community, reassuring routines, belongings, relationships, safety, and security (Bassuk, et al., 2010, p. 37).*

## The Effects of Homelessness on Family Relationships

In contrast to single homeless adults, being homeless as a family brings to bear influences on the function and dynamics of the family and its interactions. How well families fare in the crisis of homelessness varies. A study by social work professor Dr. Elizabeth Lindsey at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro focused on mothers' perceptions of how homelessness and living in a homeless shelter impacted their family relationships. This study interviewed seventeen formerly homeless mothers who had resided in a homeless shelter and were now living in stable housing environments with their children. The researcher found the homeless mothers in this study to be resilient, determined, focused, and proud. The researcher found they were also committed to personal relationships and helping others, noting "...women who enter shelters with their children have managed to maintain enough stability to avoid having the children placed into foster care. Thus, while mothers who are homeless with their children may have difficulty fulfilling some aspects of their roles as parents, many are able to keep their families intact and find ways to cope with the stress of homelessness and conditions that precipitate homelessness" (Lindsey, 1998, p. 244).

The mothers interviewed in Lindsey's study reported being closer to their children and interacting with them more while living in the homeless shelter. Enduring a crisis together and sharing small spaces, while stressful, seemed to bring most of the families closer together. However, the participants also reported being overruled by the shelter staff when fulfilling their parenting and disciplinarian roles. When parenting in public, all mothers experienced other residents or shelter staff members overruling their disciplinary choices or dictating how they could and could not discipline their children. Some participants related stories of their children acting out when in public because the children knew the mother could not spank them in front of the staff. Often, mothers would discipline their children when they returned to the privacy of their rooms. However, they admitted this tactic was often less effective than disciplining their children in the moment (Lindsey, 1998).

The stress of homelessness can also impact the emotional experiences of families. The mothers in Lindsey's study reported that their emotional state impacted their relationships with their children as well as shelter staff and residents. Many mothers were depressed, exhausted, and scared while residing at the shelter. They reported having trouble with short fuses and taking out their stress on their children. These women also were not always emotionally available to their children and, like many homeless mothers, suffered from depression, suicidal thoughts, and other mental health issues (Bassuk, et al.,

2010; Lindsey, 1998). This stress directly impacted the emotional states of the children. In the words of one study participant, *"if you're not happy, your children are not going to be happy. And if you're not in [a] frame of mind to help yourself, then they're in trouble because you can't help them"* (Lindsey, 1998, p. 249). Many children would respond to their mother's negative emotional responses by acting out or emulating their mother's despondent behavior. Older children, whose lives were disrupted by leaving school and friends behind, often tended to be angry, stressed, and embarrassed about living in a shelter. One woman's twelve-year-old son was frustrated because there were no children his age at the shelter and he could no longer visit his friends. He began acting out and rebelling against the shelter rules. Another woman reported that her son had attention deficit disorder but was forced to be quiet and still in the shelter because there were no large play areas (Lindsey, 1998).

## Family Routines and Rituals

When unable to perform consistent family routines and rituals, the stress of homelessness can increase for both parents and children. Communal living and a resulting lack of privacy as well as an increase in advice and opinions of others often negatively impacts parenting routines. Importantly, a chaotic family atmosphere lacking routines can lead to behavior problems in children. By continuing family routines and rituals while homeless, parents can maintain a sense of control, identity, and positivity in

relation to their families. Children can benefit from this stable family atmosphere and a sense of predictability and security (Mayberry, et al., 2014).

A study by Mayberry of eighty parents (primarily single mothers) who had recently lived in a homeless shelter found that homeless shelter imposed rules and routines sometimes negatively impacted pre-existing family routines and rituals. For example, one mother described that while living in the shelter, her family was required to wake up at 6:00 A.M., the children were required to stay in the bedrooms from noon to three p.m., and children were not allowed to eat food or snacks outside of the set mealtimes in the cafeteria. Losing the ability to prepare food for their children was a significant blow to many mothers. They also discussed the difficulty of attending mandatory shelter programs, caring for children, and looking for a job while adhering to strict shelter schedules. One woman felt disempowered by the many rules, stating *“it’s hard not being able to live our own life, and establish our own routine, and be free to be a mom, and cook what I want when I want, and do laundry when I want to”* (Mayberry, et al., 2014, p. 101).

While some mothers believe their families benefited from the structure and rules within the shelter, most felt oppressed. In many shelters in Mayberry’s study, there was a constant threat (spoken or unspoken) of involvement with child protective services. This threat was compounded by shelter rules and staff involvement in child discipline. One mother related how staff or other

residents often overrode her parental authority:

*“You know, I used to correct my kids; tell them don’t do that; and then, someone else will get involved, ‘Oh, you’re not supposed to do that to your kids.’ And I felt like my authority was being stepped on. And ever since that I moved out, that I’ve been on my own, is I’ve noticed that my kids are able to respect me more than before”* (Mayberry, et al., 2014, p. 101-102).

In these situations, many parents developed signals with older children that invoked discipline and conveyed that harsher reprimands would be delivered when they were in private (Mayberry, et al., 2014).

In the Mayberry study, the shelters also often had rules that parents should accompany and attend their children at all times. While this rule was created to help ensure the smooth operation of the shelter, many mothers related the difficulties of constantly supervising their children. One parent explained how she could not competently complete her assigned chores because her young son was required to be near her. She struggled with attempting to clean the bathroom while supervising her young child without exposing him to harsh chemicals. This rule created similar problems for one mother with an older daughter:

*“You can’t have them unattended at any time. You have to have your child with you, going to the bathroom, in the shower, going to an appointment, library, anything . . . and you know, she’s 15, so just like I don’t want to go to the*

*bathroom with you and you shouldn't have to go with me"* (Mayberry, et al., 2014, p. 104).

In order to maintain family routines in these situations, parents often gave their older children privacy from other shelter residents and/or other family members and maintained consistency with their children's toys, schools, or after school activities (Mayberry, et al., 2014).

To combat this problem, Mayberry identified that shelter staff members can discuss family routines and rituals with families upon entrance to the shelter. This discussion can lead to better management of existing routines within the shelter's framework. Involving residents in rule and routine setting can help parents as they try to maintain routines and also provide them with a sense of ownership in the shelter (Mayberry, et al., 2014).

## The Challenges Facing Older Homeless Children

Teenagers and older homeless children often face different problems than their parents or younger siblings. Homeless teenagers who run away from home or leave their families often create "street families" consisting of other homeless teenagers and young adults. These homeless teenagers often consider living on the street a safer environment than the dangerous home they left behind. If teenagers have experienced turbulent family times, they may be wary of adult supervision and rigid shelter programs. Accordingly, shelters must be able to accommodate their social, health, educational, and developmental needs (Oliveria & Burke, 2009).

Similarly, older children who live with their families in homeless shelters may feel oppressed or patronized. Shelters with rules that children of all ages must constantly be supervised, curfews, and activity rules can be difficult for older children. Many teenagers are resentful because they have been forced to leave their schools, activities, and friends behind. In turn, shelters may not have many peers their age for homeless teenagers to interact with (Lindsey, 1998; Mayberry, et al., 2014; Pable, 2012).

A 1999 study by Penuel & Davey interviewed seventeen homeless children and teenagers living in homeless shelters to uncover how they identified with the shelter. Identity formation is important to human development and often occurs in relation to places people occupy and value, including homes, neighborhoods, schools, and community areas (Kopeck, 2006; Penuel & Davey, 1999). The participants were asked a series of questions to determine if they thought of the shelter as home. The results varied; however, most youth described home in terms of privacy and possessions, as a safe haven, and in relation to their family and friends (Penuel & Davey, 1999). Shelters can encourage identity formation by allowing children and families to make spaces their own. This can be difficult, given that some shelters have stays limited to days or weeks.

In the Penuel & Davey study, many of the child and teenage participants did not consider themselves homeless because they did not live on the street. Some children described the shelter as home because it was *"a roof over their heads."* Others described the shelter as a



refuge and contrasted it to dangerous or unsatisfactory places they lived previously. Interacting with other children and residents within the shelter created a sense of home for some children. The children and youth who did not see the shelter as home were often embarrassed about living at the shelter and did not tell their friends about it. Others felt isolated from their friends because they were forced to move and change schools after becoming homeless. To these children the shelter was *“just a place I stay”* rather than a home. One girl, Tameeka, was embarrassed to be living in the shelter and said it was not her home because of a lack of privacy and personal possessions. The researchers noted, *“the shelter, for these children, is an important reference point for describing everything they are not or do not want to be, whereas the ideal home they describe contains their hopes and dreams for a different way of living”* (Penuel & Davey, 1999, p. 229).

# FAMILIES' PROJECTS DESIGN CONCERNS

A homeless parent is likely to be especially concerned with finding appropriate safe shelter for their children that is off of the streets and away from abusers or other negative forces in their homes (Bassuk, et al., 2010; Goering, Durbin, Trainor, & Paduchak, 1990; National Center on Family Homelessness, n.d.). Women who are homeless due to domestic violence often leave their children with relatives while residing at a shelter in order to protect them and keep a sense of normalcy in their children's lives (Doorways, 2014; Oths & Robertson, 2007). After entering a shelter, parents often regret disrupting their children's lives and hope to restore a sense of normalcy while living at the shelter. This is often accomplished by continuing family routines and rituals, maintaining consistency in after-school programs, activities, games, and toys (Lindsey, 1998; Mayberry, et al. 2014).

Another primary concern for homeless families is the availability of resources and programs. These resources are numerous and often include stress management, health services, clothing and food needs, childcare services, and family counseling. Parents also can benefit from programs that help them meet their goals of securing permanent housing, educational and job opportunities (Bassuk, et al., 2010; Biel, et al., 2014; National Center on Family Homelessness, n.d.; Shinn, 2009).

# DESIGNING SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS FOR FAMILIES

The situations of persons who are homeless can vary widely, and hence their needs can be diverse as well. Shelters that cater primarily to single people can potentially have negative impacts on homeless families. For example, if shelters require residents to leave during the day, single mothers with pre-school aged children may be required to leave their children at the shelter and are not allowed to return until 5:00 P.M. Similarly, if homeless shelters do not offer day-care services residents will have to take their children to job interviews and other program meetings (Hinton & Cassel, 2013; Lindsey, 1998; Mayberry, et al., 2014). In order to better support families, homeless shelters may benefit from design elements that support safety, privacy, personalization, and minimize excess rules and restrictions.

## Safety and Security

Homeless families' primary concern is finding safe and secure shelter. The homeless shelter can meet these needs by creating a welcoming entrance and employing active and passive security measures, including security cameras, 24/7 staff, and clear wayfinding.

- It is helpful to remember that emergency and transitional shelters must accommodate users that are often new to its environment. The design of the shelter should be easy to navigate for new residents in order to minimize confusion and apprehension. This ease of navigation can be achieved through accent colors, art, and other focal pieces that are specific to various zones of the building (WSCADV & Mahlum, 2012).
- Lockable room doors and secure storage for possessions are vital needs for this population. Many homeless families are extremely protective of their possessions and want to shield them from theft (Goering, et al., 1990; Pable, 2012).

- Offering safe areas for children of various ages to play both indoors and outdoors with clear sightlines for parents is also necessary. An attractive privacy fence around an outdoor play area can shield families from views from the street. Similarly, an indoor play area with a window to main sitting areas or the kitchen can allow parents to supervise their children while cooking or completing various activities. Play spaces can utilize bright colors and various activity zones and furniture layouts to accommodate multiple children at once. The play spaces should also accommodate parents as they interact with their children (Goering, et al., 1990; Rutledge, 2015; WSCADV & Mahlum, 2012).

## Privacy

Multiple studies discuss the hectic, crowded, and stressful nature of many homeless shelters (Goering, et al., 1990; Hinton & Cassel, 2013; Mayberry, et al., 2014; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2011; Pable, 2012). The shelter should offer some privacy for families, both privacy from other residents, and if possible privacy between family members. Older children and teenagers often need more privacy and space within the shelter environment. Educational and recreational opportunities held in various private areas of the shelter should also be available for both young children and teenagers (Hinton & Cassel, 2013; Mayberry, et al., 2014; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2011; Pable, 2012; Penuel & Davey, 1999). The design of a shelter has the potential to provide privacy and combat some of the difficulties associated with communal living.

- Designing multiple quiet areas within the shelter

can allow residents and families to remove themselves from the larger group and meditate, spend time together, or work on homework. These areas can either be labeled as quiet areas by the staff or the design can encourage quiet and reflection. Designing with calming colors, soft furniture, and acoustical solutions to combat outside noise can create a quiet, comforting atmosphere. Small alcoves within community areas created by architectural features, furniture, or curtains can encourage children to play outside of the main pathways. Creating a private room for visitors can also be helpful for residents who have family, significant others, or friends visiting them while staying at the shelter (Grieder & Chanmugam, 2013; Rutledge, 2015; WSCADV & Mahlum, 2012).

- Providing private rooms or apartments for families can greatly reduce the stress of communal living. Private rooms encourage families to continue their routines and establish a sense of normalcy within the shelter. If possible, creating a small sitting area within the space or providing opportunities to curtain off a portion of the room or bunk-beds can provide much needed privacy for children and parents. This small bit of privacy can be extremely beneficial for family members completing homework, searching for jobs, reading, or engaging in other solitary activities (Goering, et al., 1990; Mayberry, et al., 2014; Pable, 2012; WSCADV & Mahlum, 2012).

- Offering private areas for teenagers and older children can be highly beneficial. Older children can find shelter rules oppressive that require them to be accompanied by an adult at all times. A space specifically

for this population could include comfortable furniture, television, and computers with monitored internet access. This space can also be divided into a socializing area and a quiet area for homework and solitary activities (WSCADV & Mahlum, 2012).

## Personalization

When possible, the shelter design and programs should encourage personalization. Personalizing a space can facilitate empowerment, encourage residents to form an attachment to the place and positively shape their identity within the shelter (Kopec, 2006; WSCADV & Mahlum, 2012). While personalization is difficult for shelters that have short stays, more opportunities exist for longer terms.

- The design of bedrooms can include nooks, bookshelves, tack boards, white boards, empty frames for artwork, and various display spaces to encourage residents to display possessions, drawings, and photographs. These small touches of home can restore a sense of normalcy for families (Grieder & Chanmugam, 2013; Pable, 2012; Rutledge, 2015; WSCADV & Mahlum, 2012).
- When possible, the shelter programs can also encourage personalization by helping residents set individual goals and including residents in planning activities and programs for the shelter. Individualized educational and recreational programs for various age groups can also be beneficial to children and teenagers.

## Minimizing Rules and Restrictions

Offering dedicated spaces for various activities such as meditation, craft, cooking classes, homework, and play can create structure within the shelter. In this way, programs can be more empowering, encourage a strong sense of community, and allow residents to feel more in control of their shelter stay (Goering, et al., 1990; Hinton & Cassel, 2013; Kasturirangan, 2008).

An overabundance of rules and restrictions can create a stressful and disempowering environment for homeless families. In order to ensure the smooth operation of the shelter, often well-meaning staff members create rules for childcare, parenting, and discipline. These rules may include

- children must stay with parents at all times;
- no snacks outside of the cafeteria;
- set mealtimes and bedtimes; and,
- rules about how to discipline children (Lindsey, 1998; Mayberry, et al., 2014).

At times these rules can serve to reduce a desired sense of empowerment and self-esteem in residents, and undermine parents' authority. In some cases, the design of the homeless shelter environment can help to minimize rules and restrictions (Rutledge, 2015; WSCADV & Mahlum, 2012).

- Designing for multiple users and children can help to reduce shelter rules and restrictions. For example,

separating noisy, communal areas from quiet, private areas through space-planning or acoustical techniques can remove the need for quiet hours and noise rules. Similarly, designing for multiple users in the kitchen and bathroom areas can increase a sense of dignity while creating a more functional space. Offering multiples of each appliance, ample kitchen space, abundant lockable storage, and a space for children to play with clear sightlines to parents preparing food can also reduce conflicts during mealtimes (Grieder & Chanmugam, 2013; Rutledge, 2015; WSCADV & Mahlum, 2012).

- Including flexible furniture that can be rearranged in communal spaces allows residents to control their space and reconfigure it to meet their needs. This can allow spaces to perform various functions and avoid rules about usage of spaces (Rutledge, 2015; WSCADV & Mahlum, 2012).

- As identified previously, designing play areas and quiet areas for children and teenagers can help to remove excess childcare rules. Accommodating children in the design of communal areas (particularly living areas and kitchens) through play areas, nooks, and child-accessible furniture can allow the spaces to be used by multiple families at once. This accommodation encourages community amongst families by allowing children to play together and parents to talk while supervising children (Rutledge, 2015; WSCADV & Mahlum, 2012).

# CONCLUSION

Homeless shelters often can be stressful and disorienting for families. Designing a shelter to accommodate the needs of multiple users and to support programs for children and parents can create an environment that supports community and preserves resident empowerment in the face of crisis. Homeless shelters can assist families by providing childcare, educational and recreational programs, health and counseling services, and resources for finding permanent housing and jobs. While architectural design is not the sole solution for family assistance, the design of the shelter can support these services by creating a safe environment, accommodating privacy needs, encouraging personalization in the physical space and shelter programs, and minimizing rules and restrictions.

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# FURTHER READING

The National Center on Family Homelessness: [www.familyhomelessness.org](http://www.familyhomelessness.org)

Homelessness Resource Center: <http://homeless.samhsa.gov/Default.aspx>

National Alliance to End Homelessness: [http://www.endhomelessness.org/pages/families\\_overview](http://www.endhomelessness.org/pages/families_overview)

The Homeless Hub: <http://homelesshub.ca>

United States Interagency Council on Homelessness: <https://usich.gov>

National Coalition for the Homeless: <http://nationalhomeless.org/issues/families/>

Conrad N. Hilton Foundation: <https://www.hiltonfoundation.org/priorities/homelessness>

Washington Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Mahlum Architecture Building Dignity Website: <http://buildingdignity.wscadv.org>

Zero to Three: National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families (homeless resources): <http://www.zerotothree.org>

# AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Katrina Rutledge is currently an interior designer at studioSIX5, an interior design firm specializing in senior living design in Austin, Texas. She received a Bachelor of Science from the University of Southern Mississippi and a Master of Fine Arts from Florida State University. Her undergraduate thesis entitled “The Influence of Residence Hall Design on College Students’ Grade Point Averages, On-Campus Involvement, and Sense of Community” concluded that transitional style resident halls offered the most privacy while suite-style residence halls fostered a stronger sense of community among students. Her Master of Fine Arts thesis completed at Florida State University was entitled “Rules, Restrictions and Resident Empowerment in Domestic Violence Shelter Design: An Exploration and Response.” This original research revealed that empowering domestic violence shelter design can support residents by offering quiet areas, chances for personalization in bedrooms, and

spaces that encourage goal-setting and decision-making. Designing structured spaces for various activities and accommodating multiple users can also help to minimize excess shelter rules and restrictions. Katrina’s proposal was accepted to give a presentation on her graduate research at the Interior Design Educators Council (IDEC) 2015 south regional conference. She also presented a poster of her research at the IDEC 2014 south regional conference in Tallahassee, Florida.

During her studies at Florida State University, Katrina served as a graduate teaching assistant for Studio I, CAD I, and Survey of Interior Design. She is an active member of the International Interior Design Association (IIDA), American Society of Interior Designers (ASID), and the Network of Executive Women in Hospitality (NEWH). She believes in design’s ability to improve people’s lives and hopes to engage in humanitarian design projects throughout her career.



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## Design Resources for Homelessness, Inc.

**A non-profit initiative dedicated to the positive potential of the built environment for healing and recovery.**

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