

Family Reunification Services for African American Homeless Mothers with Histories of Substance Abuse Problems

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Synopsis:

According to the National Center on Substance Abuse and Child Welfare, 8.3 million children were living with a substance-abusing parent. Of these, 3 million were reported for child abuse or neglect, and as a result, 300,000 were placed in foster care. But why study the issue of child neglect among homeless women? Women with children comprise about 15% of the homeless population at any given time, and are the largest growing subgroup within the homeless population; yet, more than 70% of homeless women are not living with their minor-aged children. One reason for this discrepancy is the disproportionate number of homeless women whose children were removed and placed into foster care due to substance abuse problems. In fact, the link among substance abuse, foster care and homelessness has been found in two other areas: many homeless women with substance abuse problems have childhood histories of being in foster care (usually the result of child neglect or abuse); and many foster care children, as they turn 18 years old, "age out" into homelessness and develop or have substance abuse problems. Despite these findings, funds are not targeting this homeless subgroup. Clinicians targeting homeless women provide crisis intervention, and their work focuses on the woman or child, but rarely both. They are not encouraged to ascertain if the women have children living elsewhere. No available clinical practice guidelines, tailored to homeless women, provide recommendations for individual- and/or family-focused preventive interventions to decrease future negative adulthood experiences, promote family preservation and reunification or reduce the risk of child neglect.

Specific Aims: The proposed study will: (1) assess and compare the prevalence rates and patterns of morbidity (i.e., drug abuse, alcohol abuse and mental illness) and experiences (i.e., adulthood and childhood) for each of the three homeless women subgroups (i.e., those living with their minor-aged children, those with minor-aged children living elsewhere and those who never had children); and (2) examine the influence of substance abuse problems (and other comorbidities) and experiences on service utilization. In addition, comparisons will be made among the three homeless women subgroups and assess the impact of the three domains on the risk of child neglect for women with children. **Methods.** The proposed project will use the only existing, nationally representative sample of homeless adults. This publicly available cross-sectional data set is called the National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients (NSHAPC) and was collected by Dr. Martha Burt. The NSHAPC, funded by twelve federal agencies, includes face-to-face interviews of 831 homeless women (i.e., 405 who are living with at least one minor-aged child; 214 who are not; and 212 who never had children). The interviews elicited a total of 3919 variables including: current living condition; demographics; children and education; food intake; employment; sources of income and service use; current physical health; mental health; chemical dependency; service needs; interviewer observations and many standardized instruments such as the Addiction Severity Index. The proposed study will use a variety of univariate, bivariate and multivariate statistical techniques. Regression models (both linear and logistic depending on dependent variable distribution) will be used to examine the relationship of morbidity, adulthood experiences (e.g., patterns of homelessness) on service use after controlling for confounds such as race/ethnicity. Discriminant and factor analysis will be used to determine which services are most likely to be used by different women subgroups and by severity of substance abuse. For women living with their minor-aged children, structural equation modeling will be used to measure the influence of substance abuse problems, experiences, and services on the risk of child neglect.