



Visible Child Initiative Homeless Adolescent Parent Project: Focus Group Summary

Background

In Wilder Research's 2012 Statewide Homeless Study, there were 334 homeless young adults (up to age 21) who were parents, which accounted for approximately 28 percent of all homeless young adults. In addition, 21 percent of homeless young adults were homeless with their children. Most children of homeless youth are very young. More than three-quarters of the children (76%) are under age 3. For youth who have children with them, 13 percent said their children have emotional or behavioral problems, and 9 percent said their children have chronic or severe physical problems. At the same time, 7 percent each said they have been unable to obtain needed health care or dental care for their children. Thirteen percent said their children have had to skip meals due to a lack of money to buy food. Just under half of parents (46%) said they have been unable to obtain child care when they have needed it. This is a population that is often unable to access resources because they are often too young for services intended for homeless families and they are ineligible for services for homeless youth because they have their own children.

In September 2015, Visible Child Initiative staff conducted focus groups with 14 homeless adolescent parents in two sites, one long-term shelter and one drop-in center. The purpose of these groups was to learn more about the experiences of young parents without a permanent place to live. The focus groups aimed to gather information about how these young parents define homelessness, their barriers to getting and keeping housing and other support services, and their goals for the future. In addition to the focus groups, participants also completed a brief survey to gather more explicit information about their histories of homelessness. All participants were recruited through organizations that provide support to young adults. Participants were given child care and a meal during the group, and an incentive after the group.

Participants

Participants included 13 mothers and 1 father. Participants were approximately age 15 through 22, and all participants were under age 25. Some participants were currently homeless while others were formerly homeless, though none of those who were housed were currently living in subsidized housing, only market rate housing.

At the time of the focus groups, three participants were pregnant. In addition, nine had one child and three had two children. The children ranged in age from three months to five years, with an average age of two years.

Over one-third of the participants (38%) experienced homelessness with their parents before experiencing it on their own. Their age the first time they were homeless with or without their parents ranged from 1 to 19 years, with an average age of 14 years. Their age the first time they were homeless without their parents ranged from 14 to 19, with an average age of 17 years.

During their most recent experience of homelessness, nearly half (46%) have been homeless for less than one year and nearly half (46%) have been homeless for between 1 and 3 years (Figure 1). Based on their duration of homelessness and the ages of their children, most parents (77%) had at least one child before their most recent experience with homelessness and over half (54%) have had or will have a child while homeless.

1. Participant length of most recent experience of homelessness (N=13)

Length of homelessness	Percent reporting
Less than 1 month	0%
At least 1 month to less than 4 months	23%
At least 4 months but less than 7 months	15%
At least 7 months but less than 12 months	8%
At least 1 year but less than 3 years	46%
At least 3 years but less than 5 years	0%
5 years or longer	8%

Definition of homelessness

Participants defined homelessness as having nowhere to go or stay. Respondents mentioned that it can include sleeping outside, sleeping in parks, staying with friends, staying in a shelter, or spending time riding public transportation. One respondent mentioned harassment by police for being homeless and another mentioned a general feeling of being “unwanted.”

Impacts of homelessness

Respondents identified a few key ways in which homelessness has affected them as young parents, including:

- **Emotional health.** Most young parents described the effects of homelessness on their mental health, including feeling stressed, anxious, or depressed. Some respondents shared that they wanted to protect their children from these stressors or feelings, so they try not to show when they are upset. One mother reported that she makes sure her child does not see when she cries.
- **Lack of structure and stability.** Many respondents described issues resulting from a lack of structure and stability associated with homelessness and moving around a lot. This includes general stress about not knowing what is going to happen.
- **Lack of supervision.** Several respondents mentioned that being homeless meant that they had no supervision and no one was invested in what happened to them. In some cases, respondents shared that this lack of supervision contributed to them getting pregnant while they were homeless. A couple of respondents also commented that their parents' struggles contributed to their homelessness and stress.
- **Education challenges.** The general lack of structure and stability, as well as difficulty accessing reliable, affordable child care makes it difficult for many respondents to attend school. However, respondents tended to be resourceful and motivated to stay in school by bringing their child to school and completing work outside of traditional classrooms. Some reported that school provided a sense of stability and routine they would not have had otherwise.
- **Judgement from others.** A few respondents shared experiences in which they felt other people judging them or making assumptions about them as homeless young parents. This includes people assuming they have a mental illness, they are unfit parents, or they are not working hard enough to avoid homelessness.
- **Experiences with Child Protection.** A couple of respondents said that Child Protection has been involved with their family from the time their child was born because they are young homeless parents. This adds an additional level of stress for parents.

In addition, some respondents shared ways in which being homeless is directly affecting their children, including:

- **Increased stress.** In addition to feeling their own stress, many respondents also felt that their children were stressed from experiencing so much change and continuously living in unfamiliar environments.

- **Greater expectations of children.** A couple of respondents shared that they tend to expect their children to act older or take on more responsibility than they should developmentally. In some cases, the parents rely on their children to help out.
- **No impact.** Some respondents did not feel that being homeless affected their children.

Barriers to accessing services

Focus group participants discussed many barriers to accessing stable housing, especially:

- Young age, particularly if not emancipated, which is a difficult process in Minnesota
- Difficulty getting and keeping a job
- Difficulty balancing expenses for housing and other needs
- The need to settle for substandard or unsafe housing because of cost
- Criminal background
- Lack of rental history

In addition, respondents discussed barriers to accessing other helpful services, including:

- **Childcare.** Most participants described difficulty accessing child care. Child care can be expensive, there are limitations to the amount they can access, and respondents described the difficult cycle of needing a job to access child care, but needing child care to get a job. Many respondents also commented that child care subsidies tend to have a long wait list. A lack of child care also prevents some young parents from achieving their educational goals, such as graduating high school. A couple of respondents shared that they have had to send their children out of state to be taken care of by extended family because they could not access child care in Minnesota.
- **Employment.** Most respondents also described difficulties securing employment, especially safe employment that pays a livable wage. Many respondents mentioned the need to settle for unsafe or undesirable employment situations, such as jobs they hate, low paying jobs, or jobs in the sex trade (e.g., stripping or prostitution), in order to pay bills. Several people also discussed the difficulty keeping employment due to the lack of housing stability and the need to balance program requirements, school, work, parenting, and finding shelter or food each day.
- **Safe shelter.** Many young parents described difficulty accessing safe shelter. Many shelters are unclean or unsafe, and shelters tend to charge fees to stay in them. Respondents did not feel that the fees were justified given the conditions of the shelters. They also discussed difficulty finding shelters that accept adolescent pregnant women or families. It should be noted that respondents were from different counties

that have different policies with regard to shelters. Hennepin County guarantees access to shelters for homeless individuals while Ramsey County does not. In Hennepin County, the challenges pertained more to the quality and safety of the shelters, while in Ramsey County, the concerns also included a lack of access to shelter space.

- **Medical care.** Some respondents commented that it can be challenging access reliable health care, particularly after they turn 18 and the eligibility requirements for care change.
- **General support services.** Several respondents described barriers to accessing support services in general. One significant barrier is program restrictions, including conflicting requirements between programs, such as attendance requirements, curfews, or costs that are not compatible across programs. Some programs also contact youth's parents, which can be prohibitive for youth. In addition, respondents noted many challenging steps to take to access the services.

Suggestions for support

Focus group participants were asked to share their suggestions for program improvement and their wishes for ideal support services. The following themes emerged:

- **Affordable child care.** Most respondents agreed that affordable, or even free, child care would be a significant resource that would help them achieve stability in other areas of their lives. A couple of respondents shared that even on a sliding scale, if parents work, they also have to pay more for child care, which erodes some of the benefit of their employment.
- **Support engaging fathers.** Many participants shared that they would like their children's fathers to be more involved in their lives, and they would like support to help facilitate that. In some cases, this would include making it easier for both parents to access support services together, in other cases, it could include education for fathers to motivate them and teach them how to be involved with their children. Some respondents would like help accessing child support from their children's fathers.
- **Free, sanitary shelters.** Several respondents would like to see safe, clean temporary shelters that are free to use, as many shelters charge a fee. These fees make it difficult to save money for a rent deposit or to buy basic necessities, such as diapers. If shelters do charge a fee, then the respondents at least want to be able to see how the money is being used to make the space more comfortable or sanitary.
- **Transportation.** Most participants would like access to more reliable transportation. Some respondents shared that programs often impose a limit on bus tokens, and there are some places that are very difficult to reach by public transportation, especially in

bad weather. Transportation can be particularly challenging when respondents need to get to different locations throughout the day to fulfill different program requirements.

- **More welcoming programs.** Respondents would like programs in general to be more welcoming, less judgmental, and easier to access. They would like programs to have fewer restrictions, clearer requirements, shorter wait lists, and more centralized coordination or integration of services.
- **Basic needs supports.** Several respondents need additional support accessing basic needs, such as food and formula, clothing, and diapers.
- **Affordable education.** A couple of respondents would like access to free post-secondary education.

While no respondents specifically commented on the need for affordable housing, several commented on the need to “hustle” to be able to pay for housing. In addition, those who were housed spent an estimated 70 percent of their income on housing, which inherently affects their ability to afford other expenses, including those mentioned above.

Goals for the future

Finally, focus group participants were asked where they would like their lives to be three years in the future. Common responses included:

- Securing stable housing
- Completing their high school or college education
- Watching their child achieve developmental milestones
- Finding a romantic partner
- Moving out of Minnesota
- Experiencing less stress, struggle, or fear
- Establishing a career (e.g., National Guard, criminal justice, or opening a shelter)

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For more information

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NOVEMBER 2015