

Chapter 5

Access to Early Childhood Services for Young Children Experiencing Homelessness

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Introduction

Developmental science underscores the importance of the first years of life. During these years, young children develop the foundational cognitive, social–emotional, and gross/fine motor competencies that they will need to successfully negotiate developmental challenges across the life span (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000). These early years are also marked by increased vulnerability to traumatic events, including homelessness. Recent national estimates indicate that over 350,000 children and youth were served by emergency and transitional housing providers in 2012, and nearly 60% of these children were age five or younger (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2013a). Furthermore, children are at greatest risk of entering the shelter system during the first year of life (Perlman & Fantuzzo, 2010).

Author Note: Data referenced in this chapter are based on two separate studies conducted by: (a) the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth and (b) The Cloudburst Group, under a contract with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Office of Policy Development and Research (Grant#H-21616RG).

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Research indicates that children born into homelessness are at risk for a number of adverse perinatal outcomes. Children are more likely to be born prematurely and at very low birth weight (Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, Brumley, & Perlman, 2013; Little et al., 2005; Merrill, Richards, & Sloane, 2011; Richards, Merrill, & Baksh, 2011). Additionally, children born into homelessness are at increased risk for a stay in Neonatal Intensive Care Units (Richards et al., 2011). Furthermore, they are less likely to have well-baby visits and to be breastfed by their mothers (Little et al., 2005; Richards et al., 2011). These experiences have important implications for future development and may ultimately hinder healthy development.

Very young children are disproportionately more likely to spend some of the most developmentally important years of their lives without stable housing. Research demonstrates that the timing of homelessness during critical periods of development is important. To illustrate, in a study of over 10,000 third graders, children who experienced their first episode of homelessness during toddlerhood had a 60% increase in the odds of not meeting proficiency standards in math compared to children with homelessness experiences later in life (Fantuzzo et al., 2013). Experiencing homelessness in the first years of life also has been linked to poor health outcomes and developmental delay (Fantuzzo et al., 2013; Haber & Toro, 2004). Moreover, for school-aged children, experiences of homelessness have been associated with increased school problems, including poor academic achievement and high rates of behavior problems (Gewirtz, Hart-Shegos, & Medhanie, 2008; Perlman & Fantuzzo, 2010).

Prior research demonstrates that engagement in high-quality early childhood services can serve as a protective factor against these early risks (Puma et al., 2010). However, little is known about what factors facilitate/impede access to these services for young children experiencing homelessness. In that context, these two companion studies were designed to address several overlapping research questions: (1) Are providers and parents aware of early education services for young children experiencing homelessness and do parents receive support to access these services? (2) What factors impede access to early childhood services among young children experiencing homelessness? (3) What factors facilitate access to early childhood services? (4) In what ways does cross-systems collaboration facilitate homeless family participation in early childhood services? (5) What can be identified as promising practices among communities for facilitating access to early childhood services for families experiencing homelessness?

This chapter is based on data generated through an integrated mixed methods transformative design which included collecting and analyzing two independent strands of qualitative and quantitative data, and then seeking convergence, or relationships, between the two data sets (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The purpose of a transformative design is to conduct research related to issues of social justice in order to enact change (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The purpose of this merged analysis between the NAEHCY survey of homeless services and early childhood providers and The Cloudburst Group's (Cloudburst) HUD-funded qualitative study of homeless parents was to develop an understanding of key barriers and facilitators to accessing early childhood services (including child care,

Head Start, pre-K, and early intervention) for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers experiencing homelessness. The studies addressed these issues from the perspectives of (a) parents experiencing homelessness and (b) community-based services providers who were engaged with this population. In this design, both qualitative and quantitative data are analyzed concurrently and also independently. Select findings from each study have been reported previously (Perlman, 2014; Taylor, Gibson, & Hurd, 2015) but the data sets have not been explored through an integrated mixed methods transformative design.

Method

Participants and Procedures

NAEHCY is an organization originally established to support state and local school district liaisons under the McKinney–Vento Act (42 USC 11431 et seq) that has since grown to include among its membership personnel in Head Start programs, other early care and education programs, homelessness and housing services, and those in related roles within education and social services. In response to growing attention regarding the early education of young children experiencing homelessness, NAEHCY initiated a national survey designed to understand the challenges providers faced in accessing services for young children and to document promising practices those providers were implementing to address the challenges.

The survey was disseminated using Survey Monkey technology and the cumulative national listservs for NAEHCY and other national organizations. It was circulated several times over approximately 4 months between April and August 2013. The survey was completed by a convenience sample; unfortunately, it is not possible to estimate a response rate because the total number of people who were sent and received the e-mail invitation to complete the survey is not known. Responses were received from 970 providers who were asked to identify themselves by their role as a provider of services to children experiencing homelessness. Forty-six percent of the respondents were McKinney–Vento Homeless Education Liaisons, 27% were Early Head Start/Head Start professionals, 12% were child care providers, 11% were homeless housing providers, and the remaining respondents were from Local Education Agency preschool programs (LEAs).

At the same time as the NAEHCY survey was conducted, The Cloudburst Group—in a qualitative small research project sponsored by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Office of Policy Development and Research (Grant #H-21616RG)—collected data on parental perspectives among recently homeless families about opportunities and barriers encountered regarding enrollment of their children into preschool, with a special focus on the relation between these decisions and processes and the families’ experiences of homelessness.

The Cloudburst study drew on interviews with parents from 28 households in two varied geographic areas: Atlanta, Georgia and the Bridgeport/New Haven

region of Connecticut. Interviews were conducted primarily between February and November of 2013. All study households were previously enrolled in the *Family Options Study*, a randomized control study funded and recently published by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). This larger study included 2307 homeless families across four housing/service interventions in 12 research sites across the United States (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2013b). Cloudburst's qualitative study was designed as a smaller companion investigation tied to the broader national project, focused on increasing knowledge of how families who had experienced homelessness made decisions about preschool enrollment and participation. As national study enrollees were not immediately accessible to the research team due to privacy protections, the national study research team recruited voluntary participants. Only families with children under 6 years of age at the time of their enrollment in the *Family Options Study* were recruited to participate. Multiple invitations to participate in initial focus groups were mailed to several hundred eligible households in the two targeted geographic areas.

As a means of identifying basic demographic data descriptive of study participants, the research team relied on baseline data gathered by the national *Family Options Study* for each participant. Of the 28 heads of household/primary caretakers who participated in this study, 14 were interviewed in Connecticut and 14 were interviewed in Atlanta, Georgia. The average age of study participants was 31, ranging from 21 to 53 years old. Only one participant was married, 19 were never married, and seven were separated or divorced. Twenty-two participants were African-American, two were Caucasian, three were American Indian, and one was an unrecorded race. Fourteen participants had not completed high school, five had earned a high school or GED degree, eight had completed some college or earned an Associate's Degree or Technical Certificate, and one participant had a bachelor's degree.

Measures

Quantitative: Survey of early childhood and homeless services providers. In the quantitative study, conducted by Perlman (2014), providers of early education services for children aged birth to 5 years were targeted to complete a 53-item survey. Survey questions related to barriers to homeless families with young children accessing early childhood and homeless services; successful strategies for addressing those barriers; and collaboration among early childhood and homeless programs in addressing these issues. The survey asked providers to report their level of knowledge of various laws and early childhood programs, including the education provisions of the McKinney–Vento Homeless Assistance Act, preschool programs administered by local school districts, Early Head Start/Head Start, Early

Table 5.1 Provider ratings of familiarity with programs and laws

Program/law	Not at all familiar (%)	Somewhat familiar (%)	Very familiar (%)	<i>N</i>
Education provisions of McKinney–Vento Homeless Assistance Act	10.8	23.6	65.6	880
Preschool programs administered by a school district	6.9	31	62.1	870
Head Start/Early Head Start	5.6	34.5	59.9	877
Special Education Preschool (IDEA Part B)	10.3	37.2	52.5	871
Early Interventions (IDEA Part C)	10.4	41.6	48	864
Child care	8.7	43.5	47.9	865
Other early childhood programs	13.3	52.8	34	851

Intervention (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Part C), Preschool Special Education (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Part B), and other early childhood programs and services (see Table 5.1). Respondents rated their involvement with each program on a four-point scale. These ratings ranged from “no working relationship” to “collaboration” where respondents identified clear working relationships and shared resources with other partners (Perlman, 2014). The survey also explored providers’ perspectives in assisting families experiencing homelessness and accessing related programs and services; identifying barriers to services enrollment; and examining strategies they had used to overcome those barriers. Other issues explored were provider involvement with various community programs and services; topics on which providers would like more information, and examples of effective programs and ideas for community-level strategies for better serving homeless families.

Qualitative: Interviews with parents experiencing homelessness. In the qualitative study conducted by Taylor et al. (2015), parents who had experienced homelessness were invited to take part in initial focus group dialogues and/or semi-structured individual interviews to prompt the reflections of participants on barriers to accessing early childhood services and experiences in identifying, pursuing, and participating in preschool settings for their 3–5-year-old children. Questions also explored the role that homeless program staff and early childhood service providers played in supporting families in pursuing preschool options. All interviews and focus groups were held two and three years after the participants’ initial periods of homelessness. After the initial round of focus groups and introductory interviews was completed and preliminary data analysis had been conducted, the research team invited all participants from both sites to participate in one-on-one semi-structured follow-up interviews. Sixteen heads of households participated in these follow-up sessions. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for later coding.

Data Analytic Approach

Quantitative survey data were analyzed primarily using a series of frequency analyses to summarize the survey responses. To analyze the qualitative interview data, the Cloudburst team applied a modified grounded theory approach (Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000). One of the coauthors of this chapter (CHK) was a Coprincipal Investigator for that study and contributed to that analysis as one of several coders. The research team carefully and independently read and reread transcripts to identify themes and subthemes emerging from the interviews, then aggregated and synthesized data from all transcribed files. After developing an analytical schema, the team completed detailed coding of transcripts from initial and follow-up interviews, extracting passages from transcripts illustrating emergent core themes. All data relevant to each theme and subtheme were identified and examined in comparison with all other related data reflected in other themes and subthemes. The coding process was iterative; that is, the research team reviewed and revised each categorization level multiple times, reflecting on nuances found in the data and then altering the articulation of themes as a consequence of this dynamic analysis. This protocol was used as a means to identify overarching categories and specific themes and subthemes that comprised the final coding structure for data analysis. This protocol also served as a mechanism for ensuring cross-rater neutrality and integrity.

For the present study, these two data sets were integrated in a mixed methods analysis of barriers and facilitators to accessing early childhood services for families experiencing homelessness. The integration of the data provides a richer and clearer understanding of the barriers to accessing early childhood services than would be possible using only one of the two data sources. Furthermore, the merging of these data sets provides a unique contribution to the understanding of access to early childhood services for children experiencing homelessness. Data were merged by comparing results from both studies and identifying themes in the findings. These data were integrated for the purpose of developing well-informed policy implications and recommendations to increase access to early childhood services (see Fig. 5.1).

Results

Systemic Barriers to Accessing Early Education Programs

Transportation. Both providers and parents suggested a number of barriers to accessing early education programming for children experiencing homelessness. Of all the barriers to accessing early education, the largest proportion of providers 29% (N=281) rated finding transportation as the strategy they were least successful in helping parents overcome (see Table 5.2). In fact, 27% (N= 262) of respondents

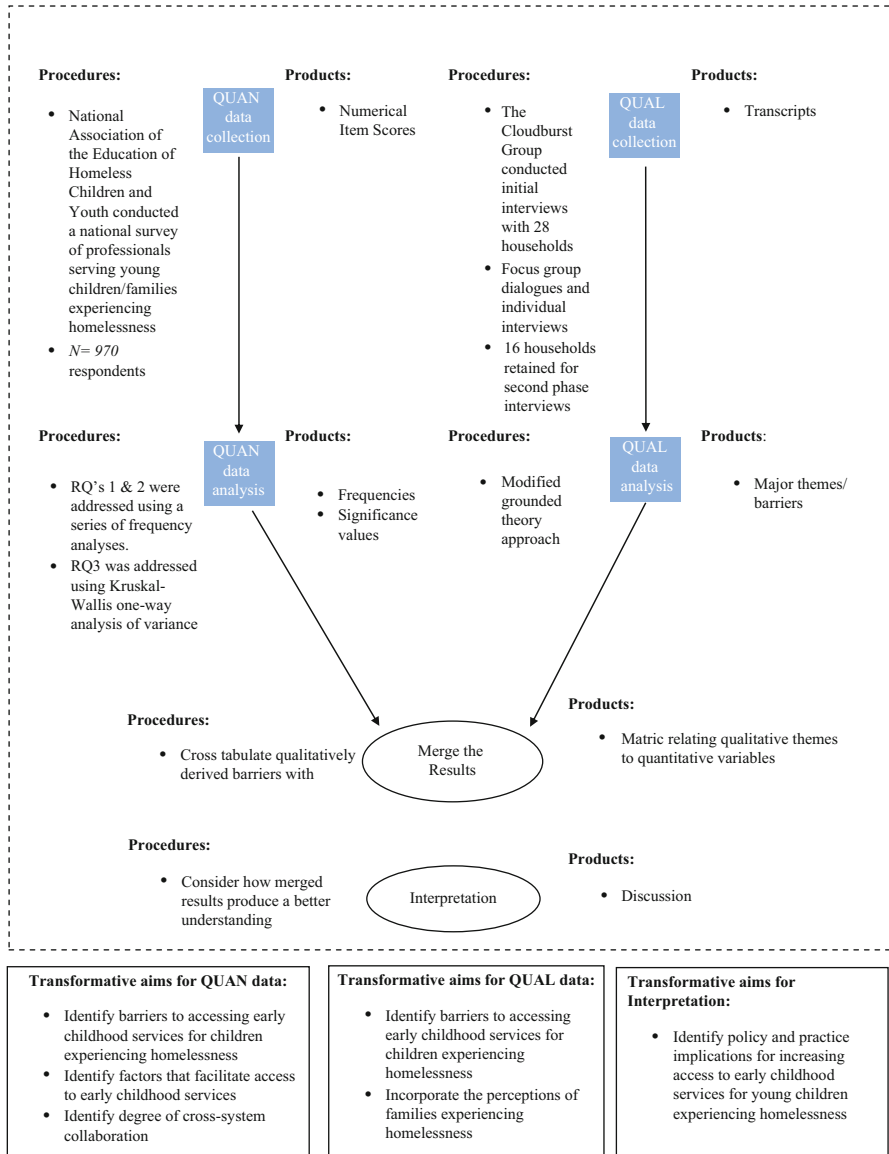


Fig. 5.1 A visualization of the mixed methods transformative design

endorsed this as a significant barrier. Several providers further qualified the transportation challenges facing parents, as follows: “Preschool is not covered under transportation by the McKinney-Vento Act. If there is an older child in the district that they can bus, then the preschool child can bus. However, if it is only a preschool child they will not transport.” Providers also indicated that this is an

Table 5.2 Provider ratings of success for strategies to connect families to EC programs

Strategy	Not successful (%)	Somewhat successful (%)	Very successful (%)	N
Help families complete paperwork	0.6	37.2	62.2	545
Help families obtain documentation and records	3.2	52.5	44.3	537
Develop relationships with EC programs	3.6	38.4	58	584
Develop relationships with homeless providers	4	39.2	56.8	553
Develop relationships with McKinney–Vento Liaisons	5.3	34.3	60.4	487
Conduct professional development training for EC programs	9.2	49.3	41.5	402
Conduct professional development training for housing providers	13.9	46.1	40	330
Dedicate staff person for early childhood issues	5.2	31.2	63.6	461
Have a key contact in various programs	5.1	39.8	55.1	548
Develop procedures to identify homeless children and families	6.4	40	53.6	500
Identify alternative transportation	29.1	41.4	29.5	478

even more pronounced burden in largely rural areas, where access to transportation is already limited.

Parents also self-reported multiple concerns regarding transportation barriers to access for early childhood education. Just over half of the parents in the Cloudburst study stated that they utilized public transportation or walked to the school. Other parents reported having their own means for transportation or relying on family and friends. Notably, only one parent received transportation services from the school itself. Further concerns with transportation were reflected in parents' desire to be closer to their child. This is reflected in a comment from a mother discussing concerns about her son's preschool location. *“So, you can't pay for transportation and you need somewhere you can walk to. These are things you gotta think (about). I gotta get my son somewhere if he gets hurt, I can get up there” (Madison, age 41).*

Finances. Another important consideration for parents was cost. *“I...wanted Head Start because in order to get...a child care option, you have to pay (for) that childcare option and I could not afford (that)” (Camara, age 35).* Many of the parents were looking for free or inexpensive programs that also held extended hours to accommodate the parents' schedules. These types of programs were very difficult to find. Providers also frequently commented on financial concerns as a barrier to accessing preschool programs. As one provider described: *“While McKinney-Vento states that young children should have access to preschool programs, there is not enough funding to provide this service. There are waiting lists for Head Start and Title I preschools. The children may still need to wait although they should be able*

to be immediately enrolled. Preschool services should be available to ALL children."

In fact, 25% ($N = 243$) of providers endorsed lack of available and affordable slots as a barrier for families in accessing early childhood services. Parents also reflected on this issue, *"They keep you on the waiting list up until they do the lottery over, and then once (they) do it over, even if you're like number two and you didn't get in, you have to reapply all over"* (Tiffany, age 23). Or, as another parent gave voice: *"I've been trying to get my 3-year-old into preschool but the wait list is crazy [long]"* and *"I looked for a preschool closer and... unfortunately it was too late by the time we were looking...most of the [programs] were already full...they just told me that I have to put – they have to put my child down on a waitlist."* Additionally, when open slots do become available, parents reported that is difficult to find out about them. Furthermore, parents said that when they do find information about programs, it is often too late, or at the wrong time of the year, to enroll their child.

Mobility and communication. Issues associated with mobility also included reference to concerns regarding communication between providers and parents. Providers suggested that it is difficult to locate homeless families, due to a lack of awareness; this concern was endorsed by 17% ($N = 165$) of providers. Providers also reported that it was difficult to maintain contact with families due to parents' lack of phones. The difficulty finding families is more pronounced in rural locations, as illustrated by this provider's comment, *"... There is also a lack of ability to disseminate information regarding programs to families who are isolated geographically."*

Other concerns linked to mobility were voiced directly by parents who had experienced homelessness, including concerns about multiple moves resulting in multiple changes to a child's preschool placement. Several parents provided examples of having to pull their children out of a preschool placement in response to an upcoming move. Only infrequently did a homeless parent seek to find housing near her child's program in order to maintain continuity in the child's education. *"I found out about the school before I found out about the house... wherever they started that's where I wanted to keep him. So I wanted to keep him in that school... I wanted to live in an area that's very close [to that school] and where I didn't have to drive a long ways"* (Khloe, age 40).

In this same vein, families reported challenges with schools not answering their calls or only providing outdated information to families. *"Basically either the information was outdated, or it wasn't for a particular area, or you didn't meet a qualification for this or that. Everything was a runaround"* (Erica, age 45).

Competing demands. Finally, providers as well as parents reported that the experience of homelessness left families with a number of competing demands, limiting their ability to focus on accessing early childhood services. Some of these demands include the challenge of addressing basic needs such as accessing housing, food, and employment to support their families. As one provider stated, families experiencing homelessness often have, *"very chaotic, 'putting out fires' lives and don't often prioritize their child's education when they're concerned about housing, feeding and clothing, and finding a job."* Parents also substantiated this statement,

Table 5.3 Barriers to accessing early childhood education services

Barriers	NAEHCY findings	Cloudburst findings
Transportation	27% (N = 262)	<i>“So, you can’t pay for transportation and you need somewhere you can walk to. These are things you gotta think (about). I gotta get my son somewhere if he gets hurt, I can get up there.” (Madison, age 41)</i>
Lack of available and affordable slots	25% (N = 243)	<i>“I . . . wanted Head Start because in order to get . . . a child care option, you have to pay (for) that childcare option and I could not afford (that).” (Camara, age 35)</i>
Mobility and communication	17% (N = 559)	<i>“I found out about the school before I found out about the house . . . wherever they started that’s where I wanted to keep him. So I wanted to keep him in that school . . . I wanted to live in an area that’s very close [to that school] and where I didn’t have to drive a long ways.” (Khloe, age 40)</i>
Competing demands	<i>“very chaotic, ‘putting out fires’ lives and don’t often prioritize their child’s education when they’re concerned about housing, feeding and clothing, and finding a job”</i>	<i>“I don’t know. I don’t think I had the time . . . being in between the shelter and everything else . . . I wasn’t really thinking about preschool. I was thinking about finding a house—a home for us.” (Zoe, age 23)</i>

“I don’t know. I don’t think I had the time . . . being in between the shelter and everything else . . . I wasn’t really thinking about preschool. I was thinking about finding a house – a home for us” (Zoe, age 23). (Please see Table 5.3 for a comparison of findings.)

Discussion

This study provides a unique contribution to the literature on access to early childhood services for very young children experiencing homelessness. We acknowledge that the studies are exploratory and the sample size of the Cloudburst study of parental perspectives is decidedly small. However, there was a high degree of corroboration of themes across the two studies, which increases our confidence in the findings. Follow-up research with a larger sample based on the themes emergent from this “small-N” approach may well add to the depth of our understanding.

Themes Emerging from Surveys with Parents and Providers

The surveys of providers and interviews with parents highlight potential policy and practice changes that can help better connect young children experiencing homelessness and their families with early care and education services in their community. Themes that emerged suggest that both providers and parents could benefit from becoming more aware of the availability of early childhood resources, especially when they are new to a community. Both parents and providers can also benefit from policies and practices designed to break down barriers to access and streamline entry into early childhood services, and both would be better served if services in their communities were provided through a cross-sector lens. Additionally, provider surveys highlighted the need for a stronger voice in the service system for attending to the needs of young children experiencing homelessness and their families. Policy and practice recommendations to address the challenges and gaps identified by these studies are provided below.

Increasing Provider Awareness of the Special Needs of Homeless Infants and Toddlers

Providers who responded to the NAEHCY survey felt that there was too little awareness regarding young children's homelessness and that although a sizeable proportion of the homeless population is made up of families with infants, toddlers, and preschool-aged children (Solari et al., 2015). This population is often invisible to the general public as well as many service providers, advocates, and policy makers. This is the case despite the profoundly negative impact that homelessness can have on a very young child's growth, development and learning, (Perlman & Fantuzzo, 2010; Fantuzzo et al., 2013) and even as policies are put into place to use early care and education as an intervention to mitigate the effects that homelessness can have on early brain development and long-term physical well-being. Resources meant to inform the public and others of the plight of homeless families should include clearer reference to newborns and toddlers, and policies and professional resources should address the full scope of individuals experiencing homelessness. Resources exploring and responding to the special needs of infants and young children experiencing homelessness, including training materials, government policy documents, and research publications, must be more widely and visibly disseminated.

Sharing Knowledge About Programs and Services

Findings underscore the recognition that both shelter providers and early childhood educators must do a better job of providing information to families about the

various early childhood options available to them. Because the early care and education community does not consistently and actively market their services to homeless families, activities that might publicize early care and education programs locations, what services they provide, and how they can be best accessed, would be of great value. Targeting marketing activities to shelters and housing services providers and others outside of the early care and education service sector would be helpful.

To some degree, this might be linked to increasing participation of the early childhood community in recent HUD-supported efforts to create more comprehensive “Coordinated Entry Systems” in the homeless service provider community. Additionally, with growing focus on quality of care, it would be valuable to have state and local systems for early care and education publicize quality rating efforts so families experiencing homelessness can be aware of where they might find high-quality subsidized care that includes comprehensive services such as that provided by Head Start.

Addressing Systemic Barriers to Help Increase Access and Attendance

Respondents to both the provider survey and parent interviews identified a significant number of barriers to accessing early care and education services. Not only do early care and education programs seem to be hidden to those homeless families who most need to find them, once found, there are myriad challenges to actually using those programs. Clearly, having information about early care and education program locations would ease the search for early childhood services for both homeless services providers and parents. Having accurate and timely information on open slots, waitlists, fees and subsidies, eligibility and residency criteria, and availability of transportation would help parents and providers locate programs that best suit a family’s needs for access to early care and education and for sustaining stable enrollment over time. Among changes in programmatic practice that might help to address these concerns are:

- Creating plans in emergency sheltering settings to facilitate smooth transition for children and families into access to early care as well as permanent housing.
- Establishing reimbursement and program “vacancy” rates based on informed estimates of homelessness and mobility in communities, and reserving slots based on those estimates of need to accommodate rolling enrollment of children from homeless families during the school year.
- Ensuring that available information is accurate and up-to-date, while relying on technological and programmatic improvement to decrease the amount of time parents have to invest to craft their own solutions.

Early care programs might also adopt other practices to help mediate the impact of family mobility and decrease logistical barriers to preschool enrollment while in shelter and in transitioning to longer-term housing. The failure of child care and early education programs to adequately meet the individual needs of homeless young children can further exacerbate family instability, resulting in more frequent moves and transitions that can negatively impact a child's ability to learn (Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, Chen, Rouse, & Culhane, 2012). For parents relocating to a new community, trying to find a high-quality early childhood program with an opening for the particular hours the parent needed and within walking distance can be a significant greater challenge. It is important that shelter staff more actively help families locate early childhood options in the geographic area they are likely to be moving to *after* they exit shelter, rather than focusing only on early care and education options near the shelter. Further, locating affordable housing and quality comprehensive early childhood programs in close proximity could facilitate stable child attendance and create a community of supports for family stability as well. Many parents in this study expressed frustration that they contacted preschool programs too late in the school year to be able to enroll. Although this may be an unavoidable challenge for families who are unsure where they will be residing several months into the future, it can be valuable for housing services staff to encourage them to proactively explore waiting lists and enrollment processes as soon as they know the general location they plan to move to.

Early care programs seeking to act more responsively might:

- Establish policies and practices to target and prioritize homeless families for enrollment and support full inclusion
- Add a priority for homeless or recently homeless families on preschool waiting lists (as is already the case with Head Start programs)
- Explore options for “transporting” slots from one program to another to maintain eligibility across different sites within the same program or system, or assisting families to enroll in similar or appropriate programs near to where they are next moving and/or
- Implement creative strategies to communicate with families, including social media, e-mail, and texting rather than phone calls and mail which are less likely to be useful means of communicating with low-resourced highly mobile families.

Increasing Cross-Sector Collaborations

A high number of participants noted that shelter providers did not discuss preschool as part of the case management provided through emergency shelter. Recognizing that this is a moment in families' lives that is especially challenging and that many children in homeless families experience trauma during these periods of housing instability, (Gewirtz et al., 2008) incorporating discussion of preschool options and

mechanisms for accessing preschool as part of a family's crisis services case plan can help to ensure that families are made aware of and can more successfully navigate their way through available options. Including attention to early care and education in housing casework practice can help ensure that the needs of children for quality early care and education and a family's need for a quality care and learning environment for their infants, toddlers, and preschoolers are better met. This, in turn, can support success in parental job search, school enrollment, and engagement in employment.

For families facing complex barriers to self-sufficiency, stability, and wellness, service systems must more actively come together to address those needs appropriately, and must also begin to adopt policies and practices that tie them more closely to one another and to the families they serve. This especially includes the early care and education system which, with the exception of federal Head Start programming, has remained silent on how and with whom it will partner to better meet the needs of this population of young children.

Expanding and Enhancing Training

McKinney–Vento Liaisons, homeless service providers, and early care and education providers are often best positioned to ensure that young children experiencing homelessness are able to access and benefit from the full array of programs and services designed to support healthy child development. Unfortunately, providers often do not receive the training they need to understand and navigate the complex system of services available, identify and refer children who are eligible, and support the children once they are enrolled in programs. Respondents to the NAEHCY provider survey thought that better training was needed to enhance their ability to identify homeless families: *“Identification of children and families experiencing homelessness is huge.”* Without open communication with housing and shelter providers and direct outreach to shelters and transitional housing sites where homeless families may be, it is unlikely that McKinney–Vento Liaisons and early care and education and homeless families will easily find one another. There is also a great need for increased understanding of all those in the early childhood and housing services fields of the impact of homelessness on young children and families so that they might better support them and assist in meeting their individual needs. Providers felt that training and technical assistance focused on how to establish networks and relationships with other providers in their community would be helpful in connecting families with services to address their multiple needs. In response to this need, many communities have begun to offer cross-sector training opportunities in which providers from several sectors (e.g., early childhood, housing, education, and child welfare) meet to increase awareness of other sectors and create relationships for working together.

Resources for training that might be more effectively tapped include tools and materials from the Office of Head Start, NAEHCY's early childhood website, the

National Center on Homeless Education, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services early childhood website. In addition, memoranda have been created by the Administration for Children and Families for providers that address the importance of connecting young children who are homeless to early intervention, home visiting, and high-quality early childhood education.

Federal and State Leadership, Actions, and Policy Recommendations

At the federal level, Congress and agencies that fund early care and education and homeless service programs can do much more to ensure access to early care and education for children and families experiencing homelessness. Federally funded programs can be targeted toward homeless families by including requirements to prioritize families experiencing homelessness in all federal early childhood programs and initiatives, including child care, the Maternal, Infant, Early Childhood Home Visiting program (MIECHV), federally funded preschool, and Race to the Top Grants. If current capacity cannot be targeted to address the needs of families experiencing homelessness, then increases in federal funding for early care and education programs are needed to provide greater capacity to serve all homeless families.

Many barriers described in both studies could be overcome by extending the full protections afforded through the education subtitle of the McKinney–Vento Homeless Assistance Act to all federally funded early care and education programs. Parents and providers described as challenges the lack of available slots to accommodate all young children in homeless families. Because universal access to early care and education is not yet a reality, McKinney–Vento strategies will need to be adapted to be more appropriate for the limitations of the current early childhood system. Such adaptations could include reserving a small number of program slots for children experiencing homelessness in order to facilitate immediate enrollment, for example. In addition, the US Department of Education could provide clarifying guidance and encouragement for Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program (EHCY) Homeless Liaisons to identify younger children and proactively support families to enroll and participate in early care and education programs and services. In terms of barriers related to transportation, amending the McKinney–Vento Act’s Education for Homeless Children and Youth program to strengthen its protections (including transportation) for young children enrolling in early care and education programs would be a huge benefit to families.

To support response to concerns identified by families in this study, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) should consider the potential impact of policies that could help integrate more thoughtful attention to early care and education access in shelter settings. HUD-funded homeless service programs (and related Homeless Management Information System standards) could consider

children as clients separate from their caregivers and appropriately distinguish the child's unique needs in case management plans. Furthermore, programs might be required to facilitate enrollment of young children and families into early care and education programs, report data on rates of such enrollment, and ensure space is provided for early childhood services (e.g., home visiting or early intervention) to provide services to families on site. In this same vein, homeless service agencies might designate a trained staff person to focus on early childhood issues, maintain relationships with early childhood programs in the community, refer children and families to early childhood programs, and assist families in completing required enrollment paperwork.

Through the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), HUD, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and the Department of Education, could more actively develop collaborative and complementary policies and approaches to support coordination and integration of early care and education and homeless services at the state and local level. Such policies might require representation from early care and education and McKinney–Vento liaisons on local Continua of Care; representation from the McKinney–Vento State Coordinator on Interagency Coordinating Councils for Early Intervention, Early Childhood State Advisory Councils, MIECHV State Advisories, and state-level interagency councils on homelessness; and inclusion of parents of young children who are homeless and professionals in early care and education on consumer advisory boards for Continua of Care. Additionally, federal agencies could more actively support training and technical assistance opportunities that foster cross-sector collaboration, alignment and sharing of resources, and connection of case management and other direct services to children and families.

States and communities can also play a key role in advancing policies and practices that improve access to early care and education programs for children experiencing homelessness. If they haven't done so already, states might move to align state-funded early care and education programs to the education subtitle of their McKinney–Vento Homeless Assistance programs. Many states fund early care and education programs that are administered outside of school settings, such as early childhood home visiting programs or community-based preschool, and therefore are not compelled to extend the protections afforded to homeless families through the homeless education law. By including requirements for community-based grantees to implement McKinney–Vento practices, states can ensure early care and education programs are utilizing the same definition of homelessness, improve data on this population to inform planning, and create more equitable access to the full array of programs that support the development and school readiness of children experiencing homelessness. Additionally, this would allow states to better leverage the existing McKinney–Vento infrastructure to support alignment of resources horizontally across early care and education programs and vertically between early care and education and K-12 education.

States and communities can reduce system-level barriers to accessing early care and education programs by investing in local community systems development, which could include community-wide common enrollment applications or

protocols, central waiting lists, and shared services among early care and education providers. Such intra-system streamlining would make it simpler for families to navigate their choices of services and programs and lay a foundation for more intentional, strategic cross-sector collaboration. States might review funding strategies for early care and education programs and increase incentives for collaboration in a meaningful way while breaking down structures that cause programs in a community to compete for resources.

Conclusion

The experience of homelessness for very young children and their families can have significant effects on each child's long-term educational success and well-being, as well as on family health and stability. Heretofore, this issue, and the related importance of enrollment of young children from homeless families in appropriate early care settings, has received woefully insufficient attention to mitigate negative effects. These companion studies of housing and early childhood providers and of homeless parents highlight the myriad challenges that confront families and young children experiencing homelessness and offer suggestions and opportunities for systems change—grounded in the voices of those most immediately impacted. These voices convey powerful insights that should be heard in shaping policies, programs, and practices better linking the homeless services and early childhood communities to ensure necessary supports and success for all young children and families.

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