

Traumatic Stress among Mothers Experiencing Homelessness

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Statement of the Research Problem

In the early 1980s homelessness became as a serious social issue and the problem has not abated. Point-in-time estimates indicate that on any given night more than 750,000 men, women, and children are homeless in the United States (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2007). Homeless families make up more than a third of the homeless population, and the majority of homeless families consist of a mother with two small children (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2006; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2007).

For more than two decades, local, state and federal agencies have attempted to assist homeless families by providing temporary shelter and referral to employment agencies and subsidized housing wait-lists. Although employment and housing assistance are important to homeless families, at least one in three single parent families will find themselves homeless again, usually within two years (Bassuk, Perloff, & Dawson, 2001; Smith, Flores, Lin, & Markovic, 2005). This finding suggests that other important needs remain unaddressed.

One hardship receiving little attention in the research literature is the influence of traumatic stress in the lives of homeless mothers. Because some research suggests that many homeless mothers have had difficult lives before the homeless event (Anderson & Imle, 2001; Bassuk et al., 1997; Styron, Janoff-Bulman, & Davidson, 2000), traumatic stress prior to homelessness may be associated with an increasing vulnerability to traumatic stress during a homeless episode. Yet very little research has been conducted on how traumatic stress relates to homelessness, and research could not be found on how past or present traumatic stress affects mothers who experience homelessness.

To date, studies of homeless mothers provide only a brief snapshot of their past or present lives. Although data gathered from cross-sectional survey research may delineate traumatic events associated with traumatic stress, the approach does not examine how those events occurred in context of the mothers' lives over time. The current study was unique in that it examined how multiple events over a lifetime influence traumatic stress among homeless mothers.

Research Background and Hypotheses

The purpose of this research was to explore the relationship between past traumatic events and the level of current traumatic stress among mothers experiencing homelessness. The following research questions were examined:

1. What is the relationship between the DSM-IV types of traumatic life events and the current level of traumatic stress among homeless mothers?
2. What is the relationship between the number of past traumatic events and the level of current traumatic stress among homeless mothers?
3. What is the relationship between the average level of traumatic stress of past traumatic life events and the level of current traumatic stress among homeless mothers?
4. What is the relationship between the timing of traumatic events (i.e., experienced at age 12 years or younger versus experienced at age 13 or older) and the level of current traumatic stress among homeless mothers?

Methodology

The data for this study were gathered between May 2006 and October 2006 using a cross-sectional survey design with purposive sampling. Seventy-five mothers were interviewed by a licensed MSW in a face-to-face, semi-structured interview format. This format allowed the interviewer to watch for and address any negative reactions to the questionnaires or measures, such as excessive psychological discomfort or trauma-related symptoms (e.g., dissociation, re-experiencing). Note that throughout the interview, the interviewer regularly checked-in with the mother, prepared her for potentially difficult questions (e.g., “These next questions might be difficult”), and reminded the mother that she was in control of the interview and could skip any questions or assessments, or stop the interview at anytime. In all cases, the mother completed the entire interview. Each interview lasted approximately 2 hours and participants were compensated \$20 upon completion of the interview. All study procedures were approved by the University's Institutional Review Board.

This study used a Life History Calendar (LHC), which a reliable method for collecting retrospective data (Freedman, Thornton, Camburn, Alwin, & Young-DeMarco, 1988; Lin, Ensel, & Lai, 1997; Yoshihama, Gillespie, Hammock, Belli, & Tolman, 2005). The LHC allowed the mothers to tell their life story in a highly structured manner and allowed the interviewer to quantitatively document the information, including the occurrence, timing, and duration of events over time. The LHC served as the primary source for identifying and documenting distressing or potentially traumatic events throughout lives of the homeless mothers; these events were then assessed for level of trauma using the Davidson Trauma Scale (DTS; Davidson, 1996) and the Traumatic Stress Index (Dennis, Titus, White, Unsicker, & Hodgkins, 2002). Additional data were collected using the Global Assessment of Individual Needs – Quick (GAIN-Q; Dennis, 2002).

The four research questions were investigated using ordinary least squares multiple regression techniques. For the multiple regression model, the dependent variable was the *DTS score*, which measured the current level of traumatic stress. The independent variables of interest in the model included *Number of Past Traumatic Events*, *Average TSI Score of Past Traumatic Events*, the recoded *Type of DTS Event* dummy variables *learned about* and *witnessed* (*direct personal experience* is the reference group and is therefore omitted), and *Number of Traumatic Events Age 12 and Younger*. The participant's *Age* at the time of the interview was controlled because the participant's age could influence the number of past traumatic events. The *Number of Months Since the DTS Event* was controlled because some mothers identified recent events while others identified events that occurred decades ago.

Regression diagnostic tests indicated that the assumptions of the model (relating to multicollinearity, model specification, nonlinearity, heteroscedasticity, normality of residuals, and influential outliers) were met.

Results

The analysis revealed that 67% of the mothers in the sample were suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at the time of the interview. This percentage is more than five times the documented rate of PTSD among women in the general population, at 12% (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). More than half of the mothers reported that the event that was most disturbing to them at the time of the interview had occurred before the mothers became homeless. These events included abuse (recent and past), the removal of children, and the death of a loved one (e.g., child, parent, grandparent), among others. That the majority of mothers perceived events that occurred prior to homelessness to be more disturbing than either homelessness or events that occurred during homelessness underscores the impact of past traumatic events on mothers experiencing homelessness.

Whereas prior research had not differentiated between traumatic and distressing past events, this research adds that more than two-thirds of past events reported by homeless mothers were actually traumatic events. Because past traumatic events significantly increased current traumatic stress, but past distressing (i.e., non-traumatic) events did not influence levels of current traumatic stress, knowledge of whether the past events were actually traumatic or distressing is an important contribution of this research.

The level of current traumatic stress among the mothers did not differ by DSM-IV categorization of the type of event (i.e., direct personal experience, witnessed event, learned about event). However, the number of past traumatic events, the average level of traumatic stress among past traumatic events, and childhood trauma each independently influenced the level of current traumatic stress among the mothers, above and beyond the effects of the other variables. The number of past traumatic events was the most powerful predictor of the level of current traumatic stress among mothers experiencing homelessness.

Utility for Social Work Practice

Because social workers are often the first line of support for persons who are homeless, two crucial issues loom over social work practice with traumatized homeless mothers. First, working with traumatized homeless mothers requires training in both trauma and homelessness, particularly since untrained workers can easily end up re-traumatizing the mother (Courtois, 2004; Elliott, Bjelajac, Falot, Markoff, & Reed, 2005; Luxenberg, Spinazzola, Hidalgo, Hunt, & van der Kolk, 2001; van der Kolk, 2002). Second, theoretical and empirical research is lacking regarding trauma work specifically with homeless individuals. In fact, research could not be located that specifically focused on trauma interventions with individuals experiencing homelessness.

Thus, social work researchers and practitioners have much work to do. First, training modules on *trauma-informed practice* for workers assisting homeless mothers must be developed, implemented, and evaluated for process and effectiveness. Next, researchers and practitioners must develop and evaluate evidence-based trauma interventions appropriate for mothers experiencing homelessness. Researchers should also explore the theoretical perspectives of trauma among homeless mothers. Finally, policy makers, funders, and the public must be educated, engaged, and kept up-to-date on discoveries and progress with this important work in order to gain and maintain their support. Although much work needs to be done, social workers can help mothers who are traumatized and experiencing homelessness through rigorous research and proficient use of social work practice skills. Together, social workers and their allies can make a difference in the lives of traumatized mothers who are experiencing homelessness.

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