

Family Status, Use of Institutional Resources, and Residential Transitions Among the Homeless

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Statement of the Research Problem

The purposes of this research are twofold: to describe the dynamic aspects of the residential experience of various subgroups among homeless adults differentiated by their family status, and to identify individual characteristics, circumstances, and experiences that explain differences in patterns of homeless-domicile transitions between homeless families and homeless single individuals.

Research Questions

Families with children constitute the fastest-growing segment of the homeless population throughout the mid-1980s and the 1990s. Although family homelessness has policy implications that may be fundamentally different from homelessness among single individuals, little is documented about whether the prospect of leaving homelessness varies according to family status. In fact, prior empirical studies, constrained by their snapshot design and an absence of heterogeneous population groups, generally fall short of informing policymakers and social service providers on the patterns of homeless-domicile transitions among the homeless and the conditions and circumstances that are associated with these transitions (Burt and Cohen, 1989; Culhane and Kuhn, 1995; Rossi, Fisher, and Willis, 1986; Sosin, Piliavin, and Westerfelt, 1990; Stretch and Kreuger, 1992; Wright and Weber, 1987).

This research, based on survey data of a three-wave prospective study of homeless adults, documents the patterns of residential transitions among homeless families and compares them with the patterns among homeless single individuals. Aside from capturing the dynamics of homeless-domicile experience, this study compares the institutional resources perspective, vis-à-vis the individual-deficits perspective on homelessness, in accounting for differences in residential patterns between families and non-families. Specifically, it is hypothesized that differences in utilization patterns of institutional resources constitute the major factor that accounts for the variation of residential arrangements between homeless families and homeless single individuals (Freeman and Hall, 1987; Liebow, 1993; Piliavin, Wright, Mare, and Westerfelt, 1994; Rossi, Fisher, and Willis, 1986; Sosin, 1992; Sosin and Grossman, 1991).

The institutional resources that are examined include participation in gainful employment, enrollment in income support programs, contacts with social service agencies, and reciprocity

of financial support from informal networks. Personal characteristics that are examined include experience of childhood out-of-home care, educational attainment, prior work history, functional health status, and diagnosis of severe mental disorders, alcohol and drug problems using the Diagnostic Instrument Schedule derived from DSM-III-R. Family status, the key variable for this study, is predicated on whether or not the respondent is currently accompanied by one or more children age 18 or under. I differentiate between single men and single women, based on outcomes of empirical research which identify significant gender difference among single homeless individuals in their family background and experience of prior family instability (Crystal, 1984; Garrett and Bahr, 1976). Due to the statistical rarity of single-father and two-parent families, only single mothers who are currently living with dependent children and single adults who are unaccompanied by minor children are included in this study.

Methodology

The analysis is based on detailed event history and panel data derived from a three-wave longitudinal study of a probability sample of 443 homeless adults in Alameda County, California between April 1991 and January, 1993. The baseline sample of 522 respondents was identified via a multi-stage cluster sampling plan, which selected homeless adults who were served by either an overnight shelter or a free meal program within the county. The follow-up sample represents 85 percent of the original baseline sample who were homeless when the research team visited. Most of the sample members were observed for one year or more and their residential and resource utilization histories were recorded in days.

An event sequence analysis is performed to unravel the complexity and diversity of residential patterns. Three residential states are differentiated in the analysis: homelessness, own apartment exit, and other domicile exit including shared lodging arrangement with friend or relative, a stay in one's own room in a motel, hotel, or single room occupancy, and a stay in a transitional housing or rehabilitative facility. A duration threshold of 30 days is employed to define an exit since it is considered long enough to require a sustained source of support from either welfare, work, or informal networks, but is short enough to permit investigation of the other phenomenon of interest -- returns to homelessness among those who have previously exited. To analyze the rates of the first exit from homelessness and the first return to homelessness, I use the non-parametric Kaplan-Meier estimator of survivor function (Kaplan-Meier, 1958).

Continuous-time discrete-state hazard regression method is employed to model the processes of homeless-domicile transitions. Given that the primary concern of this research is to examine the relevance of the individual-deficits and the institutional resources perspectives in accounting for differences in residential transitions according to family status, I employ the Cox's partial likelihood method to estimate the parameters for the effects of predictor variables on the hazard of exiting and returning to homelessness, without specifying the duration-dependency functions of the events of interest (Yamaguchi, 1991). Time-varying covariates are constructed to capture more precisely the dynamics of change in the predictor variables.

Results

The descriptive analysis of homeless-domicile patterns indicates that homeless adults in Alameda County comprise a heterogeneous population who experience varying degree of deprivation of conventional shelter as well as residential instability. Three separate groups are identified which display distinct characteristics in regard to their homeless careers within a one-year observation period: the chronic homeless, the one-time homeless, and the episodic homeless. Women who are currently homeless with children are more likely to exit homelessness at a faster rate, and to remain in their domicile longer than single adults. They are also more likely to exit homelessness to their own rented apartment. Despite their favorable residential pattern relative to those of single individuals, the majority of single mothers report some form of residential instability by experiencing either an additional homeless episode or another domicile move within the one-year study period.

Although a very high proportion of single women who are unaccompanied by minor children are able to make a transition out of homelessness, their hold to conventional abode is tenuous. As the results of the Kaplan-Meier estimation indicate, the exit process for single women closely resembles that for mothers with children, while the return process for those women who are able to exit homelessness closely resembles that for single men. Indeed, two-thirds of single women who have exited homelessness return to the streets for the second time. Finally, the incidence of unrelieved homelessness is substantially higher among single homeless men when compared with the other two subsamples. One-third of single men are observed to be continuously homeless for the entire observation period.

The multivariate regression results lend more support to the institutional resources explanation than the individual-deficits explanation on homeless-domicile transitions. Reciprocity of financial support from family and friends and enrollment in entitlement programs such as AFDC and SSI are associated with a faster exit rate. Interestingly, the effect size of enrollment in entitlement programs varies according to the three subgroups of homeless individuals differentiated by their family status. That is, the effect size for adult family members is larger than that for single men and single women. The most important institutional resources that are associated with a slower rate of returning to homelessness include participation in gainful employment, reciprocity of government housing subsidy, and enrollment in General Assistance. This study also finds that the rate of returning to homelessness is significantly affected by prior homeless episodes and the type of dwelling occupied after an individual has exited homelessness. Having had a prior homeless episode increases the risk of returning to homelessness, while staying in one's own apartment is associated with a decreased risk of return.

Utility for Social Work Practice

This study has found two easy-to-identify attributes -- family status and gender -- as important differentials in the design of social service programs to help homeless adults leave

homelessness and maintain stable domicile. The principal concern for families with children is to maintain stable domicile so as to minimize the detrimental effect of residential instability on children. Counseling service and training programs on money management, crisis management, parenting, and independent living skills as well as job training and educational programs are important measures to increase the long-term self-sufficiency of these families. These programs are especially crucial in view of the current welfare reform bills -- widely supported by the Congresses -- which propose to impose a time-limit on the receipt of welfare benefits among AFDC families. While our findings show that nearly all of the domiciles maintained by mothers with children are supported by major public income supports programs, primarily AFDC, and nearly one-half of the domiciles are supported by government housing subsidies, only 24 percent and 9 percent respectively of these mothers report to have enrolled in counseling or skill training and job or educational programs.

The principal concern for single women who are not accompanied by dependent children is to prevent recurrent homelessness by stabilizing these women's stay in domicile locations to which they have exited. Since the majority of single women have the experience of being taken in by their friends and relatives during the course of the study, programs to help these women stay in these domiciles until they acquire the necessary skills and resources to maintain independent living can be a viable option to reduce the cost of homelessness to these individuals and to society. These programs might involve short-term financial and in-kind assistance to poor domiciled families that take in homeless single women, as well as intensive counseling service to deal with interpersonal stresses that arise from sharing lodging with friends and relatives.

The principal concern for single men is to launch effective service programs so as to move hard-core continuously homeless men--estimated to be around one-third of single men who are homeless at any point of time--from the streets to conventional domicile. Social service providers should be cognizant of the structural constraints of income support programs that are available to single men and explore strategy to effect change on these programs. As this study shows, the lack of access to income support programs as well as the meager and unstable benefits provided might explain the slower rate of exiting homelessness among single men, when compared to single women and mothers with children.

The study finds that policies that aim at bolstering the human capital and hence the earning capacity of previously homeless people are necessary long-term measures to enable these individuals to attain self-sufficiency and maintain their domicile status. Notwithstanding this, the empirical results also suggest that the obstacles that come into the way of securing gainful employment are quite insurmountable. Slightly more than 50 percent of each subsample have a diagnosis of either severe mental disorder, alcohol or drug problem. About 10 percent of each subsample have a dual diagnosis of severe mental disorder and substance abuse problem. Only 10 percent of the sample have maintained continuous contacts with social service agencies throughout the entire observation period. As an interim measure, therefore, government housing subsidy should be made available to poor individuals and families so as to reduce their risk of falling into the cycle of recurrent homelessness.

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