Introduction

Women and families are the fastest growing segment of the homeless population. According to The 2020 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, families represent almost one-third of those experiencing homelessness, and most of those families are headed by single women. Of the children experiencing homelessness, 45% are under the age of six. The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly exacerbated an already serious homelessness crisis among women and families. The Economic Roundtable predicts that the effects of COVID-19 will be long lasting and will trigger a 49% increase in chronic homelessness.

For families, the challenges of homelessness can be frightening. Evictions can place them in unfamiliar communities where they know little about local supports and resources. Children living

---

* According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, a chronically homeless person is one with a disabling condition such as mental health issues or substance abuse, who has been homeless for more than a year or has experienced four or more periods of homelessness in three years that add up to at least a year in total. See the complete definition [here](#).

---

Visit the MIECHV Program website to learn more!
in homeless situations are at higher risk of delayed or disrupted development. They may live in conditions that jeopardize their health and safety, while their families frequently find healthcare, childcare, food assistance, and welfare programs inaccessible, as access to these programs often depends on having a fixed address. The pandemic has also significantly reduced the number of children being identified as homeless and enrolled in schools, eliminating a central location that provides stability and support for children and families.5

Home visiting programs can play a critical role in mitigating the impacts associated with homelessness or unstable housing in families. By improving parents’ support for their young children’s developmental needs and fostering healthy parent-child interactions, home visiting programs can ensure relationship stability and provide consistency during periods of frequent moves and unfamiliar surroundings. Home visiting can also reduce risks associated with abuse, neglect, and parental depression by connecting parents to available community-based services6 and can help to create a sense of belonging in an otherwise unpredictable and rejecting environment.

This resource provides an overview of the issues and challenges in serving families experiencing homelessness. Awardees will discover strategies that will enhance their ability to connect with this hard-to-reach population and that they can share with their local implementing agencies (LIAs). We have also included an annotated list of relevant resources.

What Do We Mean by Homeless?

The definition of homelessness is broad and encompasses people in many different living situations. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development defines the homeless as those who are:

- Literally homeless, including those who are living in shelters, are unsheltered, or are living and/or sleeping in a place that is unfit for human habitation
• At imminent risk of homelessness
• Homeless under other federal statutes
• Fleeing or attempting to flee interpersonal violence

The U.S. Department of Education defines homeless children and youth as those who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. This includes children and youth who:

• Share the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; or are abandoned in hospitals
• Have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings
• Live in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings
• Are migratory children who qualify as homeless because they are living in any of the circumstances described above*

While the characteristics of families experiencing homelessness vary widely, there are some populations that are at greater risk. Factors that increase a woman’s risk of homelessness include pregnancy, being a parent and having a disability, mental health issues, and experiencing interpersonal violence. Young mothers are most at-risk for experiencing homelessness. In addition:

• Communities of color disproportionately experience homelessness and unstable housing. Although Black people make up only 13% of the U.S. population, people identifying as African American accounted for 39 percent of all people experiencing homelessness and 53% of people experiencing homelessness as members of families.7

---

* For the purpose of Form 1 reporting, MIECHV defines homeless as “individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence (within the meaning of section 103(a)(1) of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act).”
Black and Hispanic families are more likely to be cost-burdened (i.e., to spend more than 30% of their income on housing). Data show that 53.7% of Black renters and 51.9% of Hispanic renters are cost-burdened—as compared to 41.9% of white renters and 42.2% of Asian renters. This leaves them at greater risk for homelessness.8

- Young parents are more likely to experience homelessness. According to the Policy Statement, 27.1% of families experiencing homelessness were headed by someone under 25.9
- Specific populations of young adults between the ages of 18-25 are also at higher risk. For example, it is estimated that 29% of youth who experience homelessness come directly from the foster care system, and between 20-42% identify as LGBTQ+.10
- Rural populations are also disproportionately affected, as they may be undercounted. Local agencies that serve the homeless provide data through a single annual count at the end of January, when the homeless tend to seek shelter from the cold. However, in the absence of a local shelter system or agencies, it is difficult to identify the true number of homeless in rural areas at any point in time. In 2020, rural agencies reported that 39% of all unsheltered people in rural areas are families with children.11

**Homelessness and Trauma**

Children experiencing homelessness have a higher risk of suffering adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), including but not limited to experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect; witnessing violence; and growing up in a household where mental health issues and instability are present.12 As the number of ACEs a child experiences increases, so too does their risk of adult homelessness. This cycle contributes to multiple generations of homeless families.13 In addition, parents who have experienced traumatic events are more at risk of making decisions that jeopardize a healthy, safe, and productive relationship with their children.14
Many of the factors that lead families to homeless service providers are associated with trauma, including poverty, childhood abuse and neglect, community violence, and interpersonal violence. In fact, between 22-57% of all homeless women nationally indicate that domestic violence was the immediate cause of their homelessness, and 80% of homeless mothers report having experienced domestic violence at some point.15

A trauma-informed approach to care recognizes signs of trauma and its impact on families, and applies that understanding to improve client engagement, outcomes, and organizational services. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has developed six key principles of a trauma-informed approach. These principles are helpful when working with families experiencing homelessness. They include:

1. Safety, including both physical and psychological safety
2. Trustworthiness and transparency
3. Peer support
4. Collaboration and mutuality
5. Empowerment, voice, and choice
6. Cultural, historical, and gender issues, including offering gender responsive services, leveraging the healing value of traditional cultural connections, and recognizing and addressing historical trauma16

Using a trauma-informed approach is key to breaking intergenerational cycles of trauma. Home visiting programs are particularly well suited to addressing this issue through a focus on promoting healthy relationships between parents and children. In fact, in multiple meta-analytic reviews, professional home visiting programs have emerged as one of the most effective preventive programs for child maltreatment, and they remain one of the most well-researched interventions.17 Applying a trauma-informed approach to home visiting services is particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic and other times of uncertainty, which can lead to increases in substance misuse, mental health challenges, and intimate partner violence.18 (For more information, see Creating a Trauma-Informed Home Visiting Program.)
Supporting Families at Risk: Building Partnerships

Families experiencing homelessness have a diverse set of needs that can only be met through the coordinated support of multiple agencies and organizations. Cross-sector collaboration at both the awardee and LIA levels increases the likelihood that families receive the support they need, and partnerships help to ensure the efficient deployment of services. Partnering with organizations that support both parents and children can also help break the multigenerational cycle of homelessness. Conversely, a lack of agency collaboration can place families at greater risk by leading to an undercount of this population and their needs.19

Home visiting programs can serve as the linchpin for effective coordination. State and local early childhood collaborations and councils can provide access to families needing support, as can referrals from healthcare providers, community agencies, or other social service programs. For example, homeless service providers such as shelters, and foster care systems and early care programs such as Head Start, can connect families to home visiting programs, which can in turn connect families
to health and mental health services. McKinney-Vento state coordinators—local education agency liaisons responsible for coordinating services and ensuring homeless children enroll in school—are another valuable partner in reaching families experiencing homelessness.

Cross-sector partnerships also allow home visiting programs to help families meet their basic needs while ensuring that their own services are not diluted. For example, by connecting to family supportive housing providers, home visitors can instead focus their efforts on providing the high-quality services parents and children need without taking on additional responsibilities outside of their expertise.²⁰

In addition, families whose basic needs are met are more likely to engage and remain in home visiting services and realize better outcomes. For example, families involved in supportive housing programs through cross-system collaborations, such as case management and other supportive services, experience greater stability and are better able to engage in home visiting services than families who are living in less safe and more transient circumstances.²¹

In addition to mainstream community-based organizations, there are other non-traditional partner organizations that home visiting programs can connect with to address the needs of families and children experiencing homelessness. Non-traditional partners provide another means of outreach to families experiencing homelessness, particularly those who may have access to fewer mainstream organizations, such as families in rural communities.²² Some examples include ethnic associations and social clubs, faith communities, advocacy organizations (e.g., LGBTQ+), and day centers for transition-aged youth.
What Can Awardees Do?

With strong community-based and social service partnerships as their cornerstone, MIECHV awardees can use the following strategies to support clients who are experiencing homelessness:

• **Use your needs assessment update to capture data on families who are experiencing or are at risk for homelessness.** Data on unemployment rates, average household income, economic growth, and housing foreclosure rates are potential indicators of families who are at risk for homelessness. These data can also help you identify areas where families may be experiencing homelessness, such as high poverty neighborhoods where evictions are prevalent, housing costs are rising, or schools offer a high proportion of students free or reduced-priced lunches. In addition, data can help you see gaps in services that might be filled by home visiting services and prioritize those areas where families may have difficulty accessing needed services. Data allow you to document needs and advocate for the funding and supports necessary to address these needs.

• **Develop a coordinated outreach plan for reaching families experiencing homelessness.** Collaborate with partners, including LIAs, to develop a coordinated outreach plan for identifying and recruiting families into home visiting programs. Identify and establish formalized and active referral linkages with community-based health and social services that provide support to families experiencing homelessness. Define the roles and responsibilities of each service provider and encourage consistent check-ins for review.

• **Leverage available funding streams to support wraparound service delivery.** Individual programs do not have the resources to fully address all issues of families experiencing homelessness. By identifying
funding sources that support the same target audience, home visiting programs can maximize resources and extend their reach. See the National Wraparound Initiative for more information.

- **Establish policies that recognize the unique challenges of working with families experiencing homelessness.** Recognize that providing services to families experiencing homelessness may require additional work as well as allowances for adjustments in caseload capacity. It may mean re-thinking the definition of “home” to identify other settings where visits can take place. If families are living in other situations (e.g., shelters, cars), how will they access home visiting services? Where might visits be held to ensure privacy? Create policies with LIAs that reflect the need for flexibility in choosing and implementing evidence-based models, as well as determining the frequency and locations of home visiting services.

- **Support transitions for families experiencing homelessness.** For example, “warm handoffs” can help to ensure that transient families continue to receive home visiting supports when they move from one catchment area to another. Think broadly about program options and encourage flexibility to meet family needs.

- **Rethink the idea of a “culture of homelessness.”** There is a common assumption that all individuals who are homeless share similar beliefs, values, norms and behaviors, social structures, economic situations, and comparable living environments. This is in stark contrast to the constructs of cultural competence. Homeless families are not a monolithic group; their needs and values are as diverse as any of the families we serve.

- **Support LIAs in hiring and maintaining a diverse workforce that reflects the populations they serve.** Prioritize hiring culturally and linguistically diverse individuals, formerly homeless individuals, and others who reflect the experience, culture, and languages of the families they support. A diverse workforce will increase the likelihood that home visitors are familiar with and sensitive to the challenges of families experiencing homelessness.
• **Support LIAs in strengthening home visitors’ knowledge and understanding of the nuances and challenges specific to homeless subcultures.** For example, LGBTQ+ homeless families often face discrimination in homeless services, including gendered housing and definitions of who is family, that can lead to separation of caregivers. Both real and anticipated stigma can prevent these families from accessing services. When providing professional development, use trainers who reflect the local culture and understand the unique strengths and needs of these communities.

### Strategies for LIAs

There are many steps that LIAs can take to support clients who are experiencing homelessness. Below are some examples:

• **Include questions on intake documentation that help identify when families are at risk of losing their housing or are already involved with an agency providing supportive housing.** Develop a series of questions to determine the family history of residences. Nonthreatening questions such as “Where did you stay last night?” “Can you return?” “Do you have a place you can stay?” “How many times have you moved in the past year?” can provide insight into a family’s living situation. Frequency of moves can be a warning sign for the risk of homelessness, and this information can lead to a discussion with the family around additional housing supports to prevent future homelessness. (For more on this topic, see [Supporting Children and Families Experiencing Homelessness: Module 4: Determining a Family’s Homeless Situation](#) and [Decision-Making Tool to Determine a Family’s Homeless Situation](#).

• **Gather data to gauge the effectiveness of existing programs serving families experiencing homelessness.** Collect feedback on family experiences related to ease of access to services, length of and frequency of
involvement, and intensity of services offered. Then, use these data to identify opportunities for program and professional development.

- **Leverage available funding streams to support wraparound service delivery.** For example, explore financial collaborations with community-based agencies that provide health care, childcare, transportation services, or food and housing assistance.

- **Create opportunities for families to develop social connections.** Develop and facilitate groups that are sensitive to the unique needs of families experiencing homelessness to mitigate risks of social isolation.

- **Consider identifying a select group of home visitors to work exclusively with families experiencing homelessness.** Provide home visitors with training on homelessness and the need for relevant services and identify those who would be well suited to work with this population. Strong candidates would ideally demonstrate awareness, understanding, empathy, and compassion for people experiencing homelessness; possess the ability to be flexible and creative in-service delivery; and reflect the culture and speak the home language of the family. Use a strengths-based, culturally responsive, trauma-informed approach that engages families as partners in decision-making.

- **Use reflective supervision to help home visitors become aware of implicit biases that may affect their work.** Implicit biases are shaped by our backgrounds, experiences, and environment and can unintentionally influence our thoughts and actions about other people. Reflective supervision can help home visitors recognize and address their biases by considering other perspectives, identifying and confronting feelings, and supporting home visitors’ growth. It can also help to prevent burnout and improve staff retention, which will in turn lead to greater consistency in services to families experiencing homelessness and housing instability.
• Be flexible regarding how and where services are delivered. Be sensitive to the challenges parents may experience and the stressors associated with homelessness. For example, a home visitor may need to work with a family at a relative's home one week and a homeless shelter the next, or they may need to engage in more intentional outreach to sustain contact with families as they move among temporary housing arrangements. Communicate the need for flexibility to accommodate the specific needs of the child living in homeless situations.

Conclusion

Home visiting programs are well-positioned to provide support to children and families experiencing homelessness. Both awardees and LIAs have roles to play in establishing policies, developing outreach plans, and partnering with community organizations in order to provide the most comprehensive services to children and families in their care. Using the strategies presented above, home visiting programs can nurture parent-child relationships and offer as much stability as possible to families experiencing homelessness. For more information and additional resources, see Related Resources below.

Related Resources

Access to Early Childhood Development Services for Homeless Families with Young Children: An Exploratory Project

Administration for Children & Families

This resource summarizes selected literature on families experiencing homelessness with children who are less than five years old, including specific challenges faced by families with young children who are "doubling-up" or staying in motels or hotels. One policy recommendation is to continue to engage MIECHV programs in services provided to homeless children.


Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration; the Daniels Fund; National Child Traumatic Stress Network; and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation

This is a practical guide for organizations that serve women and children who are experiencing homelessness. It includes a discussion of policies and procedures, services and support, and specific actions that can be taken to create trauma-informed environments.

Building Partnerships to Address Family Homelessness

Administration for Children & Families

This resource shares highlights of how strong partnerships can address family homelessness and provides strategies that can help MIECHV programs and housing services providers work together. It
provides background information on Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) housing assistance programs.

**Crosswalk: Early Childhood Home Visiting and Supportive Housing for Families**

**Ounce of Prevention Fund and Corporation for Supportive Housing**

This resource identifies strategies that home visiting providers and supportive housing programs can use to develop partnerships and connect services in order to support families experiencing homelessness more effectively and completely.

**Increasing State Leaders’ Collaboration to Support Families Experiencing Homelessness**

**SRI International**

This tip sheet addresses the lack of agency collaboration that can lead to an undercount of families experiencing homelessness and suggests sharing data and developing common terminology to identify families in need of support. It also offers many other strategies for increasing collaboration among agencies at the state level.

**Policy Statement on Meeting the Needs of Families with Young Children Experiencing and At Risk of Homelessness**

**U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services (HHS), Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and Education (ED)**

This policy statement offers recommendations for how early childhood and housing providers at all levels can work together to ensure that families and children experiencing homelessness or unstable housing have access to safe, stable, and supportive environments.

**Self-Assessment Tool for Early Childhood Programs Serving Families Experiencing Homelessness**

**Administration for Children & Families and Ounce of Prevention Fund**

This tool assists early childhood programs in responding to the needs of young children and families experiencing homelessness. It offers recommendations in five areas: Identification and Support; Removal of Barriers; Responding to Families’ Needs; Engagement in Strategic Collaboration; and Improving the Collection, Reporting, and Use of Data. It also includes links to resources and an action plan template. A similar tool exists for shelters—**Early Childhood Self-Assessment Tool for Shelters**.

**Supporting Children and Families Experiencing Homelessness**

**Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center**

This interactive learning series consists of nine online modules that address issues surrounding family homelessness. The modules include strategies for identifying, recruiting, and engaging with families experiencing homelessness, as well as ways to connect with community partners. Each module includes knowledge checks and practice scenarios and takes approximately 30 minutes to complete.
The Framework for an Equitable COVID-19 Homelessness Response

National Alliance to End Homelessness, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, National Low Income Housing Coalition, and National Health Care for the Homeless Council

This framework offers guidance on how to strategically use federal funding sources “to meet public health goals, increase housing stability, and prevent future increases in homelessness – all with a racial justice and equity lens.” It also contains Resources and Tools to assist with implementation, including Making the Case: An Equitable Response to Homeless Children and Families, Responding to Homeless Families’ Needs During the COVID-19 Crisis, and Strengthening Partnerships for Better Health Outcomes During COVID-19.

Five Ways to Protect Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers Experiencing Homelessness During COVID-19

SchoolHouse Connection

This tip sheet offers strategies to identify, maintain contact with, and support families with young children who are experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic. The strategies focus on home visiting programs, such as early childhood programs and homeless and housing providers, and they more generally emphasize the importance of working across agencies to provide the greatest level of support.

Strategies for Outreach to Families Experiencing Homelessness


This resource offers research-informed strategies for reaching out to families experiencing homelessness, as well as examples of outreach and related resources. It was developed for use by both state leaders and local agencies.
Endnotes
