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## **Parenting in Poverty: The Experiences of Fathers Who are Homeless**

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Poverty rates in the United States have continued to climb in recent years as people struggle in the current economic downturn. According to the United States Census Bureau (2012), 46.2 million people lived in poverty in the United States during 2010, an increase from 43.6 million in 2009. Homelessness is one important issue faced by people in poverty. The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (2011) reported that nationwide the number of families who are homeless increased by 20% from 2007 to 2010, with families making up 23% of the homeless population.

The literature suggests that there are issues unique to families who are homeless, but the majority of the literature on parenting and homelessness is focused on the needs and experiences of mothers (Seccombe, 2000; Toohey, Shinn, & Weitzman, 2004). While single mothers head the majority of homeless families, the Urban Institute (1999) reported that 16% of homeless families include a father.

The literature on homeless fathers is limited but suggests that the needs and experiences of fathers are not being met by the existing agencies that support homeless families, nor even fully explored by researchers and policy makers. A study by Buckelew, Pierrie, & Chabra (2006) concluded that involved fathers make a difference in the lives of children

and that, to best serve homeless families, the unique needs of fathers must be considered. The current qualitative study explores the experiences of fathers who are homeless through semi-structured interviews that sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the impact of homelessness on relationships between children and others?
2. What are the main stressors faced by fathers who are homeless?
3. How do perceptions of fathers as caregivers and providers impact the experience of parenting while homeless?

### **Impact of Poverty**

Current literature and statistics reveal an increasing prevalence of poverty and homelessness in the United States. To understand the experiences of fathers who are homeless, it is important to look at what is known about poverty.

**Prevalence.** For a family of three, an annual income of \$19,090 or less is the threshold the US Census Bureau uses to determine poverty (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). In 2010, the poverty rates were 13.8% nationally, 14% in Oregon, and 16.7% in Lane County (US Census Bureau, 2012). These numbers show that Oregon, and Lane County in particular, have a high percentage of people in need. One issue resulting from poverty is homelessness. The One Night Homeless Count reported 2,140 people homeless in Lane County on a given night (Lane County, Oregon, 2011). This type of point-in-time count is required by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, which provides funds for housing and services that support the homeless in Lane County. However, the National Coalition for the Homeless reports that the number of people who are homeless is likely higher than reported because methods of counting people are often limited to counting those in shelters or on the

street. This does not account for people who are temporarily living with family or friends, nor does it accurately identify the number of people who are intermittently homeless (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009).

**Effects of Poverty.** The effects of poverty are diverse, but some of the key areas of concern are chronic stress and poor mental and physical health (Seccombe, 2000; 2002; Wadsworth, 2012). People experience the effects of poverty in different ways; therefore, it is important to be aware of variation when exploring these issues. For example, depending on individual, family, and community factors, the chronic stress that debilitates one person may have almost no negative effect on the long-term success and health of another (Seccombe, 2002). Regardless of variation, the effects of poverty are widespread and create issues that negatively impact many families and children (Seccombe, 2000; Wadsworth, 2012).

### **Parenting and Homelessness**

Parents who are homeless have unique experiences, but their identities as parents are still defined in relation to their ability to provide and care for their children. Parents who are homeless struggle everyday just to protect their children. This creates stress that often leads to depression, anxiety, guilt, and shame (Paquette & Bassuk, 2009). Some parents find it difficult to practice effective parenting within the structure and setup of shelter living. Privacy is non-existent, and parents feel pressure to adhere to the rules of the shelter or risk losing their housing (Friedman, 2000). Several factors impact the parent-child relationships of families experiencing homelessness. For example, the loss of a stable family home brings changes on many levels as families also lose their support network when they leave their homes. Shelters may serve as a social setting for families to begin rebuilding support, but the process takes time and needs a nurturing environment that is sometimes lacking in shelters (Toohey, Shinn, & Weitzman, 2004).

**Homeless Fathers.** Homeless fathers are the minority, as the majority of homeless families are headed by single women (Paquette & Bassuk, 2009). The statistics regarding homeless parents are often based on who seeks support from, and is eligible for, family shelters, an approach that may exclude anyone who does not fit the traditional single mother category (Paquette & Bassuk, 2009). Consequently, most of the research on parenting while homeless is focused on the experiences of mothers, and the literature on the experiences of fathers is limited. However, some of the literature includes brief sections on fathers (Paquette & Bassuk, 2009), and one qualitative study on homeless fathers provides a foundation for this study (Schindler & Coley, 2007).

**Qualitative Study.** Schindler and Coley's qualitative study explores the experiences of homeless fathers in the United States (2007). Researchers interviewed nine fathers who were staying in homeless shelters and three shelter directors. Participants in the study were single or married biological fathers residing with at least one child under the age of 18 at the time of the interview. Researchers used open-ended interview questions focused on pre-shelter and shelter life to gain insight into how men parent their children in challenging and constricting situations.

Differences in how mothers and fathers experience homelessness are often based on social constructs that define the roles of men and women. The adjustment to shelter life may also be different for men and women, as fathers who are newly homeless focused on the adjustment to their expected gender role and identity, whereas mothers focused on safety and ability to maintain their roles as parents (Schindler & Coley, 2007).

The support services in most shelter systems are geared toward women and fail to address the unique needs of fathers. Schindler and Coley (2007) found that fathers who were used to autonomous living found it difficult to adjust to the structured environment of shelter life. Another issue was

that many fathers struggled to become full-time parents in the extremely public setting of the shelter. It is difficult to strengthen the family unit without addressing and supporting the father's primary role as parent (Paquette & Bassuk, 2009).

Fathers also experienced many barriers as they navigated support services geared toward mothers. Shelter policies offered only limited accessibility to fathers. For example, the shelter system in the Schindler and Coley study allowed only biological fathers to stay in shelters with their families, although the shelter allowed stepmothers to stay with their families (2007). These types of policies make it necessary for families to separate in order to be sheltered (Paquette & Bassuk, 2009). Shelters may have valid reasons for the policies, but the message sent to fathers is that they do not belong. These types of policies make it even more difficult for homeless fathers to access critically needed support. To help fathers, it is necessary to understand how the experience of parenting while homeless is different for men (Schindler & Coley, 2007). With that understanding, considerations for the needs of homeless fathers may begin to be addressed.

## **Method**

For the current study, qualitative semi-structured interviews were used to explore the experiences of fathers who have been homeless and received services at a homeless shelter for families. The study's format was based on Schindler and Coley's study of homeless fathers, but modified to focus on the experiences of single homeless fathers in a Pacific Northwest city. Qualitative interviews allowed for in-depth exploration of the experiences and views of a population (Schindler & Coley, 2007). Interviews with staff members of a homeless family shelter in the same Pacific Northwest city helped to triangulate data and obtain additional information about shelter rules, supports, and overall experiences with fathers who are homeless.

Additionally, shelter records provided information regarding services used by the fathers who participated in the study.

Establishing rapport is often an important part of a qualitative study (Schindler & Coley, 2007). As an intern and volunteer, the current researcher had an established and ongoing relationship with the families and staff of the shelter, a fact that served as an important connection for this study. The timeline included submission of a human subjects protocol in May, recruitment of participants in July, interviews with fathers and staff from July through November, and data analysis and writing in December and January.

### **Sample**

The sample was purposefully chosen to provide information on the experiences of single fathers who were parenting while homeless. Participants included four fathers who resided with at least one child and had received services at the shelter. All four fathers were the biological parents of the children in their care, and each father had been homeless prior to his current shelter stay. Three of the four were assuming a primary parenting role for the first time. Table 1 provides demographic information about the fathers. The shelter staff members ( $n = 4$ ), although not subjects of the study, provided additional information based on their professional roles.

### **Data Collection**

The first step in the research after receiving a protocol number from the Institutional Review Board involved recruiting fathers at the shelter by using fliers and personal connections the researcher established while volunteering at the shelter. Each participant provided informed consent, and fathers received a \$25 gift card to a local department store for participation in the study. All of the interviews took place in a private

room at the shelter.

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews lasting from 43 to 58 minutes for fathers and 13 to 33 minutes for shelter staff. All interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder and later transcribed. The interviews were semi-structured and followed an interview protocol that provided consistent coverage of topics with flexibility of order and tempo based on the participant's level of engagement. The interview protocols were derived from the themes in the literature review and focused on the areas of relationships, stressors, services and supports, and perceptions. Open-ended questions allowed participants to introduce new themes, and additional probes were used to clarify information and close gaps in the responses.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were coded and analyzed following a series of steps recommended by Rubin and Rubin (1995). Following their model, analysis began as common themes emerged while transcribing the interviews. An initial set of codes were developed from the themes and applied to each transcribed interview. Coded data were separated into categories that allowed information to be compared across interviews. After thorough examination, descriptions were written to confirm the common experiences of fathers who were homeless.

### **Results**

The interviews provided insight into the lives of four single fathers who were connected by the common experience of parenting while homeless. Common themes emerged over the course of the interviews regarding (1) the effects of homelessness on personal relationships, (2) the main stressors for fathers who are homeless, and finally (3) how external perceptions affect the experiences of fathers who are homeless.

## **Impact of Homelessness on Relationships with Children and Others**

Being homeless, the fathers spent a great deal of time with their children, a fact that had positive and negative effects. For example, interactions with teenagers were more likely to be strained by the physical closeness and structure of communal living, while younger children seemed to respond well to the increased closeness.

**Relationships with Young Children.** Two of the fathers who were interviewed had children under the age of ten. Both of these fathers had been previously homeless, but they reported that this was the first time they had been primary caregivers. They talked about the amount of time that they spent with their children while living on the street or in shelters, and the impact this experience had on their relationships. This closeness provided safety for the children and aligned with the rules of the shelter, but it also served to strengthen the connection between father and child. One father described the effect on his relationship with his three-year-old daughter, “We have no choice but to grow closer together, our bond, in order to work together as a father/daughter, as a team in order to survive.” Fathers with young children embraced the role of primary caregiver and spoke about how the experience of parenting while homeless had changed them.

I just turned 50 in April, and, you know, having a seven-year-old at 50 is a trip, because everything he does ... The first 50 years I saw through my eyes, the second 50 I'm seeing through his eyes because what he does and everything. It blows me away, it's a trip. And every morning I wake up, and me and him are taking a trip, and it's like I try to do a lot of things with him. You know, I'm talking to a seven-year-old at 50, and me and him have conversations together because there's nobody else for me to talk to.

**Relationships with Teenagers.** Maintaining relationships with teenagers often can be challenging, and being homeless places an added

strain on relationships between fathers and teens. One father, who had previously parented while homeless, reported that now that his sons were older, they were more aware of the family's situation. Teens at the shelter are often coping with an adult level of stress while simultaneously losing the freedom to spend time with their peers outside of the shelter. The shelter rules allow teens to spend one night out per week, but otherwise they are required to be with their families. The teenage years are typically a time of growing independence and stretching of boundaries, but teens in the shelter have the added pressure of knowing that if they break shelter rules, they may jeopardize their family's ability to stay in the shelter. This consequence is steeper than what typical teens risk when they decide to rebel against a rule. One father reported that even though his sons were coping, the setup of communal living made it difficult to maintain the relationships that they had prior to becoming homeless.

Interviewer: So living together with potentially nine other families in one big room, do you feel like you were still able to hold on to what you had at home when you were in your own place?

Father: No, not when you're in Night Shelter you don't. It's, you try to push everybody else out, all the other families, but you can't keep, there is no sense of being your own little dwelling. It wasn't. All it was is a place to sleep. I mean that's what it was.

Another father described the difficulties of relating to his teenage daughter. He talked about the challenge of becoming the primary caregiver while his daughter was becoming a young woman. Sensitive topics like feminine hygiene became a challenge in the public setting of the shelter.

It's hard being a single dad to a teenage girl. That is even more difficult than a single dad with boys because I have to go, "hey, Jenna, did you take tampons with you? Or pads, do you have pads with you?" You know I have to be a parent since there isn't

a female with me. In shelter it's been nice because there's other moms around, and I can go, "hey can you talk to Jenna about this please? Why it isn't good to get underwear out of the free box."... The father daughter relationship has a total different dynamic than the mother daughter... She thinks that I'm just, like, alien to her so it's really difficult.

One father talked about the difficulty of maintaining relationships between siblings. The added stress of juggling school schedules, shelter time commitments, and work responsibilities made it difficult to maintain a peaceful relationship.

You know your kids can't bring a friend over, and you feel bad about them having to be, like, my kids. Their bedtime's not until 9:30, but they have to be in at 5:30. It's like four hours in a church ... You know, and they're siblings. They fight all the time, and I feel like I spend most of my time making sure it's ok for them to be wherever they're at—whether they be at work with me. Or Jenna's having some kind of issue, and it's causing a scene with me at work or with her brother, or they're fighting over something. Constantly I just feel like I'm making it ok to exist.

**Relationships with Others.** Fathers may experience changes in relationships or lose supportive relationships with friends and extended family when they become homeless. Changes in geographic location, differences in socioeconomic status, and the stigma about being homeless may make it difficult to maintain these connections. Some fathers developed relationships with other families in the shelter, but that was not always the case. When asked about support, two of the fathers expressed that they did not have any close friendships. One father said, "Yeah, I didn't befriend anybody in Night Shelter at all. I mean I talked to them. I was polite. I said, hi, you know, and that was about it. I didn't hang out with anybody." Another father explained that he did turn to people for

support, but that he did not consider them to be his friends.

Interviewer: When you need extra support or someone to talk to, who do you turn to in your life?

Father: Um, acquaintances.

Interviewer: So not a close friend? Is that how you would describe acquaintances?

Father: Right, I don't keep many friends. They're acquaintances.

The communal setup of the family shelter provided fathers with the opportunity to connect with other homeless families. One father explained his connection with other single fathers:

Father: When I was in the shelter, I was totally blown away the first night I went in there, and all four of us. I even ended up rooming with one of the males and his kid at the first church we went to. We all four ended up sitting down, eating dinner together just sitting there talking to each other about how it's going.

Interviewer: What was that like to have other dads? Did you guys keep it on the surface or did you ask deeper?

Father: I would like tell them anything.

Fathers and other homeless parents in the shelter shared their first-hand knowledge regarding experiences accessing local services as well as parenting techniques. Another father explained why he turned to other families in the shelter for support.

Another single male with a kid saying this is what I'm going through or this is what I've been through, or you need to do this, because he's already been there and done that. I just try to do what I've gotta do, and it's good, though, to see that there's more of us getting our kids.

Fathers maintained relationships with extended family members but could not always rely on them for support. One father explained that other homeless families seemed to understand him and his situation:

I have friends that have really helped me out here locally. My family, my family is, like, "that's really, I'm sorry to hear that's what's going on." That's it. I find that the connections I have here with people in the shelter. I feel these are the only people that I can go, "this is what's going on with me," and they get it.

### **Main Stressors for Fathers Who are Homeless**

The stress of parenting while homeless involves many of the same issues for both mothers and fathers. However, participants talked about stressors that may be different for fathers. They discussed the lack of services available for single fathers and the challenges of becoming the primary caregiver.

**Lack of Resources.** Many of the resources for families who are homeless are not available for single fathers. When fathers were asked about how they ended up in this particular shelter, they explained that there was no place else that could go and keep their children with them. One father talked about the search for a place to stay: "So, basically I was out. There was nothing available. I called shelters from [city name] to [city name], um just trying to find a place." Fathers explained that the other local shelters were not equipped to house fathers and children. "There is no other place. We were gonna have to be split up." A shelter staff member agreed that having no place else to go was a stressor for fathers. She said, "Well no place to go is the big one. We have four intakes this week with single dads who have no place to go with their kids. So that, I think, is a huge stressor." One father described the relief of hearing that he had a space at the shelter: "You know the day that (they) said, 'hey, look, we're

gonna let you into Night Shelter' was one of the greatest days I ever had with Chris because I seriously didn't know where I was going."

The lack of resources available created challenges for all of the fathers. Many of the services that are available to families are set up to serve mothers and are not able to provide for these single fathers. One father said that he wanted people to know how little was available.

The thing that I'd like people to know is that there really is not a lot out there. Agencies need to open up to what they're doin' for women with kids, single women with their kids. They need to do the same for single males with their kids. Have some kind of programs, you know, that are open to the males, too ... because there's not a lot out there. There ain't, and I just hope it changes, and I think it will with the more guys that are getting their kids.

Fathers talked about the lack of support they felt and how they would like to see more programs geared toward fathers.

Father: There's no support ... they have mother/daughter classes. They have no father/daughter classes. It doesn't even matter if they're a single parent. Fathers in general. They don't have a 'how to be an effective father' class."

Interviewer: If there was something, do you think you would go?

Father: If there was something right now that I could do that was a class or a group or even a support group that was other guys that I could talk to who are going through, again they don't even have to be single. Just guys who are willing to say, "hey, I did this and it didn't work," or "hey, my daughter's doing this and dressing like this." Having other dads say, "well, that ain't nothin'." Especially when you're a single parent. You don't have anybody to bounce things off of. You don't have any way to gauge where am I at on this issue, or where are they at.

The shelter staff agreed that the lack of resources was a stressor.

One staff member explained, “not getting any services, not being able to receive services, which is something that’s very real.”

**Basic Needs.** Providing for the basic needs of a family can be stressful for any parent, but parents who are homeless face unique challenges. Fathers talked about the issues that arose as they tried to protect, feed, and shelter their children. One father talked about the difficulties of his morning routine.

Mark has to be on a bus at 8 am. Jenna doesn’t have to be at school until 8:45, and she can walk from the center, and she’s a girl, and she likes to take showers in the morning. So I have to get him on a bus by 8 am and get her here to shower, but I can’t leave her here while I take him to go catch the bus. It’s just like, “oh my god, how do I do all this?” It took me, like, two to three weeks. I think Mark was on time everyday last week, and that’s the first time since we’ve been in shelter that he was on time to school every day that week. It’s just, like, every morning he’s late, every morning. ... It’s a logistics nightmare, every day, every morning, every week. I gotta get this kid here and this kid here by this time, and then there’s no consistency.

Mothers and fathers who are homeless have many of the same challenges, but most mothers have been the primary caregivers prior to becoming homeless. Many of the fathers became the primary parent under emergency situations that did not allow time for preparation. One father explained that he was so excited that the judge was awarding him custody, but that he really was not prepared to provide for his son.

It was, like, reality set in. I was, like, “oh my god, this kid. I’m responsible for this boy, and what am I going to do?” It all hit, and the joy and everything just went right out the door, and it was, like, reality set in and I was, like, “I don’t know how to cook, I don’t know what’s going on.” I mean I had no adult and family services. I had to go to Adult and Family Services. I wasn’t

receiving TANF, no food stamps. I was only getting food stamps for me.

One of the staff members explained that some of the fathers gain custody when the children are older and suddenly fathers have to parent a child whom they are still getting to know.

I mean, sometimes we have fathers who have gotten custody of their children when they were older, and they haven't been around them for a while. You know they have custody, or they've been a couple, and mom has taken care of all these things, and then mom leaves for some reason, and all the sudden leaves dad with the kids, and he has to figure out how to communicate, you know, personal information to a teenage child and really has no concept of how to do that.

### **Perceptions about Fathers**

Fathers who were homeless were aware of expectations and external perceptions of them. They talked about the expectation that men should have jobs and be able to provide for the financial needs of their families. One father said, "Dads are expected to have a job no matter what so they have an income. They can pay the bills. I think that's the biggest thing, you know. Guys are expected to have a job." Another father felt that there was the lack of understanding for fathers who were unemployed.

People have been supportive, but at the same time they expect a lot of a single dad, and I don't think they really understand. A woman, it's okay. It's more accepted that a woman would be on TANF, but a single dad on TANF is a deadbeat. Why can't you go get a job? Because by time I get my kids off to school by 8:30 am, do the laundry, go grocery shopping, get my kid off the bus at 3 pm, I don't really have much of a work schedule to work with.

A father who is homeless may experience an increased sense of responsibility for their situation. As one shelter staff member commented:

By and large I'd say men are under the same stressors that women are plus the additional stressors on top. And that is the fact that you are not supposed to have this happen.... There's less belief that women should be able to bootstrap themselves up than there is for men. The male model is still John Wayne.

Some fathers said that people responded differently to them because they were single fathers. One father talked about applying for social services.

They don't want to deal with single fathers, dude, 'cause they think, or their big word "assume," that if it's a single dad, he's gonna screw up. If they provide the services he's gonna screw up. The child's gonna go back to the mother or go back to the state. Then they use services that they could have used somewhere else because they assume too much.

Fathers reported that initial impressions of their ability to provide adequate care were generally negative. One father gave an example of how this occurred at his son's school.

You know, there was a couple times where I had to call the school because there was a car wreck on the deal, and I called them up and, "hey, look I'm gonna be a little late. Is there a problem with you guys keeping him?" And they're, like, "no," and they'd have him in the office. And the lady was like, "You know what? I didn't think this was gonna, you know the way you look, I didn't think this was gonna go, but I've watched you, and you really have done a really good job with him. I notice that, you know, he looks around when he's leaving school to see if you're here." And the thing is, I don't do it for me, for people to be able to say something to me. I do it because that's my kid, and that's the way it should be.

These negative perceptions may mean that fathers have to prove that they are good parents even when they have done nothing wrong, a fact

that added stress for fathers. Mothers in the shelter commented that one father was constantly monitoring his son. When questioned about this heightened vigilance, he replied, "I'm gonna tell you something. Me being a single male with my son, I'm not gonna give anybody a chance to say I'm not watching my kid."

The shelter staff commented on the discrepancy between the common perceptions about fathers who are homeless and the realities that they saw in the shelter.

By and large, the projections on them aren't accurate. They're not lazy, they care about their family, they want their children to have a good life. They may not have the tools or the skills that it takes to make that happen, but they want the same things that other people want. And that they're carrying this extra burden that anyone who's in poverty, especially long term, feels like there's something wrong with them. It's big time for the guys because the model is more rigid, and the expectations are higher.

The perception that fathers are less capable of being the primary caregiver is not accurate according to the shelter staff.

They are wonderful, courageous men. I mean, you hear all the time about deadbeat dads and men taking off and leaving their children and their wives or their girlfriends or whatever, not taking responsibility. And we see these men who are working hard to raise these children and do the very best that they can, and you know it's tough for them because they don't have the resources that women do, and they don't have the places to stay with their kids. I mean, we have brought in single dads who have been living on the streets with their children 'cause there was no place for them out there, and I just think they're very courageous. I think they do an excellent job. Some of our single dads are some of the best parents I've seen in Night Shelter.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the experiences of fathers who are homeless. Given the lack of research on homeless fathers, this study was informed by a combination of literature regarding the effects of poverty, research about homeless mothers, and one prior study on homeless fathers (Schindler & Coley, 2007). The researcher also used personal knowledge based on direct experiences working with homeless fathers to create this exploratory study. Interviews with fathers and staff provided valuable insight into the experiences of fathers who are homeless. An in-depth analyses of the data and the words of the fathers themselves revealed that (a) relationships with children and others changed while fathers were homeless; (b) fathers faced a lack of access to resources for homeless families that made adjustments to primary parenting roles necessary but stressful; and (c) external perceptions of fathers as caregivers and providers had a negative impact on the fathers' experiences.

## **Limitations**

Although this study contributes important findings regarding homeless fathers, several limitations should be considered when reviewing the findings. The study took place at a family shelter in a Pacific Northwest city, and the sample included only fathers who had accessed those services. The shelter's inclusive policies regarding access to fathers may have had an impact on the results. Also, the sample was fairly homogenous concerning age and race. Finally, as with all qualitative research, the results may have limited generalizability (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009). Even with the limitations, three overarching themes were common across the experiences of the fathers.

## **Relationships**

One overarching theme focused on the significant changes to fathers' relationships with children and important others. Reaction to the structure of the shelter, separation from existing social supports, and the developmental stages of children all seemed to play into these changes. These results are consistent with the literature regarding the impact of homelessness on the parent-child relationship and changes to the social networks of homeless families (Friedman, 2000; Toohey, Shinn, & Weitzman, 2004).

Fathers with younger children adapted well to the increased time spent together and reported that their relationships were stronger as a result of becoming homeless. This evidence is consistent with the findings from Schindler and Coley (2007) that fathers appreciate having this time with their children and may use it to redefine their fathering role. The young ages and maturity levels of children may have contributed to this positive outcome.

Fathers with teenagers reported that their relationships were difficult while homeless. Teenagers were more aware of the family's struggles and pushed back against the rules and constraints of shelter life. The response of teens to stress, as well as limited privacy, created tension between fathers and their teen-aged children.

This study showed mixed results regarding social support and homeless fathers. Two of the fathers quickly developed supportive relationships with other families in the shelter. This may be reflective of the supportive environment of that particular shelter or the social characteristics of these fathers. The other two fathers reported that they kept to themselves and did not rely on social supports while homeless. They reported having "acquaintances" but no close friends.

## **Stressors**

Each of the fathers reported that the lack of access to resources and the adjustment to primary parenting were their main stressors. That finding illustrates the second overarching theme and is consistent with the other literature regarding stress and homeless fathers (Paquette & Bassuk, 2009; Schindler & Coley, 2007). The lack of resources available for homeless fathers severely limited the fathers' options for support. The shelter in this study is the only family shelter in the county that allowed fathers to stay with their families. The other main stressor that fathers identified was their abrupt transition into primary parenting. This finding supports the assertion that homeless fathers need services and support that consider their unique needs (Schindler & Cooley, 2007).

Paquette and Bassuk found that the stress felt by homeless parents as they struggle to protect their children may lead to anxiety, depression, guilt, and shame (2007). The fathers in this study spoke about the stress of trying to provide for their children within an inadequate and often inaccessible system of support and the anxiety and guilt that this stress caused. A lack of resources, combined with external perceptions about the role of men as providers, is an important issue for homeless fathers and is further explored in the next section.

## **Perceptions**

Finally, each father faced the expectation that men should be employed and able to provide for the needs of their families. This expectation leads to negative perceptions of fathers who are homeless. The findings showed that fathers felt an increased sense of responsibility for being homeless and a lack of understanding from others. In addition, fathers in this study experienced negative reactions when people learned that they were the primary parent. This external reaction to fathers as primary parents

created added stress and undermined the fathers' confidence. This adds to Schindler and Coley's (2007) finding that ideas about gender roles can negatively impact homeless fathers. Interviews with shelter staff revealed that although these perceptions added to fathers' stress, single fathers are some of the best parents that the staff see in the shelter.

## **Recommendations**

The findings from this study suggest that services and supports for homeless families need to be inclusive of fathers and directed toward their needs. For example, fathers may benefit from support groups and parenting classes that consider their transition into primary parenting roles and recognize the impact of external perceptions regarding fathers.

Fathers also need service providers who understand and appreciate their unique needs. This understanding may lead to better relationships between agencies and homeless fathers and alleviate some of the stress that fathers reported feeling when accessing services. Further research is needed to better understand how homelessness affects fathers. Future studies could include follow-up interviews, samples that include additional people of color, and interviews with older children and other family members.

Homeless fathers represent a small but growing segment of the population. The four fathers in this study provided valuable insight into the experience of parenting while homeless. The issues discussed in this study provide a foundation for further research and immediate implications for practice. This study includes unique findings that extend our understanding of the experiences of fathers who are homeless. Participants shared their stories with the intention of helping other homeless families. With that intention in mind, it is my hope that this research not only adds to our understanding, but also may inform changes to services and support that improve the lives of homeless families.

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**Table 1: Participant Demographics**

| Father                                 | Age | Children                           | Employment Status  |
|----------------------------------------|-----|------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Jack                                   | 50  | Son: Chris 7                       | unemployed         |
| Bradley                                | 42  | Daughter: Anna 3                   | unemployed         |
| Shawn                                  | 43  | Sons: Eric 16<br>Jimmy 14          | unemployed         |
| Patrick                                | 47  | Daughter: Jenna 13<br>Son: Mark 10 | employed part-time |
| <i>Note: All names are pseudonyms.</i> |     |                                    |                    |