

Surviving Against the Odds: Families' Journeys off Welfare and out of Homelessness

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Abstract

Homeless families face complex challenges when making the transition from welfare to the workforce. By focusing on the experiences of homeless families participating in a Boston-based welfare-to-work program, the multimethod, longitudinal study described in this article explored factors contributing to more successful transitions as well as barriers faced by families having a harder time making the transition.

Nearly 90 percent of the families that were studied left a shelter with a housing subsidy and retained it 6 to 12 months later. Successful employment outcomes after exiting a shelter were more evident for families whose head of household was older, two-parent households, families that had lived in their own residence before shelter entry, families that had lived in a shelter for shorter periods of time, and families that had employment income at shelter exit. Although income levels in Massachusetts were approximately twice as high for families in the workforce, income levels for most families did not meet their basic needs. Therefore, housing assistance was essential and allowed families to use their limited resources to pay for food and other basic necessities. The article describes the struggles of these families.

The article's policy recommendations focus on the link between adequate household income and housing stability, the centrality of housing assistance, the need for additional low-cost housing options, the resolution of contradictory and counterproductive emergency assistance strategies, the link between educational and job-training services and employment opportunities, and the expansion of state and federal income-support policies.

In 1996, as welfare reform policies were in the first stages of implementation, little was known about the intersection of housing and welfare policies in the context of homeless families. Historically, housing and welfare policies that affect the same low-income households have run on parallel tracks, without common goals. Furthermore, research has focused primarily on welfare recipients who are not homeless (Cohen and Eimicke 1997; Holcomb et al., 1998).

To meet the need for more research in this area, we conducted a longitudinal, multi-method study in Massachusetts examining the experiences of homeless families that were participating in both a welfare-to-work program and a housing assistance program when they left an emergency shelter.

Background

After welfare reforms were enacted in the mid-1990s, welfare rolls in the country shrank dramatically (U.S. House Committee on Ways and Means, 2000). However, despite higher job rates and the booming economy of the late 1990s, research conducted since then suggests that many former welfare recipients continue to suffer multiple hardships (Cherlin et al., 1999; Acs, Phillips, and McKenzie, 2000; Children's Defense Fund, 2000; Moffitt and Roff, 2000). Minimum-wage jobs do not provide enough income to support single mothers and their children (Edin and Lein, 1997; Children's Defense Fund, 2000; Moffitt and Roff, 2000). Families are often forced to piece together the basic necessities of food, shelter, heat, and electricity from a patchwork of federal, state, and local emergency services. Job instability, housing evictions, and food insecurity put enormous stress on already economically fragile families and are associated with increases in domestic violence, decreases in children's academic performance, and decreases in access to health care (Heyman and Earle, 1999; Moore, Vandivere, and Ehrle, 2000; Tolman and Raphael, 2000).

Making the transition from welfare to work is especially difficult for homeless families. Although many evaluations of welfare have not specifically focused on the homeless, it has been well documented that families with multiple barriers have the greatest difficulty leaving welfare and remaining employed (Danziger, Kalil, and Anderson, 2000). Homeless families face significant barriers—often centering on educational, mobility, and family-violence issues—in their attempts to obtain housing and attain economic stability. (Bassuk et al., 1996; Friedman, 2000).

Housing assistance is a critical component in enabling homeless families, whether wage earners or welfare recipients, to attain housing stability (Bassuk et al., 1997; Early, 1998). In their review of welfare-to-work evaluations, Sard and Lubell (2000) conclude that families receiving some form of housing assistance exhibit the greatest gains in employment and earnings. In 1996 approximately one-quarter of the country's Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) households and one-third of Massachusetts AFDC households received housing assistance (Khadduri, Shroder, and Steffen, 1999). In a study of welfare leavers, the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance (MDTA) found that 52 percent of these households were receiving some form of housing assistance (Nagle, 2001; see also "Comparing Housing-Assisted and Housing-Unassisted Welfare Leavers in Massachusetts," this issue).

The Massachusetts Context

Throughout the 1990s housing costs in Massachusetts steadily soared, outpacing income growth and causing serious hardships for low-income households, especially African-American, Latino, and Asian households as well as those headed by single women

with children. At the end of the decade, nearly 2 out of 5 Massachusetts renters (approximately 360,000 people) could not meet their nonhousing expenses after paying their rent, representing a 26-percent increase over 1990's figure.

Between 1990 and 1997 evictions for nonpayment of rent in Massachusetts increased by 64 percent. Since 1997 the rate of evictions statewide has remained fairly constant but at a high level, with more than 5 percent of renter households facing eviction each year (Stone, Werby, and Friedman, 2000). In Boston's lower rent neighborhoods, where the welfare-to-work program and the Transition-to-Work Collaborative's (TTW's) shelters are located, renters are affected by this housing affordability crisis to an even greater extent than elsewhere in the state (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2000; Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, 2001).

Since welfare reform was implemented, family poverty rates in Massachusetts, unlike the nation's, have remained persistently high at approximately 9 percent for all families and 14 percent for families with children. Moreover, 17.9 percent of all children in Massachusetts have been classified as poor, up from 16 percent before the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act's implementation. The percentage of very poor families with children has also risen; close to 9.6 percent of all children in Massachusetts live in very poor households, up from 6.5 percent before reform (Albelda and Friedman, 2001).¹

Between 1997 and 1999, compared with the period before welfare reform, higher proportions of the poorest 20 percent of Massachusetts families with children had a family member who was employed and no longer relied on welfare. However, gains in earnings were completely offset by the loss of welfare benefits—notwithstanding families' access to housing assistance and income from the Earned Income Tax Credit (Albelda and Friedman, 2001).

Between 1995 and 2000 the number of families using MDTA and privately funded homeless shelter services increased by close to 50 percent from just above 2,900 to more than 4,300 (Friedman et al., 2001). Furthermore, working families increasingly sought emergency shelter. In 2000, 21 percent of families statewide entered an MDTA-funded shelter with income from earnings (Meschede, Kahan, and Hayes, 2001).

The State's housing affordability crisis is making it even more difficult for homeless families to find housing. A housing assistance certificate is no longer a sure avenue to low-cost housing. Between 1996 and 2000 the number of vouchers rejected by landlords and returned to the State tripled (Friedman et al., 2001). Consequently, family shelter stays have lengthened, increasing from an average stay of less than 5 months in 1995 to more than 6 months (9 months in Boston) in 2000. Less than half (48 percent) of these families—down from 60 percent 5 years earlier—left a shelter for permanent housing (Friedman et al., 2001).

Homelessness does not exempt families from being subject to the Massachusetts welfare reform requirements. Specific welfare and emergency assistance regulations cause homeless families to experience “catch-22” dilemmas that interfere with their ability to secure permanent housing. First, because Massachusetts is a work-first state, all nonexempt families are subject to a 20-hour-per-week work or community service requirement² and 24-month time limits on welfare receipt while they are living in a shelter.³ Second, searching for housing is a requirement for staying in a shelter. Parents find that carrying out all these obligations in addition to attending to the needs of their children is, to put it mildly, extremely difficult (Friedman et al., 2001).

In fiscal year 1999 the income ceiling for family shelter eligibility was raised from 100 percent to 130 percent of the poverty line to accommodate the state's increasing number of working homeless families. However, families whose incomes exceed these guidelines while living in a shelter are terminated, even if they have not secured housing. This policy operates as a disincentive to obtaining employment.

Significance of the Research

To the best of our knowledge, no other evaluation of welfare reform has documented homeless families' journeys as they strive to enter the workforce, leave welfare, and obtain housing. Little is known regarding the resiliency, struggles, and thoughts of parents as they make the journey. Furthermore, little is known about the effects of employment and career-oriented services targeted specifically to homeless families with differing needs when they leave a shelter and move into independent housing.

Our research approach also offers a model for bridging the worlds of academia and human services. Focusing on the relevance of research for policy and practice, we engaged our partners and participating families in framing the research questions and developing the research approach. In addition, we used data collection strategies that built on the trusting relationships already in place between human services providers and families. Finally, we engaged our partners in making sense of the findings.

Partners

This research project was a collaboration between the Center for Social Policy (CSP) at the University of Massachusetts–Boston and the TTW, a support services program for homeless families in the Boston area funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The research builds on TTW's efforts to collect information on all families served using an automated data system administered by CSP. TTW comprises 10 nonprofit homeless services agencies, including 7 emergency shelters and 1 transitional housing program. These agencies refer clients directly to TTW with the goal of "increasing the education, income, and self-determination of homeless families in Boston...as they move through the continuum of care from shelter to permanent housing."⁴

Although participation in TTW is voluntary, all families living in the collaborative's shelters are strongly encouraged to join, resulting in an 88-percent participation rate.

Methodology

Research Design

Our study attempted to identify factors associated with more favorable economic and housing outcomes for formerly homeless families 6 to 12 months after leaving a shelter. To enhance the study's validity and reliability, multiple data sources and methods were used.

First, head-of-household demographics, family income and employment, and housing indicators were tracked over a 1.5-year period at three points in time: at shelter intake; at shelter exit; and at followup, 6 to 12 months after shelter exit. Quantitative analyses identified factors that had contributed to the financial independence of homeless families at followup, with housing assistance as a given for nearly all families. In particular, we explored factors related to employment status at followup and reduced reliance on welfare between shelter exit and followup.

Second, qualitative interviews were conducted with a random sample of 58 families at shelter exit and were repeated at followup. These interviews explored the qualitative aspects of parent and child well-being as they changed over time. TTW staff was trained by the project manager to conduct the interviews.

Third, a focus group comprising human services providers and TTW's partners explored perceptions of how families with differing life stresses, levels of social support, and readiness for work attempt to secure economic and housing stability. In addition, initial findings were presented for feedback. Findings from the focus group are included in the discussion section of this article.

Sample Description

TTW served 259 homeless families between June 1999 and October 2000. Twenty-two percent of these families were still living in a shelter at the end of the study period or had lived in their own residence for less than 6 months and were therefore ineligible for inclusion. Followup information was missing for another 24 percent of families served. Therefore, 139 families made up the study sample for the quantitative analyses, providing complete data on income and housing status at shelter exit and followup.

Comparing this subsample of families with the 202 families that had been in the program long enough for followup information to be collected revealed a strong match on head-of-household and family demographics (exhibit 1). Although the study sample was not randomly derived, comparisons of study sample data with those for the eligible TTW population revealed no obvious selection biases. Consequently, we are confident that the findings are applicable to the eligible group of families served by TTW during the research period.

The study sample comprised mostly single-parent households headed by a woman 32 years old, on average (exhibit 1). Close to half of the heads of household identified themselves as African American, another third as Latino. Educational attainment was quite limited; close to 60 percent did not have a high school diploma or general educational development certificate (GED) at shelter entry. Less than a third of the families had one child, more than a third had two children, and the remaining third had three or more children.

Immediately before entering one of the collaborative's shelters, a third of the study's families had lived in another shelter, and another third had lived with family or friends (exhibit 2). Approximately one in five families had rented their own home before moving into one of the collaborative's shelters. The length of stay in a shelter varied from less than a month to 29 months, with an average of 9.9 months, slightly higher than the average of 9 months for homeless families in Boston and considerably higher than the statewide average of 6 months. While living in a shelter, 42 percent of the families completed at least one of three education or training courses offered by TTW.

Most families (86 percent) left a shelter with a housing subsidy, and a few moved into market-rate housing (7 percent) or into the homes of families or friends (4 percent) (exhibit 3). At followup, 88 percent of all families were renting with a subsidy, 4 percent were renting at market rate, and 2 percent were living with family or friends.

Exhibit 1

Demographic Characteristics of Head of Household, by Data Collection Samples and Eligible TTW Population (%)

Head-of-Household Characteristic	Interviewed Families (n = 58)	Study Sample (n = 139)	Eligible TTW Population (n = 202)
Female	88	89	90
Age (years)			
18–24	16	26	23
25–34	50	39	44
35–44	28	29	28
45–54	7	7	5
Race			
African American	50	48	47
Latino	29	35	32
White	5	3	5
Other	12	12	13
Multiracial	0	0	2
Native American	2	1	1
Asian/Pacific Islander	2	1	1
Education			
Grade school	12	11	12
Some high school	47	48	47
High school/GED	22	25	24
Some college/associate degree	18	14	15
Bachelor's degree	2	1	1
Graduate degree	0	1	1
Marital status			
Single/never married	69	65	67
Married	14	17	13
Separated	12	14	15
Widowed	0	2	5
Divorced	6	2	4
Children (n)			
1	26	29	35
2	37	37	33
3+	37	34	32

TTW = Transition-to-Work Collaborative; GED = general educational development certificate.

Notes: The average age for all samples was 32 years. Percentages may not total 100 because of rounding.

During their stay in a shelter, more than half of the families (53 percent) relied solely on welfare as their source of income and a little more than a quarter (28 percent) relied solely on employment income (exhibit 4). By shelter exit, their reliance on welfare income had substantially decreased; 37 percent of the families reported income solely from welfare, 39 percent reported employment income alone, and another 14 percent reported income from both. At followup, 34 percent of all families relied solely on welfare, 50 percent relied on employment income alone, and 11 percent relied on both.

It is not surprising that the incomes of employed families were substantially higher at shelter exit and followup than during their stay in a shelter, although there were limited changes in average welfare incomes. At shelter exit and followup, employed families had approximately twice as much income, on average, as families solely relying on welfare or other non-wage-related income sources.

Exhibit 2

Prior Residence, Length of Shelter Stay, and Participation in Educational Programs (%)

Variable	Interviewed Families (n = 58)	Study Sample (n = 139)
Prior residence		
Other shelter	24	33
Home of relative/friend	40	32
Rented home	29	22
Other	4	5
Owned home	2	4
Supervised living	0	2
Substance abuse treatment center	0	3
Shelter stay (months)^a		
>3	14	8
3 to <6	12	19
6 to <12	42	42
≥12	33	31
TTW education/training completion	45	42

TTW = Transition-to-Work Collaborative.

Notes: Percentages may not total 100 because of rounding.

^aAverage length of stay was 9.9 months for both groups.

However, for nearly all families, total household income did not meet their basic needs. At shelter exit, 90 percent had incomes lower than the Family Economic Self-Sufficiency Standard (FESS) estimated for Boston (Bacon, Russell, and Pearce, 2000).⁵ At followup, close to 80 percent lived on incomes substantially below FESS.

Quantitative Analyses

The goal of the quantitative analyses was to identify factors that contributed to the financial independence of families leaving a shelter. In response to the state's 24-month time limit on cash assistance, a primary focus of TTW is to provide intensive services that

Exhibit 3

Housing Status at Shelter Exit and Followup (%)

Housing Status	Interviewed Families (n = 58)	Study Sample (n = 139)
At shelter exit		
Rental with subsidy	93	86
Rental without subsidy	5	7
Home of relative or friend	2	4
Other ^a	0	4
At followup		
Rental with subsidy	83	88
Rental without subsidy	6	4
Home of relative or friend	2	2
Other ^a	9	6

Notes: Percentages may not total 100 because of rounding.

^aIncludes other shelter or homeless, in a treatment facility, or deceased at followup.

Exhibit 4

Average Monthly Family Income During Shelter, at Shelter Exit, and at Followup

Income Source	Interviewed Families (n = 58)		Study Sample (n = 139)	
	%	Income (\$)	%	Income (\$)
During shelter				
Employment, no welfare	22	809	28	752
Welfare, no employment	52	803	53	670
Employment and welfare	2	738	4	844
Other income ^a	22	649	13	572
No formal income	2	—	3	—
At shelter exit				
Employment, no welfare	36	1,253	39	1,221
Welfare, no employment	36	684	37	619
Employment and welfare	20	1,496	14	1,257
Other income ^a	5	657	7	549
No formal income	4	—	4	—
At followup				
Employment, no welfare	52	1,345	50	1,396
Welfare, no employment	19	729	34	653
Employment and welfare	20	1,560	11	1,343
Other income ^a	7	449	4	513
No formal income	2	—	1	—

— = Undetermined amount.

Note: Percentages may not total 100 because of rounding.

^aIncludes Supplemental Security Income, child support and alimony, and general assistance.

enable families to end their reliance on welfare and enter the workforce equipped to move into jobs that will lead to a living wage.

With this objective in mind, we used two outcome variables: employment status at followup and changes in parents' reliance on welfare over time. We classified families into three groups: those that remained employed or reduced their reliance on welfare between shelter exit and followup; those that continued or began to rely on welfare during the same period; and those that had a mixed situation, relying on other non-wage-related income sources (Supplemental Security Income (SSI), child support, and so forth) at shelter exit and followup or making no change in their income mix during the period.

Distribution of Outcome Variables

At followup, 55 percent of the families had remained employed or reduced their reliance on welfare (exhibit 5). Another 37 percent of families had continued or begun to rely on welfare. The remaining 8 percent of the families were grouped as mixed. Remaining employed/reducing reliance on welfare was significantly different from continuing or new reliance on welfare ($t = 2.93, P < .01$).

Bivariate Analyses

Bivariate analyses using t -tests were conducted to explore significant group differences in demographic characteristics of heads of household, family characteristics, housing status before shelter entry, TTW training program participation, length of shelter stay, and the two outcome variables. For the income-movement variable, families identified as having mixed movements were excluded from the analyses.

Exhibit 5

Distribution of Families, by Changes in Income Source From Shelter Exit to Followup (%)

Change	Interviewed Families (<i>n</i> = 58)		Study Sample (<i>n</i> = 139)	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Remained employed/reduced reliance on welfare	59	34	55	77
Mixed movement	10	6	8	11
Continued or new reliance on welfare	31	18	37	51

Aside from educational status and TTW training program participation, the groups differed significantly on all other variables (exhibit 6). Families that had an older head of household, two-parent households, families that had rented or owned a residence before moving into a shelter, families that had lived in a shelter for less than 6 months, and families with employment income at shelter exit were significantly more likely to report employment income at followup.

Findings for families' movement among various income sources resembled those for income at followup (exhibit 7). Those families identified as reducing reliance on welfare were significantly more likely to be two-parent families headed by an older adult, to have rented or owned their residence before shelter entry, to have resided in a shelter less than 6 months, and to have reported employment income at shelter exit.

Logistic Regressions

The next analysis entailed several logistic regressions to explore the power of the several and combined variables previously identified to predict successful outcomes for homeless families 6 to 12 months after shelter exit. Because of the small sample size, we conducted several logistic regressions that included up to two predictor variables.

Employment status at shelter exit was the most powerful predictor of employment status at followup (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.35$)⁶ and reduced reliance on welfare (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.31$).

Exhibit 6

Distribution of Families, by Income Source at Followup (%)

Variable	Employment (<i>n</i> = 69)	Welfare or Other Income (<i>n</i> = 70)
Age 35+ years	44	27***
High school diploma/GED	43	38
Two-parent household	20	11**
Rented/owned before shelter entry	33	20**
TTW ELP or other program	44	40
Less than 6 months at shelter	35	19***
Employed at shelter exit	65	13***

GED = general educational development certificate; TTW = Transition-to-Work Collaborative; ELP = Economic Literacy Program.

** $P < .01$, *** $P < .001$.

Exhibit 7

Distribution of Study-Sample Families, by Change in Income Source Between Shelter Exit and Followup (%)

Variable	Reduced Reliance on Welfare (n = 76)		Continued or New Welfare Reliance (n = 51)	
	%	n	%	n
Age 35+ years	42	32	31*	16
High school diploma/GED	43	33	37*	19
Two-parent household	18	14	12*	6
Rented/owned before shelter entry	35	27	15***	8
TTW ELP or other program	45	34	39	20
Less than 6 months at shelter	32	24	18**	9
Employed at shelter exit	59	45	10***	5

GED = general educational development certificate; TTW = Transition-to-Work Collaborative; ELP = Economic Literacy Program.

* $P < .05$, ** $P < .01$, *** $P < .001$.

Employment status at shelter exit and length of shelter stay were the most powerful combined predictors of employment status at followup (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.44$) and reduced reliance on welfare (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.44$), explaining close to 45 percent of the variation in both outcome variables.

Because employment status at shelter exit is a self-evident predictor of employment status 6 to 12 months later, other predictor variables and combinations of predictor variables were explored. Age of head of household was the second most powerful predictor of employment status at followup (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.05$), and prior residence was the most powerful predictor of reduced reliance on welfare (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.07$). Age of head of household and length of shelter stay were the most powerful combined predictors of employment status at followup (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.10$). Length of shelter stay and prior residence were the most powerful combined predictors of reduced reliance on welfare (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.10$).

Summary of Quantitative Findings

Despite the small sample size, the quantitative analyses point to several factors predicting short-term employment success for formerly homeless families. Families that had an older head of household were significantly more likely to have employment income at followup, but they were also significantly more likely to live in a two-parent household, to have rented or owned before shelter entry, or to have stayed at a shelter for shorter periods of time.⁷ It is not surprising that all these factors put families in a better position to remain employed after shelter exit.

According to these analyses, educational attainment and participation in any of TTW’s educational programs alone did not help families attain significantly greater economic independence after shelter exit. However, families that had employment income or had reduced their reliance on welfare at followup were more likely to have a high school diploma or GED and to have completed one of TTW’s training or educational programs.

Both outcome variables—employment status at followup and reduced reliance on welfare—may be indicators of employment readiness. That is, families with older parents,

less transience before entering a shelter, a higher level of educational attainment, more immediate employment experience, and access to employment-oriented services are generally in a better position to gain and maintain employment than are younger, more uprooted, less educated parents. Moreover, shorter stays in shelters may point to fewer hurdles, aside from those that are inherent in being homeless, for families in their efforts to find housing and obtain employment and careers.

These quantitative findings are limited because of shortcomings in three areas. First, the number of observations included in the analyses was small; findings based on a larger sample size would have been more conclusive. Second, the number of variables available for analyses was limited. Some important quantitative variables, such as problems faced by the families and their coping strategies, were not included in the study. Given these limitations, the qualitative dimension of the study was critically important. Third, the time frame for this study was short. Families were contacted or interviewed 6 to 12 months after shelter exit. A longer time period between shelter exit and followup is needed to fully assess factors contributing to the long-term success of homeless families.

Qualitative Analyses

The families interviewed at shelter exit and followup, 6 to 12 months later, were similar to those included in the quantitative analyses (see exhibits 1–5). The information obtained from the qualitative interviews provided insight into circumstances that may have played a part in families' movement (or lack of movement) off welfare and into the workforce.

Despite the multiple barriers that these families had faced as they struggled to find permanent housing, obtain living-wage jobs, and care for their families, their optimism about a positive future prevailed throughout their interviews. As will be highlighted, these families had struggled with the loss of loved ones, illness, emotional and bureaucratic difficulties, and poverty, but they had done so with dedication, determination, and the sheer will necessary to secure a more settled life for themselves and their children.

Expectations, Hopes, and Fears at Shelter Exit

Nearly all these families left a shelter with tremendous optimism and excitement, looking forward to having their privacy and independence again. The following comments were typical:

I am extremely excited. I wish it could happen tomorrow. I have had an apartment before, so it is not really scary. I know how it is to run an apartment.

I feel a little better now that I have the key to my own place.

[The biggest change] is having your own place and being able to do things you want to do in your own dwelling.

I expect the biggest change in my life is to further my education and hope that life is the way I want it to be.

[I] feel proud...independent...excellent...expect to be on my own, don't have to return to shelter...biggest change is we have to do it by ourselves...we don't have someone there telling us what to do.

Most expected that they would continue to need assistance particularly with employment and education, childcare, furniture, food and other expenses, and emotional support—in that order:

I'll still need the services because it helps me to go to school.

My fears are that I won't be able to pay my bills...to pay my utilities, to get a...pass for the bus and train, and childcare.

[I] will need support for nighttime daycare because I plan on going to school two nights a week and need transportation in the morning...work hours are 7 to 3.

[I need help from TTW in accessing legal services] for tenants' rights, seeing that now I am responsible for everything.

For many parents, a driving force that greatly affected their sense of optimism about making the transition to their own homes was how their children would fare:

The kids will stay in the same school, so they will not have to make too much of an adjustment.

I'm ready to go.... It's going to be hard for my daughter because she won't be in the same daycare...she has been in the daycare for 10 months and she has learned a lot. She likes to be around a lot of other kids.

[I] have hopes, not fears...for the kids, having their own housing...less shameful, less embarrassed, and proud to have people know their phone number and address and invite them over. It does a lot for their self-esteem.

Families' Economic Circumstances Over Time

A vast majority of families left a shelter with incomes considerably below the Massachusetts FESS (Bacon, Russell, and Pearce, 2000), and this continued to be the case at followup. Of those families that were employed, nearly all worked in the retail or service sectors, the two lowest paying job sectors in Massachusetts. The implication of these findings is that even when the value of housing assistance is taken into account, income levels for most families are not sufficient to meet their basic needs.

It is not surprising, then, that although some families experienced improvement in their economic circumstances, others appeared to be desperately struggling with the realities of poverty. Nearly one-third of families reported having to go to food pantries for emergency food assistance. A comment by an executive director who participated in the focus group (and lives in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Boston) was particularly incisive in this regard. Upon hearing the preliminary study findings, she reflected, "These families look just like the families in my neighborhood. They are no different."

Twenty percent of the families could not be found during the followup period.⁸ Nearly 10 percent had experienced clearly negative outcomes—becoming homeless again, moving in with friends or relatives, being evicted, or fleeing violence.

Comparisons of Families by Changes in Source of Income

Fifty-nine percent of the families interviewed at shelter exit and followup had maintained employment or had become employed, decreasing their reliance on welfare. Nearly a third (31 percent) had continued to be or had just become reliant on welfare, and the remaining 10 percent had continued to rely on other non-wage-related income sources or had made no change to their income mix of earnings and welfare.

To provide more insight into the predictor variables explored in the quantitative analyses, we compared families that had maintained employment and had become less reliant on welfare between shelter exit and followup with those that had moved in the opposite

direction (exhibit 8). Higher proportions of families in the employed group had shorter stays in a shelter, lived in two-parent households, had been employed at shelter exit, had rented or owned their housing before entering a shelter, and had completed a TTW program than those in the more welfare-reliant group. The only surprising finding—differing from the quantitative findings—was the higher percentage of young parents in the employed group than in the more welfare-reliant group.

All families faced multiple challenges associated with being poor and making a recent transition from homelessness. The most striking difference between the two groups was the number of additional barriers the more welfare-reliant group faced. With one exception, all families in this group were dealing with one to four major challenges.⁹

Serious physical health problems—including asthma, chronic lung disease, cancer, injuries from an accident, and complications of pregnancy—were prominent and affected more than half of these welfare-reliant families. Two parents in this group died during the study period. Four families each had a member (child or parent) with a chronic disability serious enough to warrant SSI. Four families struggled with emotional difficulties and were receiving treatment for these problems. Three families were affected by domestic violence and drug or alcohol abuse. Two families had difficulties regarding citizenship and immigration or learning English. Two had parole or probation problems.

Circumstances of Families That Had Remained Employed or Had Become Employed and Left Welfare. Almost without exception, those families (59 percent of the subsample) that had remained employed or had become employed and left welfare continued to be poor 6 to 12 months after shelter exit, even with housing assistance. They reported struggling with low wages, job insecurity, job changes, and increased work-related expenses. Nearly all of these employed families maintained their housing and housing subsidy. However, one employed family (with a housing subsidy) became homeless again; the landlord decided that he wanted his daughter to have the apartment and evicted the family.

Another family—with an unused certificate in hand but unable to find a landlord willing to lease to them—moved in with a relative. Four families were challenged by serious physical health problems. Parents in four families were learning English and dealing with citizenship issues. Three faced obstacles stemming from domestic violence. Many parents

Exhibit 8

Distribution of Interviewed Families, by Change in Income Source Between Shelter Exit and Followup (%)

Variable	Reduced Reliance on Welfare (<i>n</i> = 34)		Continued or New Welfare Reliance (<i>n</i> = 18)	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Age 35+ years	35	12	50	9
Two-parent household	18	6	6	1
Rented/owned before shelter entry	33	11	24	4
TTW ELP or other program	49	17	39	7
Less than 6 months at shelter	35	12	11	2
Employed at shelter exit	70	24	35	6
Additional barriers	32	11	83	15

TTW = Transition-to-Work Collaborative; ELP = Economic Literacy Program.

mentioned the persistent difficulty in obtaining food stamps because they either had too high an income or had been cut off precipitously and in error once they became employed.

As exemplified by a profile of the Smith family, many parents were optimistic and upbeat, even in the face of these daunting struggles.¹⁰ Ella, a young African-American mother with one child, moved out of the shelter with a voucher for childcare and a housing subsidy she planned to use to pay her \$400 monthly rent. She received \$400 a month in child support. She had completed the TTW Economic Literacy Program and tentatively expected to earn \$1,200 per month as a full-time certified nursing assistant: "I plan to go on to be an LPN [licensed practical nurse].... I enrolled in a training program completely on my own.... It was [a] 4-week nursing-assistant course at the Red Cross. I did it on my own." Although she was still eligible for \$10 a month in food stamps, in her opinion the application process was too daunting to go through for so little payoff:

Moving here (into a new apartment), I lost the emergency assistance I had.... This is not a secure apartment.... They [the neighbors] deal drugs out of their apartment and the grounds are dirty and trashy.... They have a pit bull downstairs who is never leashed and can bite my child.... I like the neighborhood, not the neighbors downstairs.... I will need support for nighttime care because I plan on going to school two nights a week and I'll need transportation in the morning.... My hours will be 7 a.m. to 3 p.m.... The apartment should have been checked before I was moved here with my child.... I had to move and hurry to take an apartment because my Emergency Assistance ended [on] the 5th and it was already the 15th of the month.

At followup, Ella reported to her interviewer:

[I have to] slack off on one bill to pay another.... I earn about \$900 a month and make too much for food stamps. We get Mass[achusetts] Health.... I have to take care of all my business with the Department of Transitional Assistance on my day off.... One barrier is that when you work all day, the offices are closed by the time you get out of work.... I like what I'm doing (my job).... I get [health] benefits.... My sister picks up the kids at daycare.... I have asthma but the job hasn't been stressful.... I never have enough money, but so far we're managing.

Circumstances of Families That Had Continued To Rely on Welfare or Had Lost Employment and Returned to Welfare. Almost without exception, the lives of those families (29 percent) that had continued to rely on welfare or had lost employment and returned to welfare appeared to be more precarious than those with employment, even with housing assistance. These families' overall incomes were considerably lower than the incomes of those that were employed. Despite being poor and making a recent transition from homelessness, this group of families faced additional serious barriers, as previously discussed. Entering the workforce and ending reliance on some form of government assistance are expected to be extremely daunting for them, at least in the short run.

Once again, many parents were optimistic and upbeat. However, fears and concerns and untenable dilemmas predominated throughout the interviews. A profile of the Hernandez family exemplifies what we learned from families in these circumstances. Carlos, an immigrant from Haiti, had lived with his wife and three children in a shelter for 19 months:

I don't speak English very well but am a university-educated man with computer engineering skill. I want a job in that field. I'm still in school at the community college.

He and his wife had trouble finding housing because they were not U.S. citizens. One of their children, a U.S. citizen, was disabled and received \$530 a month in SSI payments. The family also received \$352 a month in welfare payments. Having finally secured state-funded housing, they were eager to move into their new apartment:

When I move, I want people to know that when you move into your new apartment, you have your own [place]...proud to be there. I won't have to live in conditions like in my old country. My daughter can get the help she needs here in this country. To have a beautiful apartment... I want my house to be a place where my children can feel good...so my children want to stay and they have educational toys.

At followup, Carlos reported:

We're in the same apartment and we pay \$266 in rent. We had [state help] to pay the security deposit. Our income is now \$542 a month through SSI and \$388 a month through welfare. We receive food stamps. I graduated from community college and am preparing myself for work. We don't go to a food pantry, but we have debt because of increased expenses for kids. My daughter is disabled and my wife must stay home in case our daughter gets sick. My son has asthma. I've never worked for pay in this country.... A big barrier is being an immigrant. The kids are doing well in school. I volunteer teaching computers and [English as a second language].

Discussion

Although we were unable to carry out a systematic comparison of outcomes for families with and without housing assistance, nearly all the families that were interviewed at shelter exit and followup emphasized the critical role housing assistance played in their lives. Nearly 90 percent of families left a family shelter with a housing subsidy and retained the subsidy 6 to 12 months later. This success in enabling families to obtain housing assistance is remarkable, particularly in light of the discouraging statewide trends mentioned previously, including reductions in low-cost housing options for families. Clearly TTW's housing-search requirement for shelter residents was extremely effective.

Based on parents' self-assessment of family income and our analysis of family incomes in relation to actual living costs in Boston using FESS (Bacon, Russell, and Pearce, 2000), the stabilizing force of housing subsidies cannot be overemphasized. With all the other stresses and worries that families uniformly had to deal with, parents indicated that not worrying about paying their housing costs was key and allowed them to focus on other aspects of their current and future well-being. For these families, any of the traditional forms of housing subsidies operated as a protective factor in preventing additional episodes of homelessness.

At shelter exit and followup, employed families had approximately twice as much income, on average, as families solely relying on welfare or other non-wage-related income sources. However, even when the value of housing assistance was taken into account, income levels for many families did not meet their basic needs. The abject poverty resulting from such low incomes created untenable and unthinkable circumstances for parents and children in these families, despite their best efforts to follow the precepts of welfare reform by going to work.

Not only did these parents work in low-wage jobs, but many were also attending school or a job-training program, juggling the demands of raising children, and caring for ill

family members. Moreover, several parents did volunteer work in the community on a regular basis.

Successful employment outcomes 6 to 12 months after shelter exit were more likely for families that were headed by an older adult, that resided in their own residence before shelter entry, that were homeless for shorter periods of time, and that had employment income at shelter exit. *Success* in this study was narrowly defined as being employed or reducing reliance on welfare 6 to 12 months after shelter exit. We have learned that employment is too narrow a lens through which to study the progress of a diverse group of families that have one experience in common: homelessness.

Indepth interviews with a subsample of families showed that those having less success entering the workforce at followup were more likely to be struggling with extremely serious challenges, in particular their own or their children's physical health problems. Other challenges included dealing with domestic violence, disabilities, emotional stress, addiction, or cultural and linguistic barriers.

These issues are not trivial, and families living in these circumstances should not be stigmatized when they seek government help to survive. Anyone facing such severe challenges could hardly be considered successful according to the goals of welfare reform. However, the human services providers who work with these families can easily identify the many subtle ways in which these families are successful. As staff in the focus group shared with us, they regularly witness a wide range of somewhat intangible signs of family success. The terms they used were *resiliency*, *spirituality*, *increase in self-esteem*, and *deepened ties with friends and supporters*.

Finally, we learned about the advantages and disadvantages of having service providers conduct qualitative interviews. On the positive side, the trust built between families and career advocates, who for the most part lived in the same impoverished neighborhoods or conditions as the families, appeared to facilitate parents' willingness to openly disclose their worries, fears, and troubling circumstances. On the negative side, it is unlikely that parents were comfortable disclosing their complaints, if any, about TTW program services. On balance, if we were to conduct a similar qualitative study in the future, we would utilize the same methodology but include more structured, ongoing oversight of the interviewing processes.

Policy Implications

The study's findings show that housing stability and income adequacy are inextricably linked. Both are essential for family survival. The results strongly suggest that housing assistance options, along with low-cost housing alternatives, need to be secured and expanded, particularly for poor families. Shorter shelter stays and the prevention of additional homeless episodes depend on the availability of permanently affordable housing alternatives for those who work in low-wage employment sectors or are unable to work temporarily or permanently.

Contradictory and counterproductive emergency assistance and welfare policies need to be resolved, particularly as they affect homeless families. Homelessness constitutes so much of a crisis that the application of time limits and work requirements should be put on hold while families are living in a shelter. In addition, public assistance grants should not be reduced for families living in a shelter. Welfare-to-work approaches appropriate for housing-assisted families on welfare may not apply directly to homeless families. Very little is known about effective approaches for helping families that are living in this destabilizing and devastating circumstance.

As a long-term human capital investment, education and training should satisfy welfare-to-work requirements. Educational achievement and technical skill are without a doubt factors that affect workers' ability to obtain jobs that pay a living wage.

One of the study's most important findings is the effect of poverty on families' lives, including the lives of those in low-wage jobs and those that are unable to work because of serious family-related barriers. Existing state and federal income supports need to be expanded (for example, the Earned Income Tax Credit and earned-income disregards), and new ones need to be created to ensure that every family's income is high enough to meet its basic needs. We should settle for nothing less from our local, state, and federal governments or from ourselves.

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Notes

1. Very poor households have incomes 50 percent or more below the federal poverty income threshold.
2. Participation in education or training cannot be used to satisfy this work requirement.
3. In Massachusetts, exempt recipients who do not face time limits or work requirements include adults who are disabled or caring for someone who is disabled, parents under the age of 20 who attend school full time and are the head of the family, women in the third trimester of pregnancy, and families in which the youngest child is less than 2 years old (or less than 4 months old if born on welfare).

4. This quotation is taken from the program's narrative in the city of Boston's 2001 application for McKinney funds.
5. These estimates are conservatively based on a single-parent family with two school-age children incorporating the median value of housing subsidy at shelter exit and at followup.
6. The basic R^2 statistic cannot achieve a maximum value of 1.0 when used in logistic regressions. The Nagelkerke R^2 statistic fixes this problem (Nagelkerke, 1991).
7. These analyses are available from the authors on request.
8. Despite aggressive outreach and multiple attempts by the TTW career advocates or shelter staff, these families could not be located when the second interview was to take place. In these cases, we asked the participating agencies' directors to provide as much reliable information as possible about the families' circumstances. We then incorporated this information into our analyses.
9. Most of this information was self-reported. However, in some cases, the families could not be found, and those service providers who were most knowledgeable about family circumstances provided details.
10. We have changed all family names to ensure anonymity.

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