A Qualitative Assessment of Parental Preschool Choices and Challenges Among Families Experiencing Homelessness

policy and practice implications

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

Quality preschool education has a critical effect on later academic success, yet only a small percentage of young children experiencing homelessness are enrolled in preschool and little is known about the challenges and decisionmaking processes that affect these children's participation in preschool. This paper responds to this knowledge gap. Using a modified grounded theory approach to analyze interviews and focus groups with 28 formerly homeless families, the authors find that key factors influencing preschool enrollment are housing stability, access to social-support networks, parental response to early learning environments, and the types of facilitative support for preschool enrollment received during interactions with early childhood and social service systems. These findings are integrated into a socioecological framework that describes the parental experience of preschool choice. The paper concludes with a series of policy and practice recommendations that may help facilitate preschool enrollment among families experiencing homelessness.

INTRODUCTION

On a single night in 2013—as measured by the Point-In-Time count conducted by homeless services providers under the auspice of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)—more than 70,000 families and 130,000 children were experiencing homelessness across the United States. Of these families, 80 percent were headed by single mothers, and 40 percent had at least one child under the age of 1 (HUD, 2013a).[1]

While poverty and homelessness present similar risk for adverse effects on child well-being, research has shown that critical timing effects with homelessness exacerbate the negative impacts of poverty (Fantuzzo et al., 2013; Shinn et al., 2008). A child's age at first entry into homelessness determines additional risk for developmental delays beyond the influences of poverty. A study of more than 10,000 third graders found that children who experienced their first episode of homelessness in toddlerhood had a 60-percent increase in the odds of *not* meeting proficiency standards in math, compared to children who experienced their first episode of homelessness later in life, in elementary grades (Fantuzzo et al., 2013). This increased risk in children who experience homelessness at earlier ages was also documented by researchers finding significant developmental delays in 4- to 6-year-olds who experienced homelessness as an infant or toddler, while children who experienced homelessness at a later age showed similar levels of academic achievement as housed low-income children (Shinn et al., 2008). Additional studies have linked the experience of childhood homelessness to increased emotional distress and decreased academic achievement (Briggs et al., 2013; Grant et al., 2013; Obradović et al., 2009).

Research also indicates that the majority of mothers in homelessness have experienced trauma as a child and/or as an adult. A recent study conducted in four cities in upstate New York found that 93 percent of all mothers in homelessness had a history of trauma, with most describing long histories of family and intimate partner violence (Hayes, 2013). Trauma, stress, and poverty are significant influences in the lives of young children experiencing homelessness (Cutuli, 2014).

Multidisciplinary studies have weighed in on the importance of early childhood education, demonstrating the long-term socioeconomic impacts of investing in children from low-income families. For very young children, Heckman and Masterov (2007) determined that adverse

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[1] The 2014 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress (AHAR) is available, but it does not report the age of children in homeless families. The 2014 AHAR reports there were 67,613 homeless households on a single night in January 2014, including 69,000 children.

environmental factors, such as financial stress, poor parenting, single-parent homes, and low parental education, increase the risk of early childhood deficits that define future health and productivity. Heckman et al. (2010) identified significant benefits for disadvantaged children who attend quality preschools in poor communities as more likely than their peers to graduate high school, find employment, and own their own homes and less likely to use social services.

Heckman and other early education researchers point to the critical need for a national commitment to the provision of quality early intervention and preschool connections for disadvantaged children (Heckman and Masterov, 2007; Heckman et al., 2010). Under the *McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act* of 1987[2] and the *Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007*,[3] policies were established to expand access to early childhood education and services for children in homeless households. These policies were further strengthened in the reauthorization of the *Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) Act of 2014*.[4] However, public policies, to date, have only partially removed significant barriers faced by homeless families when enrolling children in early education programs, as they do not fully address the multiple obstacles faced by parents experiencing housing instability as they seek to enroll and engage their children in preschool (Swick, 2010). Other researchers have identified stigma, parental guilt, and depression associated with being homeless as affecting family well-being and decisionmaking; have revealed that parents in homelessness often did not understand the value and importance of early education; and have explored the impact of shelters' not often being equipped with staff supports that might be helpful in addressing these needs (Averitt, 2003; Hinton, 2013). Past studies that focused on the voices and perceptions of homeless parents facing preschool decisions found that homeless mothers with young children are often dealing with a great level of stress, adapting their childcare approaches in relation to shelter settings (Powell, 2012).

Adding to this knowledge base, this qualitative research study investigates how families with young children who have experienced homelessness make decisions about accessing preschool. It explicitly explores the link among housing stability, social support networks, systemic supports and barriers, and preschool enrollment and advances understanding of the socioecological determinants (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) that influence preschool decisionmaking for families who have experienced homelessness.

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[2] Public Law 100–77.
[3] Public Law 110–134.
[4] Public Law 113–186.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

This research used qualitative methods to give recently rehoused homeless parents a direct voice in illuminating their individual and collective experience. In light of the paucity of prior research addressing the challenges of preschool choice and enrollment among families who have experienced homelessness, as well as the special complexity of housing instability, this study provided an opportunity for parents to define, in their own voice, the issues and circumstances that had the greatest influence on preschool enrollment. In this paper, the research team uses "preschool" to mean early childhood education programs that focus on cognitive and social development—including Head Start programs. This definition is in contrast to "daycare" or "childcare," which refer to situations in which children are cared for but without an accompanying cognitive or educational program. As noted in the following presentation of findings, respondents sometimes blurred this distinction in use of this terminology. Researchers, however, determined whether or not a child was placed in—or a parent aspired to place their child in—preschool, or simply in childcare, based on respondents' descriptions and research team members' reflection on related transcripts.

All study protocols were approved both by the authors' and Family Options Study institutional review boards, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

<u>Sample Population</u>

The study drew on interviews with 28 households enrolled in two varied geographic areas: Atlanta, Georgia, and the Bridgeport-New Haven region of Connecticut. All study households were previously enrolled in the Family Options Study, a randomized control study funded by HUD that included 2,307 homeless families across four different housing and service interventions in 12 research sites across the United States (HUD, 2013b). This qualitative study was designed as a smaller companion investigation to this broader national project, focused on increasing knowledge of how families who experienced homelessness make decisions about preschool enrollment and participation.

Only families with children under 6 years of age at the time of their enrollment in the Family Options Study were recruited to participate. As national study enrollees were not immediately accessible to the research team because of privacy protections, the national study research team recruited voluntary participants. Multiple invitations to participate in initial focus groups were mailed to all eligible households in the two targeted geographic areas.

Data Collection

Focus group dialogues and individual interviews were designed to gather study participants' perspectives on opportunities and barriers they encountered regarding enrollment of their child or children into preschool, with a special focus on the relationship between these decisions and processes and the family's experience of homelessness. Initial questions were designed to elicit information about experiences in identifying, pursuing, and participating in preschool settings for their 3- to 5-year-old children. Questions also explored the role that both homeless program staff and early childhood service providers played in supporting families in pursuing preschool options. All study interviews and focus groups were held 2 and 3 years after the participants' initial periods of homelessness.

Once the initial round of focus group interviews was completed and preliminary data analysis had been conducted, the research team invited all participants from both sites to participate in one-on-one semistructured followup interviews. Participants were contacted by phone, e-mail, and multiple mailed postcards in efforts to recruit their participation in the followup interview. Following multiple and persistent attempts at "rerecruiting" initial interviewees during a 3-month period, researchers were able to engage 16 households in these second phase dialogues—6 households in Connecticut and 10 households in Atlanta.

The research team set up a mutually convenient time for the followup interview in locations that were accessible via public transportation or in the participant's own home. Followup interview questions were designed to elicit additional detail about participant experiences, expanding on the data gathered through initial focus groups and individual interviews. These followup discussions lasted no more than 1 hour. Each interview was audiotaped and a verbatim transcript of the interview was produced to facilitate analysis. For each initial and each followup discussion completed, participants were provided an incentive of a $50 gift card to a local market or department store of their choosing.

Data Analysis

Applying a modified grounded theory approach (Pope, Ziebland, and Mays, 2000), the research team carefully read and reread transcripts to identify themes and subthemes emerging from the interviews, then aggregated and synthesized data from all transcribed files. After developing an analytical schema, the research team completed detailed coding of transcripts from both initial and

followup interviews, extracting passages from transcripts illustrating emergent core themes. All data relevant to each theme and subtheme were identified and examined in comparison with all other related data reflected in other themes and subthemes. The coding process was iterative—that is, the research team reviewed and revised each categorization level multiple times, reflecting on nuances found in the data and then altering the articulation of themes as a consequence of this dynamic analysis. This protocol was used as a means to identify overarching categories and specific themes and subthemes that comprised the final coding structure for data analysis.

Environmental Scan

The focus group and interview data were also analyzed in the context of an environmental scan in each of the two study communities. Detailed environmental assessments focused on the impact of community systems variables on parental choice and experience—including availability of preschool slots and tuition subsidies, accessibility of public transportation, and the array of early childhood education options open to the study population. These scans identified assets, supports, and resources in each study community, as well as gaps, barriers, and challenges specific to each locale. Key-informant interviews conducted in each community helped to ensure that consistent, relevant, and informative background data were gathered. These scans provided an additional dimension of contextual understanding for the relationships among participants' access to preschool, social supports, and housing stability. Selected highlights of each of these scans are summarized in the following section.

Georgia

Georgia provides state-funded universal prekindergarten (pre-K) programs for all 4-year-olds, supported through state lottery funds (Peisner-Feinberg, 2013). As a consequence, no fees are charged in Georgia for public preschool participation, regardless of family income level. Each pre-K program sets up an open registration process, through which all parents are welcome to register their child.

Head Start is also located in all 159 counties in Georgia. Each Head Start agency has its own priority list, and typically participants are enrolled based on a point system that is based on criteria that include income, public welfare status, homeless status, and disability. Statewide, Head Start serves approximately 480 homeless children each year—a relatively small percentage of the homeless families in Georgia in any given year.

Connecticut

In Connecticut, at the time this study was conducted, the State Departments of Education and Social Services were collaboratively implementing the Connecticut School Readiness and Child Day Care Grant (School Readiness) Program, begun in 1997. This program allows 3- and 4-year-old children in 65 qualifying communities (19 priority school districts and targeted schools within 46 competitive municipalities, as determined by the number of children eligible for free or reduced lunch) to participate in a high-quality preschool and childcare experience. Bridgeport and New Haven are among these qualifying priority school districts. In fiscal year (FY) 2012, 9,576 contracted spaces were available in priority school districts. In FY 2012–13, the School Readiness Program served 11,432 children 3 and 4 years old. Unlike the statewide preschool program in Georgia, an income eligibility limit is in place for childcare subsidies in Connecticut—60 percent of enrolled School Readiness families must fall below 75 percent of the state's median income. In addition, in FY 2012–13, federal and state funding supported 8,486 Head Start preschool children and their families.

The School Readiness programs in Connecticut are designed to serve children districtwide in high-need school districts and children attending targeted high-need schools within other school districts in the state. Despite this targeting, children entering kindergarten in the state's poorest communities were still far less likely to have had a preschool experience than those in the wealthiest districts (66 percent versus 95 percent; (Oppenheimer, 2013).

RESULTS

Characteristics of Study Participants

As a means of identifying basic demographic data descriptive of study participants, the research team analyzed baseline data gathered by the national Family Options Study for each participant.

Of the 28 heads of household and primary caretakers who participated in this study, 14 were interviewed in Connecticut and 14 were interviewed in Atlanta, Georgia. The average age of study participants was 31, ranging from 21 to 53 years old. Over one-half of all participants were between the ages of 21 and 30 years old. At the time of study enrollment, only 1 participant was married, 19 were single and never married, and 7 were separated or divorced.

In terms of race, 22 study participants were African-American, 2 were White, 3 were American Indian, and 1 was of an unrecorded race. In terms of education, 14 participants had not completed high school, 5 had earned a high school or GED® (general educational development) degree, 8 had completed some college or earned an associate's degree or technical certificate, and 1 participant had a bachelor's degree.

In responding to questions in the baseline survey regarding housing status just prior to the shelter entry that led to their enrollment in the Family Options Study, 16 of the 28 study participants indicated that they were staying in a house or apartment paying rent, 5 were staying in a friend or relative's house or apartment but not paying rent, 1 was in a transitional housing program, 2 were in a hotel paid for by themselves, 1 was in a domestic violence shelter, 2 were in emergency shelter, and 1 was staying in a vehicle.

With regard to income and access to benefits, all heads of household were receiving food stamps, 20 were receiving assistance from the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children; 22 were receiving Medicaid; and 14 were enrolled in the associated State Children's Health Insurance Program. The average total combined income before taxes of study participants was $7,513.

A summary of these data for the 28 families participating in the study is presented in figure 1.

Figure 1. Demographic Descriptors of Heads of Household Preschool Study Families		
Demographic Variable	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Gender		
Female	27	96
Male	1	4
Race		
African-American	22	79
Caucasian	2	7
American Indian	3	10
Unknown	1	4
Age		
20–29	15	54
30–39	6	21
40–49	6	21
50–59	1	4
Marital status		
Married	1	4
Single, never married	19	68
Separated or divorced	8	28
Highest education completed		
Less than grade 12	14	50
High school diploma or GED®	5	18
Some college, associate's degree, or technical certificate	8	28
Bachelor's degree	1	4
Housing status (immediately prior to entering shelter and enrolling in Family Options Study)		
Staying in a house or apartment paying rent	16	56
Staying with a friend or relative and not paying rent	5	18
Transitional housing program	1	4
Paying to stay in a hotel	2	7
Staying in a domestic violence shelter	1	4%
Staying in emergency shelter	2	7%
Living in a vehicle	1	4%
Financial information		
Received food stamps	28	100%
Enrolled in WIC	20	71%
Enrolled in Medicaid	22	79%
Enrolled in SCHIP	14	50%

GED® = general educational development. SCHIP = State Children's Health Insurance Program. WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children.

As referenced in the methodology section, the research team uses "preschool" to mean early childhood education programs that focus on cognitive and social development. This usage is in contrast to use of "daycare" or "childcare," which researchers used to refer to situations in which children are cared for but without an accompanying cognitive or educational program. Figure 2 provides a summary of the distribution of types of settings in which study participants had primarily placed the preschool-aged children that were associated with the focus of this study. While a majority of study households (61 percent) had enrolled their children in formal preschool programs (including Head Start), more than one-third relied upon either childcare settings or informal childcare arrangements. Enrollment in Head Start was distinguished from the more general "preschool" category, simply because of related policy and practice implications. A number of those participants did not start preschool until their child was 4 years of age, and many reported having to take their child out of preschool because of a housing change.

Figure 2. Early Childhood Settings Utilized by Preschool Study Families		
Type of Early Childhood Education	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Preschool program	13	47
Head Start program	4	14
Daycare program	7	25
Childcare provided by family or friend	4	14

Impact of Housing Stability on Preschool Enrollment

Among the specific issues this research project sought to explore in greater depth was the relationship between housing instability and preschool participation. Prior research indicates that housing instability can directly affect educational enrollment among younger children (Cunningham, Harwood, and Hall, 2010). For participants in this study, most housing moves were made within the same city limits. Housing mobility was also sometimes influenced by the desire to move to safer neighborhoods. As described by many parents in the study, their ability (or often inability) to focus on preschool choices was highly influenced by their current housing status, whether experiencing homelessness or moving to a new housing situation.

The importance of securing housing as a precursor to successfully addressing the challenges of pursuing preschool participation was a principle to which many of the study participants spoke

directly. When asked about her focus on preschool while in shelter, Brooklyn replied: *"It was more finding where I'm going to stay [first], and then go from there" (Brooklyn, age 27).* When asked the same question, Zoe stated: *"I don't know. I don't think I had the time … being in between the shelters and everything else… I wasn't really thinking about preschool. I was thinking about finding a house—a home for us" (Zoe, age 23).*

A number of parents discussed the fact that their various moves forced them to change their children's preschools as a consequence. Again, securing stable housing took precedence over keeping a child stably enrolled in the same preschool. Speaking to this point, Vanessa described the process of moving her son from one school to another after leaving the shelter: *"I took him out of [his preschool] when we moved downtown and put him into the New Haven preschool system" (Vanessa, age 20).*

The opportunity to purposefully choose housing based on the location of preschool options was mentioned only infrequently. A few parents' housing choices were, however, directly influenced by the location of the preschool they sought for their children. Khloe, for example, selected the neighborhood to which she wanted to move after her shelter stay based on the availability of a good preschool: *"I found out about the school before I found out about the house. … Wherever they started, that's where I wanted to keep him. So I wanted to keep him in that school. … I wanted to live in an area that's very close [to that school] and where I didn't have to drive a long ways" (Khloe, age 40).* Her choice, however, was somewhat unique.

Social Networks, Social Support, and Preschool Enrollment

The presence of family and social support networks was also a common determinant of the next housing location at both the initial exit from homelessness and when moving to a new housing location. Participants frequently mentioned the role of family members, godparents, and friends in providing support through childcare or through assistance in getting their children in school.

Most participants were surviving as single parents. Although several reported receiving child support or assistance from the other parent in helping to address childcare and/or transportation needs, a number of the participants reported receiving no assistance at all. This lack of assistance greatly constrained their options, as well, as they were limited both in their financial capacity and in their access to the supports that parental sharing in the burden of these responsibilities importantly provides. Participants frequently noted the consequences associated with lack of

support from their extended family. When asked if she had access to familial or peer supports she could turn to for help at all, Aria, a single parent, described her struggle in not finding help that she really needed in raising her sons: *"I really can't say that I have family that I can rely on. Because [my child's] behavior at school is atrocious, his school called me twice today about him. So I mean I'm having a hard time with him ... and like I called my dad and said, 'Dad, can you please go up to the school and just surprise and check on him?' Because I can't leave work ... I can't leave work like that. He never went. He said he had something to do"* (Aria, age 42). Such a lack of familial social supports further adds to the stress on single parents who are not only facing hardship with the challenges of preschool enrollment and participation but are also struggling to maintain stability in housing.

Parental Reflections on Experience With Early Learning Environments

In general, parents who had their children in preschool settings were relatively happy with their child's experience. Many reported they liked the fact that the program had opportunities for parental engagement and had a strong focus on education. For example, Camara, who had four children between the ages of 4 and 19, felt that the Head Start programs in which they had been enrolled provided all four of her children with the educational and enrichment basics that they needed for success in later learning: *"I need[ed] to make sure that my kids were learning. I want them to be exposed to the field trips, which they do two a month at Head Start. ... The learning process is in itself—them learning, like me being able to witness and see through the work that they sent home, that he was writing spelling words, and learning words and knowing how to add, subtract"* (Camara, age 35).

Similarly, when asked about her feelings regarding the relationship she had with her child's preschool teacher, Madison stated: *"What I liked most about it was (the) teacher, herself, because I could trust her. ... She would just let me know when (my son) needed to get back on track and when he needed some extra discipline at home"* (Madison, age 41).

Factors mentioned as important to parents were the setting's focus on education, communication between teachers and parents, teacher qualifications, the role of parents in the classroom, and the sense of order and cleanliness of the setting. Riley, describing what she liked best about her children's preschool, replied: *"I liked how they took care of their students. And there was really a lot of one on one with the kids. ... I [liked] how the teachers interacted with the kids"* (Riley, age 26).

Some parents reported a sense of dissatisfaction with their preschool choice, wishing that the school focused more heavily on promoting early learning. For some of these individuals, this concern led to a decision to pull their children out of school and keep them engaged, alternatively, at home. Addison, age 26, gives voice to this frustration: *"I felt like she was getting more over the weekends here at home as opposed to 5 days there. … Like I would ask her, 'What did you do today?' Oh, 'We played, and we painted, and we took a nap, and we ate lunch, and we came home.' … I don't see how any of the kids took away a lot from last year in the pre-K with them (Addison, age 26).*

When discussing the significance of the role that preschool played in their children's lives, some participants felt that it was important in assisting their children in a positive transition to kindergarten and later learning. Mia, for example, described wanting her two children to attend preschool to promote early learning and as preparation for kindergarten: *"I wanted my child to go to preschool because I know by me working and trying to go to school, I really didn't have time to really sit and marinate the letters with her and stuff, even though I do it with her. But I know—it's like basting, starting to get her ready—like, basting a turkey to get it ready to go in the oven. So it's more like basting her, getting her ready to go to a higher level. So I said, you know what? She needs to go to preschool to learn to be around other surroundings, so she knows what surroundings she's going into" (Mia, age 40).* In contrast, Zoe felt that the lack of preschool made her daughter's transition to kindergarten much more difficult. *"She's never been to preschool. She just—she was put in kindergarten … [which] she had to repeat because she didn't have that preschool experience. So this is her second year in kindergarten, hopefully not her third" (Zoe, age 23).*

In this same vein, Brooklyn had not initially been planning to look specifically for preschool but then chose to do so based on advice from her mother: *"My mom, she told me it wasn't mandatory for them to go to pre-K, but it's better for the kids to go to pre-K."* Ultimately she was happy that she had made this choice for her children: *"I really do see a big part of it playing in my kids' lives, because I do it here and then they go to school and learn the same things that I'm teaching them … so I see a difference with kids that don't go to pre-K and kids that do go to pre-K" (Brooklyn, age 27).*

<u>Systemic Barriers and Facilitators to Preschool Enrollment and Participation</u>

Beyond high housing mobility, the main barrier reported by participants from both geographic sites was the impact of long waiting lists for available slots and parents' related frustrations with the unmanageability of established enrollment lottery processes. Parents who wished to enroll their child in a particular preschool program frequently faced a lack of open slots in that setting. Available enrollment slots only infrequently open up. In the case of lottery processes typical for many systems in the communities associated with this study, programs enroll children based on chance—through lotteries conducted at a given moment in time. For families who do not understand that they need to get onto a waitlist or into a lottery pool—or *when* they need to do so—the pursuit of enrollment at a desirable location becomes understandably frustrating.

When asked about her experiences accessing preschool, for example, Naomi described the challenges she had with waiting lists: *"I've been trying to get my 3-year-old into preschool, but the waiting list is crazy [long]" (Naomi, age 23).* Because of her difficulties finding an open spot in preschool, this particular participant fell back on the support of her child's godmother for assistance as a childcare provider, even as a less desirable alternative. The waitlist was simply too long in the nearby preschool she had preferred, and she could not find any openings at other preschool programs within reach. Tiffany also described a similar frustration with the waiting list process: *"They keep you on the waiting list up until they do the lottery over, and then once they do it over, even if you're like number two and you didn't get in, you have to reapply all over again" (Tiffany, age 23).*

Many study participants reported finding out about school-based preschool programs too late to enroll or not being able to enter the local lottery due to lack of communication. To these points, Kaylee expressed frustration that it was up to the parents, without help from providers, to find out if the elementary school had a pre-K program: *"They [elementary schools] have pre-K slots but you have to [know about them] … and the only way you would know, of course, is if you called the school, because … they don't send no information home" (Kaylee, age 29).* Amplifying another facet of this same problem, Madison expressed frustration at the limited number of preschool slots available for low-income parents and the complicated processes associated with obtaining slots that might otherwise be accessible: *"They only have 20 slots for pre-K and the thing is that they only do it [registration] one day out of the year" (Madison, age 41).*

In this context, several participants mentioned challenges associated with the time of year that they had to look for schools. If they began their search too late in the year, no spots were available and their children had to be placed on waitlists. For families whose lives are defined by mobility and who have little control over when they may be moving to a new home, the need to enroll only at a certain time of year creates a particularly problematic barrier. Many study participants, for example, were unaware that preschool enrollment occurred in the spring for the following fall school year. They, in turn, voiced frustration at the lack of communication concerning this policy. As one participant expressed: *"By that point in the summertime, you couldn't enroll her anywhere" (Erica, age 45).* Madison similarly stated: *"I looked for a preschool closer and … unfortunately, it was too late by the time we were looking. … Most of [the programs] were already full. … They just told me that I have to put—they have to put [my daughter] down on a waiting list" (Madison, age 41).*

Several of the participants from each of the research sites described experiencing difficulties with both program costs and schedules. These participants were in search of preschool options that were both low or no cost *and* had extended hours. In many cases, extended-hour arrangements were not easy to find and families had to find alternative after-school care with higher financial costs.

About one-third of participants specifically described school enrollment procedures in the early childhood education system as being problematic. These parents reported struggling with complicated and sometimes overwhelming bureaucratic processes, without readily identifiable supports—mentioning the amount of paperwork, number of steps, large number of personal and historical documents needing to be submitted, and length of time required to find out if they had been approved for entry.

Participants also described practical challenges with schools simply not answering their telephones, absence of systems for tracking prospective enrollees, and the difficulties associated with finding only outdated, and thus unhelpful, online program information. As shared by one participant describing her experience: *"Basically either the information was outdated, or it wasn't for a particular area, or you didn't meet a qualification for this or that. Everything was a runaround."(Erica, age 45).*

For the most part, participants reported that they located preschool or childcare on their own by searching the Internet, calling schools, or looking for flyers or signs. Tracy (as did a number of other parents), described happening incidentally upon a sign for preschools with open slots: *"I saw … a small, little sign that they had on the side of the road and it says 'Free Georgia Lotto Program.' So then I went over there and I checked it out. They had an open slot available"* *(Tracy, age 26).* Similarly, Leslie described pursuing several different search strategies before she simply happened upon a school, coincidentally, because of a sign: *"I found it on my own … walking around the blocks I used to live on … and the sign is right off the … street right here and I was walking around the block and I seen it, so I stopped and talked to them and I liked it"* *(Leslie, age 21).*

Finding easy and/or cost-effective access to transportation was another primary concern for many of the study's participants. Just over one-half of participants used public transit or were within walking distance of the school. Some had their own vehicle or counted on family or friends for a ride, but only one family had transportation provided by the school. For parents that had multiple children—both in primary school and preschool—the ability to get their children to and from different schools each day at different times without reliable transportation was often a significant stressor. Leslie, for example, described the challenge of taking her two young children on a bus every day for preschool: *"I have a 3-year-old and a 4-year-old. They are in preschool now. They go to preschool in Hartford. I really don't have a car. I went on the bus, $4.00 to go and $4.00 to come back from New Haven to Hartford. Sometimes I stay over"* *(Leslie, age 21).*

Atlanta study participants, in particular, reported significant concerns with transportation. Some were unable to take advantage of open preschool slots due to being located too far away and lacking the necessary transportation options. Many participants relied on public transportation, but this commute often consumed a great deal of time. Illustrating this point, Madison, one of the study participants residing in Atlanta, described how she and her children spent 2 to 3 hours each day riding a bus and then two trains in order for her youngest daughter to attend preschool.

Participants had mixed experiences with regard to assistance from homeless service providers in accessing preschool. Less than one-half of the participants reported that they had received meaningful information from their homeless service providers about preschool options and, of

those participants, only three said their emergency shelter actively helped connect them to an early childhood setting. Only one participant reported that accessing preschool was discussed as part of their case management plan. While the percentage of participants that reported receiving useful information about preschool from their homeless service providers was higher in Connecticut than in Georgia, many families struggled to find new preschool options when they left the shelter setting and received little or no support in that search.

With specific regard to Head Start, few parents were able to articulate the distinction between general pre-K programs and Head Start programs, and fewer still reported receiving any information about Head Start options specifically. Addison struggled to describe the differences between pre-K and Head Start: *"I mean … what's the difference in Head Start and pre-K? I don't really know. … I know I wanted her to go to pre-K. I wasn't quite sure about Head Start" (Addison, age 26).* Head Start programs typically have specialized services and resources of great value to parents characteristic of those in our study population, as well as an established priority for homeless families. Because parents in this study apparently did not have access to the knowledge to distinguish between Head Start and other preschool settings, however, few mention having reached out to Head Start programs during their preschool search. Neither did these parents describe receiving any information specifically about Head Start programming—such as eligibility or services—from either Head Start, a homeless shelter, or other social service providers. Given that federal policy delineates homeless family populations as a priority target for Head Start enrollment, there was a striking absence of reference to having experienced any contact or outreach from Head Start programs by study participants.

Of additional note, participants reported receiving very little contact or assistance from public school systems' homeless liaisons—those public school staff specifically designated by the McKinney-Vento Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program as having responsibility for connecting homeless children to school settings—in addressing preschool or Head Start placement concerns. Only those parents who also had primary school-aged children reported any interactions with their local education agency homeless liaison, and in most cases even that interaction was described as being of limited value. In general, very few participants reported interacting with the McKinney-Vento liaison whatsoever. In one participant's case, because she had worked as a preschool teacher, she was better informed of the systemic supports available to her through EHCY, and—on her own—she sought these supports out. Commenting

on this experience, she reported that after she had already found the help she needed, the homeless liaison reached out to her: *"She [homeless liaison] apologized to me because she didn't get me help—the help I needed. I had to go over her [to get what I needed]"* (Camara, age 35).

Almost one-half of the participants that reported receiving information from local service providers indicated that they had information only on preschools in the immediate vicinity of the shelter in which they were staying. Although this information was valuable for the participants while they were still residing in a shelter, it proved to be a challenge for those parents who had to withdraw their children and find another preschool option as soon as they left the shelter to move into permanent housing. Aria, for example, described the limitations of the assistance she received from her shelter given her plans to move to a different county when leaving: *"The thing about [the shelter], they're basically in downtown [city]. So they had a lot of stuff for that area. They didn't necessarily have a lot of stuff for where I was at. So if I didn't [already] have daycare, I would have to actually do my research for myself"* (Aria, age 42).

Many of the participants echoed this experience—that local homeless service providers simply did not provide any meaningful information or discuss preschool options with them and that they had to pursue these alternatives on their own. When asked about assistance received from shelter providers, another of our study parents stated: *"Oh, no, they didn't talk to me about preschool … they didn't help me with nothing, I got absolutely nothing out of the shelter"* (Avery, age 21).

By way of notable contrast, several parents reported receiving helpful childcare referral information and assistance from local social service providers other than the emergency shelter: *"The [social services program] though—they help because they know that I'm moving, and they know us … (they) know that 'Okay, if you are moving, where do you want the kids to be?'"* (Madison, age 41).

It is significant to note that in both communities studied, systemic resources have been strategically established to assist families in accessing early childhood educational programs. In Georgia, for example, parents can utilize the website *Bright from the Start* to view both preschool and Head Start programs. Similarly, in Connecticut, parents can call 211 for information on specific early childhood educational programs. Avery describes using 211 as a referral mechanism: *"It just shows you what's available. … They tell you, like, what schools are*

available. Like, they have openings. They help you with Care for Kids. They help you with a lot of things" (Avery, age 21). In both locations, parents also noted relying on word of mouth, basic Internet and yellow page searches, and information provided by a sibling's school as helpful sources of information. It was also common for Georgia lottery-funded programs to advertise preschool openings by posting signs on the side of the road.

In both Connecticut and Atlanta, multiple participants referenced use of the state or local childcare referral agencies, though many participants discussed the challenge of locating early childhood programs on their own. When asked how homeless service providers could have supported them in accessing preschool, participants suggested that providers could provide basic information about preschool options as a function of regular casework practice and could also offer critical and/or comparative information on options available.

<u>Other Influential Factors in Preschool Choice</u>

Despite the many sources of stress present in study participants' lives, a number of them exhibited remarkable tenacity in prioritizing enrollment of their children in their preschool of choice. When Aria and her two sons had to move to a different county to live in a homeless shelter, she continued to bring her boys to the same school they had attended before becoming homeless: *"When I left [for work in the morning], they left with me early in the morning. I dropped them off at daycare and picked them up."* In addition to maintaining some consistency for them, she wanted to reinforce the importance of their school experience: *"I just want them to … know that education's important" (Aria, age 42).*

Naomi described how the enthusiasm that her children—and in turn she—had for their preschool was an important factor that outweighed the inconvenience of their preschool location: *"[My daughter] loved the school. She came home excited every time. I liked … the teachers … [they] were very nice. I liked the way they teach them. How everything went, it was just really nice. So the only thing was, it was very far… it was just me having to catch a bus and then still walk down a long hill and around the corner just to get her to school every day. But I really wanted her to go there. … My girls are very smart … to the point that they need to be in school" (Naomi, age 23).*

Some participants mentioned the role that childcare (whether preschool or daycare) played in allowing them to work and obtain income. Tiffany stated: *"So really it was just I needed her to*

be somewhere so I could look for work and get things done … that's really why I put her in preschool" (Tiffany, age 23). Riley echoed the same sentiment: *"I wanted her to be in school because I knew I had to get a job" (Riley, age 26).*

When asked what they were looking for when selecting a preschool, participants discussed a number of different priorities. Location was mentioned often as a high priority. When Brooklyn found a place to live after leaving a local shelter, she was fortunate to find a daycare and preschool within walking distance: *"The car is messed up, (but) I can walk to the daycare. … The location is going to be the main part for me … and if walking my kids to school so they can get an education is what I have to do, then that's just what I have to do" (Brooklyn, age 27).*

Proximity to home was also a critical factor for Madison when she selected a preschool for her son: *"So, you can't pay for transportation and you need somewhere you can walk to. These are things you gotta think (about). I gotta get my son somewhere if he gets hurt, I can get up there" (Madison, age 41).*

Having had a number of traumatic experiences in their familial lives, historically, several of these parents shared concerns about their ability to get to their children quickly if the need arose. Speaking to this issue, Addison did not want her three children in just any preschool. Unfortunately, she did not have her own means of transportation and was concerned about her ability to help her children if something were to go wrong, and therefore did not want to send her children too far away: *"They gave us bus passes and stuff to get back and forth. But then we moved off the bus line and moved back with my great aunt, and they had to change schools because there was just no way. … I looked at a couple of places. A couple of them were too far. I tried to take into consideration, if something happens, getting there. And some of them were just too far" (Addison, age 22).* As a consequence of the confluence of all these concerns, this mother then chose to keep her youngest child at home rather than put her in preschool.

Other factors mentioned frequently were issues that included cost, safety, and security; qualifications of teachers; extended hours; and availability of transportation. Camara, who was very familiar with the Head Start program, being a teacher in the program, explained that cost was an especially important factor in her selection of a program: *"I … wanted Head Start because in order to get … a childcare option, you have to pay (for) that childcare option and I could not afford (that)" (Camara, age 35).*

Zoe described the investigatory process she undertook when trying to select a preschool. Clearly, she was highly invested in knowing and understanding as much as she could about the setting her children would be entrusted to: "*Walking around, looking at it, going into the library, calling the school, walking around the school to see, because before I put my kids in any school, I got to spend the day to see how the students are there, how the teachers communicate with the kids*" *(Zoe, age 23).*

As participants discussed their experiences, some showed a sense of resignation to the challenges at hand, but others felt it was their individual responsibility to connect their child to the kind of educational setting they desired. If no protocol was in place for assisting parents in their search, they often simply figured out a way on their own to get their child into a desired program. When asked what advice these participants would provide to others in a similar situation, they responded with a consistent theme—be persistent, do the research, pull your own documentation together, visit schools before enrolling, and don't give up.

Speaking to this point, Brooklyn underscores the importance of personal perseverance: "*Like it's just open your mouth, check your resources, check them two or three times if you have to. And don't let nobody tell you nothing [about slots] because it's always somebody over them that could tell you 'yes'*" *(Brooklyn, age 27).* Camara echoed that sentiment, and adds to it the dimension of the importance of preparation and documentation: "*It's all about what you do. You got all your paperwork, and right there you talk to the people … so you go in. You try and do business. You got all your documentation, as far as birth certificates, social security, income tax, lease—all that—they're gonna get you in [to the program] that day. They would rather work with people that got [all] their stuff together than half of it*" *(Camara, age 35).*

A THEORETICAL MODEL OF PARENTAL PRESCHOOL CHOICE

Focus group and interview narratives presented a wide range of patterns of influences that led to enrollment and retention choices for preschool, with the most common decisionmaking factors identified as housing instability, social networks and supports, and systemic challenges and supports. Common elements in research findings, as reported previously, supported the construction of a socioecological conceptual model that reflects both risk and protective factors that influence parental decisionmaking about preschool enrollment. In this analysis, risk factors are defined as attributes contributing to the risk of a child not attending preschool (that is, barriers or challenges) while protective factors are defined as attributes supporting enrollment in preschool (that is, facilitative supports). Protective factors contribute to increased likelihood of a successful connection with preschool, while risk factors are seen to be connected with decreased likelihood of preschool enrollment.

Based on Bronfenbrenner's theoretical framework for human development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), this socioecological model—which recognizes the interrelatedness of person-place contexts—depicts multilevel risk and protective influences on preschool enrollment. Identifiable risk factors influenced parental decisions to opt out of or drop out of preschool enrollment, while key protective factors influenced parents in their capacity and choices for enrolling a child in preschool. The conceptual model in figure 3 depicts a framework of barriers (risk factors) and facilitative influences (protective factors) impacting how parents make decisions about preschool, based on insights and realities shared throughout the study interviews.

In the context of each family's housing status, multiple ecological and social factors appeared to mediate preschool choices, including access to social support networks, parental response to early learning environments, and supports or barriers embedded in the early childhood and social services settings or systems assisting these participants (for example, access to transportation, length of preschool waiting lists, access to tuition subsidies). Themes identified in the results sections (in the previous section), and discussed further in the following section, reflect the concerns that influenced parents' decisions to pursue, maintain, or alter their child's enrollment in a preschool setting.
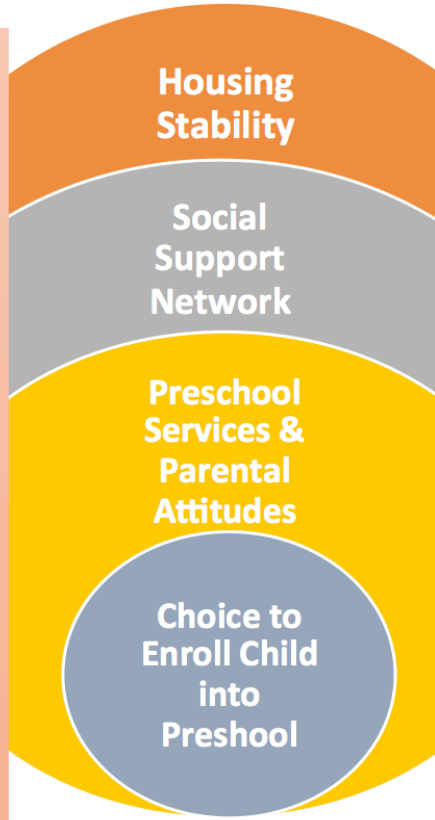
Figure 3: **Conceptual Model—Factors That Influence Parental Preschool Enrollment and Choice**

Risk Factors   **Protective Factors**

Risk Factors		Protective Factors
High Housing Mobility/ Homelessness	Housing Stability	Stable, Affordable, Safe Housing
Disconnection from Social Networks/Social Supports	Social Support Network	Access to Supportive Networks/Social Supports
Systemic Barriers (for example, wait lists; need for subsidy; lack of transportation; inability to pay first month cost for care); Parental stress	Preschool Services & Parental Attitudes	Systemic Facilitators (for example, preschool subsidies; access to transportation; Information and referral support); Parental ability to focus on preschool options
	Choice to Enroll Child into Preshool	

DISCUSSION

This socioecological conceptual framework (figure 3) can act as a guide for both housing and education systems that provide early childhood support services to families who are experiencing homelessness. If facilitating enrollment in early childhood education is a desired policy goal, then providing support in the context of this framework becomes an important strategic approach.

Reflections commonly voiced by parents in this study help shed light on the many barriers to accessing preschool confronting families that have recently experienced or are at risk of homelessness. Key obstacles identified include the relative absence of active outreach and information sharing by preschool settings; the negative impact of long waiting lists for preschool enrollment; the logistical difficulties consequent to enrollment lottery processes; the difficulties associated with a scarcity of open preschool slots (especially those with subsidies); challenges regarding needs for transportation and flexibility in scheduling; and difficulties in tapping into other social, familial, and systemic supports that might be helpful in addressing these concerns. Despite the fact that many early childhood education programs, particularly Head Start, have services available that could be of benefit to homeless and formerly homeless families, a working connection between homeless service providers and both Head Start and other early childhood settings was mostly missing from this study sample's self-described experience. Many of the families in the study repeatedly expressed the feeling that they were fundamentally "on their own" in identifying and accessing preschool options.

Although both Georgia and Connecticut have comprehensive statewide programs that provide low- to no-cost preschool alternatives, it was still a challenge for study parents to find preschools that had open slots at the time that their children needed them. While Georgia offers free universal pre-K programming, it is unfortunately not funded at a level that can accommodate all children in need. Because no income-based eligibility requirements are in place for families, a large number of families are in competition for limited preschool slots. In Connecticut, the families in the study may have been more likely to qualify for low or no cost preschool assistance; however, the need still outweighed resources accessible in the system. While the Connecticut Board of Education maintains a central waiting list and is able to provide information to families about current availability of slots, Georgia lacks a similar system for

parents to identify which of the participating preschools have current availability. Therefore, Georgia families often have to reach out to a number of different preschools to inquire about potential openings and to be placed on a school-specific waitlist.

The identification of waitlists and lottery processes as a critical barrier to preschool enrollment also points to the larger issue of limited availability of free, subsidized, and/or affordable early childhood education. While being placed on a waitlist or having to participate in a lottery was often identified as a source of annoyance or frustration to parents, their greater concern was the identifiably insufficient number of slots available at a free or reduced rate in the specific geographic locations that they desired. For many, this concern was also tied to accessibility of public transportation. For Atlanta, in particular, transportation was one of the greatest barriers to consistent engagement in preschools. This finding is not surprising given metropolitan Atlanta's lack of public transportation infrastructure. The Brookings Institution's Metropolitan Policy Program reported that, within the Atlanta metropolitan area, only 38 percent of working-age residents live near a transit stop. By comparison, 75 percent of working-age residents in New Haven and Bridgeport-Stamford live in proximity to public transit, and the average across 100 metropolitan areas, according to the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program, is 69 percent (The Brookings Institution, 2014). In a ranking of 100 metropolitan areas with regard to public transportation coverage and access to jobs via public transit, Atlanta ranked 91st.

In light of recent research on the impact of early childhood education for later educational success, facilitating access to early childhood education for families experiencing homelessness or housing instability is quite important. Insights from this study's participants underscore the importance of parental needs for preschool-related supports among families who are currently in homeless programs and extending into the critical period when those families are transitioning into more stable permanent housing. Constructing more active linkages between the early childhood education system and the homeless service provider system can help to address many of the barriers that families have articulated regarding learning about, enrolling in, and sustaining participation in preschool programs.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Findings described in this study point to a number of implications for potential application to both public policy and community practice. Some of these findings are summarized in the following section.

Increase Consumer Awareness of Preschool Options and Requirements for Enrollment

Findings underscore the recognition that both shelter providers and early childhood educators must do a better job of providing information to families about the various preschool options available to them. In particular, few parents had articulated any understanding that Head Start programs have established a priority for serving homeless and formerly homeless children, or that these programs are also designed to offer comprehensive case management for enrolled families. It is also important that families have better access to better information about preschool enrollment processes and how to locate and decide between different early childhood education alternatives. Helping families understand and gather all documents they need to enroll their children in preschool can substantially reduce difficulties described by study participants. Similarly, many parents in this study expressed frustration that they contacted programs too late in the year to be able to enroll. Although this challenge may be unavoidable for families who are unsure where they will be residing several months into the future, it can be valuable to help them to know that they should proactively explore waiting lists and enrollment processes as soon as they know to what location they plan to be moving.

Integrate More Thoughtful Attention to Preschool Access into Shelter-Based Case Management Protocols

A high number of participants noted that shelter providers did not discuss preschool as part of the case management provided through emergency shelter. Recognizing that this moment is especially challenging in families' lives and that children in homeless families experience trauma from frequent changes both in living situations and educational supports during these periods of housing instability, incorporating discussion of preschool options and mechanisms for accessing preschool as part of a family's housing crisis services case plan can help to ensure that families are made aware of and can more successfully navigate their way through available options. In addition, it is important that shelter staff help families locate preschool options in the geographic area they are likely to be moving to *after* they exit shelter, rather than focusing only on preschool

or childcare options near the shelter. This notion is fundamental in assisting families in establishing arrangements for preschool participation that can be sustained following shelter exit and can help to reduce the likelihood that families will lose access to preschool once they move into stable housing.

<u>Develop Strategies That Help Reduce the Impact of Housing Instability</u>

Because many of the families that have experienced homelessness often continue to experience high rates of housing mobility, it can be helpful for preschool and Head Start programs to explore options for "porting" slots from one program to another or for helping families enroll in similar or appropriate programs near to where they are next moving. In addition, clarifying guidance and providing encouragement for EHCY homeless liaisons as to their role and potential for impact in helping families access and maintain pre-K and early childhood education options could help increase the assistance available to homeless families with children aged 5 and younger.

<u>Address Systemic Barriers to Preschool Enrollment</u>

A number of parents expressed frustration that much of the preschool information available to them was neither current nor accurate, including data as basic as having correct and working telephone numbers for early childhood learning options. Ensuring that available information is accurate and up to date, while relying on technological and programmatic improvements, would likely decrease the amount of time that parents otherwise have to invest to craft their own solutions. Many parents reported putting themselves on multiple waitlists and simply hoping that one of these referrals would call them back. Building stronger connections among preschools in the community to create common enrollment applications or protocols, and/or facilitating a central waiting list for homeless families in particular, would also help reduce the difficulties otherwise confronting these households. Adding a priority for homeless or recently homeless families on preschool waiting lists (as is already the case with Head Start programs) might also help to ensure that families access preschool when they move into stable housing. Moreover, exploring ways to support strategies that provide more active transportation assistance would likely help to decrease the logistical barriers that many homeless and/or formerly homeless families confront in preschool enrollment, both while in shelter and in transitioning to longer-term housing.

Increase Collaborative Partnerships Between Homeless Services Providers and Educators

The importance of increasing both the quality and character of collaboration between homeless services providers and early childhood educators was also evident from these findings. For example, having Head Start staff or EHCY liaisons doing active "in-reach" to shelters and helping families to locate and register for preschool in the geographic area to which they are hoping to move can minimize the barriers to successful enrollment identified by participants. Engaging key actors from both the EHCY and Head Start programs as more active partners with homeless services providers can also help to ensure that eligible parents have the requisite understandings of program quality, availability, and access that are crucial for knowledgeable followup. In addition, increasing cross-system collaborations may well help the early childhood education system to identify practical and programmatic strategies for decreasing the barriers most frequently articulated by homeless and formerly homeless families. In the same vein, including homeless service providers more actively in systems planning for early childhood education and outreach can help in enhancing those systems' sensitivities and responsiveness to homeless families' needs.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the influence of homelessness and housing instability on parental decision making regarding preschool enrollment, relying on parental voices to identify key issues, themes, and challenges in their direct experience. This article introduces a socioecological conceptual model as a framework for identifying and understanding the complexity of factors that inform or underlie parental choices regarding preschool enrollment and participation. The study's findings have direct policy and practice implications both for the homeless and early childhood care systems, and the socioecological model presented may help frame practice that better facilitates preschool participation in a highly challenged population. Future research can productively look to evaluating interventions that link housing assistance and early education supports for families and their young children who experience homelessness, informed by the socioecological context in which parents make decisions about preschool enrollment.

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