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Social Services Professionals' Views of Barriers to Supporting Homeless Noncustodial Fathers

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Abstract

Objective—To investigate barriers to service for homeless non-custodial fathers from the perspective of social service professionals who work directly to assist men with securing housing while meeting the demands of fatherhood.

Background—The population of homeless fathers in the United States is increasing. Longitudinal studies show that although homeless noncustodial fathers and mothers face similar risk factors and barriers to services, research on minimizing risk factors and barriers for noncustodial fathers is limited compared with that for noncustodial mothers.

Method—The sample included 7 administrators and 12 direct service professionals engaged with fathers transitioning from homelessness. Data were collected via face-to-face, semi-structured interviews and analyzed using a qualitative inductive approach. Multiple cycle coding was employed to capture emerging themes.

Results—Three major themes, encompassing emotional, relational, and systemic factors, emerged regarding participants' experiences serving homeless noncustodial fathers.

Conclusion—Effective approaches to supporting fathers require empathy, relationship building, and collaboration between service providers and policymakers.

Implications—Future policies and interventions should be based on input from direct service professionals and homeless noncustodial fathers themselves, with the aim of best supporting their efforts toward securing housing while meeting the demands of fatherhood.

Keywords

fathers; homelessness; men; public policy; qualitative research; social services

Homelessness is persistent and widespread in the United States. Foreclosures, lack of affordable housing, and limited housing assistance are primary contributing factors (National Coalition for the Homeless [NCH], 2014). Among the homeless, 68% are single adult males

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(NCH, 2014), a large percentage of whom are thought to have minor children (NCH, 2014). Despite a slight increase in father specific services, such as education and employment programming, barriers associated with accessing support services continue to be seen as an impediment to homeless fathers' ability to resolve their homeless status (Barrett-Rivera, Lindstrom, & Kerewsky, 2013; Castillo & Sarver, 2012; Ferguson & Morley, 2011; NCH, 2009a, 2009b; Paquette & Bassuk, 2011). Barker (2012) noted that barriers to services for fathers include inability to bring their children into shelters with them and a lack of readily available childcare that would enable them to focus on participation in services. Other researchers have noted barriers such as fathers' distrust of systems, negative perceptions of homeless men, and service providers' unrealistic expectations of homeless fathers (Amato & MacDonald, 2011; Barrett-Rivera et al., 2013; Shade et al., 2011; Zanoni et al., 2013).

Among the limited studies exploring homeless fathers, the experiences of single custodial fathers have been central. For instance, a qualitative study of single custodial fathers and shelter staff found that homelessness affected child–parent relationships both positively and negatively, that gender-specific services for fathers were lacking, and that negative perceptions and unrealistic expectations were often placed on homeless fathers (Barrett-Rivera et al., 2013). In addition, “the fathers ... were acutely aware of the [societal] gendered expectations, [but felt] a lack of understanding from service providers” (Barrett-Rivera et al., 2013, p. 82). This concern may be particularly salient for homeless noncustodial fathers (HNCFs), who do not have physical custody of their children and who are believed to make up a substantial portion of homeless fathers (Barrett-Rivera et al., 2013; Castillo & Sarver, 2012; NCH 2009a).

Although services and policies addressing homelessness in the United States continue to expand, homeless fathers remain an underserved subgroup (Barker, 2012; Ferguson & Morley, 2011; Livingston, 2013; NCH, 2009a, 2009b; Robbers, 2010; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012), in part because providers serving homeless families generally focus on women and children (Amato & MacDonald, 2011; Lu et al., 2010; Pruett et al., 2009; Widarsson et al., 2012). For example, many shelters serving homeless families do not welcome adult men or male children aged 12 years or older (Barker, 2012; Barrett-Rivera et al., 2013; Berlyn et al., 2008). Research also notes stark differences in parents' experience of homelessness rooted in the social constructs defining male and female. Fathers experiencing homelessness tend to focus on their expected gender roles and identity, whereas mothers focus more on their parental role (Barrett-Rivera et al., 2013; Paquette & Bassuk, 2011; Roy & Dyson, 2010). Social services for HNCFs are rooted in a continuum of care model (COC) that emphasizes education and employment as the primary tools needed to acquire self-sufficiency (Lu et al., 2010; Pruett et al., 2009; Widarsson et al., 2012). This implies that financial means are the only obstacle facing homeless fathers.

Social service agencies seeking to effectively strengthen families must address the spectrum of HNCFs' unique needs. The literature highlights the importance of service professionals acknowledging gender roles and the components of father identity beyond the traditional “breadwinner” role (Barrett-Rivera et al., 2013; Paquette & Bassuk, 2011; Roy & Dyson, 2010).

Workers providing social services to homeless men, and specifically to HNCFs, have knowledge of the availability, barriers to access, and gaps in services. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions, needs, and barriers experienced and observed by a sample of direct service professionals (DSPs) and administrators serving HNCFs.

Theoretical Framework

We used the ecological systems perspective (ESP) to frame our understanding of the service needs of HNCFs because it aligns with our belief that various systems underlie how these men navigate fatherhood during economic hardship and suggests that father engagement is embedded in networks of these systems. Within this framework, we evaluated the challenges, barriers, and inherent strengths of fathers experiencing homelessness.

The ESP proposes four levels of interaction—microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)—that can be applied to the HCNFs. In this context, the *microsystem* comprises relationships among family and peers, including relationships with the children's mothers or other family members. The *mesosystem* encompasses connections between HNCFs and social service workers; these interactions could increase stress for men facing the dual roles of homeless male and father. The *exosystem* consists of government and organizational policies that influence the supportive services available for homeless fathers. Lastly, the *macrosystem* encompasses broader cultural and subcultural views (e.g., related to being male, homeless, and a father) that could have a hierarchical influence (e.g., a homeless label overshadows the father label for men accessing support services).

Literature Review

Literature exploring the state of social services for HNCFs and the barriers experienced by social service professionals who assist them in maintaining the role of a father while securing housing (Castillo & Sarver, 2012; Deslauriers et al., 2012; Fagan & Lee, 2011) is scant. Influenced by social norms that perceive fathers solely as breadwinners, social service agencies primarily offer employment-related services to HNCFs, while diminishing the value of their father role due to their homeless status; for example, services aimed at helping HNCFs visit their children are practically nonexistent (Deslauriers et al., 2012; Devault et al., 2010; Negura & Deslauriers, 2009). Fathers are more inclined to engage with services when they believe the services will help them, but few interventions use social-support services to facilitate increased noncustodial-father involvement with their children (Castillo & Sarver, 2012). Formal supports such as social service agencies, by their very nature, sometimes undermine men's independence and self-efficacy (Castillo & Sarver, 2012). Fagan and Lee (2011), drawing on data from a broader quantitative study of fathers and framing their findings within the ESP, concluded that father engagement is higher when overlapping systems—i.e., the mesosystem—are structured to support noncustodial fathers' complex needs.

Thus, social services—despite their potential to buffer the adverse effects of homelessness on fathers and their children—are suboptimally used in practice. Inquiry is therefore warranted into how these services can be more effectively harnessed to remedy the barriers experienced by this subpopulation of fathers when they attempt to parent while homeless (Castillo & Sarver, 2012).

Homelessness is a particularly complex issue that requires a multifaceted response from social service professionals if it is to be efficiently and successfully resolved for fathers, children, and families. Fagan and Lee's (2011) quantitative analysis identified three major themes associated with social services for noncustodial fathers: a pervasive negative perception of noncustodial fathers, a strained relationship between fathers and other intersecting systems such as child protection, and a need for services that adapt to fathers' specific needs. To address these issues, the authors argued that the social service support needs of fathers—whether homeless or not—first need to be recognized by those who develop and deliver such services, and that additional support options need to be explored. Scholars have consistently asserted that the responsibility falls on researchers and practitioners to determine how interventions should be developed and delivered to ensure that social services assist with improving father engagement (Deslauriers et al., 2012; Fagan & Lee, 2011; Negura & Deslauriers, 2009).

Despite a wealth of empirical literature exploring the positive impact of social supports on psychological well-being, the role of formal support networks (e.g., those provided by social service agencies), in the context of promoting positive outcomes among the homeless population is poorly understood (Cook-Craig & Koehly, 2011; Reitzes, Crimmins, Yarbrough, & Parker, 2011; Wasserman & Clair, 2013). For example, when working with homeless individuals a key outcome of service provision is securing safe and suitable housing; however, follow-up remains minimal and limited government data are collected to assess outcomes (Reitzes et al., 2011; Wasserman & Clair, 2013). In the absence of good data on outcomes for homeless individuals, another approach to obtaining relevant data is to interview direct social service providers to understand their experiences providing services to HNCFs and possible barriers to service experienced by the fathers. In this way, service professionals who work with the homeless population can provide valuable information about services rendered and possible areas for improvement.

Thus, we investigated barriers to service for HNCFs from the perspective of direct social service professionals (DSPs) who work to assist homeless fathers with finding homes. We chose to interview DSPs because they experience first-hand the barriers hindering fathers from accessing the services they offer. Administrators provided an alternative perspective due to their leadership positions, allowing them to identify gaps in services across systems and programs and permitting us to consider additional barriers.

Our overarching research question was: How do DSPs and social service administrators describe the experience of providing support and services to HNCFs? We explored the experiences of DSPs in providing services to HNCFs and their perceptions of the barriers these men experience when attempting to access services. An underlying impetus for this research was evidence that early intervention substantially improves parenting in the long-

term (Fagan & Lee, 2011; Hong et al., 2011; Roy & Dyson, 2010), suggesting that both parents and children will benefit if (a) social service agencies can proactively work to alleviate barriers to services, and (b) homeless fathers are assisted in maintaining relationships with their children.

Method

Sampling Procedures

During October 2015, a purposive, non-probability sampling plan was used to recruit social service professionals serving HNCFs. This technique facilitated obtaining information-rich insights that cannot be obtained with other methods (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Maxwell, 2002). We anticipated obtaining a total sample of 10–15 DSPs and 5–10 administrators. Eligible participants were at least 18 years of age, had been employed by their agency for at least 6 months, provided direct services to fathers enrolled in their support programs, and spoke English. The study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Boards at Capella University and the University of Minnesota.

Study participants were recruited from two organizations, both of which are federally-, state-, and county-funded social service organizations within Minneapolis–Saint Paul that work with fathers on employment, education, housing, parenting, and other essential life skills. Combined, the agencies provide services to over 1,000 fathers annually.

A formal letter was sent to the gatekeepers at each proposed research site, followed by telephone calls to both organizations to inquire about study support. Gatekeepers at both sites granted permission for the study to be conducted at their site. Each was then given the interview questions and asked to provide space for interviews lasting up to 60 minutes.

The gatekeepers identified potential participants, roughly 25 DSPs and administrators at one site and 20 DSPs and administrators at the second site. To avoid singling out participants, we recruited at all-staff meetings within each agency. The first author distributed 45 identical packets that included a letter explaining the study and providing researcher contact information, a consent form, and a checklist of inclusion criteria. Potential participants could take a package home and follow up privately within one week to indicate their interest.

Of the 22 individuals who contacted us and were assessed for eligibility, 19 (7 administrators and 12 DSPs) met the inclusion criteria. Their mean age was 39 years (range: 31–66 years) and they had been working with fathers for a mean of 11 years (range: 2–16 years). The sample comprised 13 males and 6 females; 14 were non-Hispanic African Americans, 4 were non-Hispanic Whites, and 1 was Hispanic.

Data Collection Procedures

Preliminary interview questions were field tested by two university professors and two practitioners, all with qualitative methods expertise. The proposed questions were sent to each person via e-mail with a summary of the study's background and purpose. Field testers were asked to provide feedback concerning whether the proposed interview questions would sufficiently answer the research question. Recommendations received included adding

questions about women or mothers as a comparison point. This recommendation was rooted in the fact that most homeless single-parent households are headed by women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The second suggested modification was to ask participants at the end of each interview whether they had anything to add. Both suggestions were implemented in the final interview guide (see Appendix).

Participant demographics were gathered via questionnaire before the interviews, which took place in private offices at the participants' work sites in late 2015. Face-to-face interviews roughly 30 to 60 minutes in length were all conducted by the first author for consistency. Interviews were semi-structured and open-ended to provide sufficient flexibility within each interview to explore and validate participant responses (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Participants were given a \$10 gift card as compensation. All interviews were audiotaped via a password-protected handheld device, and subsequently transcribed verbatim by professional transcriptionists.

Data Analysis

A qualitative approach akin to Hatch's (2002) nine-step inductive approach was used: (1) identify overarching themes; (2) read the data and mark the related themes; (3) read the entries and record the main ideas or overarching themes; (4) find subthemes and relate them to the overarching themes; (5) re-read the data and code them to fit the identified themes; (6) describe the subthemes, supporting them with transcript data, and remove examples that do not align with the identified themes; (7) identify relationships among the subthemes; (8) summarize the subthemes as one-sentence generalizations; and (9) confirm that the generalizations are supported by data excerpts. The first author and a research assistant analyzed the transcripts using multiple-cycle coding and constant comparative data analysis methods (Boeije, 2002; Saldaña 2009). QSR International's NVivo 10 qualitative data analysis software was used to organize the data into major ideas and thematic categories.

Findings

Three major themes emerged regarding participants' experiences providing support and services to HNCFs: emotional, relational, and systemic factors, each of which included subthemes. To protect participants' identities, each was given a unique identifier (e.g., DS1, AD2).

Emotional Factors

Many participants identified emotional factors as contributing in important ways to their work with HNCFs. These factors arose in several subthemes.

A sense of hopelessness—The most notable emotional factor affecting participants in their work with HNCFs was a sense of hopelessness. This was described in various ways, from service providers experiencing outright resistance from fathers—described as a way fathers avoided disappointment—to the providers themselves feeling that services were inadequate. This theme applied to both the fathers' and service providers' feelings about the

lack of support they could provide for the HNCFs. All providers acknowledged that their agencies often failed to provide services beyond basic needs (e.g., food, clothing) for fathers.

It doesn't feel like there is a real true win for most of our clients. The greater percentage lies in, "Sorry, there is nothing I can really do to help you" rather than being excited about being able to help them. (AD7)

Some participants discussed additional circumstances that they believed prompted feelings of hopelessness for fathers, such as the complex nature of homelessness resulting from compounding issues of unemployment, mental health, trauma, poor rental history, and lack of education: "Being homeless is one of the most challenging things that you can probably deal with.... They develop a negative mindset and don't sometimes understand how to receive the help" (DS11).

Participants said that HNCFs struggled to see any potential for better circumstances, and that they were "in the streets because the system is too difficult to navigate" (AD7). All participants believed that their positions provided them with invaluable opportunities to "walk alongside" homeless fathers and recognized that they were often the only support for these men, who regularly experienced social isolation.

Stigma and shame related to social expectations of men—Participants shared their perceptions of how *stigma and shame related to societal expectations of men* affect the HNCFs they serve. Examples of such statements include, "Men get cut down a lot. It's like men are not supposed to be homeless. It's like, 'You're a man, you should be able to figure it out'" (DS4), "You should be able to go and get a job and find your own place" (AD2), and "It's almost like our society says to homeless dads, you are a man, buck up!" (DS12). Another participant described the "glass barrier" associated with homeless fathers trying to obtain employment:

It's how the system treats them. You know, here is a guy you see in the same clothes every day. We can't get them employed.... He is a negative in the employment world, and employment is the one step out of homelessness.... You have to have an address; you have to have a steady place to live. You know it [homelessness] is like having a felony. (AD6)

We also uncovered paradoxes within agency policies and social service practices that, at times, reinforced male social roles. Yet, despite the tendency of the support system to be biased toward mothers, participants acknowledged that the homeless fathers' needs do not substantively differ from those of homeless mothers; rather, "just the support and availability of resources [to meet those needs] differ" (DS11).

Need for compassion and increased sensitivity by providers—According to several participants, a good service provider understands the fathers' need for compassion and increased sensitivity by providers. Many participants said something akin to "meeting clients where they were" (AD4, DS11) was very important. This involved gaining a deeper understanding of the men's experiences, feelings, and needs.

I would invite anyone to come along with a homeless father who is looking for housing like we do. Walk alongside them as an outsider and see what you experience. See how it transforms your life.... We can't walk in the right shoes if we don't know where we are walking from. (AD7)

Others felt the need to understand and empathize with underlying issues such as mental health and untreated trauma as factors contributing to homelessness.

I think the greatest problem is that there is a huge lack of understanding for these people. I believe many have a mental handicap of some sort.... It could be genetic, ... it could be a result of prolonged use of drugs, or it could be an injury that was never taken care of. (AD7)

Many also spoke about reserving judgment regardless of the cause of homelessness. For example, one direct service provider said, "We just have to accept [fathers] for who they are and for their situation without any judgment" (DS1).

Relational Factors

Another major theme was interpersonal connections. The most common underlying subthemes were barriers to service provision and the importance of building rapport and trust, relational factors that were "lifelines" for fathers.

Building rapport and establishing trust—Participants' work with fathers relied heavily on building rapport and establishing trust.

One of the biggest challenges is developing a rapport with the father to where he will actually articulate the fact that he is homeless. I want to say that it is almost an embarrassing thing for them to say, "Hey, I'm a man with children and I have no place to lay my head at night." (DS12)

Beyond embarrassment, many fathers had experiences with the criminal justice and child protection systems that had eroded their trust in others. A direct service provider shared the experiences of one such father.

[The father] felt like the whole system was so against him, and so he was very resistant to anybody's help. His child had gotten tied into child protection services, and he was actually able to get her out. According to him, the mom made so many false allegations about him that [child protective services] ended up taking the kid back [into their custody again]. So he was very distrusting and resistant to believing that anybody had his best interest at heart. (DS8)

Participants added that, consequently, fathers will accept only a limited amount of information from them unless they perceive an interpersonal connection.

I think some other challenges [for service providers working with HNCFs] are helping them understand some of the services that they can access in the community and being able to build a rapport with them where they are actually open to receiving that information. (DS5)

Participants employed various approaches to establishing trust and rapport with homeless fathers. Showing genuine care was a foundational requirement because “people want to know that they are cared about” (DS11). An administrator said staff could work toward establishing trust by “providing support and encouragement” such as saying, “You can do it, don’t give up. I’m here for you. Let’s sit down together and try to figure this thing out” (AD2).

Barriers to service provision—Participants acknowledged that relationship building takes time that is not always available, and they were therefore sometimes forced to follow pre-developed agency case plans. However, fathers were more resistant to receiving services when rapport and trust had not been established, and participants were adamant that so-called “cookie-cutter” case plans are not always effective. For example, a direct service provider stated, “The people who are disbursing the resources are not knowledgeable about the clients that they are servicing. More focus needs to be put on the individual rather than the resource itself.” (DS9). Similarly, another perceived that “resistance came from [the father’s] goals maybe not aligning with the agency’s goals or the case plan that was designed for him” (DS6).

Furthering the point, another direct service provider detailed a specific example of how relationship building helped an HNCF become more open to receiving services:

[The father] was very resistant to the support because he felt. . . . he wasn’t going to be safe in any kind of shelter and in spite of our best attempts to . . . shine a different light on the options that might be there for him, he was still very resistant to it. Once we were able to use motivational interviewing and . . . talk with him about . . . his real fears, . . . he became a lot more open. We were able to [reassure him] that he would not have to stay [in a shelter] for an extended length of time . . . and then he would be able to get some help to move forward. (DS12)

Participants described motivation interviewing as a client-centered approach that utilizes empathy and support to help clients resolve ambivalence related to life issues.

Despite the relational challenges that participants encountered, they described the relationships, once established, as being “lifelines” for HNCFs, who often feel rejected and isolated in their attempts to remedy their homelessness.

The resistance comes because this is a lot of stuff to do! “I have to work on myself plus I have to work with the system, plus I have to work with my family, and I got to work on being there for my children.” That is overwhelming to a lot of our guys. A lot of them want that but not realizing what all comes with that. It’s especially overwhelming when you feel like you have to do it alone. (AD1)

Systemic Factors

The last overarching theme was systemic factors. The underlying subthemes most commonly expressed were outreach, community collaboration, and a holistic approach.

Outreach—Many participants described outreach activities—physically going where the fathers were to meet a need—as a regular part of their work with HNCFs. Outreach was perceived to be a vital resource that may go beyond providing basic needs and often involves educating. An administrator stated that, “We are taking the initiative to go out and provide services to fathers [because] they may not otherwise have access” (AD3), and a direct service provider conveyed that “it’s important that we provide [homeless fathers] with additional resources and information on what’s out there, what’s available in their communities” (DS2). Similarly, the administrators stated that their positions heavily involved outreach: “We are continuously trying to get the word out [by] doing presentations for different organizations that we partner with about some of the issues that custodial and noncustodial fathers face” (AD3).

Community collaboration—Participants saw collaboration as being equally important to outreach, and they relied heavily on other community members to provide support and services to HNCFs. A direct service provider stated that service provision “is going to vary per agency, so things work better when we collaborate to meet fathers’ needs” (DS5), and an administrator expressed similar sentiment: “We need to collaborate, instead of one agency scrambling around thinking that they can do it all or thinking they have all the answers and all the information” (AD5). Participants also expressed that, beyond providing complementary services, agencies could develop better solutions when working collaboratively: “We all know what the problem is, now let’s get together and figure out some solutions” (AD2).

Holistic approach—Most participants felt that they could serve fathers more effectively if they could also provide wraparound services or intensive case management. Homelessness was viewed as a complex social condition requiring multidimensional solutions. Participants deemed it vital to address not only fathers’ physical needs but also their emotional, spiritual, and mental health needs because, as an administrator put it, fathers “need employment, education, mental health, and support programs. . . . ‘support’ means the whole deal” (AD3). This perspective was echoed by a direct service provider, who stated that “there has to be a holistic approach . . . to deal with the symptoms and social conditions that brought about the homelessness” (DS9).

Discussion

This study was designed to investigate barriers to service for homeless noncustodial fathers from the perspective of direct service providers who work with this understudied, underserved, and vulnerable population. Fathers can play an important role in children’s emotional, social, and health development, and well-supported fathers are critical for producing environments in which children thrive (Curtis & Geller, 2010; Deslauriers et al., 2012; Fagan & Lee, 2011; Mollborn & Lovegrove, 2012; Ngu & Florsheim, 2011). An absent father is a risk factor for poverty, drug use, emotional and behavioral problems, child maltreatment, and criminal behavior (Curtis & Geller, 2010; Jones & Mosher, 2013; National Fatherhood Initiative, 2010; Ngu & Florsheim, 2011; Perlman et al., 2012; Zannoni et al. 2013).

Using ESP as a theoretical framework, we explored the experiences of DSPs and social service administrators serving HNCFs. A primary focus of ESP is understanding the meanings attributed to experiences within the context of one's life or environment. Emotional, relational, and systemic factors emerged as key themes.

Among the emotional factors affecting how participants served fathers, issues of hopelessness were prominent. Service providers despaired that their agencies lacked adequate services to fully assist fathers and shared their belief that fathers experience hopelessness when attempting to navigate support systems unable to meet their unique needs. Participants shared that, beyond the situational barriers of homelessness, many fathers had overwhelming feelings of defeat when also tasked with parenting responsibilities, possibly because the financial, emotional, and physical challenges of homelessness are detrimental to one's ability to parent (David et al., 2012).

Stigma, shame, and compassion were also perceived to be prevalent emotional factors for HNCFs. The societal expectations participants believed were placed on HNCFs were consistent with the findings of Barrett-Rivera et al. (2013), who documented service providers' lack of understanding of the true needs of homeless fathers and unspoken gendered expectations. Homeless individuals tend to refuse help when service providers have rigid expectations (Ogden & Avades, 2011), but our participants described their attempts to not project those cultural ideologies when working with HNCFs; rather, they wanted to be sympathetic to the plight of the fathers they serve. Indeed, findings from Sznajder-Murray and Slesnick (2011) suggest that clients respond more positively and remain more engaged with services when social service providers exhibit such empathetic and compassionate behavior.

Many participants shared that they have formed friendship-like bonds with the fathers they serve, and that relational factors contributed heavily to their ability to engage fathers in services. For example, consistent with Barker et al. (2011), developing rapport and trust with HNCFs was deemed crucial for assisting HNCFs to obtain housing and develop parenting capacity. Without trust, men would sometimes not disclose their housing or parental status. Conversely, denying HNCFs' parental identity could lead to further anguish, potentially diminishing the father's parenting capacity, prolonging his homelessness, and further exacerbating the separation he felt from his children (Barrett-Rivera et al., 2013; Coles, 2015). Participants felt most effective in their work with HNCFs when they assisted fathers in developing relationships that entailed mutual reliance and interdependence.

Several participants reported that outreach and awareness at the social service and legislative levels affected how they provided services and support to HNCFs. Participants clearly believed that both social service providers and legislators lack a full understanding of the plight of HNCFs and reported that leaders with direct influence over their practice were not always aware of clients' unique needs. To eliminate barriers to service, our participants, like those of Pattnaik and Medeiros (2013), reported a need to further educate community stakeholders and legislators on father homelessness, including how homelessness challenges the traditional male provider and affects the parent-child relationship.

Our participants indicated that many homeless fathers become discouraged due to the lack of available services to assist with life issues outside of child support, addiction, and mental illness. Once fathers become frustrated with a system not designed to meet their needs, they tend to withdraw from supportive services (Deslauriers et al., 2012). Conversely, their engagement is higher when overlapping support systems are structured to support their complex needs (Fagan & Lee, 2011), including interagency collaboration (e.g., coordinating with child support to set up payment plans, through family courts for fathers to have parental time). Such interaction across agencies and services can enhance social service professionals' ability to meet HNCFs' needs while also fostering working relationships within the larger social service system.

From the perspective of father-specific social service professionals serving HNCFs, support systems include mental health agencies, substance abuse services, housing programs, and criminal justice agencies (e.g., courts, probation services). The exchange of resources and information between father-specific social service agencies and other service professionals can influence service delivery patterns. For example, social service professionals are often the first to identify fathers' housing needs and play an important role in enabling or inhibiting service access for many HNCFs (Barker et al., 2011; Barker, 2012; Zanon et al., 2013).

Understanding how professionals successfully render social services to HNCFs is an important step toward strengthening programs and informing effective strategies. Aligned with ESP, the results of this study indicate that the experiences of HNCFs are shaped by the social services they encounter (e.g., child support workers, homeless service workers, shelter staff); the subculture of homelessness; and the male subculture. However, Nooe and Patterson (2010) noted that HNCFs also experience a variety of personal challenges, including substance abuse, low education, and untreated childhood trauma. Understanding these factors can make social service professionals more sympathetic to the emotional challenges these men face when attempting to remedy their homeless status while maintaining a parental role.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although our findings are both consistent with and advance existing research, the study has important limitations. We did not interview HNCFs, so our findings do not represent the views and experiences of fathers themselves and there may be more to learn in subsequent research that directly solicits their participation (e.g., their perspectives on the causes of homelessness, their active efforts to continue parenting, efforts to resolve homelessness, and the multiple service barriers they directly encounter (Scullion et al., 2015). Further, the use of purposive sampling may limit the ability to generalize the findings beyond this study's sample. The targeted sample, however, allowed us to understand the particular settings and viewpoints of interest for the purpose of this study. Because HNCFs experience unique social and cultural vulnerabilities that differ from those of homeless mothers, we focused exclusively on DSPs and administrators within agencies that provided services solely to fathers.

Practical Implications

Given the continual emphasis on the relational components of social services and other helping professions, this study has several implications for practice. The impact of service providers establishing interpersonal relationships with fathers can inform strategies for effective program development. According to our participants, social service provision is most effective within the context of a corresponding relationship, suggesting that the quality of contacts, rather than the number of clients served, should be emphasized. In short, our findings suggest that to be effective, social service agencies must find ways to establish rapport and trust with HNCFs.

Several participants alluded to gaps in the social services available to HNCFs, as well as to a lack of resources to meet fathers' needs even among services that work exclusively with fathers. For example, agencies provided support and services such as child support and employment assistance, but not visitation areas for homeless fathers to visit with their children. Additionally, participants believed that wrap-around services or holistic approaches to service delivery are essential for providing comprehensive support to HNCFs. Indeed, other studies have shown that wraparound services are a vital component of support for HNCFs, especially given the complex nature of both homelessness and parenting (Cook-Craig & Koehly, 2011).

Conclusion

Findings from this study inform social change by indicating a clear need for empathy, relationship building, and collaboration among service providers to create effective and practical approaches for supporting fathers. The study highlights the importance of exploring multiple ecological levels to provide a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to successful service outcomes for fathers who access homeless services. These results further suggest that HNCF's positive experience with service providers at the micro level can buffer some of the negative effects of exo- and macro-level interactions. Future directions in this area should include developing, analyzing, and validating policy and interventions based on input from DSPs and HNCFs themselves to further identify ways to best support their efforts to remedy the social dilemma of homelessness while meeting the demands of fatherhood.

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Appendix

Interview Questionnaire Guide

Overarching research question: How do direct service professionals and social service administrators describe the experience of providing services to homeless non-custodial fathers?

1. As best you can, describe what it is like working with homeless fathers enrolled in your programs.
2. What challenges have you experienced working with homeless fathers?
3. Can you recall a time when you personally or your agency experienced a homeless father being resistant to support? If so, what did that look like?
4. As best you can, describe how the needs of homeless fathers may differ from those of homeless mothers?
5. If you could change things to make access to services easier for homeless fathers, what changes would you make? How would you go about ensuring these changes are made?
6. What type of programs and services do you see as most essential to helping fathers get out of homelessness?
7. Is there anything else you feel is important about your experience serving homeless fathers or the barriers you may observe?