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Child protection involvement among homeless families

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ABSTRACT

Linked administrative records were leveraged to characterize the demographics, prevalence and timing of child protection system (CPS) involvement of families receiving services from a homeless services agency in Los Angeles County, California between 2013 and 2016. Results revealed that nearly two-thirds of families seeking homeless services between 2013 and 2016 had concurrent or historical CPS involvement. Given that CPS involvement most often preceded the families' first homeless service encounter, the results not only underscore the value of cross-system coordination in the provision of family supports, but also highlight opportunities for prevention.

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Child maltreatment; family homelessness; child welfare services

Introduction

Family homelessness emerged as a major national social and public health issue in the 1980s (Grant, Gracy, Goldsmith, Shapiro, & Redlener, 2013). Since then, the number of homeless families with children rose sharply, then plateaued and began to fall around 2009 (Grant et al., 2013), now constituting 33% of the overall homeless population (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), 2017). Some researchers argue the proportion is likely higher, as families are more likely than other homeless populations to fall among the “uncounted homeless” (Brush, Gultekin, & Grim, 2016). This general upward trend is particularly alarming given the short- and long-term deleterious physical and mental health effects homelessness can have on children and families. In addition to the immediate stress and disruption housing instability and homelessness can cause, homeless children and families often experience a number of negative exposures and life events that compound to increase risk for poor health outcomes in the long-term (Cutuli et al., 2017; Felitti et al., 1998; Ma, Gee, & Kushel, 2008; Park, Fertig, & Allison, 2011; Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). The experience of homelessness is often cyclical for families (Grant et al., 2013); many homeless children and youth find themselves in families struggling with deep poverty, family instability,

mental health and substance exposure, and domestic violence before becoming homeless, and homelessness increases their vulnerability to additional adversities (American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) Council on Community Pediatrics, 2013; Anda et al., 2006; Bassuk, DeCandia, Beach, & Berman, 2014; Cutuli et al., 2017; Putnam-Hornstein, Lery, Hoonhout, & Curry, 2017; Shonkoff & Garner, 2012).

Despite the clear adverse implications of the cyclical nature of homelessness, the pattern inherent to the experience could signal important service needs that ought to be addressed by homeless services providers. Additionally, it could highlight potential opportunities for prevention. For example, linkage and analysis of administrative records has documented significant overlap among the homeless and child protection populations (Culhane, Webb, Grim, Metraux, & Culhane, 2003; Park, Metraux, Brodbar, & Culhane, 2004; Park, Metraux, & Culhane, 2005; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2017; Zlotnick, 2009). This research also suggests that child protection involvement often precedes the first encounter with homeless service agency. In fact, Putnam-Hornstein et al. (2017) found that 50% of homeless young adults receiving homeless services in San Francisco County, California had been reported as being maltreated at least once during childhood.

Much of this research, however, has been conducted at the child- or youth-, rather than family-level. Given that families are the unit of service for the child protection system, and that families have different service trajectories within the homeless service system, better understanding their unique experiences and service needs has implications for service delivery. The only study addressing this gap is a recent investigation by Rodriguez and Shinn (2016). They found that, among a small sample of homeless families ($n = 258$), 52.8% had at least one referral to child protective services (CPS) within two and a half years before emergency shelter entry.

Understanding the timing and prevalence of child protection involvement among families seeking homeless services could help providers better tailor their supports, and ultimately, better serve their clients. It also could help county agencies leverage initial touch points to change these families' trajectories at an earlier stage, and potentially prevent homelessness down the line. The goal of the current study is to examine the prevalence and timing of child protection involvement of families accessing homelessness services in Los Angeles County, California through linkage and analysis of administrative records, with an eye toward identifying implications for service delivery and prevention.

Methods

The current analysis was based on a linkage between countywide administrative homelessness services records from Los Angeles County, California and statewide administrative child protection records. Homeless Management

Information System (HMIS) records for all individuals with homeless service encounters from January 2013 through December 2016 were provided through a data use agreement with the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority. These records identify persons within a family seeking services, dates and types of services provided, and related information for identifying program enrollment. Child protection records collected through Child Welfare Services/Case Management System were available through a long-standing university–agency research partnership with the Department of Social Services (DSS). Child protection data were based on an extract from the fourth quarter of 2016 and included information dating back to 1998. Child welfare data includes records of allegations of abuse and neglect, perpetrator information, and outcome of investigations. Both linkage and analysis fell under approved university and state human subjects protocols.

Record linkages

Records from both data sources were coded and standardized for linkage. HMIS records for the population of clients who had a service encounter with Los Angeles County’s homelessness services system between January 2013 and December 2016 were first subset to the population of individuals 18 years of age or older (i.e., Head of Household; HoH) ($n = 115,175$) at the date of first homeless service encounter during the study window. Separately, we identified individuals in the data who were minor children (i.e., under age 18) on the date of first service encounter ($n = 28,686$). Then, using HMIS Case and Grouping keys, minors were matched to HoHs. Minors seeking services who were not attached to parents ($n = 3,270$; 11.4% of all minors identified) were excluded from the analysis. Finally, children in HMIS were probabilistically matched to children who were involved with the child protection system at any point since 1998 ($n = 4,680,314$). CPS records were left-censored (unavailable prior to 1998) due to California’s transition to a new data collection system. In order to improve the validity of the child-to-child matches, an analogous process was completed using the CPS records as the universe. Specifically, analysts identified children alleged to be victims within CWS/CMS, confirmed that guardian information was attached to these children, and then probabilistically matched these children to children in HMIS.

Record linkage software was used to generate matched pairs (ChoiceMaker, Version 2.7.1). Records were probabilistically linked on a non-networked workstation based on a combination of unique (i.e., Social Security number) and nonunique (i.e., first name, middle name, last name, date of birth, gender) personal identifiers. A customized algorithm applied a set of logical clues to assess select fields for each comparison of two records. Each clue used personally identifying information to determine if the two records were the same person (match clues) or different persons

(differ clues). Match probabilities based on these clues in excess of 0.8 were deemed a sufficient probability of matching and included in the linked dataset¹. After records were linked using confidential information, all direct identifiers were stripped and a restricted research dataset was constructed for statistical analysis.

This matching procedure yielded a population of HoHs seeking homeless services who had at least one minor child attached to them at any point during the study period, hereafter referred to as “Parents” ($n = 12,283$).

Variables

Parent demographics

HMIS records served as the source file from which all demographic characteristics were derived. Parent age, defined as client age at the date of the first homeless shelter service encounter recorded during the 2013–2016 window, was used to identify the parent as a Transitional Age Youth (TAY) (i.e., ages 18–24) or Non-TAY Parent (i.e., ages 25 and older). Because the universe of parents included in the record linkage was conditioned on age between 2013 and 2016, there were no records in which date of birth was missing. Parent gender was coded as Male, Female, or All Other Cases, which included Transgender (i.e., MTF, FTM), Other, Client Doesn’t Know, Client Refused, and Data Not Collected, comprising 0.3% of records ($n = 31$). Parent race and ethnicity was derived from separately recorded fields in the HMIS data to create five categories: Black, Hispanic, White, Asian/Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander and Other, which included Non-Hispanic American Indian/Alaska Native, Multiple Race Stated, Missing, and No Race Stated. Using the family Grouping key, we then calculated the number of distinct children who were attached at any time during the time window per parent (1 child, 2 children, 3 children, 4+ children). Child age was defined based on child age at the date of the parent’s first homeless shelter service encounter recorded during the 2013–2016 window (Parents with children under age 5 at first encounter, Parents without children under age 5 at first encounter). Parents without children under 5 at first encounter includes children whose date of birth is after the household’s entrance into the program.

Homeless service project type

Receipt of various homeless services (referred to within HMIS as Project Types) also was recorded. Project types include: Public Housing (PH)-Rapid Re-Housing; Transitional Housing; PH-Permanent Supportive Housing (Disability req. for entry); Homeless Prevention; Services Only; Street Outreach; Emergency Shelter; and Coordinated Assessment.

Child protection history

Interaction with CPS was first defined for each child attached to a parent, and then rolled up to the parent level to identify parental CPS involvement for any child. Parental CPS involvement in California (i.e., CPS involvement of any child in that family at any point since 1998) was defined at four levels: Any history of alleged maltreatment (Referred), substantiation as a victim of maltreatment (Substantiated), case opening for CPS services (Case Open), and foster care placement (Placed in Out-of-Home Care). We then defined the timing and level of CPS involvement for descriptive purposes relative to the timing of homeless service interaction.

Analyses

The final analytic dataset from the record linkage procedure outlined above consisted of the full population of Parents (i.e., clients seeking services in 2013–2016 who were 18 years of age or older and had at least one minor child attached to them at any point during the study period ($n = 12,283$)). For each parent and attached child, linkages to statewide CPS data were used to establish a longitudinal record of childhood allegations of abuse and neglect, substantiated allegations of maltreatment, open cases for services, and placements in out-of-home foster care. For descriptive purposes, we calculated the prevalence and timing of CPS involvement among the entire population of parents. We used Chi-square tests to assess the statistical significance of observed differences.

Results

Population

As depicted in [Table 1](#), the number of individuals, Heads of Households, and parents seeking homeless services increased substantially between 2013 and 2016. Homeless Parents accounted for an average of 11% of all Heads of Households seeking homeless services in Los Angeles County in this time frame.

Demographics

As shown in [Table 2](#), more than half (57.8%) of the parents in this cohort ($n = 12,283$) were between the ages of 25 and 39. Almost a quarter (24.6%) of parents were 40 or older, while 17.6% were between the ages of 18 and 24 (TAY). The distribution of race was 48.4% Black, 38.4% Latino, 8.8% white, and 1.5% Asian/Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander. The vast majority (83.2%) of parents were Female. During the study window, 40.9% of parents

Table 1. Number of parents seeking homeless services (i.e., individuals ages 18 and older with one or more minor child attached to them at any point during the study window), by year.

	2013	2014	2015	2016
Individuals	31,325	36,118	51,708	66,819
Heads of Household (Individuals 18 and older)	25,474	27,156	39,831	54,245
Parents	2,475	3,633	4,601	4,672

Table 2. Demographics of parents seeking homeless services between 2013 and 2016.

	Overall (<i>n</i> = 12,283)	
	Frequency	Percent
Parent Age		
18–24 (i.e., Transitional Age Youth)	2,164	17.6%
25–39	7,094	57.8%
40+	3,025	24.6%
Parent Race/Ethnicity		
Non-Hispanic Black	5,940	48.4%
Hispanic	4,714	38.4%
Non-Hispanic White	1,076	8.8%
Non-Hispanic Asian/Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	188	1.5%
Other(1)	365	3.0%
Parent Gender (2)		
Female	10,220	83.2%
Male	2,032	16.5%
Missing/Unknown/Other	31	0.3%
Number of Distinct Children Per Parent		
1	5,024	40.9%
2	3,649	29.7%
3	2,053	16.7%
4+	1,557	12.7%
Child Age		
Parents with children under 5 at first encounter	7,134	58.1%
Parents without children under 5 at first encounter (3)	5,149	41.9%

(1) Other includes Non-Hispanic American Indian/Alaska Native, Multiple Race Stated, Missing, and No Race Stated.

(2) Transgender (i.e., MTF, FTM), Other, Client Doesn't Know, Client Refused, and Data Not Collected (*n* = 31).

(3) Parents without children under 5 at first encounter includes children whose date of birth is after the household's entrance into the program.

had one minor child attached to them at any point, 29.7% had two, 16.7% had three, and 12.7% had four or more. Over half of homeless parents (58.1%) had children under the age of 5 at first encounter.

Homeless services provided

As shown in Table 3, nearly two-thirds (61.1%) of all parents in this cohort received Coordinated Assessment, 39.1% received Rapid Rehousing, and 10.8% received Transitional Housing. A chi square test of proportions indicated there were significant differences between no CPS involvement compared to any CPS involvement over homeless services provided ($\chi^2 = 93.9$, $p < .001$). Post hoc analyses with a conservative Bonferroni correction

Table 3. Types of homeless services provided.

	Overall (<i>n</i> = 12,283)		Any CPS		No CPS	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Row Percent	Frequency	Row Percent
PH-Rapid Re-Housing	4,800	39.1%	3,097	64.5%	1,703	35.5%
Transitional Housing	1,321	10.8%	878	66.5%	443	33.5%
PH-Permanent Supportive Housing (Disability req. for entry)	871	7.1%	622	71.4%	249	28.6%
Homeless Prevention	1,204	9.8%	657	54.6%	547	45.4%
Services Only	1,579	12.9%	1,078	68.3%	501	31.7%
Street Outreach	374	3.0%	257	68.7%	117	31.3%
Emergency Shelter	2,847	23.2%	1,908	67.0%	939	33.0%
Coordinated Assessment	7,511	61.1%	4,794	63.8%	2,717	36.2%

identified Homeless Prevention as having a significantly lower proportion of families with CPS involvement versus all other categories. Conversely, Permanent Supportive Housing (71.4%) had a significantly higher proportion of families with CPS involvement than Rapid Re-housing (64.5%) and Coordinated Assessment (63.8%). Other comparisons of homeless services between CPS involvement group proportions were not significantly different.

Child protection history

Table 4 shows 63.4% (*n* = 7,832) of homeless parents in this cohort (*n* = 12,283) had at least one child who had been referred to child protective services for alleged abuse or neglect since 1998, 31.9% had at least one child who had been substantiated as a victim of abuse or neglect, 27.8% had at least one child protection case opened for services, and 16.7% had experienced the removal of one or more children to out-of-home placement. Table 5 presents an analysis of timing of child protection involvement relative to first homeless services interaction. It was found that 84.5% of families with a child who had been reported for alleged maltreatment experienced their first referral before their first homeless services encounter. Additionally, 80.8% of families with a child who had a substantiated claim of maltreatment experienced their first substantiation before their first homeless services encounter. Finally, 23.2% of homeless parents who were CPS-involved had a CPS case open at the same

Table 4. Child protection involvement of families seeking homeless services between 2013 and 2016.

	Overall (<i>n</i> = 12,283)	
	Frequency	Percent
Referred	7,832	63.4%
Substantiated	3,935	31.9%
Case Opened	3,429	27.8%
Placed in Out-of-Home Care	2,057	16.7%

Table 5. Timing of child protection involvement of families seeking homeless services between 2013 and 2016.

	Overall	
	Frequency	Percent (col)
Referred		
1st Ever Occurred Before 1st Homeless Services Interaction	6,620	84.5%
1st Ever Occurred Concurrently With or After 1st Homeless Services Interaction	1,212	15.5%
Substantiated		
1st Ever Occurred Before 1st Homeless Services Interaction	3,180	80.8%
1st Ever Occurred Concurrently With or After 1st Homeless Services Interaction	755	19.2%
Case Opened		
1st Ever Occurred Before 1st Homeless Services Interaction	2,564	76.8%
1st Ever Occurred Concurrently With or After 1st Homeless Services Interaction	775	23.2%
Placed in Out-of-Home Care		
1st Ever Occurred Before 1st Homeless Services Interaction	1,384	67.3%
1st Ever Occurred Concurrently With or After 1st Homeless Services Interaction	673	32.7%

time or subsequent to receiving homeless services; 32.7% had a concurrent or subsequent out-of-home placement.

Discussion

This data linkage study generated important insights that have implications for both child protection and homelessness programs and policies. First, a full two-thirds of homeless families identified in this study had at least one referral to CPS for alleged abuse or neglect. For the vast majority of parents identified as both homeless and CPS-involved, their first contact with CPS occurred before they sought homeless services. It is unknown whether earlier prevention supports and coordination of case services could have helped resolve problems at an earlier stage and potentially prevented later family homelessness, but the trajectory is intriguing. One potential avenue could be to address housing instability among CPS involved families; an issue research suggests is common in this population (Barth, Wildfire, & Green, 2006; Courtney, McMurtry, & Zinn, 2004; Fowler, Farrell, Marcal, Chung, & Hovmand, 2017; Fowler, Toro, & Miles, 2009). To address that need, a subset of child welfare agencies are incorporating housing supports into their responses to cases of child abuse and neglect. A review of these approaches has identified the following strategies: Partnering with public housing agencies and leveraging resources; assessing housing needs of CPS involved families; prioritizing CPS involved families for housing resources; housing first strategies; developing housing stability plans and shared case plans; screening families into, as opposed to out of, housing; providing help with housing search, and adopting a Supportive Housing approach to the provision of housing (Cunningham & Pergamit, 2015; Landsman & Rosenwald, 2015). More research is needed to assess the effectiveness of their application – either individually, or in combination – within the context of child welfare in preventing homelessness, and

also promoting child safety, permanence, and well-being, but early evidence is promising (Cunningham & Pergamit, 2015; Fowler, 2017).

Second, the results show that the number of individuals, HoHs, and parents accessing homelessness services in Los Angeles County appears to be increasing, with the number of parents seeking services nearly doubling between 2013 and 2016, from 2,475 to 4,672. It is uncertain how much of this increase is due to improvements in data collection related to parental identification versus true increases in family homelessness, but the trend is consistent with literature documenting increases both at the state and national level, and within Los Angeles County during the study window (U.S. HUD, 2017). It should also be noted that, despite the apparent increases, the total number of parents identified in this study is likely an undercount. First, the proportion for which homeless parents accounted was lower than national estimates (11% of all HoHs seeking homeless services in the current study vs. an estimated 33% (or more) of the homeless population nationwide (Brush et al., 2016; U.S. HUD, 2017)). Second, researchers have found that a substantial number of mothers (~20%) become separated from children just before or at emergency shelter entry (Cowan, Shinn, Weitzman, Stojanovic, & Labay, 2002; Gubits et al., 2016), whereas others have placed that percentage at closer to 40% when describing families in shelters who had a child living away from them, either before or during their shelter stay (Walton, Wood, & Dunton, 2018). Our methods would lead to a misclassification of individuals who did not have physical custody of their children during the study window as non-parents. It is therefore possible that increases in family homelessness are larger than those observed, but are unable to be detected using this methodology.

Finally, the results should contribute to needed discussions about the appropriateness of earlier child welfare responses to families who subsequently sought homeless services. Among CPS-involved homeless families, more than half had not had any case opened for services (58.4%). Certainly, these numbers call into question whether earlier or current responses were adequate in intensity, duration, format, or content. Future research could explore the trajectories of children and families from CPS interaction to homelessness, and, specifically, to assess differences in the rates of subsequent homelessness between children who have had either a case opened or not, and between children who received community-based supports but no foster care vs. those who experienced a removal. Further explicating the intensity, duration, format, and content of CPS responses is absolutely possible using administrative data, and could help to further our understanding of not just the nature of and diversity in responses, but also lead to the development of “precision-oriented” approaches.

In sum, more research is needed to better understand the characteristics, needs, and experiences of these families so that service providers can tailor supports and develop coordinated cross-sector responses. One thing, however, is clear: The high degree of overlap in these populations highlights opportunities for increased cross-system coordination. Not only could this coordination

facilitate the generation, refinement, and evaluation of programs for families touching both systems, it also could lead to the development of cross-cutting, tailored programs and services that proactively serve families' needs.

Note

1. Repeated examination of score distribution has consistently supported a 0.8 threshold.

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Notes on contributors

Regan Foust, PhD is the Director of Strategic Partnerships and a Research Scientist at the Children's Data Network, a data and research collaborative focused on the linkage and analysis of administrative records. An experienced researcher, project manager, and data translator, she works closely with data, research, and funding partners to pursue and communicate the CDN's transdisciplinary research agenda, inform childrens' programs and policies, and build the capacity of government agencies to make better use of their own data. Formerly, as Senior Manager, Data and Research for the Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health, she managed and curated www.kidsdata.org, guided the development and implementation of child health and well-being initiatives, and stewarded strategic data and communication partnerships. Prior to joining the Foundation, she worked to bridge the gap between research and practice in the social sciences at a research and development firm, and to evaluate and improve programs at a child welfare agency. Dr. Foust holds a doctorate in Educational Psychology from the University of Virginia and a B.A. in Psychology from U.C. Davis.

Huy Tran Nghiem, MS is the Research Programmer at Children's Data Network. He participates in research projects by developing programs for large and complex data from various sources. He functions as liaison between scientists and IT analysts to design and enhance systems to satisfy research specifications. Huy has had experience in data analytics and administrative procedures in various fields of healthcare. He holds dual Bachelor degrees in Applied Mathematics and Public Health Sciences from University of California, Irvine and a Master degree in Software Engineering from the California State University, Fullerton.

John Prindle, PhD is a Research Assistant Professor with the Children's Data Network. His research focuses on longitudinal and predictive modeling of the impacts of maltreatment on

child and family services, and on child development. Prior to working with the CDN, John developed theory guided exploration methods to combine structural modeling and data-mining techniques to examine covariance structure heterogeneity. He is also interested in models of growth and change, measurement models, and studying the impact of incomplete data in biasing statistical tests. John graduated from the University of California, San Diego with BS/BA degrees in Psychology and Economics, and from the University of Southern California with a PhD in Psychology.

Jonathan Hoonhout, BFA serves as Project Administrator of the Children’s Data Network. His research interests include child welfare, homeless youth, single parenting, and LGBTQ youth outcomes. From 2009 to 2011, Jonathan served as the Grants Director and Company Manager of the Washington Ensemble Theatre. His responsibilities included proposal design, project oversight and serving as liaison between various interest groups for the company. Jonathan received his BFA in Theater from Cornish College of the Arts.

Jacquelyn McCroskey, DSW is a core team member responsible for creating the Children’s Data Network and currently serves as Co-Director. She holds the John Milner Professorship of Child Welfare at USC’s School of Social Work. Her research focuses on financing and organization of services for children and families, utilization of results and performance measurement, and the efficiency and effectiveness of services. She draws upon both qualitative and quantitative methods to inform policy and guide improvements to government systems providing child welfare, juvenile justice, and early care and education services. Currently, McCroskey co-leads the multi-university child welfare evaluation team funded by Casey Family Programs to support the Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services in understanding the impact of a variety of community-based service initiatives, including the DCFS Family Preservation Program and Prevention Initiative Demonstration Project. She also leads a cross-disciplinary research roundtable of researchers from USC, UCLA and Cal State LA in the Los Angeles County Probation Data Project funded by the Keck Foundation under the auspices of the Advancement Project. Through earlier efforts she helped to create the Family Assessment Form, working with the Children’s Bureau of Southern California to develop, test and disseminate a practice-based assessment instrument now used in child and family service settings across the country and abroad. Through her work with county, city and school district policy makers and philanthropists, she has investigated inter-agency collaboration and community partnerships across a broad range of organizations, service areas and settings. Jacquelyn received her DSW from the University of California, Los Angeles.

Emily Putnam-Hornstein, PhD is an Associate Professor at USC’s School of Social Work and Director of the Children’s Data Network. She also maintains a research appointment at the California Child Welfare Indicators Project. Emily’s current research focuses on the application of epidemiological methods to improve the surveillance of non-fatal and fatal child abuse and neglect. Her analysis of large-scale, linked administrative data has provided insight into where scarce resources may be most effectively targeted and informs understanding of maltreated children within a broader, population-based context. Emily graduated from Yale University with a BA in Psychology, received her MSW from Columbia University, and earned her PhD in Social Welfare from the University of California at Berkeley.

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