Families’ Experiences in Different Homeless and Highly Mobile Settings: Implications for School and Community Practice

Peter M. Miller

Abstract

Family homelessness has been on the rise throughout the United States in recent years. As a result, more schools and communities than ever are challenged to serve students whose lives are touched by instability, uncertainty, and crisis. To date, there has been little inquiry into how families’ particular places of homelessness might shape school and community action. Accordingly, this mixed-methods study examined how their experiences in different settings were associated with their social network-related aspirations and outcomes. With insights from social network theory, the findings suggested that although most families opted to double up with others before entering residential shelters or agencies, there were few positive social and educational opportunities in these places. Families’ networks were more heterogeneous and resource-rich in long-term residential agencies. Given the considerable variance in families’ experiences with homelessness and residential instability, it is suggested that schools and community agencies develop differentiated models of practice that address students’ place-specific needs.

Keywords

homelessness, mobility, poverty, parent engagement, collaboration, leadership

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In 2010, the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) developed and released *Opening Doors*, the most comprehensive and ambitious federal plan ever designed to engage homelessness in the United States (Donovan, 2011). The plan marshals resources from 19 separate federal agencies with the hope of ending homelessness among targeted groups within a decade. Its planners and early advocates include prominent actors such as the Secretary of the Department of Education, Arne Duncan, and the respective secretaries of Labor, Housing and Urban Development, and Health and Human Services. The significant visibility of *Opening Doors* was undoubtedly reflective of the increasing prevalence of homelessness in communities throughout the United States, for previous estimates that approximately 3.5 million people—1.35 million of them children—experience homelessness in a given year (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2007) are likely far-exceeded by present day numbers. This is especially troubling given that the growth rates of homeless families and youths have exceeded those of the overall homeless population since the onset of the economic recession in 2008 (United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2009).

The national crisis of family and youth homelessness has coincided with dramatic increases in the numbers of students identified as homeless in urban, suburban, and rural school districts (Miller, 2011a; Duffield & Lovell, 2008). These increases have challenged educators and community-based actors to more purposefully consider—and respond to—homeless families’ particular experiences (Obradović et al., 2009). Although the challenges facing students are clearly central to these considerations, so are those that face their parents, for education research clearly documents associations between parental well-being and student performance (Lareau, 1987; Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Marra et al., 2009). The purpose of this study is to learn about homeless and highly mobile (HHM) mothers’ experiences in different conditions of homelessness. I pay particular attention to mothers’ relationship networks and the impacts these networks have upon their capacities to support their children in school. In the following sections, I cite key literature on school and parent matters in contexts of homelessness, describe how elements of social capital theory inform the study, and provide an overview of the methods that I used. I then present the findings and discuss their implications for research and practice.

**Homeless Families and Schooling**

Among the millions of families who struggle to meet their basic living needs each year in the United States are at least 400,000 families with children that experience homelessness (Huntington, Buckner, & Bassuk, 2008). Although
the impacts of homelessness upon children differ based on the duration and particularities of their situations, it has been widely documented across circumstances that these impacts include significant physical, social, and psychological problems (Duffield, 2001; Fantuzzo & Perlman, 2007; Gargiulo, 2006; Helfrich & Beer, 2007; Nabors et al., 2004; Shinn et al., 2008). These impacts appear to be manifested in the students’ many school-based struggles. For example, homeless students score well below housed students on standardized tests (National Center for Homeless Education, 2009), they have lower class attendance rates, and they are more than twice as likely to repeat a grade (Duffield, 2001). Some studies indicate that school-based discrepancies, in fact, hold true not just in comparisons with overall student populations, but also in comparisons with poor students who are housed (Rafferty, Shinn, & Weitzman, 2004).

Parents—a majority of which are single mothers—also display widespread struggles amid conditions of homelessness. Along with confronting the significant issues that contributed to their homelessness—such as unaffordable housing, physical and mental health problems, abusive relationships, and financial problems—they are often burdened by depression, guilt, anxiety, and shame (Paquette & Bassuk, 2009). Parents also tend to have insufficient social support networks (Bassuk et al., 1996; Howard, Cartwright, & Barajas, 2009) and, while staying in shelters or shared living arrangements, virtually no privacy. In fact, parents’ very capacities to “be in charge” are often stripped away in public spaces where shelter leaders take on strict monitoring roles (Fonfield-Ayinla, 2009). The cumulative severity of these dilemmas impedes many parents’ capacities to support their children as actively as they would like—particularly with school-related matters.

Such conditions are daunting considering the wide-ranging body of research documenting that the ways and extents to which parents support their children are of critical importance when it comes to school performance (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009; Sanders, 2009). Those who engage in what Lareau (2002) refers to as “concerted cultivation”—deliberate and sustained efforts to stimulate children’s development and to cultivate their cognitive and social skills—are considered to be directly contributive to their children’s educational success. For example, they enroll their children in supplemental programs, they organize structured play opportunities, and they encourage ongoing adult–child dialogue. Lareau (2002) notes that such parenting is practiced most frequently by middle class parents. Those who are from poor and working class backgrounds (and, clearly, those who are homeless) are often restricted by inadequate time, resources, and understandings of how to effectively navigate social and educational systems. They tend
to have limited social networks and, in many instances, lack trust in formal institutions and the authorities within them. Lareau (2002) suggests that this is particularly troubling given that “children seem to absorb the adults’ feelings of powerlessness in their institutional relationships” (p. 773).

With recognition of such discrepancies in parental capacity to support children’s growth and development, the responsibilities of schools and other key community organizations are heightened. They are called to engage all parents as partners in the schooling process, especially those who face great obstacles to involvement. Numerous strategies have been put forth to guide such parental engagement—including Epstein’s (2001) highly disseminated model which calls for two-way communication between schools and parents and Comer’s (1993; Comer & Haynes, 1991) “School Development Project,” which highlights parent, school, and community connections. These and other models note the fundamental influences that parents’ life conditions have upon the ways and extents to which they become involved in their children’s schooling and that it is critical that schools are aware of and responsive to these conditions.

Accordingly, this study fills an important niche in that it seeks to develop our understandings of parents and families as they experience homelessness and residential instability. The particular focus upon mothers’ relationship networks across different shelter, agency, and doubled up settings builds “differentiated knowledge” (Obradović et al., 2009, p. 493) that might undergird more effective responses to their needs.

**Social Capital**

Given recent research that emphasizes the importance of relationship networks in homeless education (Miller, 2009; 2011a; Swick, 2005), social capital theory provides an especially relevant theoretical guide for this inquiry. Lin (1999; 2000) broadly refers to social capital as the advantages that individual and collective actors accrue from their relationship networks. Although numerous others have put forth slightly different definitions of social capital (e.g., Bourdieu, 1985; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1995), the core assertion that social networks are vital elements of individual and/or collective advancement is common among them. Given the broad and complex nature of social capital theory, it is beyond the scope of this study to comprehensively test and/or measure any of its major models. Rather, several key insights are drawn from Lin’s (1999, 2000) “network theory of social capital” to organize the discussion of HHM families’ experiences in different settings.
Among Lin’s major contributions to social capital theory are his discussion of social capital outcomes (1999) and his description of inequality in social capital (2000). Addressing the debate about whether dense, closed social networks (those marked by tightly knit relationships, trust, norms, authority, etc.) or weaker, more heterogeneous networks (those that bridge differences in place, identity, and occupation) are more efficacious, Lin (1999) suggests that the answer depends upon one’s outcomes of interest. He writes:

For preserving of maintaining resources (i.e., expressive actions), denser networks may have a relative advantage. Thus, for the privileged class, it would be better to have a closed network so that the resources can be preserved and reproduced; or for a mother to move to a cohesive community so that her children’s security and safety can be assured. On the other hand, for searching and obtaining resources not already possessed (i.e., instrumental actions), such as looking for a job or better job, accessing and extending bridges in the network should be more useful (p. 34).

Lin’s work in this area is insightful for this study’s investigation of what parents are gaining—and/or hoping to gain—from their relationships in doubled up and shelter situations. It moves the focus beyond whether or not parents have social capital, instead examining their relational aspirations and outcomes in these different settings.

A second—and closely related—element of Lin’s social capital work that informs this study is his description of inequality in social capital. He notes that individuals’ identities and social positions have profound implications for the types of relationship networks that they develop. Lin (2000) describes how some people have relational networks that are not very diverse due, in part, to what he refers to as homophily—the tendency to relate to those who are similar to oneself. Such individuals often gain information and support almost solely from family and kin networks—which are helpful in many ways, but can also limit upward mobility because they often lack “bridges” or “structural holes” to new personal, professional, and/or educational opportunities. This is critical because, from a network perspective, Daly (2010) writes that “The old maxim, ‘It’s not what you know but who you know’ shifts to ‘Who you know defines what you know’” (p. 2). Therefore, the makeup of homeless parents’ relationship networks is also of central concern in this study, for parents’ social capital-related aspirations and outcomes are fundamentally interwoven with the compositions of their networks. The
guiding research question for the study is: How are particular conditions of homelessness and residential instability associated with mothers’ relationship networks and how do these relationships shape mothers’ capacities to support their children’s school-related experiences?

**Context and Method**

The findings presented here are part of a larger long-term study of homeless services in Metro, a major city in the eastern United States. Like many other cities, Metro has experienced significant challenges with unemployment, crime, and urban flight in recent years. Family homelessness has been on the rise in Metro since 2006 (refer to Figure 1) and this growing population appears to be largely new to homelessness. For example, Miller & Schreiber’s (2012) earlier findings from the Metro study include:

- 70% of families at Metro’s residential agencies were experiencing their first episode of homelessness;
- 76% of agency-based families had experienced homelessness only once in the past 3 years;
- 65% of families had been homeless for 6 months or fewer;
- Only 7% of parents had experienced four or more incidents of homelessness; and
- Parents averaged only 1.78 total separate incidents of homelessness.

Especially considering that that so many families are new to homelessness in Metro, this crisis—which is in fact likely much worse than the numbers...
indicate (because they do not include many families that are doubled up with others, in motels, or other places of temporary residence)—clearly has major implications for schools and social service agencies throughout the region.

There are 20 Metro County-run agencies and shelters that serve homeless families. These settings differ in their positions along the continuum of care—some provide short-term services and others offer longer-term opportunities—and also in size, structure, issue-focus (i.e., domestic violence, poverty, education, mental illness, AIDS, addiction), and resources. They do, however find common ground in that they provide services and places to stay for HHM families.

Data Collection

Surveys were administered to mothers in these 20 agencies to learn about Metro area families’ paths through residential instability and their network-related social and educational experiences and opportunities. In addition, I drew data from the Metro County Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), a comprehensive database maintained by the County Department of Human Services, to learn about families’ service usage patterns at these 20 agencies. Finally, this study draws most substantially from focus group data that were gathered from six of the 20 agencies. Before describing each of these methods of data collection, I should make two notes about the process. First, the feasibility of the study was fundamentally tied to the cooperation of the Metro County Department of Human Services, which not only granted me access to all 20 agencies, but also facilitated the distribution and collection of surveys. This support was critical because, as noted by Douglass (1996), access-related issues are often among the biggest challenges of conducting research in contexts of homelessness and high mobility. Second, in seeking parents’ perspectives, I only focused on mothers, for, like residential homeless agencies throughout the United States, there were very few fathers residing at these 20 agencies (mothers constituted more than 95% of the parent populations).

Surveys. Two different survey instruments were developed and administered in the 20 agencies—one for mothers and one for staff members. The mother surveys included questions about their family backgrounds (education, children, etc.) as well as questions asking about their experiences with and perceptions of Metro area schools, shelters, and agencies. The staff surveys asked questions about staff members’ educational and professional backgrounds, their knowledge about education-related policies and organizations, and their perceptions of factors that affected the social and educational
experiences of students and families with whom they worked. Both mother
and staff surveys—which included multiple choice, Likert-type scale, and
open-ended questions—were developed in consultation with two other
researchers and four practitioners in the fields of education and homeles-
ness. Such collaboration with diversely-situated experts is cited by Creswell
(2008) as an effective way to reduce measurement error in survey research.

After being granted access by Metro County, I corresponded with admin-
istrators from the 20 agencies and they agreed to solicit participation from
each of their clients over a 30 day period. Participants’ ultimate decisions
about whether or not to participate were kept confidential and so there was no
way that they could be penalized within their settings for nonparticipation.
Ultimately, 152 usable surveys were collected from mothers and 32 were col-
clected from staff members who work directly with families (approximately
15 surveys were discarded because only small portions of them were com-
pleted). Based on HMIS data, which identifies how many total clients were
served at the 20 agencies during the period of the study, it appears that more
than 75% of the parents and targeted staff members completed the survey.

HMIS. The Metro County HMIS provided a vital source of aggregate
family-level data about agency service utilization. It allowed me to learn pre-
cisely who used County services and for what periods of time—data that was
particularly important in answering the first research question. To date, HMIS
data from urban areas that maintain such systems has not been cited in any
education studies that I have identified, but it has been effectively used in the
social sciences by Lobao and Murray (2005) to study homeless shelter pat-
terns of usage in Columbus, Ohio and by Metraux, Byrne, & Culhane (2010)
to learn about shelter use among unaccompanied adults in New York City.
Although Fitch (2010) found that more work needs to be done to ensure that
shelters use the systems more fully and consistently, HMIS data are widely
regarded to be the most accurate form of cumulative homeless data available
in the United States.

Focus groups. This article draws mostly from the data that were gathered
from 12 focus groups sessions that were held over a 6-month period. These
semi-structured (Creswell, 1998) group interviews, which took place in three
shelters and three agencies³ (see table 1 for a description of each), averaged
between four and five participants each—a total of 51 mothers took part—
and lasted approximately 45 to 60 min. All residents from these agencies
were invited to participate in the focus groups sessions and more than 85%
agreed to take part (with the exception of those who were unavailable to
employment responsibilities or illness). Approximately 70% of those in the
focus group settings were experiencing their first episodes of sheltered
Table 1. Focus Group Sites.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Agency description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Haven</td>
<td>Long-term</td>
<td>Offers transitional housing for homeless women with children while they work to become economically self-sufficient. Includes educational opportunities, case management, and connections with community resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healing Ground</td>
<td>Long-term</td>
<td>Offers transitional housing for homeless single mothers and their children for up to 24 months. Includes case management services and connections with community programs. Leads to permanent housing and eventual self-sufficiency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah’s Pier</td>
<td>Long-term</td>
<td>Provides housing and supportive services for homeless single parent families. Attempts to create a caring and supportive community and to lead families to self-sufficiency and independent housing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Womansplace</td>
<td>Emergency</td>
<td>Provides temporary (30 to 60 days) shelter, counseling, advocacy and support services for women victims of domestic violence and their children. Also provides support in accessing school/community resources and offers training about broader conditions associated with domestic violence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GoodChoice</td>
<td>Emergency</td>
<td>Offers women opportunities to break “generational” cycles of poverty and to overcome addictions while staying in private spaces with their children. Provides opportunities for “forgiveness, healing, and redemption.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s Port</td>
<td>Emergency</td>
<td>Provides temporary (up to 60 day) emergency housing services for women (and their children) who are homeless due to domestic violence, physical or mental health issues, eviction, and/or natural disasters. Offers an array of social and educational services.</td>
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</table>

homelessness—based on HMIS data—and 76% of them had experienced no more than one episode of sheltered homelessness in the past 3 years. Several mothers had children who were in high school, but most mothers identified their children as being enrolled in grades eight and lower—mostly at the schools that were in closest proximity to the RHSAs at which they resided.
Based on staff members’ recommendations, I did not request other specific demographic information about mothers in these focus group settings.

The literature indicates that, in general, there are both strengths and limitations to using focus groups as a method of data collection. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005), for example, note that focus groups “can be used strategically to cultivate new kinds of interactional dynamics and, thus, access to new kinds of information” (p. 903). They suggest that the synergy created among participants can help diminish researcher–participant power dynamics that commonly plague one-on-one interviews. Similar claims were made by Morgan (2008), who stated that focus groups can help reduce the interviewer’s power or control in interview settings. However, others have noted assorted shortcomings associated with focus groups. Kvale (1996), for instance, warned that focus groups can lead to “relatively chaotic data collection” (p. 101) and Fontana and Frey (2005) noted that they can sometimes decrease individual participants’ authenticity as a result of unfolding “group-think” mentalities.

Despite these potential limitations, I chose to use focus groups because issues of participant comfort and, more generally, researcher–participant rapport were paramount in this setting. Those who consulted in the design of the study (two faculty colleagues with research experience and four practitioners with practical school/shelter experience) agreed that mothers might be reticent to engage in much depth of discussion with me in one-on-one arrangements due to the intersection of their experiences and my personal characteristics. Specifically, many of the mothers were victims of domestic violence at the hands of male perpetrators and I am a man. This factor cannot be minimized as it intersects with the mothers’ experiences and, in turn, identity associations. Focus groups, then, were chosen not just for purposes of developing conversational synergy between the mothers (i.e., “Yes, I can relate to that!”), but also for establishing a baseline of comfort for them (i.e., “OK, I am safe here . . . ”). My methodological choices here are in concert with Douglass’ (1996) claim that, in researching homelessness, comfort and trust are not only matters of ethics, but also ones of access. That is, to gain truly authentic access to families in such settings—to really learn about their complex experiences—researchers need both entre to place (agencies, shelters, etc.) and establishment of rapport. Accordingly, it is not surprising that previous research on issues of homelessness in schools also employed focus groups (Day, 2002; Richards & Smith, 2006; Ward & Seager, 2010).

Upon convening each group, I described my background and purposes with the mothers. I told them that I had a history of working in schools and homeless agencies and that I wanted to learn about families’ experiences in
order that schools, agencies, and community services might be more appropriately responsive to their needs. I then asked each of the mothers to share her first name (none of which are used in this study—pseudonyms are used throughout) and to briefly describe her children’s current school statuses. From those points of departure, the focus groups were loosely guided by questions and conversational cues that I provided. These cues facilitated mothers’ interactive discussions about their families’ experiences with schooling and education during their times of homelessness in doubled up, sheltered, and agency settings. For example, the questions I asked included, “How have the relationships in your life affected your ability to learn about and use helpful programs at school and other community places?” and “What (or who) has helped you and your family most in getting connected with helpful educational programs and services?”

These were designed to be flexible sessions, so I encouraged mothers to share their stories, even if they were not directly related to my line of inquiry. I wanted to learn about families’ education networks through authentic conversation, rather than rigid, predetermined interview guides. My perception as a field researcher is that the focus group formats were indeed useful in this regard, for each of the 12 sessions was filled with insightful, seemingly open—and often emotional—dialogue about what it is like to be a HHM family in Metro.

A final note about the focus group data collection is that it provided a rich source of learning not just about families’ current residential conditions, but also about all those that they had previously experienced. Although HMIS data was important in providing baseline data (i.e., how many people were in each agency/shelter at a given time and where they had been living before arriving at each of these places) and the surveys further parsed out families’ residential trajectories, the focus groups provided rich narrative descriptions of families’ experiences in each of these settings. Accordingly, although the mothers were interviewed in particular places (agencies and shelters), our conversations addressed their wider experiences of homelessness and residential instability—importantly, including those in doubled up settings.

**Data Analysis**

Although basic descriptive statistics—percentages, frequencies, and so forth—were run to discover collective trends in HMIS and survey data, I engaged in a more extensive analysis of the qualitative data. This entailed identifying emergent themes (open coding—refer to table 2), organizing them into logical clusters, and presenting conceptual links between the
Table 2. Open Coding Process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Raw data example</th>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Code explanations</th>
<th>Findings supported</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“The relationships with the other women, we are like a family . . . There are of course problems with people not getting along from time to time, but it's just like that. Everybody seems to have that one person or two people that they just grow on. Not only staff with all the services and programming that help with emotions and financing. We need someone to fall back on. For me that's been Rachel. Her family and my family have become one. Her kids play with my kids and mine with hers. We have dinner together, cook together, and take care of each other. Where she's lacking I am, where I'm lacking she is. We pick each other up. And that happens with other relationships throughout this program. And it works. (This place) is a family.”</td>
<td>• Agency.relations</td>
<td>Relationships between families are important sources of support</td>
<td>1. Long-term agencies provide mothers with supportive bonds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Relations.prob</td>
<td>Relationships within agencies can be marked by problems</td>
<td>2. Living in common spaces with other families is difficult</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
clusters (axial coding [Benequisto, 2008]). I made a conscious attempt throughout this process—and the ultimate presentation of findings—to appreciate both secretarial and theoretical elements of data analysis. Specifically, I drew from Apple’s (2009) assertion that when attempting to learn about the experiences of groups that have been relegated to the fringes of society, researchers might best function as secretaries who tell their stories. I wanted to listen to the stories of homeless families because they are worthy of being heard and, like Apple mentioned about education reformers in Brazil, they are rarely afforded meaningful space in the public discourse. Although described here as informing the analysis process, this secretarial role is, in fact, also tied to the data collection processes, for the flexible, participant-driven direction of the focus group interviews is only authentic if data collected during the interviews are presented in accurate and representative manners. I undoubtedly maintained agency in shaping the findings (by developing the conversational cues and situating the mothers’ stories in a given context), but, in a purposeful effort to prominently center participants’ perspectives, I selected numerous representative quotes and organized the theoretical comparisons around them. Accordingly, although my use of theory was critical in grounding the work in the larger academic field, my substantial reliance upon inductive sense-making methods aligned with Morgan’s (2008) belief that focus group analyses should pay particular attention to topics and issues that were voiced most commonly and with greatest levels of interest among the participants.

Finally, it was impossible to conduct member checks with all of the study’s participants due to the highly mobile nature of families and staff members, but I shared the emergent themes with two academic colleagues and the an administrator at the County Department of Human Services to support their general logic and appropriate direction. The emergent clusters of findings are presented in the next section as they relate to the research question and then, in the final section, discussed as they relate to elements of social capital theory and school/community practice.

**Findings**

Substantial differences in network compositions and outcomes were found among the study’s participants. Although families’ experiences of homelessness and residential instability were not solely dependent upon their “places of homelessness,” there did appear to be some experiences that were relatively consistent across doubled up, emergency shelter, and long-term agency settings. Mothers described multiple challenges associated
with doubled up living conditions and—along with challenges—numerous benefits of resource-rich relationships at shelters and agencies. It was particularly interesting to note that “bottoming-out” appeared to be a precursor to institutionally facilitated productive relationship development for many families.

**Living in Doubled Up Conditions**

Approximately two-thirds of the students who are identified as homeless in U.S. schools each year reside in conditions of doubled up homelessness, where they are forced to share housing with others (National Center for Homeless Education, 2009). It was not surprising, then, to find that most mothers’ first choices upon losing housing were to secure accommodations with friends or relatives. These doubled up situations were largely described as being very difficult and often unbearable. Mothers’ stories of shared residency varied, but three themes that were commonly included in their stories were that doubled up conditions were unstable, discouraging, and disconnected. In terms of being unstable, it appeared that many of the friends/relatives with whom families shared living spaces were, themselves, in the throes of difficult life periods associated with issues such as financial duress, addiction, and turbulent relationships. As a result, rather than HHM families finding spaces that allowed them to stabilize and advance past life crises, they often ended up embroiled in (and debilitated by) further crises—those of their friends/relatives. A homeless mother named Tammy from one of the long-term agencies, for example, described how hard she and her kids found it to live with friends because, “You’ve got all their distractions” and “They were trying to maintain their own lives.” Such chaotic doubled up living environments were framed by several mothers as especially difficult settings for parenting. A mother named Debbie, described her time living at a friend’s house: “Where I was staying, she was not on top of her kids and they (her friend’s children) were doing things that they shouldn’t be doing. And the mom wasn’t doing anything about it. And my kids are seeing all this happen.” A sheltered mother named Dawn shared similar experiences:

You have two different styles of parenting and because it’s their house you might have to follow rules of theirs that you don’t agree with. Where I was staying before here, family members would say one thing to my child where I would have said the opposite. And I think that confused my kids.
At least 12 mothers also described doubled up homelessness as challenging in that conscious and/or unconscious pressures from their friends/relatives kept their families in “ruts.” They suggested that their attempts to escape and/or advance beyond troubled pasts were made more difficult when surrounded by those who knew about (and, in some cases, abetted) these pasts. Whereas some mothers indicated that these limiting pressures were subtle and maybe even rooted in hyper self-consciousness, others said that it was purposeful. One mother, for example, explained, “It’s almost sabotage. I take a step forward and they’re whacking me back.” Forging “new selves,” then, was described as nearly impossible when housemates held fast to old ones.

The institutionally disconnected, “under the radar” nature of doubled up homelessness—which, ironically, is one of the primary reasons that many families first choose to double up⁵ (rather than being subjected to the pain, humiliation, and fear of more “explicitly homeless” settings such as shelters and agencies)—also emerged as a challenging aspect of sharing housing with others. Mothers in each of the focus group sessions claimed that, in these settings, they were largely unaware of social service opportunities in the local community, their children’s conditions of homelessness often went unidentified by their schools (leaving them unable to take advantage of enrollment, transportation, and other rights afforded by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, the federal policy that establishes rights and opportunities that are to be afforded homeless students⁶), and, in general, their families were disconnected from systems of practice designed to help residentially unstable families. Barb, a mother from a long-term agency recalled: “Everything’s a secret. You don’t even realize the things that are available because nobody tells you. Like, I didn’t know anything about McKinney-Vento or stuff for school or transportation.” Very similar statements were made by 13 other mothers.

Ultimately, a majority of the mothers referred to some kind of personal “bottoming-out” as occurring during their times of doubling up. Having already endured personal crises in wide-ranging circumstances and lost their own places to live, the instability, limitation, and disconnection of sharing space with friends or relatives facilitated further tension and decline. It was at these points that most of the focus group participants indicated that they were willing to enter “the system.”

Living in Emergency Shelters

Emergency shelters are the most frequently used residential homeless serving agencies (in terms of number of individuals served) in the United States.
and they typically provide food, shelter, and other immediately needed resources to individuals and/or families for periods of less than 60 days. In each of the focus group sessions I conducted, mothers indicated that the life periods during which they checked into emergency shelters were among the most challenging ones through which they had to pass. The difficulties that contributed to their homelessness (unemployment, lack of affordable housing, violence, addiction, health issues, natural disasters, etc.) were still fresh elements of their lives and, at the same time, they were also responsible for the care of their children and getting adjusted to life in the shelter. Overwhelmed by the confluence of these factors, mothers wanted basic life supports from the emergency shelters. A mother named Pam’s statement that “I need to find a more reliable support system” was typical of other mothers’ stated rationales and aspirations upon entering the shelters.

Survey and focus group data revealed some positive, but limited shelter-based outcomes—particularly as they related to families’ school experiences. For example, the vast majority of surveyed parents and shelter-staff members (more than 70%) agreed that relationships between families and shelter staff were “very helpful” in helping homeless students with education matters. Asked what specifically was helpful about these relationships, survey respondents most commonly indicated “providing encouragement.” HMIS and focus group data, however, suggest that these relationships were challenged by a number of factors, including the highly transitory nature of shelter life. Families and staff members tended to cycle in and out of the emergency shelters at such high rates (HMIS data reveal that 57% of families stayed for less than 1 month and 44% of staff members had held their jobs for less than 2 years) that sustainable relationship development was nearly impossible. This rapid overturn contributed to virtually no mothers forming meaningful bonds with other shelter-based mothers and very few of them getting to know shelter-staff members very well. In fact, one shelter alone (Women’s Port) served 332 clients in 2008-09—an extremely high number that mitigated staff members’ opportunities to develop ongoing relationships with any particular families. Some mothers’ descriptions of transient shelter living included:

“The biggest challenges for us are the transitions. Moving to a different building is a challenge.”

“I would love to keep Annie (a helpful shelter staff member) a part of my kids’ lives. That might be hard because I don’t know what the rules are.”
“My child has to constantly adjust and it’s very difficult and frustrating for him and for me. It’s been terrible.”

Every shelter-staff member who completed the survey indicated that the short time frames that they had to work with homeless families often forced them to prioritize other issues over education and relationship-building. For example, Sandy and Tilly, caseworkers at Women’s Port, explained (respectively):

For us, what is most difficult is that we only work with children for 30-60 days. Often times, within this period children start at a new school when they come and transfer schools again when they leave. Unfortunately, often, just as soon as a child gets comfortable with her new school, she begins the school transition process again.

Education can take a back seat, but we try not to let it. As soon as they come in here, Annie’s working with them…Our main goal is housing because we only have them for 30 days . . .

Amidst these situations of turnover, shortcomings in the personal and/or professional capacities of mothers and staff members also appeared to serve as limiters of relationship development and school success. Although less than 13% of staff members from the broader survey indicated that mothers were “not responsive” to education-related assistance from the shelters, some staff members did suggest that mothers did not make sufficient efforts to engage school-related matters. For example, staff members’ survey comments included: “Parents do not access the services due to busy lives or their laziness in working with their kids” and “Parents are not willing to put the time in.” Staff members’ shortcomings were found in areas such as their understandings of school policies and processes (only 39% of them knew very much of the McKinney-Vento Act and 42% indicated that they understood “how schools work”) and their relationships with/connections to school personnel (only 15% of shelter staff suggested that they have meaningful connections with members of the broader education community, 12% claimed that they speak with school staff very often, and only 8% desired to speak with school staff more often). Several mothers suggested that these staff limitations, in conjunction with general stresses associated with shelter life, led them to leave the emergency shelters. Leona said, “Nobody there could give me any answers—or they didn’t feel like giving me any answers” and Nancy noted, “Things just weren’t working at (the shelter) and so I had to go back to my old (abusive) relationship.”
In sum, although a majority of mothers claimed to have received some valuable support from shelters, these emergency settings were largely characterized as difficult places for families to stabilize and develop meaningful relationships. These settings did, however, appear to serve as necessary points of entry into communities’ continuums of care, for, as previously described, almost all long-term agency residents made at least brief stops in emergency shelters.

**Living in Long-Term Agencies**

The compositions and outcomes of mothers’ relationship networks appeared to be significantly different in transitional housing and permanent supportive housing programs—what I collectively refer to as “long-term agencies”—from those of mothers in doubled up and emergency shelter settings. One major difference was the greater stability of the long-term settings. In 2008-09, more than two-thirds of the families in these settings had been in programming for at least 1 year—a far cry from the ever-changing populations served in the emergency shelters. Mothers claimed that this stability in their long-term sites (which countered the transiency of the doubled up and emergency settings) created space for them to make much-needed life progress. Most of these mothers—and multiple staff members—indicated that these stable, long-term settings were less chaotic than doubled up and emergency places because the programs were relatively intimate in nature (Goodchoice, for example, usually serves only 5 to 7 families per year) and most of the families were further along on their roads to recovery (in areas of finance, health, addiction, etc.). After spending extensive time in both long-term agencies and emergency settings, my perceptions of these settings supported parents’ statements in this regard. The overall “feels” of Goodchoice, Haven, and Sarah’s Pier were qualitatively different from those of the emergency shelters in that their residents and staff members alike exuded senses of hope and life purpose that were associated with the relationships they had forged and the personal/professional/educational actions they were taking. In the long-term settings, families were still faced with numerous challenges—including the relational stresses brought about by living in close spaces with other families—but, in general, they seemed closer to success on multiple fronts than they did to crisis.

**Relationships with staff members in agency settings.** The stability and hopefulness of the long-term sites seemed to be tied to the resourceful relationships that families were able to forge with staff members. The majority of parent survey respondents indicated that these connections availed them to
needed services such as child care and new opportunities such as employment training and home purchasing. Most mothers indicated that they had one particular relationship with a staff person that was especially instrumental in these regards. These point people—mostly case managers and program administrators—were described as caring, knowledgeable, accessible, and well-connected in the community. The following quotes from mothers were typical of the sentiments expressed in the focus group sessions:

She helped me to go to school and to learn to speak English . . . She helps with transportation and she got me linked up with two schools to learn English very fast. And she helped me with legal services because I had many problems . . . And because I’m not American, she is so helpful in helping me understand things and the way they work here.

(My son) is learning so much from being here. The resources here and the people here are giving him a broader perspective on life as far as like extracurricular activities and stuff like that. A lot of things to look forward to...They’ve just helped me to look at a different lifestyle. It’s helped to clear my mind from all of those things. To start fresh.

A number of mothers emphasized that staff members were indeed advocates for them, but the staff members practiced “tough love” to hold families accountable for making necessary life improvements. Hester, for example, said, “I think the independence of this program helps you experiment with things on your own without someone saying, ‘Well, you shouldn’t do that.’ The consequences are on you. It’s a learning experience” and Ruby noted, “This place was very much like crutches for me. I’m finally learning to get off them and onto my own two feet.” The executive director of Haven explained that the aims of her long-term center are indeed consistent with these mothers’ statements: “This program is to help women to be able to take care of themselves. It’s transitional housing that leads to permanent housing.”

Many of the mothers expressed deep gratitude for agency-based relationships and resources that benefitted them. Mothers portrayed their entries into the long-term agencies as pivotal steps in their advancement toward better lives. At Haven, for example, almost every focus group participant was able to recall the exact date upon which they arrived to the program and their descriptions of their moments of entry mirrored that of Maren, a mother who recalled, “When you walk through that door it’s like, “Thank you, Jesus! Thank you Lord!”
Relationships with other families in agency settings. It appears that the resourceful bridging relationships that mothers developed with staff members were importantly accompanied by opportunities to bond with other families in the long-term agencies. Unlike the shelter settings, where families’ short stays mitigated their capacities to know one another, the long-term agencies brought them together in both formal and informal ways for extended periods. At Sarah’s Pier and Haven, for example, they collectively attended weekly staff–family meetings and gained not only “official” information about policies and developments around the agencies, but also casual insights about school matters (most of their kids were in the same local elementary schools). I witnessed a number of such conversations while collecting data. Before the start of one of the focus group sessions at Sarah’s Pier, for example, I noticed a couple mothers discussing a particular teacher at the school. They shared ideas about how to best approach her (their conversation portrayed the teacher as one who was somewhat ineffective at communicating with parents) and, although it was brief, it struck me as a type of exchange that I had not witnessed in the emergency shelters. Indeed, interfamily relationships in these settings—although not necessarily as resource-rich as those that families cultivated with staff members—seemed to be important sources of both information as well as general social support. Their statements indicate as much (Miller, 2011b):

I like the Monday night meetings because a lot of us have schooling and other things so, being that this is mandatory and we have to be here, it just gives us a chance to see each other and to talk and share and relate. And it helps us build our relationships with one another. They even provide daycare during the meetings so our kids aren’t around during the meetings so we can get to talk with each other even better.

There are of course problems with people not getting along from time to time, but it’s just like that. Everybody seems to have that one person or two people that they just grow on...We need someone to fall back on. For me that’s been Rachel. Her family and my family have become one. Her kids play with my kids and mine with hers. We have dinner together, cook together, and take care of each other. Where she’s lacking I am, and where I’m lacking she is. We pick each other up. And that happens with other relationships throughout this program . . .

It must be noted that the long-term settings that were studied were by no means perfect or altogether comfortable places for families, for, like doubled
up and emergency settings, those at Goodchoice, Haven, Sarah’s Pier, and the other long-term spots were challenged by staff shortages and sometimes ripe for tension, conflict, and crisis. On the whole, however, families appeared to make significantly more resourceful relationships and achieve better outcomes in the long-term agencies.

**Discussion**

The findings suggested that although participants’ experiences of homelessness varied, their social capital-related aspirations and outcomes were associated with their shifting settings and relationships. Families’ tendencies, upon losing housing, to first choose doubled up conditions (which supported earlier findings by Haber & Toro, 2004) allowed them to avoid—at least temporarily—the pain and shame of checking into shelters, but usually left them with what Lin (2000) refers to as “poor social capital.” Upon “bottoming-out” in these conflict-ridden, status-quo maintaining settings, many families entered Metro’s more formal continuum of care where, despite continued challenges and discomfort, they were able stabilize and build bridges to new opportunities. Lin’s (2000) description of inequality in social capital lends insights:

> Resource-rich networks are characterized by relative richness not only in quantity but also in kind—resource heterogeneity. Members of such networks enjoy access to information from and influence in diverse socioeconomic strata and positions. In contrast, members in resource-poor networks share a relatively restricted variety of information and influence. (pp. 786-787)

The long-term agencies seemed to provide especially fertile ground for the cultivation of resource-rich networks. In these settings, mothers described being removed from the unhealthy ties of their pasts and exposed to other mothers and, most importantly, to caring, well-connected agency staff members who possessed relevant stores of “information and influence.” These staff members were valuable not only because of their substantial personal guidance and support of the families, but because of the bridges that they provided to other people and resources in the community. They “heterogenized” families’ networks by connecting families with childcare centers, tutoring programs, school personnel, adult learning opportunities, legal advocates, and an array of other people and places. Although staff members from emergency shelters were able to assist in some of these ways, the transient
natures of their settings mitigated their capacities to have sustainable influence. Clearly, then, many HHM families’ network compositions—and the relative resource richness of their networks—shifted commensurably with their place-based trajectories through homelessness.

The focus group findings suggested some broad trends relative to families’ network-related aspirations and outcomes across the three major setting types. In doubled up settings, they appeared to want help in “just getting by.” Using Lin’s (1999) language, mothers sought expressive ends (the preservation of current resources) while doubled up. They wanted to have roofs over their heads and a degree of security and dignity for their families. In contrast, mothers’ aspirations in the long-term agencies and, in some cases, the emergency shelters, were more typically described as instrumental in that they sought resources and conditions that they did not currently have. These parents wanted to use their increasingly diverse networks to improve children’s educational experiences, further their own education, gain employment, and find housing.

Given these differences in aspiration, then, it was not surprising to note differences in network outcomes. Many families that shared housing space with friends or relatives sought only basic sustenance and claimed to receive nothing more—but often less—than that. They remained largely disconnected from schools and social service agencies and, in turn, unable to benefit from the resources such places could provide. Those who sought instrumental action, however, described much different social capital outcomes. Through their relationships with other mothers and with resourceful staff members, they became more informed about educational and professional opportunities, they took advantage of these opportunities, and ultimately described their lives as much improved in comparison with their preagency conditions. Perhaps most notably, many parents in long-term settings were hopeful about their futures. In contexts of homelessness and residential instability, then, it appears that families can benefit from diverse, bridging relationship networks just at least as much as they can from dense, homogeneous ones.

Implications for Practice

Recognizing these apparent connections between families’ places of homelessness and their relationship compositions, aspirations, and outcomes, some educators—particularly school principals, social workers, and teachers—might be left asking, “so what?” How is this relevant to school practice? A fundamental response to such questions is tied to the study’s highlighting of
the diverse array of place-attached conditions and experiences that all fall under the umbrella of “student homelessness.” Educators can learn from these findings (which generally support earlier ones by Anooshian (2003) and Obradović et al. (2009)) that the “homeless” label is—like most others that are attached to students—insufficient for predicting or determining particular student needs. The label merely indicates that students occupy space on a wide spectrum of residential instability and that they are to be granted McKinney-Vento-stipulated rights and opportunities. While dichotomizing student and family homelessness by place is—like other efforts to categorize the homeless (Grigsby Baumann, Gregorich, & Roberts-Gray, 1990; Humphreys & Rosenheck, 1995; Kuhn & Culhane, 1998; Mowbray, Bybee, & Cohen, 1993)—limited to the extent that there is variance both within and across settings, it does appear to be useful in illuminating the utility of differentiated service of HHM students and families. Similar to earlier, more school-centric studies (Obradović et al., 2009; Wong et al., 2009), it highlights the fact that different homeless settings dovetail with different needs.

For example, in doubled up situations, where parents are disconnected from social services and bogged down by broken and/or homogeneous networks, schools might take on active roles identifying “invisible” homeless students and connecting them with appropriate school and community-based resources. This recommendation to serve as identifiers of the homeless aligns with the earlier findings of Harter, Berquist, Titsworth, Novak, & Brokaw (2005), whose investigation of doubled up adolescents indicated that schools are often, in fact, among the only institutional contacts for these under the radar homeless families. Noting that schools have unique organizational identification capacities, they wrote: “Educators and social workers are in positions, in part because of their experience and training, to see things that might be invisible to the lay public and to build trust with at-risk youth—both of which we view as essential for providing social support” (p. 325). The authors suggest that this decoding capacity can be cultivated among school workers through systemic mentoring and professional development. Such intervention might help ensure that fewer parents and families have to bottom-out before they can build bridges to new opportunities.

Toward building these bridges, schools’ “connecting” functions would seem to naturally build upon student identification efforts. Specifically, students identified as residing in unstable doubled up settings might be expeditiously referred to instrumental resources. These might include school-based people or programs (counselors, social workers, tutoring programs, etc.) and/or those in their wider communities (mentors, Boys & Girls Clubs, Head Start programs, etc.). They would present opportunities for students and
parents to develop supportive, heterogeneous networks that were sustainable regardless of the families’ shifting residential statuses. Schools and shelters might collaborate to create similar school and community-based connections in instances where families reside in short-term settings, for enduring, instrumental connections appear to be few and far in between in these places of constant family and staff transition.

Place-based awareness might guide schools to engage students and parents residing in long-term agencies in slightly different fashions. Although identifying students and connecting them with relevant resources in schools and communities remains a logical step in many of these cases (along with making sure that their McKinney-Vento-attached rights are afforded them), the findings indicate that there are often existing family-agency connections that can be built upon and further expanded to more fully include schools. That is, parents’ productive relationships within their long-term agencies beckon more connection to school actors. This effort toward what Coleman (1988) referred to as “social closure”—where key members of children’s social networks know each other and usefully exchange information about the children—can allow school and agency personnel to operate with efficiency as they serve overlapping populations.

These ideas for school and agency/shelter practice are but a few among countless others that could be put forward. They are perhaps most important in cueing to the larger take away from the study: that schools and communities should learn about and acknowledge the diversity of student and family homelessness and, in turn, develop differentiated systems of practice to address their needs.

**Conclusion**

This study suggests that families’ places of homelessness are worthy of consideration—and that schools and community organizations must get beyond “one-size fits all” (Fonfield-Ayinla, 2009) models of service. Among other variables, relationship networks in these settings are important and highly situation-dependent. Expanding educators’ awareness of how diverse settings shape students’ and parents’ homeless relationships and other experiences is an important step in meeting their wide-ranging needs. This awareness is especially necessary given the federal government’s recent fundamental shift in how it addresses homelessness. Specifically, the Homeless Emergency and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act of 2009 shifts priority from the traditional continuum of care model (i.e., emergency shelters, transitional housing) to a rapid rehousing model, where
families are immediately directed toward independent living arrangements. While a series of studies (Gulcur, Stefancic, Shinn, Tsemberis, & Fischer, 2003; Matejkowski & Draine, 2009; Padgett, Gulcur, & Tsemberis, 2006; Pearson, Montgomery, & Locke, 2009; Stefancic & Tsemberis, 2007; Tsemberis, Gulcur, & Nakae, 2004) has indicated that such models—which include scattered site social services—can be cost effective and that families often retain their housing for sustained periods of time, there has not been any work that examines the policy’s implications for students’ education experiences. Research is needed, then, to examine questions such as: Do independent housing spaces help families take advantage of educational services? Do they help families become “attached” to resourceful school and community-based relationships and organizations? Do schools and community organizations have purposeful and differentiated ways of engaging students and parents in rapid rehousing programs? All are timely “place” questions to address amid the likely expansion of rapid rehousing programs throughout the United States.

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Notes

1. Pseudonyms are used for all identifying names in the study.
2. Beginning in 1994 the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) required each community that received federal funds to design a “continuum of care” that met the diverse needs of their homeless populations. These plans were to typically include wide-ranging services from street-level interventions to permanent housing programs (Livingston & Swenson-Miller, 2006).
3. The term shelter takes on various connotations in different areas of the larger homeless discourse. In this study, “shelter” is predominantly used in reference to short-term/emergency places and agency broadly refers to longer-term transitional and permanent supportive housing for HHM homeless.
4. This study’s sample of shelter/agency-based homeless parents likely contributed to the highly negative descriptions of doubled up conditions, for if these conditions had been comfortable or productive ones for the families, they probably would have never entered the shelter/agency system. Nonetheless, the
findings are not altogether unexpected given Nunez and Fox’s (1999) finding that most doubled up conditions are stress-filled.

5. Harter et al. (2005) found that doubled up homelessness is often associated with social “invisibility.”

6. The McKinney-Vento Act has been amended several times and, since its 2001 reauthorization as part of the No Child Left Behind Act, includes the “Education for Homeless Children and Youth” (EHCY) Program, which structures school and community engagement of student homelessness. For more information, refer to Miller (2011b).

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**Author Biography**

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