Families Experiencing Housing Instability: The Effects of Housing Programs on Family Routines and Rituals

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Abstract

Maintenance of family processes can protect parents, children, and families from the detrimental effects of extreme stressors, such as homelessness. When families cannot maintain routines and rituals, the stressors of poverty and homelessness can be compounded for both caregivers and children. However, characteristics of living situations common among families experiencing homelessness present barriers to the maintenance of family routines and rituals. We analyzed 80 in-depth interviews with parents who were experiencing or had recently experienced an instance of homelessness. We compared their assessments of challenges to family schedules, routines, and rituals across various living situations, including shelter, transitional housing programs, doubled up (i.e. living temporarily with family/friend), and independent housing. Rules common across shelters and transitional housing programs impeded family processes, and parents felt surveilled and threatened with child protective service involvement in these settings. In doubled up living situations, parents reported adapting their routines to those of the household and having parenting interrupted by opinions of friends and family members. Families used several strategies to maintain family rituals and routines in these living situations and ensure consistency and stability for their children during an otherwise unstable time.

Homelessness can present almost insurmountable barriers to the maintenance of family processes (Friedman, 2000; Hausman & Hammen, 1993; Lindsey, 1998; Torquati, 2004). The loss of a permanent residence is associated with a sense of failure and loss of parental roles (Banyard & Graham-Bermann, 1995; Cosgrove & Flynn, 2005; Thrasher & Mowbray, 1995). Conditions such as sustained noise and crowding, common in some shelters, have been associated with less responsive parenting (Evans, Maxwell, & Hart, 1999; Torquati, 2004), and housing services can usurp parental authority and disrupt family roles and organization (Cosgrove & Flynn, 2005; Friedman, 2000; Lindsey, 1998; Schultz-Krohn, 2004). In multiple-family living situations, families may encounter a lack of privacy, and

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schedules and rules necessary for shelter operations may conflict with family routines (Friedman, 2000; Memmott & Young, 1993; Menke & Wagner, 1997; Perlman et al., 2012; Schultz-Krohn, 2004; Thrasher & Mowbray, 1995). Regular family mealtimes are challenging for families with few economic resources (Tubbs, Roy & Burton, 2005), and may be impossible for families who are homeless if meals are organized by shelters. Finally, the time and energy parents must dedicate to seeking employment or obtaining housing takes away from parenting and the maintenance of family routines and rituals.

Given the importance of healthy family processes to individual and family well-being, it is critical to identify the ways various housing services and housing conditions common among families experiencing homelessness facilitate or present obstacles to family rituals and routines. While the effects of homeless shelter environments on parenting and on parents' and children's individual well-being have been explored, there is less information on the effects of other living situations common to families experiencing housing instability and homelessness. Furthermore, there has not been much discussion of effects of homelessness on family processes (Paquette & Bassuk, 2009). The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of various living situations on family processes among families participating in a larger evaluation study of the effects of housing interventions on families experiencing homelessness. Our primary goal was to understand how different housing conditions influence family routines and rituals among formerly and currently homeless families. Secondarily, we were interested in understanding the strategies families use to adapt their routines and rituals to their circumstances while preserving the meaning of the activities for the family members. We studied these questions with a sample of 80 parents who had recently been in homeless shelters in four states across the United States.

Background & Significance

Family processes theoretically mediate the effects of stressors associated with poverty and homelessness on long-term outcomes for parents, children, and families (Linver, Brooks-Gunn, & Kohen, 2002; Weisner, Matheson, Coots, & Bernheimer, 2005). Scholars in the areas of family process theory and child development emphasize the importance of *family* health – not just parent health or child health – in the maintenance of positive individual family member development (Boyd-Webb, 2004; McColl, 2002; Pat-Horenczyk, Schiff, & Doppelt, 2006), the ability of the family to adapt to stressors (McCubbin & Patterson, 1988; Serpell, Sonnenschein, Baker, & Ganapathy, 2002), and the amelioration of the long-term effects of stressors on individual family members (Evans & English, 2002; Linver, et al., 2002).

Family routines/rituals and family health

Assessing family health includes considerations of the multidimensional processes whereby families develop their identities, manage their roles, and organize the tasks of daily life (Boyce, Jensen, James, & Peacock, 1983; Denham, 1995; Weisner, 2010).Two such processes are family routines and rituals. Family routines are "repetitive behaviors which involve two or more family members and which occur with predictable regularity in the ongoing life of the family" (Boyce et al., 1983, p.194). Family rituals, also described as family activities, similarly serve to organize and strengthen family relationships but may

occur with less regularity (e.g., celebrations of holidays or achievements, vacations). Sustaining family routines and rituals requires four simultaneous processes: (a) ensuring meaningfulness of family activities, (b) adjusting the routine/ritual to family resources and circumstances, (c) balancing competing demands and interests, and (d) providing stability and predictability through daily routines (Weisner et al., 2005).

We chose to focus our examination on family routines and rituals for three reasons. First, family routines and rituals are influenced by context more readily than other family processes (Fiese et al., 2002), and therefore are quickly adjusted to the demands and opportunities of living situations. Second, other family processes (such as parenting behaviors) are enacted during family routines and rituals, and so disruptions of routines and rituals likely lead to disruptions of other aspects of family life (Boyce et al., 1983; Denham, 1995; Fiese & Winter, 2010). Third, family routines and rituals make sense to families (Fiese et al., 2002). They can easily recount how they conduct them, and identify instances of disruptions of these family processes more readily and with less stigma than disruptions of parenting or intra-parental conflict.

Sustainment of family routines and rituals is one indicator of family functioning and health (Boyce et al., 1983; Denham, 1995), and routine performance preserves family identity as the completion of routines creates a sense of belonging and closeness among family members (Daly, 2001; McCubbin & McCubbin, 1988). The construction and protection of "family time" is also critical to the organization of daily family life (Daly, 2001; Fiese & Winter, 2010). Most families construct family time around meals, during which they make plans for the organization of individual activities (e.g., plan transportation, assign chores, review homework requirements; Serpell et al., 2002). Moreover, family routines and rituals clarify and reinforce individual roles within the family. For instance, parental authority and compassion can be asserted through the preparation of meals, sibling cohesion can be reinforced during play, and parental provision for the family can be asserted through family activity planning or the provision of gifts or food, especially in the absence of financial provision.

Family routines/rituals and parent and child outcomes

When families cannot maintain family processes while experiencing homelessness, the stressors of poverty and homelessness can be compounded for both caregivers and children (Evans & English, 2002; Evans, Eckenrode, & Marcynyszyn, 2010; Linver et al., 2002). The absence or disruption of regular family processes has been described as a form of chaos that stands at odds with family and individual well-being (Fiese & Winter, 2010). Chaotic family environments are associated with more behavior problems at school (Ackerman, Kogos, Youngstrom, Schoff, & Izard, 1999) and more risky behaviors in adolescence (Compan, Moreno, Ruiz, & Pascual, 2002; Eisenberg, Olson, Neumark-Sztainer, Story & Bearinger, 2004). When a family experiences homelessness, family routines and rituals may be the only element of a child's environment over which parents can exert control. Thus, the preservation of routines may also buffer parents from the negative psychological effects related to the loss of self-efficacy, control, and stability experienced during homelessness (Boyd-Webb, 2004; McColl, 2002; Pat-Horenczyk et al., 2006).

In summary, the maintenance of family routines and rituals can have both individual and family-level effects. On the individual level, parents preserve a sense of control, self-efficacy, and positive self-regard, as they are able to continue to maintain their identity as successful parents. Children, in turn, benefit indirectly from the enhanced mental health of their parents, while also benefiting directly from the structure and predictability of family life in the face of housing instability and uncertainty. On the family level, parental authority and family relationships are reinforced and families experience enhanced cohesion and belonging, which prevent family disintegration and contribute to a sense of security during an otherwise uncertain time.

Methods

We conducted 80 semi-structured, in-depth, face-to-face interviews with family caregivers several months after they were first identified in shelters in four states. As part of a larger intervention trial, participants were recruited from shelters and randomized to receive an offer for one of three housing interventions or usual care. Eligibility criteria for the larger study included being in a homeless shelter for at least one week with at least one child, and meeting existing eligibility criteria for at least two of the intervention programs (in addition to usual care). Interventions included program-based transitional housing (PBTH), time-limited housing subsidy through community-based rapid re-housing (CBRR) programs, or a long-term housing subsidy. Those assigned to usual care received no special offer for housing assistance but were free to access all the services ordinarily available in their community and to seek housing services on their own.

Housing Situations

Families were recruited from shelters, so all families reported on their experience in a shelter. Shelters in this study were primarily congregate dorms or bedrooms with shared bathrooms and kitchen space, although a few shelters provided apartments. Families in shelters received an array of social services. Residence was typically time-limited with permitted lengths of stay ranging up to six months. Space in PBTH programs varied from private apartments to private rooms with shared bathrooms and kitchens. Programs typically provided extensive and wide-ranging social services, and required that residents participate in some of the services provided. Many also instituted communal meals and/or curfews. Residents were permitted to stay for only a limited amount of time (typically 2 years) before moving on to more independent living. In this study, all transitional housing was program-based rather than scatter site (i.e., families live in a single building or small cluster of buildings rather than in several places in the community), and families did not have the option to transition in place (i.e., to stay after the program ended).

Long-term subsidies were typically provided by the Housing Choice Voucher program, in which families rent inexpensive housing from private landlords, and the voucher limits rent to 30% of family income. A few families in one site (Bridgeport, CT) received project-based Section 8 housing. Short-term housing subsidies, through CBRR, were provided as part of the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-housing Program funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. CBRR-funded housing was also with private landlords, but

the amount and duration of subsidies varied; most lasted six months or less, although durations up to eighteen months were possible.

Families assigned to any of the interventions (especially usual care) often ended up in doubled up arrangements with family and friends. They might reside in a single room of the residence, or share the full living space. Although many families outside of this study live in stable three-generational households, the doubled up arrangements that families enter into following shelter were usually temporary. Families were considered doubled up if the parent's name was not on the lease, the leaseholder would not move if/when the family moved, and the family's stay was temporary. Some families also spent some time in hotels. Families who declined intervention offers, who were turned down by programs, or who were assigned to usual care sometimes found independent housing or PBTH placements on their own. Because family routines and rituals did not depend on how families obtained housing, analyses focus on housing arrangements, not on randomization or type of subsidy.

Sample

Participants were 80 parents who had previously been in a homeless shelter with their child(ren) in Kansas City, Missouri (n=18); Phoenix, Arizona (n=19); Alameda County, California (n=19); or Connecticut (Bridgeport, New Haven, Norwalk, and Stamford; n=23). Descriptive statistics for the sample, including living situations since enrollment and current living situation, are shown in Table 1. Relationships between participant/family characteristics and housing conditions were not explored because participants were offered referrals to various housing conditions as part of a larger randomized experiment.

Since study enrollment, participants had experienced an average of 1.7 housing situations (SD=.8) in addition to shelter. As a result, participants were able to report on family processes in several living situations. All participants reported on their shelter at enrollment, and 21% had lived in an additional shelter. At some point since randomization, 37.5% had been doubled up, 16.2% had been in PBTH programs, and 57.5% had been in their own place (41.2% with either a time-limited or long-term subsidy, 16.2% without).

Procedures

Trained interviewers conducted interviews with participants 3 to 10.5 months (M=6.4, SD=1.9) after they were enrolled in the larger study.[i] Interviews were conducted in a private place (usually the participant's home, a friend's home, or a restaurant) and lasted approximately one hour (range 0.5 – 2 hours). Among other questions, interviewers obtained a housing history since leaving the shelter where families had been recruited (see Table 1), and asked questions (shown in Table 2) about the effects of each housing condition on family processes, as reported by the parent. Participants were compensated $50 for their time. Participation in the caregiver interview had no effect on participation in the larger study. All study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board.

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[i]Interviews were conducted in summer, 2011. Since certain sites took longer to randomize families, participants in those sites were interviewed 3–5 months after randomization whereas participants in other sites had been randomized earlier and were interviewed 6–10 months after randomization.

Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using NVivo 9. First, interviews were divided into four sections based on topics in the interview protocol. One section included interview questions about family processes and parenting. Next, following the recommendations of Tesch (1990), a team of analysts read a subset of interviews to inductively develop an organizing coding scheme for thematic coding of each interview section. Then, two analysts were assigned to each interview section. Each pair of analysts conducted three stages of coding on their interview sections: (a) thematic coding based on the coding scheme developed by the research team, (b) coding for housing situations referenced throughout the interview section (i.e., shelter, PBTH, doubled up, own place, hotel, other), and (c) identification of any data relevant to another section which was spontaneously discussed by the participant. Thus, all interview text relevant to parenting or family processes was included in thematic coding. Authors L.S.M. and J.G.B. coded all data relevant to family processes and parenting, and met weekly to conduct reliability checks on 20% of the interviews. All inconsistencies at this stage of coding were resolved by consensus and by making changes to the codebook as necessary. Codes were reorganized, clarified, and renamed through this weekly process to accurately reflect the data and the language of the participants.

Next, author L.S.M. conducted constant comparison analyses on the data identified as relevant to family processes. Constant comparison is an analytic procedure in which each incident in the data is compared with other incidents appearing to belong to the same category (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The purposes of this phase of analysis were (a) to identify common challenges experienced by families and (b) to identify similarities and differences in challenges across and between various housing conditions. All participants' descriptions of their family routines were read to identify regularities and then to identify differences by living situation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Tesch, 1990). We conducted a similar process with parents' responses to questions about the impact of rules, privacy, and surveillance; we first identified themes, and then conducted comparative analyses to identify differences by living situation. Throughout analysis, instances of routine or ritual maintenance, coping, or strategies to maintain consistency were identified.

Attempts to ensure credibility—To enhance credibility of qualitative data, we employed two tactics recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985): peer debriefing and assessing inter-rater reliability. As mentioned previously, authors L.S.M and J.G.B. coded the family process section as part of a larger team of five analysts who were coding other sections of the interview transcripts (not reported in this paper). Throughout analysis, all members of the research team met weekly to discuss issues with coding. The research team participated in resolving coding inconsistencies, helped evaluate coding categorizations, and evaluated thematic and comparative analyses.

Once coding was complete, we conducted two reliability checks. First, we conducted a reliability check on housing situations on the full transcripts of all 80 interviews (Cohen's k=.91, SD=.02) and resolved all inconsistencies by consensus before reporting results. One example of an inconsistency that arose during this processes regarded participants who

shared a residence with a non-partner adult; one coder might think they were doubled up whereas the other thought they were in roommate situation (i.e., in their own place). We resolved these inconsistencies by determining if they had their name on the lease or if it was temporary living situation. Second, we assessed inter-coder reliability with a random sample of 10 interviews on the themes presented in Figure 1 (Cohen's k=.86, SD=.14). J.G.B. independently coded 10 interviews and this coding was compared to categorizations made by L.S.M. We resolved the inconsistencies that were mistakes in coding, but three inconsistencies remained. For example, one coder felt that a participants' description of drug use by other shelter residents was indicative of chaos and the other coder disagreed. When consensus was not reached on data coded in the reliability check, it was excluded from the values in Figure 1.

Results

Family Routines

Participants compared their daily routines in their current living situation to each prior living situation since enrollment in the larger study. Every parent had lived in a shelter and contrasted their current routines with their routine in the shelter. In general, parents in independent living situations organized daily family routines around children's natural waking and sleeping rhythms, family activities, transportation availability, and pursuing personal goals (e.g., seeking jobs, working, or pursuing education and career development opportunities). For instance, the following description of a family routine in an independent living situation was typical of parents in our sample:

> Sometimes [Child] wakes up before me. She wakes up around 9:00. I wake up, and sometimes I have appointments with the [CBRR program]. They help you with things. And I have to go to the chiropractor, so basically it's around appointments, and she takes a nap around 2. So I'm on the Internet looking for jobs, I wrote a list down of jobs to look for to go to. Sometimes we go to the park, the beach, things like that.

When asked how their routines differed from when they lived in the shelter, most parents described the restrictions placed on their family routines by imposed schedules and shelter rules. One parent described her current family routine in an independent living situation as organized around her children's play, family time, homework, and meal preparation. When asked to compare her current routine to the one she had in shelter, she responded:

> It was different. Because you were out of bed by six o'clock, everybody, and kids weren't allowed out of rooms if it was noon to three and you couldn't feed them whenever you wanted to because it was set meal times and everybody had to be in their room and in bed by ten and it was just pretty strict.

Families frequently described their routines while in shelters as organized around imposed schedules for sleeping and eating, and *demonstrations* of seeking housing and employment. For instance, several parents described leaving shelter during a designated period of time each day to look for resources and employment, but indicated they were rarely able to identify and pursue such resources during the allotted time period (before the next scheduled

event for which they needed to be back at the shelter) and with their children in tow, as these two parents describe:

> [In one shelter] I just spent my time filling out paperwork and signing my name, like signatures and dates and workshops basically, which I really felt kind of used…it was how can I help them, not how can they help me.

> We wake up, get the girls ready. I had to have my room clean every day. We had things that we had to do like the computer thing you had to sign up for a job or something. You had to have an activity and you had to do like community service for the court. And that's like stuff around the facility, not even leaving.

Another described how scheduled program requirements and lack of childcare made it difficult for her to look for a job:

> The program rules—as far as your kids not being able to attend groups with you, and [the groups] were in the middle of the day—with me not being able to leave and go job hunting.

Another recounted interference with her classes:

> The [shelter] case manager, no matter what I did it was wrong. She wanted me for all these mandatory meetings, which I thought were ridiculous, 99% of them. Like one in particular—at that moment in time, I had a class. I was in school full-time, and she was like, "Well, it only takes you a few minutes to get to [school] from here." I'm like, "Okay, I know what it takes me when I drive. Then I circle around the parking lot for 10 minutes to find a parking spot, if I'm lucky. And then it takes me another 5 to 10 minutes to get to the class, then you've got to get there a couple of minutes early so you can get your stuff out." So I said, "So, I need 30 minutes, at least." And she's like, "Well, no, I don't think so, and you can make it to this little free give-away, and if I don't feel like you're cooperating…" She mandatorily made me go to some free give-away, and she knew that people weren't going to be there on time! So I had to sit down [in class] with my kids, upset and sweating, because I couldn't go drop them off; I couldn't go do what I needed to do.

In addition, many parents discussed the amount of time spent waiting as a result of shelter schedules. They described having to wait (and teach children to wait) to leave the shelter in the morning, for meals, for baths/bathrooms, and/or to return to the shelter in the evening.

> You had to be inside at a certain time. So they had to go to bed at a certain, time so we could get to sleep. And as soon as you're allowed out, we could leave. That was also hard. Like not being–having to wait until a certain time, in the morning, before you're allowed to leave. It was weird.

A few participants emphasized the benefits of imposed routines on their own parenting or the parenting of others, indicating:

> Some people aren't like that—don't have that routine and structure in their life—it helped them.

> That's one thing I got from shelter, to have [the kids] in bed every night at the same time, get them up at the same time…it makes things easier.

In contrast, most parents felt the imposed routines disempowered them as a parent:

> It's hard not being able to live our own life, and establish our own routine, and be free to be a mom, and cook what I want when I want, and do laundry when I want to, just everything.

Challenges to Family Routines and Rituals

Responses to the general question "Is there anything about your living situation that makes parenting difficult?" and specific follow-up questions about rules, privacy, and surveillance were analyzed by living situation. The first column in Figure 1 depicts the number and percentage of parents who reported about shelter, transitional housing, doubled up situations, and living in their own place. Because we asked explicit follow-up questions about rules and privacy and surveillance, many parents told us about these, as shown in the second column of the figure. Responses related to privacy and surveillance overlapped, so they are coded together. Emergent themes discussed most frequently by parents in each living situation are shown in column three. Parents mentioned chaos and distractions were challenges in shelters and doubled up situations, though we did not ask about these specifically. Some emergent themes were related to both rules and surveillance (e.g., rules about permitted and prohibited forms of discipline), so they are linked to both in Figure 1. Thus, an example of information depicted in Figure 1 is as follows: 13 parents lived in PBTH since random assignment and reported on their experiences in PBTH programs; of those, 54% (7 of 13) felt rules posed a challenge to family processes, and 23% (3 of 13) specifically cited rules about food and meals as a challenge.

Service Intensive Living Environments: Shelter and PBTH—Three challenges to family routines and rituals were consistent across shelters and PBTH: (a) rules about food and meals and (b) rules about discipline which lead to (c) implicit and explicit threats of child protective services involvement (CPS; i.e., investigations potentially resulting in children being removed from parental custody). Participants' discussions of these three challenges were similar in shelters and in PBTH, so these themes (discussed below) include descriptions of both settings. Also, in most programs (both shelters and PBTH), when parents broke rules they received "write ups" and were forced to leave once they had a certain number of write ups.

Rules about food and meals in shelters and PBTH programs: Parents frequently discussed how rules pertaining to food and meals were a challenge to family routines and rituals. Parents reported their young children were unable to have choices regarding which foods to eat, and often the food offered by the shelter and PBTH programs were either inappropriate for the child's age, unappealing to the child, or not to the parents' nutritional standards. Many shelter and PBTH programs required residents use their personal food stamps to pay for the program's food, thereby making it difficult for residents to obtain food to supplement or replace the choices offered at mealtimes.

> The only problem for me here is just about the eating. Like we give up 75 percent of our food stamps, and we don't have a say-so on what we can and can't eat. We just have to eat what the cooks cook for us. And like I went down there Sunday morning, because we was going to church and we needed some food in our stomach because we was going to be sitting through the sermon. He made bacon and bread for breakfast—bacon and bread! And it made me really mad. And it's like okay, I'm glad I gave up my 75 percent of my food stamps. I don't pay for no bacon and bread, you know? We eat healthy food.

Other parents expressed their perception that rules which disallowed having food/drinks in rooms and giving children snacks/drinks outside of regularly served meals were absurd and underscored their inability to provide for their children.

> I only have one child, and it's things that I'd give my daughter to show, you know, mommy loves her. But it was like I couldn't, or I had to sneak and give it to her. So, she's sitting in the room talking about, "Mama, I'm hungry. I want some fruit snacks." And it's like "Okay, I'm gonna get you some fruit snacks. Let me dig in my purse. But it's like—I couldn't just give things to her without [the staff] looking over my shoulder. Like, "Well, did you bring anything for everyone else?" If I'm homeless, what make you think I can afford other stuff for other people? It was hard.

Finally, parents discussed how lack of access to a kitchen impeded their efforts to teach their children basic life skills or engage in cooking together as a family.

> I couldn't go in the kitchen and make her a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. She needs to learn how to do that. She's seven years old. She's got to learn how to do simple stuff like that. I can understand not being allowed to use something electric or a knife—but a sandwich? That's not going to kill her. And they used to yell at us for stuff like that.

Rules about discipline and threats of Child Protective Services (CPS) in shelters and PBTH programs: A prominent issue was program rules about appropriate and inappropriate forms of discipline. Parents felt these rules required them to be inconsistent in their disciplinary practices, which confused children and undermined parental authority. These four parents clearly described this issue:

> You know, I used to correct my kids; tell them don't do that; and then, someone else will get involved, "Oh, you're not supposed to do that to your kids." And I felt like my authority was being stepped on. And ever since that I moved out, that I've been on my own, is I've noticed that my kids are able to respect me more than before.

> If I tell [my children] something and they didn't feel like doing it, they would boldly tell me in the shelter "I don't want to do it" because then you have all these people watching you telling you, "You can't discipline your child because you're in the shelter." So once you get out of the shelter, you have to go through a whole new ballgame to get your kids reprogrammed.

> I just think she had to sit there and watch how her parents were—to me it's belittling because if you're sitting there scolding me out in front of my kid, that's a belittling feeling. So I just think experiencing that, I think that that wasn't a good thing for her.

> I think [Child] took it like there was somebody above me—it was hard `cause she didn't want to listen all the time because I had to listen to somebody else and that kinda thing. And she's like, "Why can't we have our own house, there's so many rules." Especially when you had to be back at 6:00, and that's kind of unrealistic when your kids are on summer break, and they're trying to have fun, and they can't do any activities. And they're like "Why?" And you're like "Because we have to listen to the rules." And they're like, "But you're the"—they're looking at you, like "Hello, you're the parent, nobody's supposed to tell you what to do."

In addition, program staff and other program residents were authorized to watch parenting behaviors to ensure parents were not breaking discipline rules. As a result, parents reported being interrupted by others and corrected when disciplining their children:

> You get someone who works at these places, and they see you're trying to discipline your child. Like the other day, when we first went to [shelter] he was tired cause it was late, but I had to do a bunch of paperwork. So the next day he is tired, and he kicked me, and I said "No, you don't do that" and he was having a little tantrum. And so I'm like "Okay, we're going to our room," and I was going to talk to him like I usually do and explain to him. And the staff woman is stopping me as I'm going in, and she's intervening and telling him what to do. Well, that's fine, but can you let me continue to parent, because I am his parent. I know what I'm doing. So I'm like "Excuse me, can you please let me take care of him?" and she goes "Well, it's my job." And I'm like "It's my job to take care of what's going on…You're taking away from what I'm saying, you're not letting him listen—you're not valuing what I'm saying."

Parents also reported feeling constantly surveilled and threatened with having their children removed from their custody. Twenty parents in shelters and PBTH discussed threats of CPS, and 11 parents (9 in shelters, 2 in PBTH) felt threats of CPS involvement were a direct result of staff and other residents watching them to ensure they followed rules about discipline. These participants were evenly distributed across all four states, but certain shelters were consistently mentioned among participants in two sites, suggesting contextual effects may be more salient than accurate identification of abusive parenting by program staff. These two parents describe the connection between discipline and threats of CPS involvement:

> People are watching you—because since I have been here, that's all everyone threatens you with—CPS, CPS, CPS. Through some of these agencies, they threaten with the CPS all the time. You know, "If you don't do this for your kid and you don't do that, this is what we are going to do." You know, and that makes a parent worried. You are trying to do your best, but you've got people breathing down your neck and then we will threaten you with CPS all the time. It gets a little nerve racking. In all my life of raising kids, I have never been threatened with CPS as much as I have down here. And I'm like, "Why?" I guess you could be in trouble

for being in a shelter, because you were in there with your kid? And it's like "why?" As long as you have a roof over your kid's head and you are trying, why would you be in trouble? So see, that is why a lot of people won't go to these shelters, is because of that. Because they think that they are going to get their kids stolen or something, you know. They threaten CPS a lot.

[In my own place] I don't have eyes on me all the time. I can, if I feel it necessary to discipline my kids, then I can do it and not be afraid of what they're gonna say or what they're gonna do. If they think it was inappropriate where I may have thought it was necessary to do something, I wouldn't have to worry about [them] turning me in to CPS or something like that for something that was not even, in my eyes, bad. I think it's necessary in some instances to give a little swat on the hand for touching something bad or a little swat on the butt. If [shelter staff] saw you do that, they'd call CPS on you for child abuse.

Parents reported that taking away privileges and/or toys was difficult in a shelter when they felt their children had already lost so many privileges and material items as a result of their economic situation, as described by these two parents:

My daughter's room was decked out with Dora and princess and everything, so she's used to that. And now she's looking at like, a futon? What is that? So I'm more concerned with trying to give those things back to her, than trying to take them away from her. That's why I'm like, "Okay, you want it? You can have it." `Cause it's like, "You don't have nothing. You want some ice cream? Okay. Here you go." She don't have nothing.

Parents are scared to say "I'm gonna take away as much stuff as I can until you're miserable." Because now they don't go outside so their games is their only toy and their games are the only things that are keeping them occupied so they need those things. When you're in a shelter it's like you can't—there's nothing to take away because you don't have nothing there. You don't have a TV there. You don't have games there. You don't have nothing there so there's nothing to discipline your kids with.

Another described how sharing a single room with two children made it difficult to remove privileges:

It's one room so it's hard. If there's something to be taken away [from my older child]—like a video game—it affects the little one because, if I take it away from one, I have to take it away from the other. Otherwise, he just is there watching it while the little one plays [with it].

Rules and Surveillance in Shelters—In addition to the challenges common across shelters and PBTH programs, there were several challenges experienced by families in shelters: (d) required service use, (e) imposed schedules, (f) rules excluding partners from shelter stays, (g) restrictions on play and space, and (h) chaos and distractions (see Figure 1).

Required service use in shelters: Parents reported that they were required to use certain services and/or attend programs during the day, which created problems for their pursuit of housing or employment:

> We had to go to groups. Which, it kinda helped, but I felt like that wasn't the reason I was homeless. I had to go to an AA meeting, and it was like, I'm not an alcoholic or on drugs or anything. But in order to not get wrote up and get kicked out— because if you got wrote up three times, then you get kicked out—so it's like, I'm reporting to these meetings that didn't even apply to me, instead of doing what I need to be doing.

Mandatory attendance also created problems regarding childcare. For instance, one parent shared that her daughter had been sexually abused, and she was hesitant to leave her alone with strangers, which clashed with requirements that she attend groups without her child:

> It's just too many mandatory groups. Some groups your kids can't come to, so you may get a violation if you don't attend. But then now they have it where you can do up a babysitting contract or whatever. But I'm a paranoid after what happened to my daughter. I don't want my daughter in a house with someone by theirself, but I can't take her with me to the groups.

Frequently, families were required to attend church services offered by the programs. This presented problems for many families, especially those of other faiths and those with established relationships at their own church. Several parents across different states reported they would be written up for failing to attend church services. One mother describes how this requirement interfered with stability for her son, who had to change schools when they entered the shelter, but could maintain relationships with friends at his church through youth group meetings.

> We had bible study we had to go to and on Wednesday nights, and you could no longer go to your church on Wednesdays—you had to go to theirs and we got wrote up for going to ours because they had a youth program. Our church has a youth program for our son on Wednesday nights so we would go so he would be able to go, have some normalcy to his life, and we got reprimanded for doing it.

Notably, required service use was not a challenge in PBTH programs. Parents described being able to choose which services they wanted to attend from a menu of service options, and emphasized the utility of case management services and assistance with employment searches.

Imposed schedules in shelters: Parents frequently mentioned imposed times for waking, sleeping, leaving, eating, and curfews as challenges for family routines. Some parents described how strict times for waking and sleeping were age-inappropriate. They reported getting in trouble when they couldn't make their infants and young children be quiet during a pre-set period of time, or described how their child would get sleepy at a time of day when they did not have access to a quiet place to a nap.

> All kids under a certain age had to be in bed at 8:00. Okay, she was one year old at this time. I can't force her to lay down and go to sleep. The only thing I could do

was rock her. If she screams and cries while I'm rocking her, it's like I can't help that. And I understood that it was people there that had to get up and go to work really early and a whole bunch of stuff. So that kind of conflicted because it's like, "Okay, what y'all want me to do? I can't put tape over the kid's mouth. I understand that you have to go to work, but I really don't know what to do."

I think it was 9:00 that kids went to sleep and so for me going to school and coming home, that's where I was like—my son would go to sleep a little later because we have to have our time, like bath time. It was difficult. The rules about times had it semi-hard for me to continue to do what I'm used to doing because he is a person—he's not an object, he's a real person.

Others described how imposed schedules interfered with special family time activities. For instance, one parent could no longer take her children to the public beach or park because the bus schedule returned them to shelter after curfew. Another had special "movie nights" during which the family would stay up late and watch a family television program together with popcorn. Time restrictions on when the television had to be off and children had to be in bed made it impossible to continue family movie nights.

Imposed schedules also presented challenges to finding employment and housing. Parents described how difficult it was to search for resources, get children from school, be present for dinnertime (often as early as 4:30 or 5:00 pm) and be home by curfew. Parents described the time available to find employment and housing as one or two hour gaps in between trips to and from their shelter; being subject to the schedules of public transportation compounded this issue.

It made it hard to find a job, and be like [to potential employers] "Well, I'm sorry, but you have to work around my schedule," with the curfews and everything.

Partner exclusion in shelters: Some programs' rules prohibited male partners from living with the family for various reasons, including rules prohibiting men (i.e., women/child-only programs; 4 cases), rules prohibiting partners who are not married (2 cases), and rules prohibiting partners who broke other shelter rules (1 case). Some transitional housing programs also prohibited partners, especially non-married partners, but our participants with partners chose not to live in these programs. When parents made the decision to separate from a partner due to shelter rules prohibiting men, they indicated these were temporary situations resulting from their lack of options.

I didn't have help at the time, because it was just a shelter for women and children. He wasn't with me at the time. He was staying with his mom trying to situate stuff, so it was like–if he was here, it would be so much easier, but they didn't allow that. Then I was referred to [another shelter], then he was able to come along. So that helped out.

One mother indicated her husband was able to stay in the same shelter as the rest of the family, but had to sleep in a separate section. Some shelters had policies prohibiting non-married parents from living together, even if the partner was the biological parent of the children or if they had a common-law marriage, as described by these two parents:

We were kind of separated then because he had to go to one shelter and I had to go another and the way we had to do our paperwork basically separated us. We were together relationship-wise but we were just separated in housing. It's cause we weren't married. Once we did get married we could move in…They're a Christian-based shelter so you know, of course.

After that, we ended up in another shelter which could have took me and the three girls but he would still have to stay at [the previous shelter] because the requirement is you have to have a marriage license. We've been common law for a while…They talked about if you want him to stay with you in the family center you have to go get a marriage license down there…At the time [living separately from my partner] was the best thing I could do because if we didn't have [the placement in the shelter] at that date and time…I wouldn't have had nowhere to go then we would have been sleeping in an abandoned house or the park or had to do what we had to do.

Restrictions on play and space in shelters: Most shelters had rules that parents had to be with children at all times. This rule, while reasonable for protecting children and families, presented numerous challenges to families with more than one child, and families with children in different age groups, as described by these three parents:

At [shelter] we were in a one bedroom little hotel room type thing and it was really hard because when the baby was sleeping, [my older] kids—whenever I used to put him down they would make all this noise and I'm like "No you can't, stop, stop." So it was hard on them because they're like "Man, I can't even talk," and they weren't allowed to leave the room.

You can't have them unattended at any time. You have to have your child with you, going to the bathroom, in the shower, going to an appointment, library, anything… and you know, she's 15, so just like I don't want to go to the bathroom with you and you shouldn't have to go with me.

They have mandatory chores that you have to do as a requirement of staying there and also this other rule as far as having your children with you at all times. There's times where—like say I'm cleaning up the bathroom I don't want to take my son in the bathroom while I'm spraying all these chemicals. Depending on the chores it's okay for someone else to watch your child at that time or you still got to bring with your child with you. And it's kind of conflicting because I don't want to have my child exposed to too many chemicals. He's an infant so that's really harsh. And then at the same time I don't want to just leave him with anybody…There's times where I seen people with like six, seven kids and they're struggling to clean up the dining room area and their kids are running around everywhere because mom is occupied. And then the shelter manager is getting on her case because she's not watching her kids.

This rule also bound the amount of children's playtime to the amount of time their parent could devote to supervising play.

> There were certain playground areas they had to be in, if you were in certain spots.
> Like if you had to do laundry, there was a playground next to the laundry room and
> the kids had to be in that one. Or there's a separate playground that had swing sets,
> and that was only for people who were in the smoking section. It's like, I would be
> doing laundry, and my kids would want to be on the swinging playground, or they'd
> go back and forth. But your kids had to be next to you at all times. Our room-if I'm
> standing right here, putting my shoes on, and my kids are outside, they would write
> you up for that. So that was kind of hard, `cause my kids want to grab their things
> and run. And if they're seen, for one second without you, you're in trouble.

Parents also reported feeling that their children weren't allowed to exhibit normal play
behavior in many of the spaces.

> They're just real strict with the kids. I don't really jump on him every time he runs
> around and stuff. They want you to have total—they want him sitting still. Their
> cafeteria was getting hard on me because he wanted to go eat with the other kids.
> And there were so many kids in there that it was overwhelming for him. He'd end
> up playing and wanting to go running back and forth to the garbage can and the
> water fountain. And they were pretty strict about that.

Chaos and distractions in shelters: Of course, in a congregate setting, freedoms for some
children can contribute to environments that parents of other children find chaotic. Parents'
discussions of barriers to family processes included complaints about noise and distractions
when parents were trying to help children complete homework, or have a discussion about
their behaviors.

> It was harder for her [at shelter] because she would sit there and try to do her
> homework. There it's loud. It's like you got kids between the ages of a year old and
> maybe five and six running around that don't have homework. So what are they
> doing? They're running around, and screaming. So it's like it was just distracting
> her constantly. And there I'd have to have her do her homework late at night after
> all the little kids went to bed.

Participants' experiences of chaos and distractions were particularly salient to disruptions of
family processes when they intersected with other challenges, as discussed below.

Intersections of Challenges to Family Processes in Service Intensive Living Environments

Parents frequently indicated that they understood why each individual policy was necessary
in shelters and PBTH programs, but described how intersections between rules, the
environment, and their family's unique needs and circumstances led to interruptions of
family processes and made it difficult maintain family routines and rituals while following
all of the rules. The challenges encountered by families in shelters and PBTH programs were
most interruptive for family processes when they intersected, making parents feel that they
had to compromise certain aspects of family routines or parenting to maintain others. In this
example, the themes of rules about discipline, surveillance of parenting, and restrictions on
space intersect:

> They want you to discipline your kids, but they don't want you to discipline your kids. I don't believe in whooping them and I don't whoop my kids at all because I don't have to, but how are you going to put them in timeout? "Well, you can't put them in timeout here, you can't put them in timeout there." Well, if they're behaving wrong I can't go back later—they are not at an age where I can go back later and say, "Hey, this is what you're in timeout for." I have to do it right then and there and I have to take time to do it. So it's like time constraints or area constraints.

In this example rules about food and meals, lack of privacy, surveillance, chaos and distractions intersected, resulting in parental authority being usurped and family processes being compromised:

> Everybody wanting to be a parent at the same time. All the distractions. With the community eating dinner and all of that. It makes us hard for us to have a family conversation about how the day went with everybody when we sit down to eat. With me having to stand in line with him and his hyperactivity it makes it hard for him to sit down, so it takes me quite a while to get back say "Sit down, [Child]" and run back up there and get food and stuff. And then, listening to what everybody else's two cents are. "Oh, can he have this," or, "Can he have that?" And it's like at least ten times, every time I sit down, if there's a dessert there, and I purposely tell them not to put it on the tray—and they're not even asking me, some of them, they're just putting it there, and it's like, "Oh, why are you doing this?" It used to make me so mad, and it was like, "Why are they doing this just to me?" And then I looked around, and they were doing it to everybody.

Being Doubled Up: Surveillance by Friends and Family Members—Challenges to family processes took different forms for families in doubled up situations. Parents in doubled up living situations most frequently mentioned the following challenges to parenting: being unable to establish their own rules/having to live with someone else's rules, and friends/family interfering with their parenting decisions by (a) ignoring the parents' rules for the children (e.g., giving the children privileges or treats when parents had taken them away as a consequence, allowing children to watch too much television or stay up late) or (b) interrupting and correcting parents in the middle of discussions with their children (see Figure 1).

Parents reported having to concede their own family rules to the rules of the person with whom they lived. For instance, these two parents described house rules versus parents' rules in doubled up situations:

> We felt safer at my mom's house [than in the shelter]. But then again, we weren't really wanted there. I felt like my children were kind of abused in a way, because, like, they're little babies—and they were made to sit like animals all the time—like locked away—like couldn't play. And they were yelled at all the time. It was bad.

> Instead of being the parent, I kind of have to be like the stepparent or something. Since I do the cooking or whatever, I get to plan their meals and stuff. But like the responsibilities that I give my kids, they get overridden. Like my kids are three and four, but I have them wipe the table after themselves. I make them wipe the floor

up if they get stuff all over the floor. But my mother she will say something like they're too young for those responsibilities and stuff. She thinks they should be out playing. My parenting gets overridden here.

While parents did not mention being threatened with CPS in doubled up situations, they did report being interrupted by family members and friends when they were attempting to discipline their children, and being criticized for their parenting decisions, as described by these three parents:

I need my own place with my kids, so that I don't have to listen to how someone else feels like my child should be parented.

Sometimes my mom gets in between me and my kids…and won't let me just do my job.

Living with my mom, there was, it seemed like, five different parents there. And they're all expressing their opinions. But here [in my own place], I can raise my kids how I want to, and it's easier. They're not being told five different things, so it's not as confusing.

Own Place: Continued Threats of CPS Involvement—When asked if anything presented challenges to parenting, parents in their own place (with or without housing subsidies) frequently expressed relief that their current living situation made them feel free and in control of their lives and their children. Challenges shared by parents in independent living situations included transportation accessibility, childcare availability, and external environment issues that restricted children's play or presented other challenges. For instance, one participant discussed how her children had to be quiet in their apartment because she knew the sound would disturb her neighbors; others stressed the importance of keeping children inside so they were safe from perceived dangers or negative influences in the area.

When asked about rules, privacy, and surveillance in their own place, one participant mentioned partner exclusion due to her partner's criminal record. A few parents reported that surveillance and threats of CPS involvement were challenges once they were in their own place. One mother recounted a conversation in which her status as a person who was previously homeless was mentioned in a conversation about CPS involvement:

[My kids are] really loud. They're very active and people just don't like it. My son is going through a stage—he likes to throw tantrums. So people around are like "Oh my god, why is that kid screaming?" They think he's in here getting beat, or I don't know what they think. I had the woman in the office call me one day, and she said that some people wanted to call CPS on me. I'm like "Well, if they feel like they should, then they should. Let CPS come here and see that there's nothing wrong. I don't know what else to say." She got upset and she said "You need to keep it in check"…She said, "You're lucky you're in here, because" –she said something about the program that I was in, and she was like, "you wouldn't even, normally, have been accepted into here. We were only doing it to work with your program." Or something like that. And I was like, oh my god. I can't believe she went there.

Strategies Families Use to Manage Challenges to Family Processes

In spite of the numerous challenges parents reported experiencing throughout periods of housing instability, they were able to maintain family processes by adapting family activities to new circumstances. One parent would hang a bed sheet to create a private section in the family's room in the shelter. Each child was allowed to sit in the private space for a set period of time, during which no one was allowed to talk to them. They could play and read books without distractions. Another reported a similar strategy:

> I give [my son] his space too. That's another thing I do. Like I'll sit out in the common area and [the baby and I] will watch TV so this way he could have the room to himself and he likes it, cause he's used to having his own room and his own space, so I do that. Cause sometimes the baby crying it gets to him sometimes. You know he loves his brother but it's like sometimes it's just too much.

Sometimes parents would decide to break program rules to maintain consistency for their children, but they were strategic so they would not be forced to leave the living situation. One parent (quoted previously) recounted how her son had to leave his school and his home when they went into shelter. She was adamant about taking him to attend his church youth group, despite missing mandatory meetings at shelter, to help him maintain "*some normalcy to his life*." She said, "*I just decided to take a write up every week*" because she knew that they would not get enough write ups to be forced to leave as long as they followed the other rules. Several parents described focusing efforts on maintaining consistency in certain areas of their children's lives. For instance, they maintained consistency in the type and number of toys children could have in each living situation so they would have ownership and stability. Other parents fought to ensure their children could stay at the same school despite the family's residential changes, or focused on establishing consistency at school and celebrating children's academic achievements. For instance, this mother describes her efforts to ensure her son's transition to a new school went smoothly despite living in a shelter:

> You've got to attend [school] for the first couple of weeks to make sure the structure— and see what is going on. It was like, I'm going to be really, really, really involved with this first three weeks of school, first month of school, as far as going to the bus stop and meeting the teachers and stuff–and their classmates. I want to us to have an understanding straight up.

To maintain consistency in discipline, parents with older children developed signals that they could use in public to let the child know that discipline would come later. They would then revisit the issue when they were in private. One mother described a double clap that she could do in the shelter, which let her children know that they would be in major trouble later, when they were in private, if they didn't correct their behavior at that moment. Another said, "I've got to whisper to my baby certain things to let her understand certain situations."

In addition, parents shared how they were able to block out threats of CPS and criticisms of their parenting by focusing on their own personal strengths and positive relationships with their children. The two parents below described how they were able to refocus under surveillance:

When you signed in and signed out there was a yellow piece of paper and it showed what the write up was for. [My] incident was unsupervised child. And then you see it and you're like "Man, am I a bad parent because I didn't see my child?" but you have to think about it—my child knows where I am, he came to the room, he was responsible enough. Now if I left [my younger child]—she's 2—that would be something terrible and that would be a CPS case but for [my 6 year-old] I don't believe that that was—because you get scared you're like, "Okay if they're documenting this and then they might see me as a bad parent because I'm not doing this or I'm not doing that." But I had to put all that aside, I'm like I know what I'm doing for my children, my children know what I'm doing for them. If I get a write up for whatever it has to do with my children then so be it.

Then I tell myself, you know? I don't see [the people watching us]. I see only me and my child right now. And if they got a problem, they can go tell someone. But for the most part it's me and my child right now. So you kind of have to like refocus.

Reframing, or changing perspectives, was helpful for maintaining other aspects of family life as well. One mother, who shared a room with her daughter, described how she handled their close-quarters living situation in the shelter by reframing her situation:

I had to make myself believe I had privacy. Really I didn't, but I had to make myself believe it, because I looked at some of the families who shared a room with teenagers, and had four kids, and I saw how happy they were, and I saw how they were peaceful, and no one bothered them; they lived and come and go, do the same routine as you would if you were on your own, and I had to look at that. And I said just us two, well, this is regular, and make it work. There's nothing to it, you know? But that's how I was, so I adjusted.

Unfortunately, several parents reported coping by keeping their family in their rooms and isolating themselves from staff and other residents completely.

A lot of the staff members are always like "Don't do that, don't do this." So it was frustrating because I couldn't do what I thought was necessary for my kids to behave and get along with the other kids…so, I kinda—I tried to stay in my room as much as possible. Unless the kids wanted to go out and play. Because at shelter it was hard for me I didn't like the idea of people sitting there watching me.

Just trying to keep the peace because it was drama in there every night. And sometimes I used to get caught up in it without really realizing. So I tried to just eat and go upstairs to my room and keep my distance. We only came down when I had to do my chores.

Discussion

Often the experience of becoming homeless indicates that parents do not have claim to a physical space in their communities; this is compounded by imposed rules and routines of many housing programs, indicating they do not have claim to the symbolic space of their family system (Baumann, 1993; Friedman, 2000; Hausmen & Hammen, 1993).

Understanding how parents strategically and creatively overcome obstacles to family processes contributes to the literature on family-level resilience by emphasizing the maintenance of a family process as a successful family outcome in and of itself. The negative individual effects of homelessness, so frequently associated with a sense of being cut-off from community participation, may be buffered by successful participation in the family system. According to ecological-cultural theory, adapting to sustain regular family routines is a unifying problem for all families (Weisner, 2010; Whiting & Edwards, 1988), symbolizing involvement in a community of parents (McCubbin, Thompson, McCubbin & Kaston, 1993; McMillan, 1996). Participants reported that being prohibited from performing these activities due to their circumstances, or being interrupted by imposed schedules or rules about discipline, made them feel like they could not "be a mom," underscoring the centrality of controlling family routines/rituals for self-identification as a parent. In actuality, parents made decisions in each living situation, based on their circumstances and values, about which rituals and routines to maintain and which must be adapted or surrendered. In making these decisions, they selectively and creatively managed family routines to provide stability and predictability for their children. However, parents found rules about discipline and threats of CPS involvement to be most disruptive because they prevented parents from maintaining family values and consistency, while also undermining parental authority (see similar findings reported by Lindsey, 1998; Scultz-Krohn, 2004). They described challenges with regaining parental authority after shelter stays, and how living in shelters led others to stigmatize and question their parenting after leaving shelter. Disproportionate rates of child separations in families who were previously homeless (Barrow & Lawinski, 2009; Cowal, Shinn, Weitzman, Stojanovic, & Labay, 2002; Culhane, Webb, Grim, Metraux, & Culhane, 2003) may be related to continued stigma associating shelter use and incompetent parenting, or to disrupted parenting practices which undermine parental authority and may lead to discipline problems. Increased surveillance of parenting behaviors by family and friends as well as authorities, while just one potential reason for child separations, may explain the significantly higher proportion of both formal and informal separations among homeless and previously homeless families as compared to poor families (Cowal et al., 2002; Park, Metraux, Broadbar, & Culhane, 2004).

Implications for Service Provision and Policy

Our findings regarding parents' experience of rules as disenfranchising is not new to the literature on families who become homeless. Hausman and Hammen (1993) described the "double crisis of homelessness" in which the same factors that inhibit a parents' ability to maintain stable housing interfere with their abilities to parent their children, and characteristics of the shelter environment (e.g., the inability to establish a routine, a lack of privacy, interrupted parenting by shelter staff) inhibit parents' self-efficacy. Lindsey (1998) also described very similar findings regarding the impact of shelter residence on parent-child relationships, and Cosgrove and Flynn (2005) discussed repeated marginalization of homeless mothers in shelters. What is notable here is that the same rules and circumstances persist in shelters across the country nearly 20 years after they were first indicated as problematic. The need for some rules is inherent in safe operation of facilities where many families live together. The challenge of crafting rules is illustrated by the fact that some families complained about lack of freedoms for their children to run around and play

whereas other families complained that such activities made for a chaotic atmosphere. Rule-free communal living situations are not advised; however, our findings contribute to and extend the literature on families and housing services in the following ways.

First, this study extends work focusing on families qua families, rather than parents and children individually. Previous recommendations for family-centered services (c.f., Perlman et al., 2012) emphasize the importance of individualizing service plans by evaluating parenting strengths and weaknesses and assessing children's needs. In contrast, our findings emphasize the importance of understanding families as systems – their interactions, their values, their routines – for *family* health as well as individual family member health. These findings support Kilmer and colleagues' (2012) recommendations that services be family-centered by focusing on parent-child interactions and relationship building.

Second, we recommend collaboration between program staff and parents upon program entry regarding how to manage family routines and rituals within the restrictions of program policies and settings. Programs may be able to do more to ask parents about their family routines and rituals, and work collaboratively with parents to identify creative strategies to maintain family processes (Kilmer et al., 2012). Our participants' strategies for managing challenges and maintaining family routines demonstrate their often sophisticated understanding of what children need for healthy development, suggesting that they would be willing partners in this enterprise. In addition, we support recommendations that service providers receive training to model supportive parenting and enhance parenting self-efficacy (e.g., respecting parents' choices about food for their children). Housing programs should promote parent/child activities and protect space for family time (Kilmer et al., 2012; Schultz, 2009).

Third, we identified specific interactions between program staff and parents that should be addressed: parenting interruptions and threats of CPS involvement. Rules about prohibited discipline techniques should not be enforced in front of children; service providers should be required to address these infractions privately with the parent. Advice or guidance from a service provider delivered as a parenting interruption will not be perceived as constructive nor be "heard" by the parent, and will necessarily undermine parental authority and confuse children. Service providers should be allowed to interrupt and intervene only when the child is in imminent risk. Moreover, threats of CPS involvement accentuate power differentials between service providers and program residents, which serve only to disempower parents and to cut off collaborative efforts at the knees. While service providers should be aware of situations in which a child's well-being may be compromised and notify appropriate authorities, our findings suggest that the absence of a systematic process for handling these discussions with parents has led to the proliferation of CPS threats in some program environments. Several parents who experienced threats of CPS involvement at one shelter reported no such experiences at others, suggesting setting-level problems rather than individual parenting deficiencies. We recommend that housing programs require all mentions of CPS be handled jointly by a program staff member and supervisor, be discussed with the parent in private at a specified time, and be documented to (a) identify repeated instances of concern, and (b) protect parents from unnecessary threats.

Fourth, we recommend collaborative rule setting in programs with lower rates of resident turnover. If program residents and staff design the rules and policies collaboratively, program staff might come to see parents as efficacious rather than incompetent, and rules would be less likely to interfere with family routines and rituals. Although we did not have a large enough sample from specific shelter programs to do a formal comparison, it was clear that families were consistent in their praise of some programs and expressed concerns fairly uniformly at others. Some programs scheduled mandatory meetings during times that were disruptive for family schedules and/or seeking employment and housing, whereas others did not or were flexible in their attendance requirements. Flexible programs engendered parents' desire to cooperate with service providers and to benefit from these programs. Through such programs, parents were empowered, able to maintain family values, and able to maintain consistency for children while pursuing housing and employment goals.

Fifth, our findings support Culhane and colleagues' (2011) prevention-based model for homelessness, which shifts the nexus of housing services away from shelters and transitional housing programs to a community-based network of services so families can maintain community ties (both formal and informal) that they can continue to access once they obtain independent housing. This approach removes the obligation of housing programs to create and sustain internal fully functioning service systems, thereby cutting costs from the housing service system and reallocating them to existing specialized systems. Mental health and substance abuse issues of those who become homeless remain the domain of the mental health/substance abuse system, which is equipped to handle those issues and provide continuity of care *in the community*. Locating these services exclusively within a shelter program stigmatizes families who become homeless by insinuating that their homelessness is due to individual-level problems that must be resolved for them to obtain and maintain stable housing. Requiring families to attend meetings and services only within the shelter program also cuts them off from supportive relationships with community members and organizations (e.g., faith-based organizations, existing mental health/substance abuse counseling). Instead, shelters should provide case managers who link families with existing community resources to meet their unique needs.

Finally, policy efforts should dedicate more resources toward moving families who become homeless to independent living situations where possible (see Shinn, 2009), and/or toward more private living quarters in communal/shelter environments. Efforts to move families rapidly into independent housing may or may not succeed in helping families establish stability, but it is clear that families who received such assistance experienced fewer challenges to family routines and rituals. Transitional housing models in which participants have independent residences in the community (i.e., scatter site and transition in place transitional housing models) may also be preferable, from the perspective of family routines and rituals, to the program-based transitional housing we examined here. Notably, participants who lived in PBTH programs that required service use described fewer challenges to family processes and did not indicate that required service use challenged their family routines and rituals. This may reflect the fact that PBTH programs generally allowed families more private space in which to enact their routines.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

The central strength as well as the major limitation of our study is that it relies on the perspectives of parents. Parents' perceptions are often missing from policy discussions, so it is important to understand them, but other relevant perspectives are omitted here. Interviews with service providers representing the programs participating in the larger study suggest that they have designed programs carefully within resource constraints to help families move to independent housing, attain needed skills, and become self-sufficient. Considerable knowledge could be gained from comparative analyses of shelter interactions from the perspectives of program directors, program staff and residents. Also, we were unable to assess the (potentially beneficial) effects of required service use on parenting practices or on parenting self-efficacy. From families' perspectives, required service use sometimes interfered with parents' attempts to obtain housing and employment or indicated that programs assumed deficiencies in parents who become homeless. As a few participants indicated, required parenting classes, family activities, or family mealtimes may create opportunities for new family routines to develop. Longitudinal research may be needed to assess the effects of identified challenges on long-term family outcomes. Much could be learned by comparing families who are able to maintain consistency in family processes in more flexible housing programs to those who are restricted by program policies to assess the long-term effects on parents and children.

In our sample, which was about half African American, we did not find racial differences in challenges to family processes. Certain discipline techniques are culturally dictated and may be more or less common among African American, Hispanic, and Caucasian families (Whaley, 2000). Future research should explore whether or not racial concordance between shelter and PBTH residents and staff is associated with more or less surveillance of parenting and threats of CPS involvement. It is reasonable to hypothesize that discipline techniques may be interpreted differently based on the racial and cultural backgrounds of program staff. Further, while our sample was 25% Hispanic, most (13 of 20 participants) also reported being white or African American, and only one respondent chose to be interviewed in Spanish. Therefore, our results do not reflect the unique experiences of Hispanic families who become homeless.

Conclusion

We found that maintaining health family routines and rituals is challenging for families who become homeless. While the challenges of each living situation were somewhat unique, there is much that service programs could do to better support family processes, and therefore to support family and individual well-being. Namely, shelter and transitional housing programs should cultivate parents' self-efficacy by training staff to understand and support healthy family processes and collaborating with parents to identify strategies to maintain consistency in family processes in the context of program rules and physical environments. In addition, our findings support more use of community-based services for families who become homeless, rather than program-based services that cut families off from community supports. Finally, as families are the fastest growing segment of the homeless population in the US, policy efforts should focus resources toward providing families privacy in communal living situations and toward quickly moving families to

independent living situations to mitigate the effects of housing service system use on healthy family processes.

Acknowledgments

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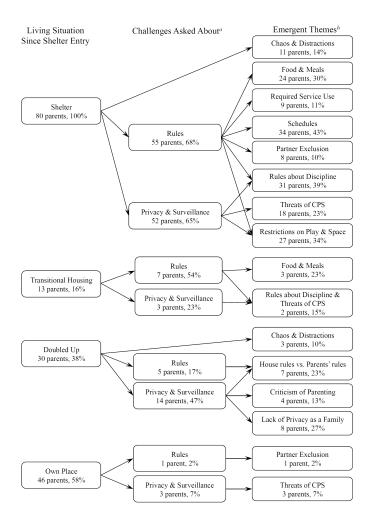
Figure 1.
Frequency of challenges to family processes reported in each living situation.
[a]Percentages represent number of participants who reported on each living situation of 80.
[b]Percentages represent number of participants who endorsed each challenge of the number of participants reporting on the living situation. CPS = Child Protective Services.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

Mean ± SD & Range or N (%)	N=80	Range
Age	31.2 ± 9.0	18 – 60
Gender		
Female	77 (96.3)	
Male	3 (3.7)	
Hispanic [a]	20 (25.0)	
Race		
African American	42 (52.5)	
White	24 (30.0)	
Native American	3 (3.7)	
Other	11 (13.7)	
Education		
< High school degree	35 (43.8)	
High school degree/GED	28 (35.0)	
Some college	11 (13.8)	
Technical Certificate	6 (7.5)	
College degree	0	
Marital Status		
Single, Never Married	54 (67.5)	
Married/Partnered	13 (16.2)	
Divorced/Widowed	13 (16.2)	
Number of Children Living with Participant	2.0 ± 1.3	0 – 6
Age of Children Living with Participant (years)	6.1 ± 4.5	0 – 17
Time Since Study Enrollment (months)	6.4 ± 1.9	3 – 10.5
Number of Living Situations Since Enrollment	1.7 ± .8	0 – 5
Participants who lived in: [b]		
Shelter	80 (100)	
Transitional Housing program	13 (16.2)	
Doubled up	30 (37.5)	
Hotel	9 (11.2)	
Own place	46 (57.5)	
Mental Institution	1 (1.2)	
Living Situation at Interview		
Shelter	7 (8.7)	
Transitional Housing program	10 (12.5)	
Doubled up	15 (18.7)	
Hotel	3 (3.7)	
Own place	45 (56.2)	

[a] Of the 20 participants reporting Hispanic ethnicity: 10 reported White race, 3 African American race, 7 "other" race. One interview was conducted in Spanish.

[b]Percentages do not sum to 100%; parents experienced more than one living situation since enrollment.

Table 2

Interview Questions Analyzed

Routines

1) Can you tell me about a typical day with your children?

    Probes: For instance, who usually wakes your children up in the morning, what time, how do they get to and from day care or school? When do you have meals? How are they prepared? When is bedtime? Are there any things you do with your children every day?

2) How often are you/were you able to keep the routine you just described?

3) How was your routine different in [each previous living situation]?

4) Is there anything about your living situation that makes/made it difficult to carry out a typical day with your children? What are some of the biggest difficulties as you try to get these tasks done the way you plan? [Repeated for each previous living situation]

Challenges to Family Processes

1) Some parents say there are things about their living situation that make it difficult to be a parent. Is there anything about your living situation that makes parenting difficult?

2) Some parents say it is difficult to be a parent when…

    a) … people are watching them all the time.

    b) … they don't have any privacy from their children or with their partner.

    c) … they have to follow rules of shelters or other housing programs.

    d) … they have other people making rules for their children.

    Is this a problem for you and your family? How so? [Asked for each]

    What about in [each previous living situation]?

3) Is there anything about your current living situation that makes it easier for you to be parent, compared to your previous living situations?