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“They Can Only Do So Much:” Use of Family While Coping with Rural Homelessness

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Eastern Washington University

Abstract. This research explores individual and family reliance on non-homeless family members in coping with homelessness in a rural area. Drawing on 114 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with homeless adults and families in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, we found that almost all participants relied on non-homeless family members for assistance, but with variation in the amount of help sought and received. Some participants displayed high thresholds for help-seeking, only relying on family under extreme circumstances and generally asking for modest assistance. This was common among childless single homeless adults who often had different support. Other participants displayed low thresholds for help-seeking, frequently asking for and requiring much assistance from non-homeless family members. This was especially common among homeless persons with children. Implications for policy and services are presented.

Keywords: homelessness, rural, poverty, family assistance, coping behaviors

Coping with homelessness is difficult everywhere, but especially in a remote area like Michigan’s Upper Peninsula (UP) where services are scarce and the climate unforgiving. Hilton and DeJong (2010) found that surviving while homeless in the UP often requires tremendous adaptability and the capacity to harness supports from multiple sources including family members, friends, service providers, and the larger community. This study focused on one potential support in coping with homelessness, relationships with non-homeless family members.

Considerable research in recent years has focused on homeless persons’ relationships with non-homeless family members. The majority of this work found that the homeless tend to have little contact with non-homeless family members, and family help that was received proved insufficient to help recipients successfully manage, let alone escape homelessness (La Gory, Ritchey, & Fitzpatrick, 1991; Polgar, North, & Pollio, 2009; Toohey, Shinn, & Weitzman, 2004). Several studies have suggested that being homeless makes it difficult to maintain positive relationships with non-homeless family and friends (Anderson & Koblinsky, 1995; Lindsey, 1998; Shinn, Knickman, & Weitzman, 1991; Toohey, et al., 2004). Liebow’s (1995) qualitative study of homeless women in an urban shelter, for example, detailed difficulties associated with maintaining relationships with non-homeless family and friends, including pride, shame and guilt, and fear of judgment. This work also demonstrated issues related to past relationship histories; transportation difficulties; substance abuse and mental health related issues; and general stress associated with homelessness and extreme poverty.

Most studies on social networks of the homeless, and homelessness in general, have been based on urban or at least non-rural samples (Bassuk, Rubin, & Lauriat, 1986; Bassuk & Rosenberg, 1988; Goodman, 1991; Grisby, Baumann, Gregorich, & Roberts-Gray, 1990; Letiecq, Anderson, & Koblinsky, 1996; North & Smith, 1993; Rossi, Wright, Fisher, & Willis 1987; Wood, Valdez, Hayashi, & Shen, 1990). One reason researchers have focused less on rural than urban homelessness is that rural homelessness is less visible. The homeless in smaller
communities are typically harder to identify or count than their urban counterparts given the relative scarcity of shelters and other human services that serve the homeless (Henry & Sermons, 2010; Lawrence, 1995; Patton, 1988; Post, 2002; Strong, Del Grosso, Burwick, Jethwani, & Ponza, 2005). Many have suggested that homeless counts underestimate this rural problem since many rural homeless are hidden in campgrounds, cars, and other substandard housing, often avoiding or otherwise failing to engage homeless shelters and other programs (Fitchen, 1991; Hilton & DeJong, 2010; Hoover & Carter, 1991; Kusmin & Hertz, 2010; Post, 2002).

Several qualitative studies of rural homelessness found that the rural homeless cope differently than their urban counterparts, as they use various tactics to obtain short-term shelter, food, and other basic necessities. Moving between family and friends, or piecing together shelter arrangements through relying on social networks, obtaining help from social service agencies, and roughing it (e.g., camping, squatting in abandoned buildings, and living in cars) is common in rural areas (First, Rife, & Toomey, 1994; First, Toomey, & Rife 1990; Hilton & DeJong, 2010; Hoover & Carter, 1991; Nord & Luloff, 1995; Post, 2002).

Some research has suggested that reliance on non-homeless family members is an especially critical coping method for rural homeless (Henry & Sermons, 2010; Nord & Luloff, 1995). Lack of rural shelters and transitional housing programs force many to seek family help. Scarcity of services may also increase non-homeless family members’ tendencies to offer help, especially when faced with the reality that they may be all that stands between their relative(s) having to stay outdoors. Some researchers have also suggested that socio-cultural factors in rural areas, especially the importance of family and family responsibility, may also contribute to greater reliance on family as opposed to formal services in coping with homelessness; however, there are also indications that families and communities as a whole are often pushed beyond their capacities to help (Patton, 1988).

Hilton and DeJong (2010) found that the majority of their sample (91%) maintained regular contact with non-homeless family members and relied on family for several things including short-term shelter, food, transportation, storage and other basic necessities. A central question that emerged from their work was why most who received family help remained homeless. In response to this question, the authors suggested several hypotheses:

- First, often families are themselves struggling financially and simply lack resources to help their kin escape homelessness;
- Second, the homeless sometimes decide not to seek family shelter, at least not permanently, because such help comes with costs including lost freedom and autonomy, as well as expectations of contributing to the household financially (e.g., in-kind benefits like food stamps), and expectations of helping with household chores and other demands (e.g., child care);
- Third, family homes are often crowded and uncomfortable, causing some to leave, even without other shelter options; and
- Fourth, many homeless are too proud to seek family help either because they feared the loss of family status or they felt their families were struggling themselves and should not make their homelessness a primary concern.
Hilton and DeJong (2010) explored coping mechanisms of homeless adults, who were mainly single. While they examined help received from non-homeless family members, their analysis of relationships between the homeless and their non-homeless relatives was limited. Building on their hypotheses, the current study examines relationships between homeless persons and their non-homeless family members, and explores relationship variations with non-homeless family members by homeless family type, individual homeless (adults who are not living with children) and homeless families (adults living with children).

The goals of this current study were to: (a) more fully understand the nature of relationships with non-homeless family; (b) describe the homeless persons’ decision-making regarding whether or not to seek help from family; (c) identify the unique contexts within which these decisions are made; and (d) make policy and program recommendations for improving services for families and individuals experiencing homelessness, especially those in rural areas. We present the perspectives of this study sample regarding family help to better understand the functions families play in coping with rural homelessness, and illuminate the nuances and complexities of family assistance to inform policymakers and service providers.

Method

The sample

Using purposive sampling techniques, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 114 homeless adults between 2009 and 2012. In most cases (n = 76) we conducted individual interviews. We interviewed 38 participants in couples or small groups at the request of the participants. In all cases group interview participants knew one other prior to the interview, and in several cases (n = 20) the interviews consisted of a married couple or romantic partners. The decision to terminate data collection at 114 participants was based on resource and time constraints, as well as theoretical saturation. Over time, patterns emerged from both samples relating to participants’ relationships with non-homeless family members, and thus we felt confident there were sufficient data to illustrate significant patterns.

Our main recruitment concern during the initial stages of data collection was to create a geographically diverse sample that included shelter residents, homeless persons doubling-up with family and friends, and people living outdoors or in automobiles. We targeted homeless living throughout the UP and were successful in recruiting participants from the eastern three-quarters of the region. We attempted to recruit participants from communities of various sizes. Marquette, Escanaba and Sault Ste. Marie are the largest communities in the UP with populations around 15-20,000 each. As Table 1 shows, approximately 60% (n = 69) were living in these communities at the time of the interview, and roughly 40% (n = 45) were in smaller, more remote communities. About 45% of participants were staying in shelters at the time of the interview or during their most recent homelessness (n = 51). Twenty nine percent (n = 34) were primarily staying with family or friends, and 25% (n = 29) primarily living outdoors or in automobiles.
Initial analyses suggested substantial differences in coping behaviors between individuals and families, so we began to recruit participants residing with children in 2011 and 2012. Of the 114 study participants, 72 reported having at least one biological child; however, only 33 had one or more children residing with them at the time of the interview. Our sample was predominately male (N = 69); however, we did interview 45 women. Age ranged from 18 to 68, with an overall average age of approximately 36.5. Our sample reflected the racial distribution in the general population of the UP, which is over 90% White (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). One hundred nine participants were White, two were Native American, two were African American, and one was Latino. Table 2 presents sample demographics.

### Table 2

**Demographic Data of Homeless Individuals and Families (N = 114)**

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<tr>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>33</td>
<td>114</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Individuals</th>
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<tbody>
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<table>
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<tr>
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<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a Biological Children; b Non-homeless relatives in UP/an hour away; c Physical/verbal contact with family in/outside the UP*
We relied heavily on shelters and service agencies like the Department of Human Services and the Salvation Army to recruit participants, and posted flyers at coffee shops and restaurants throughout the region advertising the study (less than 5 participants responded to these flyers). We also used snowball sampling to recruit several non-shelter users by asking participants who were not staying in shelters to refer other non-shelter users. Each participant in the first two years of data collection was offered a $10 and $7 gift card for an area restaurant for agreeing to participate. During the second two years of data collection, each participant was offered $20 and many were also given a meal (if the interview occurred during a meal time).

Northern Michigan University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) initially approved this research in 2008 with a renewal in 2010. The IRB’s main concern was establishing an interview payment schedule valuable enough for participants, but not overly enticing as to persuade very reluctant potential respondents to participate. This led to using a $10 and $7 gift card for the first round of interviews, and $20 in cash during the second.

A second concern was that some participants may have been experiencing great hardships at the time of their interview, but were unfamiliar with homeless resources in the area. This led to the development of a list of regional resources and connections that would help study subjects. To develop this list, we met with representatives from several organizations that regularly interact with homeless adults including three Salvation Army offices, four homeless shelters, two Michigan Department of Human Services offices, two community-based organization, two area food banks, and two police departments. These interviews helped identify available services throughout the region, and revealed important policy and service contexts affecting homeless adults and their families. As standard procedure, this list was offered to all participants.

Data collection and analysis

We used a semi-structured interview schedule. Participants reported on their social networks, especially relationships with family, friends and other homeless adults. We asked several specific questions about participants’ families, including family size (their immediate families and families of origin), relationships with family members, and proximity to various family members. We also posed several questions pertaining to methods of meeting basic needs (food, shelter, clothing, and transportation), and use of and involvement with various human services.

Our primary data were audio recordings of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with homeless adults. We created interview narratives for each participant that included a summary of the individual’s coping mechanisms (primarily methods of securing food, shelter, clothing, and transportation) as well as his/her relationships with family, friends and other associates (Charmaz, 2000). These narratives also included categorizations of family dynamics (both for the family of origin and the homeless family), shelter arrangements, and social services use. The narratives gave us a structured summary of each participant’s interview as a preliminary step toward in-depth analysis of the recordings.

We then analyzed interview data (both the narratives and audio recordings) using NVivo software. Directly coding audio recordings saved time and other resources associated with transcribing interviews. It also allowed us to code the tone of participants’ voices, their
intonation, and their timing (e.g., did they speak quickly or slowly, did they pause). This capability was especially valuable for capturing participants’ felt experiences (Downes, 2000), particularly emotional aspects of their relationships with non-homeless family members.

We employed a grounded theory approach to analysis because there was limited existing research on relationships between homeless persons and their non-homeless family members in rural areas (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser, 1992; Wasserman, Clair, & Wilson, 2009). Our purpose was to: (a) identify participants’ relationship patterns with non-homeless family, (b) identify factors that explain whether or not these relationships provide substantial help in managing homelessness, and (c) create new hypotheses or theoretical propositions related to homeless persons’ social networks, specifically relationships with non-homeless family.

Issues of reliability and internal validity. Initial interviews were conducted under the observation of other team members to assure consistent data collection. We wrote narrative summaries shortly after each interview. Together we analyzed the first six interviews to ensure uniform coding scheme application. Subsequently, interviews were coded independently. We reviewed each other’s work while spot checking to ensure consistent coding.

We met regularly during data analysis to review coding issues whenever it was unclear how to classify an interview segment, and these discussions often led to the creation of new codes. Several existing codes and categories were modified as new variations emerged from the data. We also compared homeless adult interview data with data collected from staff from service agencies. This allowed us to identify unusual cases and assess the credibility of interview data. It also permitted us to compare the nature of available services with homeless adult participants’ perceptions of these services. We also compared emerging concepts and themes pertaining to homeless adults’ use of social networks, particularly non-homeless family members, to findings from previous studies of homelessness (Charmaz, 2001). Although data were collected over a span of four years, we do not believe that coping options, particularly those related to use of non-homeless family members, friends or social services, changed drastically during this timeframe.

**Results**

Below we present results from our analyses of interview data. First we present data on participants’ contacts with non-homeless family members while highlighting variations and patterns with respect to individuals and families. We then present data on help sought and received from non-homeless family members while again highlighting variations and patterns for individuals and families.

**Family contact**

Almost all homeless individuals and families maintained at least some contact with non-homeless family members living in the UP or within an hour of where the homeless were currently residing at the time of interview. Compared to homeless families, individuals tended to have more sporadic and less intense contact with their non-homeless relatives. Homeless individuals had access to and made use of a larger number of shelters that were tailored to individual homeless persons. These settings often required users to tolerate austere and...
potentially dangerous sleeping conditions. A female participant, Robin, described her reluctance to stay at a shelter for two reasons. First, she would have had to leave her children with family because the shelter did not allow children; and second, she would have been one of few women in the shelter. As she explained, “There was no way I was going to stay down there with a bunch of men...I mean there was only like one other woman in the place.” Ultimately, Robin had to place her children with family but she was able to rent a single room for $160 a month.

Individuals typically had larger social networks that they could rely on for help. They generally required modest assistance, and a couch offered sufficient bedding. Individuals were able to make themselves welcome with friends by bartering food, food stamps, child care, and chore provision. Jen and Mike explained how they made themselves welcome houseguests:

[We] started bouncing around with friends...you can't really stay at somebody's house forever...You can have food stamps and stuff to help them out but it's not like you can go stay there for months and months. It's two compared to one.

As these participants indicated, individuals were also highly mobile and could easily move from house to house and stay with a variety of people and places. Lara, 43 years old, explained that she preferred to move around frequently so as to not overstay her welcome:

[I] would only stay] two days...I have a backpack with me all the time...I keep my clothes at a friend’s house, but I always make sure I have my toothpaste and a couple changes of clothes in my backpack...I never wanted to put anyone out or stay too long. It is hard for me ‘cause I always supported myself.

Bartering for shelter and moving around frequently allowed individuals to retain their social networks and not risk exhausting help from any one source.

Unencumbered by children, the single homeless person was adaptable and could be housed in various environments and conditions. Bill, a 46 year old transient, described his austere living conditions: “I have one comforter. Once I slept in a little cave...if you go back in the woods there's like a little cave...and then the last two nights I've slept over with a friend.” These kinds of arrangements would be nearly impossible with children.

Without caregiving responsibilities and able to use extensive friendship and social service networks, homeless individuals were more likely to cope with homelessness. Curt, 50 years old, described being homeless alone:

[I] stayed with [a friend] for a few weeks then came this way. Been pretty much [homeless] the whole month, stayed with a friend for a little while and you know but they get tired of that too. Last couple of nights I've been staying at [a shelter]. Depression gets me down and I start drinking...If I’m not at the [shelter] I go sit on the hillside out in the woods...I got a tent but I ain't got it set up. I figure it's too late to set it up now. I'm getting old. I mean I suppose I could but there ain't really no place to set it up around here for free in the city limits. I just curl up on a hillside over by the harbor.
Like Curt, other homeless individuals demonstrated a higher personal threshold for physical and psychological discomfort but were unwilling to subject children to these same circumstances. Cam, 44 years old, suggested that being homeless is easier without children:

[It's easier being homeless] alone. ‘Cause then you don't have to worry ‘bout no one else. I wouldn't be homeless [if I had kids now]. I would never be homeless if I had kids. I was never homeless when I had kids, ever. I made it happen. Now um I'm tough. I am [making it happen for myself]...it just takes time.

Like Cam, several participants remarked that while homelessness was often physically and psychologically taxing, at least they did not have the added burden of caring for children.

We found that, compared to homeless individuals, homeless families tended to maintain more frequent and prolonged contact with non-homeless family members and the nature of help received was greater. Families frequently sought help from non-homeless relatives because they were seen as the only viable option for keeping everyone together. This is especially true in rural areas where social services are limited and there are few, if any, shelters that can accommodate families without splitting up partners (Vissing, 1996). Tamara described having to lie about being abused by her partner when she sought refuge at a women’s shelter, the only available shelter at the time—for herself and her four children:

And I went and honestly, I went to a shelter at the time. I lied. Steve couldn't go to the shelter…’cause it's a shelter for domestic violence and the only way you could get in there is if you're being abused. Because what was I going to do? I had to have somewhere to go with my kids. And Steve went and stayed pretty much house to house until we were able to find a place.

As with Tamara and Steve, several participants described the need to carefully craft what they told service providers to get the right help.

Many parents were less willing to ask friends to house their families because this was viewed as a major imposition. Friends may be willing to let a homeless individual couch surf for the night, but were less likely to house a homeless family for the significant period of time that is typically required. Gabe, homeless with a toddler and infant, explained the difficulty of finding someone to house his entire family:

Well we've probably been roughing it here for the last month. We've been with a couple friends, family. Point is, you can't stick a family of four in the middle of most households. So we've been bouncing around here and there and slept in our truck a few nights...No one has really volunteered [to help]. We've asked a few of our friends but we don't want to overuse anybody. It's stressful enough on us but we don't want to ask anyone else.

Parents were particularly doubtful of their friends’ willingness to offer shelter for any substantial time given their inability to offer an equitable exchange of goods or services. Parents generally only felt comfortable asking for such extensive help from family members who they believed would help because of lifelong connections and responsibilities. Further, parents were less likely
to expect family members to ask for compensation in return for providing assistance, at least not immediately or regularly.

Homeless parents were sometimes forced to seek help more readily from non-homeless relatives in the area for fear of social service involvement. Teachers, medical professionals, social workers and other professionals are mandated to report potential cases of child abuse and neglect. Many mandated reporters view being homeless with children as neglectful, and immediately report such families to child protection services. Parents sometimes maintained ties with non-homeless relatives to ensure they had a permanent residence in the event social service agencies were notified of their housing instability. Danielle, mother of one, described using her mother’s permanent address and phone as contact information when Child Protective Services (CPS) inquired about the conditions at the campground where she was temporarily staying with her daughter:

People were getting wind of it that I was living in a campground, and I had CPS called on me because of it. Through the grapevine of all the gossip it got thrown to the Department of Human Services protective service worker that I was living in a tent with nothing with my child in a campground. They contacted me through my mother. They contact her and talk to her to ask what was the explanation...She contacted me through somebody else who gave me the message. I didn't have a phone at the time, so I came straight here to use the telephone to sort out all the rough edges on ’he said, she said’ miscommunication...I just briefly told them I was in a cabin and no, it didn't have running water or toilet facilities, but we had ’em right across the driveway in the shower stalls...We did have electricity.

Homeless families have to prepare for all contingencies to avoid having their children taken away, exposed to the elements, or deprived. Joe, homeless with two children, explained how he and his wife made arrangements with non-homeless relatives to ensure their children were not outdoors: “We always make sure we have a backup plan, someplace we can bring the kids if we need to...right now it’s my parent’s [house].” Faced with unpredictable circumstances, parents tried to maintain some semblance of normalcy and consistency in their children’s lives. This included maintaining contact with extended family.

Help received from family

Non-homeless family members provided a variety of types and degrees of help to homeless kin. Non-homeless relatives were often better equipped to assist individuals, as opposed to families, with short-term housing (1 or 2 nights) where they could sleep on a couch or floor. With only one person to house, there was less physical space used and generally less burden placed on relatives. Ron, 44 years old, described the sleeping arrangements in his nephew’s large house where he was staying temporarily:

They got a big house...I don’t got a room. I sleep on a mat on the living room floor. The kids...They got 4 bedrooms. Each of the kids has got a room and [the parents] sleep in a room. I sleep on a mat in the living room...not a couch. It’s a mat. [I: Is that comfortable?] Yeah, for me the mat’s fine. It’s one of those hospital mats, it’s comfortable.
Individuals also spent time at relatives’ homes during the day when shelters require guests to leave the premises. During this time non-homeless family members would often provide food and allow individuals to shower and use laundry facilities. Brett, 22 years old, explained that his mother would provide what she could for him when he stopped by her house: “My ma is pretty cool, ya know. Like if I go over there she’ll let me eat. You know, she ain’t got much food herself.” Brett and many other homeless individuals knew they could get help from relatives, but they also understood there were limits to their families’ resources.

Lacking a permanent residence means that homeless individuals were unable to transport more than the basic necessities with them. Non-homeless family members sometimes allowed individuals to store larger and more expensive belongings with them while they were moving around the area. Brett, mentioned previously, explained how he showered and stored clothing at his mother’s house:

[My mom] kind of looks at me like an outcast sometimes…So that's why it's been hard for me to go there. So I just keep all my clothes in a big, red duffle bag. Whenever I go there and like shower I take a few pairs of clothes [back] with me so I'll have them.

While family offer some help, relationship dynamics may make it difficult to feel entirely welcome.

In addition to storage, non-homeless family members provided valuable help transporting homeless individuals around the area. This was a particularly significant help in a rural area where public transportation is limited and often unreliable. Don, 43 years old, noted:

I'll call relatives and I'll say, ‘do you have time to provide me a ride?’ Nine out of 10 times it'll be ‘Yah’…When I ask somebody for a ride it is usually for something important. I won't do that unless I'm unable [to get there on my own].

Homeless individuals maintained numerous appointments with various social service agencies which were rarely in close proximity to one another. They often relied on their non-homeless relatives for small amounts of money. These transactions were infrequent because many family members of the homeless were themselves struggling financially. Ryan, 28 years old, explained that his family’s financial struggles and a desire to stay in the area with his son precluded him from receiving much support:

Some family members I do have, I'd love for them...they'd love to help me but they're on fixed income. Some of them are elderly so they live...a lot of the family that's there they don't really have the means for me to do anything. And I don't want to be that far away from my son so I'm kinda stuck.

Similarly, Eric, 26 years old, was hesitant to accept money from his mother because she was struggling financially:

My mother…She's offering, but she ain't doing really too good herself. So I wouldn't feel too good taking it. She needs it just as bad as I do...Just my sister
and friends, they help me out as much as they can. I could be worse off, definitely.

Accepting money from family who are struggling themselves is often not an attractive or viable option.

Homeless individuals tended to have extensive social networks that they could call on to obtain emergency housing and support. They were also keenly aware of the risks associated with over-reliance on any one person in their network. For this reason, and because they were more mobile than homeless families, individuals tended not to stay in one place for more than a few days. Couch hoppers like 28 year old Jared, lived a transient life, relying on the generosity of multiple family and friends, none of whom provide a stable housing option. Here he described spending time living with extended family:

[I: Have you ever been a couch hopper?] Oh, definitely. Kind of hard having to go back to the place where you were the past night ‘cause you don’t like the scene where you’re at…Like you’re hoping you’re not imposing. You’re hoping they’re in the mood. Hoping they’ll want some company. Hoping they won’t have a girl over. Things like that...But I never stayed anywhere I didn’t feel welcome—even though I knew I was being a vagrant. But I had a few people who would offer for me to stay—even for extended periods. Kind of surprising, you know? ‘Cause I wasn’t offering to pay some rent.

The homeless were particularly sensitive to the burdens they pose for others. Jared, mentioned above, noted that he was often surprised by others’ willingness to house him given his inability to provide much in return for being sheltered:

I was always amazed that I was able to do what I did for so long and never become a burden or have a bad name…I always tried to keep a certain level of standard and had some pride. ‘Cause I never wanted to be a burden. I knew some people in a similar situation. Some people who when they came to the driveway everyone would say ‘shhh, maybe he’ll go away.’ I never wanted to be like that. I never tried to overstay my welcome or anything like that.

Jared and other homeless who made use of others’ generosity were typically cognizant of the potential burdens they posed and thought strategically about maintaining these social networks.

Compared to individuals, homeless families have a greater need for long-term housing because it is particularly difficult to make frequent moves with children. However, housing an entire family when space is limited is difficult. Marissa, mother of three, described her parents’ inability to provide shelter:

My mom and dad live in [small town in central UP], but they have four—three younger brothers and a sister—at home and they all live in a three-bedroom house. And I have three children and a baby due any day now, so there's no room at home. They'd like to help, but there is just no room for us anywhere.
Carol, a mother of two, described having to share a couch with her two children while staying at her mother’s house:

> It was tiny. [My mother] had a little living room and a little kitchen. It was one of those older houses like from a hundred years ago...it only had two bedrooms...The kids wouldn't sleep unless they’re with me, they just won't, so I ended up sleeping on the couch with both of them. There were two couches so I put my son on one, and I was on the other one with my daughter.

Having to reside in cramped living quarters invariably resulted in increased tensions and stress among family members. The homeless often felt, or were made to feel, as though they were imposing. Further, they were generally unable to contribute financially to the household in return for receiving shelter. Alex, mother of four, described the crowded living conditions that eventually forced their exit from her mother’s home:

> It was me and my boyfriend, our son, his mom and his sister. [The mother’s boyfriend] just...it was crowded in there and he didn't like all the people there—and he's like ‘If it would be just you and the baby it would be a different story, but it’s too many people’ and he's like ‘You gotta get out.’

These compounding factors suggest that homeless families are at greater risk of exhausting vital family relationships more quickly than individuals.

In lieu of housing the entire homeless family, for lack of space or because of limited resources, non-homeless family members would sometimes offer to house a portion of the family or only the children. Anna, mother of three, explained that her mother’s boyfriend eventually demanded that she and her boyfriend leave, though he was willing to continue housing her children: “It was pretty ridiculous...like my mom was with her boyfriend and it was his house and he basically told her she can take the kids or help the kids or whatever, but not me.”

Other times, existing family discord dictated a family’s willingness to house their homeless relatives. Rachel, mother of one, explained that reconciling with her boyfriend was unacceptable to his father: “We were homeless ‘cause at Christmas time he pretty much wanted to get back together and his dad just said ‘Get out! Take your son and get out!’ He didn't want us to be together.” For some homeless like Rachel, accepting help from family could potentially come at the loss of control over personal aspects of their lives.

Non-homeless family members would sometimes provide small amounts of money to homeless families to help cover the cost of daily expenses. However, in many cases these relatives were also struggling financially and unable to offer much assistance. Marissa, mentioned above, noted the following about her family:

> There's not much they can do. Both my parents are older, disabled and have Social Security. Plus with my brothers and sisters at home, there's really no room. If they had more of an income they would help, but they just can't.

In other cases, homeless families were sometimes asked to contribute to the household finances while being housed by their relatives. This was usually difficult as many of the homeless parents...
were unemployed. Rachel, mentioned previously, described how her relatives asked her to start contributing to the household when they lost their jobs:

> At that point, when we moved down there, [my mother] did not have a job and shortly thereafter her—it was her boyfriend at the time—lost his job. And they were just swearing and yelling at us [for not bringing in money], and we're in a trailer park in the middle of nowhere. It was like a 10 mile walk [to town] and it was like 90 degrees in the summer. It was unbelievable. I think maybe because I was pregnant, but my God it was hot. They wanted me to go and get work, I was like ‘Hello, I'm ready to pop. They're not gonna hire me.’

When homeless families were doubling-up, or sharing living quarters with their relatives, the strain of limited resources was felt even more acutely. Kiera, mother of two, lost the supplemental income she relied on from her brother’s disability insurance and her son’s child support payments when her brother and son moved away. Unable to pay the rent on her salary alone, she was forced to leave her apartment and stay with an on-again-off-again boyfriend:

> I got an apartment...with my family. My handicapped brother decided to go move with my sister...so I didn't have his income anymore. My youngest son went into foster care and then decided to get adopted by the foster family so I didn't have his child support income anymore. All I had was my working money from work and I just couldn't pay the bills or nothing. I couldn't afford it. So I lost my apartment. I lost everything in it. And then from then on I had nowhere else to go but my boyfriend's.

For some homeless like Kiera, relying solely on family for help was risky as the support could be withdrawn at any time.

> Families often provided temporary housing or child care to ensure homeless families maintained good standing with social service agencies that monitor child welfare. Carol, mentioned previously, explained how her mother-in-law, herself once homeless with children, provided temporary housing and child care, thus ensuring CPS did not remove her children:

> The same thing happened to my mother-in-law, and she had to go stay with her mother-in-law. She said she'd rather do that then have the kids taken away, because if the kids got taken away she'd have to step in and take the kids, so she figured to help us this way would keep her from having to raise her grandkids.

Having children removed was a legitimate fear among homeless families. As mentioned, some agency staff (e.g., CPS) view homelessness as a form of parental neglect, therefore, parents often had to rely on family and friends to attain adequate housing or risk losing their children to foster care. Debbie, mother of three, explained the difficulty of negotiating the social service network while receiving only limited and temporary child care assistance from her non-homeless relatives:

> My CPS worker told me my brother didn't want to take care of my daughter anymore and that I was going to have find somewhere else for her to go, so I talked to my son's girlfriend's mother...and she said ‘I'll take her’...So I called the
CPS worker and she called me back the next day and said...‘Is she going to take [daughter] for the next 8 years?’ And I said ‘why would she have to take her for the next eight years?’...She said ‘I need something more legal and stable than that. You're going to court.’

Debbie eventually lost custody of her daughter who was subsequently placed in foster care.

Sometimes non-homeless family members intervened on behalf of CPS and attempted to gain custody of the children from their homeless relatives. This was often the case in situations where there were existing animosities between family members, and children were viewed as the innocent victims of their parents’ bad choices. Nina, mother of three, explained how her father attempted to attain guardianship of her eldest son who was currently living with him:

We were not stable so I left. I brought my son to my parents because they were more stable. So ever since then he's been with them. I've tried to get him back and it's just kind of like a family dynamic or argument...they won't release him back. My father recently went and filed for guardianship behind my back in the courts and had a court hearing that I never knew about and my dad got guardianship.

While homelessness was rarely the sole factor in the loss of child custody, having unstable housing was a major contributing factor. Being unable to provide stable housing for children led to many CPS investigations, though not all of these investigations resulted in child removal; however, the lack of stable housing made it difficult for many parents to comply with imposed CPS requirements. In cases where children were removed and placed in foster care, homelessness made it extremely difficult to get children back.

Discussion

Understanding family contact and help received does not explain the entire dynamic between the homeless and their non-homeless relatives. It is important to understand the homeless person’s perspective, specifically when and how frequently they ask for help from relatives. The homeless are active and strategic agents in their own coping. They make choices rationally within unique contexts, evaluating the costs associated with asking for and receiving help. This help-seeking and decision-making behavior is situated within the broader familial context—one that accounts for family history and dynamics in addition to the homeless persons’ unique attributes (values, skills, and adaptability). Both the homeless and their non-homeless relatives weigh the pros and cons of asking for and giving help that can change the nature of familial networks from relational to transactional. Study data suggest two conceptual categories of homeless that differ in the frequency with which they seek help from non-homeless relatives and the amount of help they request: high and low threshold help-seekers (see Table 3). These categories are not static identifiers. Homeless individuals and families have, at various times and in different contexts, exhibited both types of help-seeking behavior. This study’s goal is not to explain or predict thresholds for help-seeking behavior; rather, it describes variation in the distinctive characteristics of each.
Table 3

Thresholds for Help-Seeking Behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Help Seeking Behavior</th>
<th>High Threshold</th>
<th>Low Threshold</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Only seeks help in unique circumstances considered especially &quot;dire.&quot;</td>
<td>Asks for help to meet basic needs on an ongoing basis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attribution of Homelessness</td>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Circumstantial Environmental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of Family Responsibility</td>
<td>Based on dynamic of social exchange and reciprocity.</td>
<td>Expectation and presumption of help are embedded in the nature of family relations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Needs</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Networks</td>
<td>Numerous</td>
<td>Few</td>
</tr>
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High threshold help-seeking behavior

Individuals who exhibited high threshold help-seeking behavior were characterized by their tendencies to ask for help only in unique circumstances that they define as especially “dire”. Their help-seeking tended to be infrequent and the help received was in relatively modest amounts. This help-seeking behavior can be understood in two ways. First, individuals who exhibited high-threshold behavior were more likely to attribute their homelessness to personal failures or shortcomings, often related to past relationships with family members. For example, Jackson, 39 years old, did not seek help readily or ask for much help from family members, in part, because he envisioned having already burned bridges with them. He recounted a strained relationship with his mother:

I was hoping to go back to my mom's, but she brought me to [a homeless shelter]. It's just too much, ya know? They're getting older. She's seen a lot of stuff through me, through the years. Bad things. And they don't deserve that. They deserve a life of their own and I understand that…It was very depressing…but sometimes you gotta do what you gotta do. And that's what she did. Sometimes you just gotta let someone go.

Jackson’s comments reflected a focus on personal accountability associated with his homelessness.

A second way to understand high-threshold help-seeking behavior is to recognize that individuals with these tendencies required fewer resources to be helped and tended to have greater mobility, more flexibility in their coping options, and more extensive social networks that
allowed them to limit help sought from family, thus preserving these vital relationships. Lawrence, 23 years old, preferred to seek help from friends because they tended to have less complicated living circumstances (no partners or children) so he would not feel as though he were imposing:

It’s easier to ask a friend. It’s easier asking one of them than a relative or a girlfriend or an ex-girlfriend…The ex-girlfriend I just don't get along with very well…Family, I don't care to stay there. They got their own kids and stuff.

For Lawrence and several others, having several options for help meant not having to deal with complicated relational dynamics.

Perception of family responsibility. Individuals who exhibited high-threshold help-seeking behavior tended to view family members’ responsibility to help as conditional. They had less expectation of help and were more willing to take whatever was offered to them because they tended to have strained relationships with their non-homeless relatives, were often unable to provide much in exchange for help received, and recognized that their relatives were often struggling themselves.

George, 62 years old, is a divorced homeless father of two sons. The relationship with his sons deteriorated after his divorce and subsequent homelessness, yet they managed to maintain tenuous relations that were undoubtedly influenced by these shifts in the family dynamic. George recounted an evening spent sleeping while parked in a son’s driveway during a particularly bad winter storm:

I didn't go to [my youngest son] for help…Even my oldest son…him and I never had a good relationship, but he never threw me out either. I knew I couldn't stay long [at oldest son’s house]. But maybe an hour or two to warm up…[My oldest son] helped me the most…[He is] the one that I went to live the closest to in the city itself. And a couple of times [My oldest said] ‘If you kinda want to back up [your car] between the house and the garage if the wind's real bad go ahead. Go ahead and do that.’

George was almost completely estranged from his youngest son. His oldest son was not able or willing to house him, but the help he did provide, shelter to warm up for an hour or two and a place to park the car out of the wind, was, in George’s estimation, more than he deserved. George’s conception of this help as “enough” has to be understood within the context of his family and the nature of the relationships that exist therein.

Many relatives of the homeless were themselves financially, psychologically, and materially taxed; therefore, even if they desired to help, they were often unable to offer much more than emotional support. Don, 42 years old, explained that he avoided asking for assistance from family members who may have wanted to help because they were dealing with their own problems:

My parents live here also….they can't right now. [I: Are they aware of your circumstances? Can they help you out?] Their health is real bad so they can't
really [help] either...I try not to [ask for help]. I don't want to be a burden to them in any way. I try not to [ask for help].

For Nathan, 28 years old, repeated previous requests for assistance had subsequently decreased his family’s willingness to help and had diminished available resources:

[My family members] want to help as much as they can, but here's the thing; when you move four times in four years and it's just you’re used to it you do kind of ask for help from your family and I think eventually they start...You know everybody has the point where they're like, okay, we've helped, we've helped, we really don't want to help anymore.

Like others who had turned to family many times in the past, Nathan no longer viewed his family as a viable source of help.

Individuals who demonstrated high-threshold help-seeking behavior made calculated assessments of their capacity to garner help from non-homeless family members within the broader context of family histories and the current non-homeless family’s circumstances. The willingness of non-homeless family members to help hinged on a combination of factors that, taken together, allowed them to assess the extent to which assisting their homeless relatives outweighed the costs of not helping. A key factor in determining merit simply entailed defining what it meant to be an independent adult. Anya, 26 years old, elected not to seek assistance because she perceived the norm within her family was to be independent by adulthood:

I always felt uncomfortable asking my mom for help. ‘Cause she's always been the kind of lady that will kick you out and say ‘You know this is the real world. You have to figure it out on your own.’ She's got a point ‘cause people got to start living their own life and not depending on their parents. It was crowded and I felt uncomfortable and I always felt like I was overstaying my welcome. I always felt like I had to get out...I wanted to be out on my own, but I didn't know how to go about that because I didn't have a job. I figured I had to go and try like low-income [housing].

Anya understood her mother’s position and chose to seek alternative housing rather than risk exhausting family help networks. For others, like 24 year-old Hank, being an adult meant taking responsibility for his decisions and understanding the consequences of having burned bridges in the past:

As you get older...I think it's the equivalent of nature. A bird is going to be less likely to return to its mother's roost after a few years than the second day after it got kicked out. Eventually they'll be less willing to have that back. I feel like I'm not in a position to ask for help because I already know what the answer is going to be.

Hank did not perceive his family as a viable source of assistance because as an adult he should presumably have been self-sufficient.
Low threshold help-seeking behavior

Individuals who demonstrated low threshold help-seeking behavior were characterized by their tendencies to regularly ask for help and by their needs for high levels of assistance. Low-threshold help-seeking behavior can be understood in two ways. First, some homeless tended to see their homelessness as circumstantial, a product of their environments, especially the failure of people within their social networks to help, as opposed to their personal inabilities to provide for themselves. Anna, 26 years old, described being frustrated with her parents’ refusal to take custody of her daughter when she was in rehabilitation treatment for alcoholism. As a result, her daughter was subsequently placed in foster care: “They are missing out on so much of my daughter's life...It hurt a lot. It really did. ‘Cause that's family. You don't mess with family. You try and help out family as much as you can.” Anna’s comments deflected focus from her personal problems (alcoholism) onto her parents and suggested that their failure to provide continued assistance is the primary reason for her problems. Homeless individuals’ help-seeking behavior, and their families’ responses, must be situated in larger relationship histories and dynamics. In this case, Anna had exhausted her family’s help over time, yet believed that the familial bond should continue to extend privileges. Help-seeking behavior must also be understood within the larger family context. Anna further chastised her parents for failing to provide her with financial support while they supported her unemployed brother. She viewed this dynamic as unfair because she believed her situation was more serious because she was a single mother:

So my dad makes very, very good money...It is not a question of my parents don't have the money. It’s just that they believe I should be doing it on my own, but my brother who is three years younger than me...He has not had a job, he has not gone to college. He lives at home with mom and dad and gets everything paid for. And look at me, I'm the one that's up here with a kid. It’s just an unfair dynamic, I think.

Viewing her parents’ financial assistance as unfair allowed Anna to reconcile her continued requests for help. She felt as though she had not been given her fair share.

The second way to understand low-threshold help-seeking behavior is to recognize that some homeless, especially homeless families, had few viable alternatives for obtaining needed assistance and were often forced to turn to non-homeless family members for help. Rachel, mother of one, explained the difficulty of having her son while staying with friends:

We had lots of friends [in town]. My friend, Janie, she felt bad when she asked us to leave ‘cause I had my son—she asked us to leave because Robby was too loud at night...I didn’t like [couch hopping]. Different people’s houses every night. I feel like I’m imposing.

Rachel was forced to seek help from family members who she perceived as more sympathetic to her plight. Another concern for homeless families in particular was the cost associated with not asking for help from family, namely the risk of CPS involvement. As Rachel, mentioned above, explained:
The lady who runs the [shelter] down there she does the practice of calling CPS because families are homeless...They never had a chance with me ‘cause I sent him to live with my mother so he couldn't be taken away.

As with Rachel, relatives sometimes provided shelter and child care that could protect homeless families from CPS scrutiny.

Perception of family responsibility. Homeless exhibiting low threshold help-seeking behavior tended to believe that family helps family, unconditionally and regardless of need or history. This belief led to different patterns of help-seeking for homeless individuals and families. For individuals, family was often one of several practical options for garnering necessary resources. Turning to family when there were other alternatives for help (especially friends) was often the result of individuals’ insistence that they were owed something from some family members. For some, their homelessness could be attributed to the failure of family to provide more, as opposed to their own failure.

In contrast, homeless families were more often forced to turn to relatives for help because there were few, if any, alternative sources of help that could meet their needs. While they asked for help from family in great amounts and for prolonged periods, they tended to exhibit a high threshold help-seeking mindset in that they were more willing to take whatever was offered to them. These families understood the immense burden they placed on non-homeless relatives and were often forced by necessity to seek help. They tended to view non-homeless family members’ occasional reluctance to provide as understandable.

Understanding decisions about whether to seek help from family requires knowledge of social contexts (i.e., family dynamics and history, social networks and community resources), unique attributes of homeless individuals and families (e.g., values, skills, adaptability) and the meaning homeless ascribe to their circumstances. Focusing on homeless persons’ coping behaviors reveals substantial costs to requesting and receiving help from family members. Feelings of guilt, shame, and discord are common among participants who must rely on family assistance. This is especially true of those who exhibit high-threshold help-seeking behavior who readily view their homelessness as a personal failing rather than a complex, systematic failure of their social contexts. Homeless families, who more often demonstrated characteristics associated with low-threshold help-seeking behavior, were also acutely aware of the unique burden they posed for non-homeless relatives. Homeless individuals and families were generally reluctant to overburden any one component of their help-seeking networks. Ideally, they wanted to be self-sufficient, and in lieu of that, they wanted to establish an equitable share of assistance from available family, friends, and social services.

Vital family relationships were often strained, and sometimes exhausted, because of a lack of alternative assistive options. While the homeless may be concerned about maintaining their social networks, dire circumstances might preclude them from fostering these relationships. Further, in some circumstances the homeless were forced to accept inequitable and seemingly unjust circumstances from their non-homeless family members because they lacked any alternative sources of help. These included being verbally shamed, being financially extorted and blackmailed, having family threaten to call CPS on homeless parents, giving up authority over daily parenting tasks, and having to accept rules and restrictions associated with living in a
relative’s house. These costs are arguably unique to the family domain (wherein one may presume existing relationship ties give one license to enact these injustices) and ultimately undermine the strength of familial relations. Requesting and receiving help from family is not an isolated singular event—these occurrences must be situated in the larger context of the family history and dynamic to fully gauge the rationale of the homeless’ decision-making processes.

The rural context of this study is also an important consideration in understanding decisions of both the help-seeking homeless and the non-homeless family helpers. The costs of homelessness can be great in areas like the UP where services (including shelters) are scant and weather extreme. This may partially explain both homeless persons’ propensity to seek help from non-homeless family members and family members’ extension of many forms of assistance.

Policy Implications

Data suggest that service providers and policymakers should pay more attention to the critical roles of non-homeless family in helping the homeless, especially in rural areas where human services are scarce. Policies and programs to support non-homeless family members who help the homeless and help maintain or restore strong relationships between homeless persons and their families would be a major contribution to the social welfare of many people struggling with homelessness and extreme poverty, especially in rural areas where families tend to be major coping resources.

Providing tangible assistance in the form of utility payment offsets, increased food stamp allowances, and housing subsidies to family members who house otherwise homeless kin could be an effective and efficient means of extending housing to many homeless. It would also permit them to stay in their own communities instead of migrating to larger cities away from their extended families. Helping families who help the homeless would be an especially effective strategy in rural areas where there are few shelters and housing options for those who are homeless with children. Shelters, and other agencies serving the homeless, should include non-homeless family in their service plans, even including them in counseling sessions and case management services aimed at helping their homeless relatives. Cook-Craig and Koehly (2011) argued that this approach could strengthen the abilities of those within a homeless person’s social network to provide valuable supports. These services could also address past family conflicts and other issues that make it difficult for homeless persons to seek help from family members or for the non-homeless family members to provide assistance. Polgar et al. (2009) argued that non-homeless family members often experience many forms of caregiver stress when helping homeless relatives. Counseling services for the homeless should reach out to their clients’ relatives to help them relieve and manage this stress.

Many of the homeless participants in this study expressed both a desire to “earn their keep” when staying with others and not to be seen as a burden. Shelter- and community-based programs that allow the homeless to earn money and other valuables (e.g., food, tools, bicycles, food stamps, coupons, etc.), in return for what would otherwise be considered volunteer work, may improve their abilities to maintain positive relationships within helping networks (United States Employment and Training Administration & James Bell Associates, 1997). Valuables could be exchanged for shelter, transportation assistance, child care or other necessities within the homeless’ helping networks. Such an exchange would help preserve positive relationships.
with people who may provide critical assistance, including non-homeless family, while allowing the homeless to contribute to the household when staying with relatives and friends.

**Limitations and future research**

This research explored relationships between the homeless and their non-homeless family members; however, data are only from the perspectives of the homeless. While we do gain some insights into how non-homeless family members view these relationships, there are undoubtedly many aspects of these relationships that could be illuminated by collecting data directly from non-homeless family members and other help providers. A few studies have examined how homelessness may impact non-homeless family members (e.g., Polgar, 2011); however, we know of none that include non-homeless family members as study participants. Our future research will examine the perspectives of non-homeless relatives supporting their homeless kin.

Another study limitation is that the data are cross-sectional. Because we rely on interview data that captures homeless participants’ experiences and feelings at a single point in time, we may not fully understand how relationships with non-homeless family members change during and after bouts of homelessness. A follow-up study that includes some of these study participants could examine how relationships with family members and others change over time, especially as some experience extended homelessness, some secure stable housing, and others experience sporadic bouts of homelessness.

The sample size (N = 114) is extensive for a qualitative study, and to the best of our knowledge it is reasonably representative of the homeless population within the UP. The sample is limited by geography; however, and is not generalizable to other areas. We believe many of the experiences, perceptions, and feelings of participants uncovered in the data will be similar to homeless individuals and families throughout the U.S. and certainly to those in rural areas where formal social services are scarce. Additional research that includes other regions in the U.S. (including both rural and urban areas) would strengthen the external validity of our findings.

This study relied on descriptive data in evaluating participants’ perceptions of the costs and benefits of seeking and receiving help from non-homeless family members. While data were helpful in creating deeper understandings of decision-making processes among the homeless, we were not able to fully capture the value of help received. This made it difficult to compare levels of help received between groups in our sample (e.g., individuals versus families). Follow-up research will include a more systematic measure of both the costs and benefits of seeking and receiving help.

This study offers a unique perspective on the value and limitations of family networks in coping with homelessness. Help from non-homeless family members is critical to survival for many people who are homeless in rural areas where support services are scarce. However, seeking help from family can sometimes strain and alter relationship dynamics. Our data offer a snapshot of family networks among individuals and families experiencing homelessness and help paint a more complete picture of the family context of rural homelessness. Knowledge of this context may help policymakers and service providers better understand the unique experiences of homeless individuals and families in rural areas as they relate to family history and dynamics,
seek ways to involve non-homeless relatives in the assistance of their relatives, and design services that better meet the needs of homeless individuals and families.

References


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