



Washington Families Fund Systems Initiative Evaluation

Summary Highlights of Baseline Data on Homeless Families—Cohort 1

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Summary Highlights

Who Are The Families Being Served In Our Systems?

Families entering shelters in King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties are similar demographically and in composition to families entering shelters in other regions of the country. Families are generally single, female, young, US born, and long-time Washington residents, though there is some important variation. In particular, across the three counties, nearly a quarter are two-parent families, with a 1/3 of families in Pierce as two-parent families.

Family homelessness is associated with family separations, with over a quarter of the families having a child temporarily living away, for a variety of reasons.

What Have Been the Families' Housing and Homeless Experiences?

Just prior to entering homelessness, the place most families stayed was not their own, but a doubled up situation in which they stayed less than two months. Only 18% held the lease in this housing.

In the 12 months prior to entering shelter, families have moved an average of every four months. Over half of the respondents held a lease in their name at least once during this time. To try to avert homelessness, many families sought and received help. The most commonly received help involved finding housing and receiving money for either rent, utilities or a security deposit.

Over their lifetime, 40% of the families have experienced homelessness at least once before. Those who have experienced multiple episodes of homelessness have more challenges and barriers to housing than other families, especially first-time homeless families.

What are the Health Needs of Homeless Families?

The majority of families have access to health care insurance and primary health care.

The need for mental health attention is high, and a fourth of the families have need for substance abuse attention.

Dental care is the highest reported unmet need (56%) of the health-related services.

What are the Human Capital and Income of Homeless Families?

The majority of respondents have some level of education. Over 70% have a high school degree/GED or higher. A greater percentage of respondents in Snohomish than the other two counties lack a degree.

Few respondents are working, but many more have recent job history. A little over a fifth of the families are working, significantly more are working in King County than the other two counties (especially Pierce). Jobs are generally low-wage, less than full-time, and lacking benefits.

Over 60% have worked in the past year (near 3/4s of the families in King County), signaling potential work readiness for a majority of the families.

Families are poor and in debt. The average homeless family receives less than \$500 in median monthly income and has median debt that averages nearly \$350 per month.

How Do Families Enter the Homeless System?

Entering each of the county homeless systems prior to any systems change took time and stamina. On average, families waited over 3 months to enter shelter, had to make 36 calls before getting shelter, and, for those on shelter wait lists, check in at least multiple times a week or once a day.

Families rate the process of finding shelter as stressful and frustrating, but were very satisfied with the assistance provided and found the agencies very respectful during the process.

Overview of Design and Methods

The sample includes 466 families who entered a homeless shelter in King, Pierce or Snohomish counties (excluding DV shelters) and who speak either English or Spanish. Recruitment began in October 2010 and ended in January 2012 in King County, April 2012 in Snohomish County, and July 2012 in Pierce County.

All families who agreed to be contacted by the research team were invited to participate in a set of standardized interviews to achieve as close to a census as possible in Pierce and Snohomish, and all families entering the 5 largest shelter organizations in King County. Of the families who consented to be contacted and were eligible for participation, 78% participated in a baseline interview. The sample likely underrepresents non-English/Spanish speaking families, families who exit shelter quickly, and families who seek DV shelter.