

**HIDDEN VOICES: THE REALITIES OF
HOMELESS FAMILIES AND HOMELESS IMMIGRANTS**

Coalition on Homelessness San Francisco

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

This report establishes homeless families and immigrants as an integral part of the over-all homelessness crisis in America and argues for the inclusion of families and immigrants in any strategy to reduce or end homelessness.

Today, 14.4 million American families - one out of every seven families - have critical housing needs. Despite all of the talk of family values in America, we have utterly failed as a society to value our families. We have failed to create the necessary affordable housing, decent and accessible jobs, income safety net, childcare, and health care that will allow all families in this country to thrive. Despite the severe needs of America's low-income families and children, the last twenty years have witnessed massive cutbacks in programs that benefit them. The 1996 Welfare Reform act has also adversely affected America's families by pushing heads of households into low-paying jobs while eliminating social safety net.

The shifts in the economy over the past two decades – including deindustrialization, globalization, the growth in low-wage, temporary service jobs, and the decline in union density – have led to rising gaps between rich and poor and declining real wages for workers.

Taken together, the consequence is homelessness. Homelessness disrupts family life, damages emotional and physical health of family members, and inhibits children's education and development. Homelessness often causes family separation due to increased contact with Child Protective Services. Frequently homeless families are headed by single-mothers who are often victims of domestic violence. Instead of addressing the systematic nature of family homelessness, public policy and perception has been driven by stereotypes of poor families as parasitic and criminal.

Similar to families who have U.S. citizenship or legal residency status, Latino immigrants have distinct challenges that intensify and complicate their lives should they become homeless. In San Francisco, as in much of the rest of the nation, the lowest-paid, most hazardous work for is reserved for immigrants. Such work is usually casual, with no formal job protections and little recourse should an employer decide not to pay earned wages. Logically this increases the likelihood of immigrants becoming homeless.

This report challenges stereotypes of homeless immigrants. Homeless people in general are often accused of moving to areas where there are generous public benefits to be had. Our study provides evidence to the contrary. (See Homeless Family section for more detail.) Similarly, immigrants are typically viewed as having little roots in the areas in which they settle. Those who we spoke with indicated that they have lived in the United States for a substantial period of time.

Immigrants contribute to the economy, often working in the lowest paid and most unstable jobs. The instability and poor quality of these jobs, however, often leads to homelessness or makes it near impossible to exit homelessness. Participants in this study indicate severe barriers to exiting homelessness, including legal status, racism, and language.

Most of the reasons why immigrants arrived in the U.S. are economic. The first most common reason for migration was to better themselves and to create a better life and future for themselves and their families. Many immigrants reported coming to the United States to find economic opportunities that were absent at home. American dream. The second most common reason for immigration to the United States was poverty and economic crisis in the immigrants' home countries

A third key set of reasons that respondents expressed for coming to the United States was to help their family - both their family in the United States and their family in their country of origin

Immigrants face many of the same challenges that any low-income person or family would to get by in San Francisco. The immigrant specific barriers are: lack of legal documents which make it difficult to rent or work, and discrimination. It should be noted as well that immigrants are prohibited from the majority of government benefits and that regulations passed by Congress during the Clinton years make gaining subsidized housing nearly impossible

METHODOLOGY OF THE FAMILY REPORT

The findings in this report are based upon written surveys, taped interviews and focus groups conducted with 133 homeless parents in March and April of 2004. Of those we spoke with, 42% lived in shelters, 35% doubled-up, 11% lived in transitional housing, 6% were in residential treatment, 3% lived in residential hotels, 2% lived on the street and 1% lived in cars.

In addition, respondents had the following characteristics:

Gender

- 87% female
- 13% male

Race

- 68% African-American/Black
- 17% Latino
- 8% Asian/Pacific Islander
- 6% White
- 1% Native

Age

- 4% under 18 years old
- 30% aged 19-25
- 41% aged 26-35
- 25% 36 years old or higher

Family Size

- 79% are single parents
- The average number of children in each family is 2.1

KEY FINDINGS OF FAMILY REPORT

Basic Demographic Findings

- Many homeless families are “chronically homeless” The average length of homelessness for parents interviewed was 2.4 years. 65% of parents reported being homeless for one year or longer.
- The average homeless parent interviewed has lived in San Francisco for 18.6 years. 70% of homeless parents have lived in San Francisco for 5 years or longer.
- 88% of parents lived in San Francisco before becoming homeless. 4% became homeless upon moving to the city.

African-Americans Are Homeless Longer Than Other Races

	Average Time Homeless
African American/Black	2.8 years
Latino	1.3 years
Asian	1.6 years
White	1.6 years

Homeless Parents Report Working and Overwhelmingly Prefer Work to Cash Assistance

- 23% of parents interviewed reported currently working.
- Most parents have received cash assistance for one year or less.
- Over half have previously exited cash assistance
- 95% of respondents receiving cash assistance said they would rather join the workforce than stay on welfare.

Homeless Families Face Particular Challenges

- Homeless families identify housing as their most pressing need.
- Homeless families identify the prime barriers to housing as long waiting list for subsidized housing, lack of family-sized housing, discrimination and high rents.

- Homeless family's income - whether working or on cash assistance - is inadequate to pay rent.
- Barriers in trying to obtain work are: not being hired, lack of childcare, disabilities, and conditions related to homelessness.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this report we illustrate that families face particular barriers as families. However, the most important solution to their problems is to include them in gains established by any political, policy or social policy effort designed to reduce or end homelessness! Problems which much be addressed to make sure that homeless families exit homelessness include family separation, emotional and psychological stress particular to preserving a family, increased costs of living for families and children's education, safety and recreation. While distinct, the principal barriers to families attempting to exit homelessness are similar to those facing single adults - the lack of access to affordable housing and living wages!

BASIC DEMOGRAPHIC FINDINGS OF LATINO REPORT

Most Homeless Latino Immigrants have lived in the United States for a substantial period of time.

The average time that the homeless Latino immigrants interviewed have lived in the United States is 9 years, and half have lived in the United States for 5 years or more. The average time homeless Latino immigrants have lived in San Francisco is 4.8 years, and 60% have lived in San Francisco for one year or more. Thus, the overwhelming majority of these homeless immigrants have been in this country contributing to its economy for a significant period of time.

Homeless Latino immigrants contribute to the economy, often working in the lowest paid and most unstable jobs.

The occupations which immigrants reported are (in order of frequency): general labor/day labor, construction assistance/carpentry, restaurant work, cleaning, painting, gardening, moving, and janitorial jobs.

The instability and poor quality of these jobs, however, often leads to homelessness or makes it near impossible to exit homelessness.

69% of the homeless Latino immigrants said that they are either currently unable to find work or are unable to find stable work. The inability to find work is reflected in respondents' answers to the question of why they are homeless. The most reasons given for their homelessness were: the lack of work, inability to afford rent, low paying jobs, the lack of job stability, and the high cost of housing.

Many homeless Latino immigrants are chronically homeless.

The average time homeless Latino immigrants have been homeless is 1.5 years. (This figure does not include people living in SROs, who reported living in SROs for twice as long.) Nearly half have been homeless for one year or longer, and 27% have been homeless for two years or more.

Homeless Latino immigrants face severe barriers to exiting homelessness, including legal status, racism, and language.

Legal Status:

80% of homeless Latino immigrants are without legal immigration documents. This lack of documentation was repeatedly stated as one of the largest problems that homeless immigrants feel they face.

Racism:

80% of homeless Latino immigrants interviewed felt that racism is a cause of homelessness. Racism and discrimination are among the major problems that homeless immigrants feel they face.

Language:

Spanish was the first language of all of the immigrants interviewed, except for one who spoke Portuguese. Language barriers are another major problem that homeless immigrants feel they face.

RESEARCH REPORT ON HOMELESS FAMILIES

THE NATIONAL CONTEXT: IT'S TIME FOR A NEW FAMILY VALUES

Despite all the talk of family values in America, we have utterly failed as a society to value our families. We have failed to create the necessary affordable housing, decent and accessible jobs, welfare safety net, childcare, and health care that would allow all families in this country to thrive. Today, 14.4 million American families – one of every seven families – have critical housing needs. These families pay more than half of their household's income for housing and/or live in substandard housing conditions.ⁱ Housing costs far outstrip wage levels, as the cost of the average two-bedroom apartment in America is more than three times the minimum wage.ⁱⁱ Exacerbating this problem, poor families face a dismally thin social safety net with welfare benefits insufficient to afford housing or meet basic daily needs. Often, it is children who suffer most from America's failure to protect its families. 39% of persons living in poverty in America are children, and the poverty rate for children is almost twice as high as the poverty rate for any other age group.ⁱⁱⁱ

Despite the severe needs of America's low-income families and children, the last twenty years have witnessed massive cutbacks in programs that benefit them. Between 1978 and 2002, the budget of the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) was cut by almost 63%. During this time, Project-Based Section 8 was limited, public housing construction was halted, and HUD went from producing or subsidizing over 430,000 new units of low income housing in 1976 to adding less than 8,500 new two decades later in 1996.^{iv}

Compounding the affordable housing crisis and cutbacks in federal housing spending, the 1996 Welfare Reform Act has also adversely affected America's families. Welfare reform eliminated families' entitlement to cash assistance, imposed time limits on federal aid, and granted broad discretion to states in designing safety nets for families. As a result, current welfare benefits are below the poverty level in every state. In fact, the median assistance level for a family of three is approximately one-third the poverty level.^v In addition, since the passage of welfare reform, welfare recipients are less likely to attend college and less likely to have health insurance. Most welfare recipients, particularly single mothers, who have been able to obtain work have been locked into low-wage jobs where they have little opportunity to exit poverty and are unable to improve their families' economic well being.^{vi}

Moreover, shifts in the economy over the past two decades – including deindustrialization, globalization, the growth in low-wage, temporary service jobs, and the decline in union density – have led to rising gaps between rich and poor and declining real wages for workers.^{vii} As a result, in one decade, between 1979 and 1990, the number of poor people increased 41%; and families and children under 18 accounted for more than half of that increase.^{viii}

In the midst of this economic context, rents have sharply risen in recent years. Between 1999 and 2003 alone, the wage needed to afford the average two-bedroom apartment in the United States increased 37%, and there is little reason to think that the steep rise in rents will falter.^{ix}

As a result of these massive changes in the structures of the United States economy and government social programs, neither steady work nor welfare benefits are guarantees against poverty or homelessness. Homelessness, especially family homelessness, has skyrocketed. Families with children comprise the fastest growing group of homeless people in America today.^x Families are estimated to comprise between 35-40% of homeless people nationally, and the rate of family homelessness continues to grow.^{xi}

Homelessness severely disrupts family life, damages the emotional and physical health of family members, and inhibits children's education and development.^{xii} Homelessness frequently results in family separation either because homeless services deny access to all family members, because children are placed into foster care, or because parents leave their children with other caregivers.^{xiii} In fact, most "single" homeless women are actually mothers who have been separated from their children.^{xiv} One study found that 35% of homeless women with children under 18 do not live with any of their children, and even more mothers do not live with all their children.^{xv} Other research estimates that 22% of homeless kids are separated from families.^{xvi}

The majority of homeless families are headed by single-mothers.^{xvii} Many of these mothers have experienced domestic violence; this is illustrated by the 57% of homeless parents who previously lived with a spouse that cite domestic violence as a reason for leaving their spouse.^{xviii} Two-thirds of homeless mothers report that they have experienced domestic attacks, with more than one-quarter reporting the need for medical treatment as a result. Perhaps due to this violence, homeless mothers are reported to suffer twice the rate of major depressive disorders and three times the rate of post-traumatic stress disorder of the total female population.^{xix}

As a society, instead of supporting families facing poverty, overwhelming barriers in housing and labor markets, as well as high rates of domestic violence commonly associated with marginalized communities; we have cut back the very support and access these families need. Instead of focusing upon providing affordable housing, decent jobs, child care and health care, public policy discussions in America have too often demonized poor families, and especially poor mothers, caricaturing them as evil welfare dependent, promiscuous parasites. Moreover, when homelessness is publicly discussed, families are very rarely mentioned.

A major reason that families are frequently omitted from homeless policy discussions is that local homeless policies are often implicitly concerned with removing homeless people from sight, not addressing the causes of homelessness. Family homelessness is among the least visible forms of

homelessness, and thus is frequently ignored by policy makers. Homeless families are not publicly visible for many reasons:

- Parents may avoid public scrutiny for fear of losing their children.
- By the time many of these parents become “visible,” they have already been separated from their children or they may have temporarily left their children with other caregivers in order to spare their child the hardships of homelessness.
- Families are often publicly overlooked because they are more likely than single adults to remain hopping between friends or family, or “doubled-up” for long, dangerous, or uncomfortable periods of time before entering into shelters, the streets, or other emergency situations.^{xx}

By ignoring the reality of homeless families, we run the risk of ignoring the intergenerational cycle of homelessness. We also fail to see the ways that homelessness tears families apart. Most currently unaccompanied homeless individuals were themselves once members of family units. Many unaccompanied homeless adults actually have children but have been forced to separate from them.

Perhaps the most devastating aspects of family homelessness are the physical, psychological, developmental and educational harms suffered by homeless children.^{xxi} Oftentimes these harms result in children being removed from their parents by the Child Protection Services (CPS). The cost of taking children from their homeless parents and placing them in foster care could easily subsidize the housing needs of the entire homeless family.^{xxii} Although many localities have a policy of not taking children because of homelessness, homelessness greatly exacerbates other causes of child removal. Once a child is taken by CPS, adequate housing is often a requirement for reunification. Even when a child is in foster care, however, the cycle of homelessness continues; an estimated 27% of homeless people reported living in foster care, a group home, or other institutional setting as a youth.^{xxiii}

If we as a society are truly concerned with family values, our first step should be to provide adequate affordable housing, welfare benefits, access to living wage work, child care and health care to ensure that all families have a home in which to live and the means with which to thrive. Rather than criminalize, punish, or demonize poor families, we should support them through adequate social welfare programs, and we should guarantee them the necessary educational, work, health care, childcare, and housing opportunities for them to succeed and maintain their family. It is time for a set of new family values in this country. It is time to demonstrate our commitment to American families by taking the steps needed to end family homelessness.

This report – based on over 130 surveys, interviews, and focus groups with homeless families in San Francisco – aims to communicate the challenges, barriers, and needs these families face, as well as to document their struggles to

exit homelessness and the impacts of homelessness upon them. As we strive to create a society in which all families can thrive, we must pay close attention to the voices of those families who are most marginalized and most in need, who experience daily the brunt of poverty and homelessness. Only by listening to their voices and to the lessons of their direct experiences will we understand the problems they face and be able to better address those problems.

METHODOLOGY

The findings of this report are based upon written surveys, taped interviews and focus groups conducted with 133 homeless parents in March and April of 2004. Respondents were asked open-ended questions regarding: their needs, problems, barriers, and fears; their efforts to exit homelessness; the effects of homelessness upon themselves and their children; and what they would like to say to policy makers. Respondents were also asked a list of demographic questions and closed-answer questions about work, cash benefits, their children’s education, how long they have been homeless, and how long they have lived in San Francisco. Answers to open-ended questions were coded, counted, and sorted in order of frequency mentioned. Answers to closed-answer questions were statistically tabulated.

Surveys, interviews, and focus groups were primarily designed and conducted by formerly homeless parents. This research was designed to provide currently homeless respondents with an opportunity to discuss their personal situations through open-ended questions. Unlike many policy reports on homeless families that involve an “expert’s” assessment of family homelessness, this research was designed to provide homeless families with an opportunity to assess their own situation. This report serves primarily to aggregate and communicate that assessment. The closed-ended and demographic questions were intended to supplement this assessment and are not intended to provide fine-tuned demographic estimates of the homeless family population. Demographic characteristics of respondents are as follows.

Living Situation:

Shelter	42%
Doubled-up/transitory	35%
Transitional Housing	11%
Residential Treatment	6%
Single Room Occupancy Hotels	3%
Street	2%
Car	1%

We utilize San Francisco’s Continuum of Care definition of homelessness, which includes people in doubled-up and transitory living situations and transitional housing. Often the public does not perceive people living in these situations as homeless. One homeless mother stated during her interview, “People don’t think of us as homeless because we don’t live on the streets.” Despite the lack of public visibility of homeless families in transitional housing, shelters, treatment, or who are doubled up, however, they all lack a stable home and are deeply affected by that lack.

Gender:

87% of respondents we spoke with are female; 13 % are male.

Race:

African-American / Black	68%
Latino	17%
Asian / Pacific Islanders	8%
White	6%
Native	1%

It is important to note that the racial composition of respondents in this survey differs from demographics found in previous studies. In particular, we spoke with fewer whites and more African-Americans than other studies of homeless families in San Francisco. For example, a 1998 study of homeless families living in shelters in San Francisco found that 48% were black and 24% were white.^{xxiv} One possible explanation for this divergence is that our study does not focus solely on the shelter population. Significant attempts were made to speak with homeless families living in doubled-up or transitory circumstances. It is also important to remember that this study was not designed to provide detailed demographic counts. Demographic data given here primarily intends to give a sense of the characteristics of the respondents.

Age:

The average age of respondents is 30.

Under 18 years old	4 %
19-25 years old	30%
26-35 years old	41%
36 years and older	25%

Family Size of Respondents:

79% of the parents we spoke with are single parents.
The average number of children in each family is 2.1.

BASIC DEMOGRAPHIC FINDINGS

Many Homeless Families are Chronically Homeless

The average length of homelessness for parents interviewed is 2.4 years. 65% of parents reported being homeless for one year or longer.

Homeless Families Are Long-Term San Franciscans

The average homeless parent interviewed has lived in San Francisco for 18.6 years, far longer than many of the city's housed residents. 70% of homeless parents have lived in San Francisco for 5 years or longer. 88% of parents lived in San Francisco before becoming homeless, and 4% became homeless upon moving to the city.

African-Americans Are Homeless Longer Than Other Races

Race	Average Time Homeless
African-American / Black	2.8 years
Latino	1.3 years
Asian / Pacific Islanders	1.6 years
White	1.6 years

Nearly One-Quarter of Parents Reported Working

23% of parents interviewed reported currently working, half of them full-time and half part time.

Parents on Cash Assistance would prefer to work

Although 3 out of 5 homeless parents receive cash assistance, most of these parents had been receiving assistance for short time periods (68% reported receiving assistance for one year or less) and over half of them had previously exited from cash assistance. Over 95% of respondents receiving cash assistance said they would rather join the workforce than stay on welfare. The relatively short time frames that parents have received cash assistance, the high frequency of previously exiting assistance, and the overwhelming preference exit welfare and to work, suggests that parents are trying to find work and to exit welfare but experience barriers to doing so.

THE CHALLENGES FACING HOMELESS FAMILIES

Housing

The single most frequent comment made by homeless parents is that they need affordable and adequate housing. In particular, parents need housing that is affordable or subsidized and that has enough rooms for themselves and their children. Parents also need housing that is safe for their children to live in; some felt that low-end SRO housing is not a safe environment for children.

It is clear from our study that the parents struggled determinedly to secure housing. Parents reported persistently looking for housing on the market, signing up for subsidized housing waiting lists, sending out applications for homeless programs, bouncing between family and friends, and accessing shelters. Despite their continued attempts to find housing via multiple avenues, respondents to this study have not been able to secure stable housing for themselves and their children. One parent's lament is echoed repeatedly: "I've tried everything, and none of it has worked."

Many parents identify the length of waiting lists for subsidized housing as their primary obstacle in securing housing. "Section 8 seems to be shut down from what I understand," noted one homeless father. "They still got waiting lists, you know, they got lots of waiting lists; but whenever they'll move, who knows? That might be when they go to the moon again."

A few parents also mentioned that finding housing with children is especially difficult. Parents have to pay high rents for units large enough to accommodate children. Often there are extra charges for children at SROs. In general, many people simply dislike renting to families with children. As one mother stated, "Single adults only need 1 room. We need 3-4 bedrooms. Hotels want to charge more money for children per week, which makes that impossible. We have to clothe and feed children as well as ourselves."

Another mother spoke about the social barriers she faces finding a place to stay with her children: "A lot of people ask you how many kids you have or how old your kids are, and won't rent to you. It shouldn't be like that. When people put their property up for people to live in there and pay rent, they should not be worried about how many kids you have. You are worried about getting a roof over your head, but people don't have compassion. It all comes down to money. They are just trying to make a dollar, and they don't care if you live on the street or in a cardboard box because it ain't them."

The importance of stable, affordable housing is reflected in the fact that the most common fears homeless parents mentioned were of themselves or their children not having anywhere to go, of not ever being able to afford housing, and of ending up on the streets.

Finances

After the lack of housing, the second most frequent problem that homeless parents mentioned was the lack of money. The lack of money is, of course, inextricable from the high cost of living and rent. As one mother stated, “I’ve been looking for places, but rent is too high for me to make by myself.”

While 62% of homeless parents interviewed reported receiving cash assistance, cash levels are insufficient to exit homelessness. A homeless mother commented, “I need an apartment that’s affordable; and I don’t mean affordable only if you make over 18,000 a year. I mean affordable at the \$704 monthly amount which is what I get from welfare, so I could probably afford \$250 for rent and still live comfortably enough to take care of myself and my children properly.”

Some homeless parents with disabilities similarly mentioned that SSI was insufficient to cover the cost of living in San Francisco. Moreover, even if they could afford monthly rent on an apartment, a number of homeless parents highlighted move-in costs, such as first and last-months rent and deposit, as another major financial barrier to exiting homelessness.

In addition to the lack of cash, other barriers that inhibit parents’ financial well-being and prevent them from securing housing include (in order of frequency mentioned): owing back rent and lacking assistance in repaying their back rent, credit issues or bad credit records, evictions on their record, and criminal convictions on their record. Each of these barriers makes exiting homelessness extremely difficult. One homeless mother described the evictions and bad credit that resulted from circumstances related to her pregnancy, “I have evictions from not being able to work while pregnant and owing money. I’ve never owned a credit card, but still have bad credit.” Another mother wanted to improve her life but her credit history prevents that: “Because people have had a hard time in the past and it shows up on their credit record, doesn’t mean that people don’t change and want to make better for them and their children. Give us a chance because our kids are suffering. And we are suffering because we can’t get good jobs because they won’t give us a chance.” Finally, a few parents also said that the lack of a stable home also affects their families’ ability to keep possessions safe.

Work

The third most frequent problem that homeless parents mentioned was in regards to work. The 62% of homeless parents interviewed who receive cash assistance are attempting to exit assistance and would overwhelmingly prefer to work, yet are unable to do so. Many parents stated that they need a job, but despite intense searches they have been unable to secure employment. The barriers that homeless parents face in obtaining work are (in order of frequency mentioned):

- Can’t find work

- Lack of child care
- Disabilities
- Homelessness makes securing work difficult
- Currently attending school
- Lack the necessary support to attain work
- Currently pregnant or nursing
- Substance abuse recovery.

Only 3% of unemployed homeless parents said that the reason they are not working is because they do not want to work.

The labor market is inadequately structured to allow willing homeless parents to access decent employment. Homeless parents experience barriers to securing work primarily because they lack a steady address. Parents who are pregnant, nursing, or have disabilities face additional barriers to working. Moreover, most homeless parents are single mothers who face particular challenges as such. They need childcare and flexible jobs that can allow them to carry out their responsibilities as primary guardians of their children while working. In addition, some respondents noted that difficulties with transportation inhibit their ability to work. A number of parents also mentioned needing more training or education in order to work. However, among those who had recently attempted to increase their educational level and training, many could still not find a decent job. Homeless parents need adequate financial support while they are in school or training if their efforts to exit from homelessness are to be successful.

Even those 23% of homeless parents who are working do not receive enough wages or hours to exit homelessness. One mother explained, “I have worked but even though I have a job I’m not making enough to really stay nowhere. And if I do make enough I’m just making barely enough, just to stay there, no electricity, nothing else.” Working parents often commented on their need for more stable work, more hours, or higher pay if they are to exit homelessness. Half of the 23% of employed respondents reported working half time jobs. One woman commented, “All the jobs I’ve found lately are temp. It’s hard not having a permanent job or a permanent place to be.”

A few parents pointed out that the problems they experience are a result of the poor economy and of the difficulties of finding work for low-income people and for people with a low educational level. One respondent summed up the situation by saying, “A lot of times there is just no work.”

HOMELESS FAMILIES ARE TRYING TO EXIT HOMELESSNESS BUT LACK ACCESS AND OPPORTUNITY

Many of the findings previously discussed show that homeless families employ multiple approaches to maintain their families and are persistently endeavoring to exit homelessness. Parents' efforts to exit homelessness can be seen in their determination to find housing and work, evident in the fact that 23% of parents interviewed are currently working. As noted above, most of the parents receiving cash assistance prefer to join the workforce. Many have exited welfare as a result. Despite their determination, families experience significant obstacles to exiting homelessness.

Homeless Families Face Particular Barriers as Families

Homeless families reported many barriers that single adults do not face, such as:

- the need for childcare
- the inability to work because of nursing or caring for young children
- the difficulty of moving around and transportation with children
- the increased cost of caring for and providing housing for children
- the increased stress and responsibilities of taking care of children
- the difficulty of finding housing large enough for children
- the increased rental costs of housing with children
- the inability to rent much low-end housing and SROs with children.

One mother succinctly summed up the added challenges she faces as a parent trying to exit homelessness, "It costs more as a homeless family. I have to spend money on three people rather than one."

However, some of the barriers families face in exiting homelessness are similar to those commonly associated with single adults. For example, the two major barriers homeless families reported were the lack of affordable housing and the lack of money. Some parents also said disability is a barrier they face to exiting homelessness, and two of the parents currently living at residential treatment centers mentioned substance abuse challenges as related to their homelessness. One mother stated, "When I was a kid and we were homeless my mom smoked dope. And when I was 13, I was stressing so hard that we were going to lose the hotel we were staying at; I told my mom to give me a piece of that dope and let me go handle it because I know people who want that. So at 13 years old I started selling dope, stopped going to school, ended up sleeping with men, using dope." Another mother described the limited housing options she faces, "Cheap housing

and SROs and one that I can afford are in the Tenderloin where there is lots of drugs and being a recovering addict with my baby I don't want to go there, coming up back in crack city."

Lack of Family Services and Issues with these Services

The most frequent comment that respondents made about homeless services, programs, and shelters is that there needs to be more of them. These parents felt that there are insufficient resources in the community to assist them in exiting homelessness and maintaining their family. One mother pointed out that available services are all temporary. This has left her cycling through shelters and programs, but unable to establish stable housing.

Issues with service staff or public agency representatives were also mentioned by a number of parents. The most frequently criticized agency was the Housing Authority. A number of parents felt that the Housing Authority was difficult to work with and unhelpful, and a few parents reported that the Housing Authority had lost or misplaced their files. One mother recounted her difficulties with public housing waiting lists: "Back in 96 when the public housing list opened up, me and a few ladies from my church we went. Only two of us received anything back; but there were like three of us who never received nothing. We was calling, and calling and calling and calling, and they never got back in touch. So me, I just gave up on it all and went back to my addiction. It's like your number and application is just lost or shredded."

A few parents who had been separated from their children because of homelessness also discussed the difficulties this caused them in qualifying for some family services. One mother explained, "It's a catch 22. They don't want to give you no help if you don't have your kid, but you are trying to get your kids and that's why you need the help."

Another problem noted by a few parents was the lack of information about available assistance. Others felt that shelter rules that forced them to leave and return at certain times were difficult, especially when they and their children were forced out into the cold and rain. One parent remarked that these shelter time rules also made it difficult to attend to her business and to find work.

Race and Family Homelessness

There is an obvious racial dimension to family homelessness. The fact that 68% of respondents in this study are African-American suggests a tremendous overrepresentation of African-Americans. While this study was not designed to provide fine-tuned demographic data about the homeless family population, previous estimates of families staying in shelters also found a significant overrepresentation of African-Americans (48%).^{xxv} Moreover, on a national level African-Americans are estimated to comprise 40-50% of the homeless population

compared to only 12% of the total population.^{xxvi} Racial differences are also evident in the average time families reported being homeless. African-American respondents reported being homeless on average of 2.8 years, twice as long as respondents of other races.

When asked whether they felt there is a connection between race and homelessness, 48% of respondents believed that racism is one of the causes of homelessness. Most commonly, they said that discrimination against people of color exacerbates or leads to homelessness. Three specific types of discrimination respondents mentioned were housing discrimination, employment discrimination, and discrimination in homeless services. While 48% of all respondents felt that racism is a cause of homelessness, 87% of Latino parents interviewed believed it is. Many of these respondents pointed to the specific barriers that immigrants face such as lack of legal status, anti-immigrant sentiment, and language.

THE EFFECTS OF HOMELESSNESS ON FAMILIES

Instability and Difficulties Due to Not Having a Home

Instability and consequent difficulties were the most frequently mentioned effects of homelessness on families. One mother explained, “We are constantly being uprooted from place to place. We don’t have a sense of stability or of belonging anywhere.” This sense of instability can lead to stress for both parents and children, and can make it difficult to function as a family. As another mother notes, “It’s hard not having a steady foundation to raise a family, to build something strong, to be a family, when you have nothing, no roof over your head, not knowing where you’re going to sleep the next night.”

Parents reported that instability and moving around frequently was especially difficult for their children. One mother commented, “I strive everyday to try to find a place for my kids for them to be in a stable home because it is so dangerous out here. Us being back and forth running the street trying to find a place to stay, we have [a shelter] right now but there’s only a time frame that you can be there. So I need a stable place to stay, so my kids don’t have to worry about where we are going to go in the next month, and having to know all these different addresses we stay at.”

A few parents also commented that the lack of stability affects children’s scholastic achievement and overall attitude. A homeless mother explained, “My daughter needs a better life, so she can go to school, and not just different houses, laying her head on different pillows. It affects her growth and how she can become a better child, affects her attitude and her personality. If my daughter grows up on the street all she’s going to know is the street, not anything better than that.” While this research did not measure how often homeless children move, another study found that 97% of homeless kids move at least twice a year.^{xxvii}

In addition to the instability of not having a fixed home, families also lack sufficient space or privacy. Again, many parents pointed out that the lack of space and privacy is particularly difficult for their children. A number of parents in shelters mentioned that it is hard for their children to find a space to play, to have guests, or to be social. Others mentioned that it was hard for their children to have a “normal” life like other children. One mother explained, “Because this is not our own space you have to limit what you can allow children to do. You constantly have to be on a routine to accommodate other people. It’s hard for her to understand if she wants to go spend the night at her cousin’s house, that I can’t just go. I have to put in a request to get permission to spend the night out. So it is hard.”

Family Separation

Homelessness frequently leads to the separation of families, and homeless mothers are far more likely to be separated from their children than housed mothers.^{xxviii} One study found that 35% of homeless women with children under 18 do not live with any of their children, and even more mothers do not live with all their children.^{xxix} Other research estimates that 22% of homeless kids are separated from families.^{xxx} Many parents reported giving up children to other caretakers or family members because of homelessness. This informal separation is often done to spare children from the hardships of homelessness and is required by some service programs. In addition to informal family separation, homeless parents also face the threat of having their children involuntarily taken from them by the Child Protection Services (CPS). Just over one quarter of parents interviewed for this study reported having had some interaction with the CPS. It is important to note that this does not mean that the CPS took the children of all these parents, only that a case was opened or contact made.

Homelessness greatly increases the chance of CPS cases. One study in Philadelphia found that among a birth cohort of children who went into foster care by age 5, 61% had been in the homeless system.^{xxxi} Even if children are not taken by CPS explicitly because of homelessness, being without a stable home exacerbates and compounds many of the factors that can lead to child removal by CPS. In fact, the second most common fear parents have is that CPS will take their children away. Additionally, parents reported that the lack of stable housing prevents parents from regaining custody of their children once they have been taken by CPS.

Of those parents who had interacted with CPS, about half reported they had been treated fairly by CPS. One mother explained, “As long as I did what I was supposed to do, CPS did what they were supposed to do.” About half of respondents, however, reported they had been treated unfairly. Some of the common complaints about CPS were that they manipulated or misled respondents. One mother said, “CPS makes errors and won’t correct them till too late. They pencil whip you to death.” Another mother reported an interaction with a CPS worker in the hospital a day and a half after she had given birth to her child:

“We had a visit with CPS, they just wanted to check us out. She was rude and trying to scare us, but she realized that there was nothing wrong with our family and it was okay. But in the beginning I don’t think it was fair. She treated us like she was already going to take our child away from us and she said, ‘oh, when we go to court we’ll have a lawyer and you’ll have a lawyer.’ She wasn’t trying to tell us anything that we did; she was already telling us about how it was going to be when they take our baby away from us in the hospital bed, a day and a half after I had my daughter. So it was pretty scary.”

Emotional/Psychological

Another of the highly common effects of homelessness that parents reported is emotional and psychological stress, both on themselves and their children. One mother reported, “I’m more irritable, it’s harder for me to talk through my problems because I’m so stressed out, there are so many of them.” This stress can in turn cause difficulties between homeless partners. One respondent said, “We are always arguing about how we are going to pay for this, how we are going to get a home, what about the baby, what she needs.”

A number of homeless parents also reported low self-esteem, a sense of failure, and depression resulting from homelessness, as well as a sense of being scorned by others because they are homeless. One homeless mother described the shock of becoming homeless and ending up in a shelter: “This is our first time in a shelter and I never ever thought we would have to come into a shelter. So my first night here, I cried because I’m like I can’t believe this is where we are.”

Many parents reported that their children also suffer from stress, low self-esteem, depression, shame, and feelings of being scorned by others. One homeless mother commented, “My child builds up tension from us always moving around from here to there without having stability.” Another mother who lives in a shelter explained, “Being here in this shelter is really hard. I always catch my daughter in the middle of the night crying. And she won’t tell me why, but I know it is because we are here.”

A number of parents also reported that homelessness has affected their children’s attitudes, making them more mean or disobedient. A couple of parents attributed this to their children being in environments where they are exposed to bad habits. A couple of parents attributed this attitude change to their inability to discipline their children while in shelters because of constant scrutiny and threat of having their children taken away from them. A few parents also reported that their children are angry with them or look down on them because they are homeless.

Physical Health

In addition to reporting psychological effects of homelessness, respondents also said homelessness leads to physical health problems. Some parents reported that

homelessness was at the root of their health problems and acknowledged they need better care; others reported that homelessness caused frequent illness for their children, who were also in need of better care. Some parents interviewed remarked that homelessness leads to inadequate nutrition for their family, and a few noted that it is especially difficult not to have a place to cook. A few respondents also felt that illnesses were passed around quickly among children in shelters, leading to frequent ailments. One parent felt that their child's development was stunted by homelessness; and another reported a miscarriage brought on by homelessness.

A number of parents said their biggest fear as a homeless family was that their children would become sick; a few even feared that their children would die. One mother who had lived in a car with her family described, "I feared waking up in the car and my son would have frozen to death, hypothermia, you know being gone. And then them being hungry, not knowing if I would have enough money to feed my kids the next day."

Children's Education, Safety, and Recreation

Instability and lack of privacy, separation from parents, and mental and physical health problems all make life very difficult for homeless children. In addition to these hardships, some parents reported that their children were experiencing school related challenges. Moving around so often is hard for children in school, and the daily challenges of being homeless restrict the time children can devote to homework and tutoring. 20% of parents with children in public schools reported that their children were in some type of special education. A couple of parents noted that their children did not like school because they did not fit in there or because they felt scorned there. One parent stated that the stresses of homelessness had eventually led to her child ending up in jail. A number of other parents worried that homelessness had subjected their children to poor environments and unsafe conditions.

In addition to school problems, parents were concerned about their children's inability to lead normal lives. For example, respondents observed that their kids had restrictions on their social activities, had no private space, could not have guests, and did not have access to many of the recreational activities non-homeless kids enjoyed. One parent explained, "They are unable to have their own room to be free as far as playing and getting what they want, what they need." Another parent lamented that homelessness prohibited her child from "having a birthday party like normal children do."

Homelessness Can Impair a Family's Ability to Be a Family

Instability, the lack of privacy and space, stress, depression, illness, family separation, and CPS cases often impair a family's ability to even be a family. A number of respondents described the difficulty of staying together and functioning

as a family. A couple of parents expressed that the demands of homelessness leave little bonding time with their children. In addition to straining the relationship between parents and children, one parent reported that homelessness also strains the relationship between couples, which can in turn lead to separation of partners. One father commented, “I wouldn’t like anyone to have to go through what people who are homeless are going through. Homelessness should be the first priority, and to keep families together. It seems that when you are homeless you have more problems and more arguments, and there have been families broken up behind it or kids are known to have just turned away from their parents.”

Despite all of these challenges, a number of homeless parents expressed a firm commitment to staying together as a family, to love each other through adversity, and to come closer together in the midst of hardship. One working father summarized his situation: “Being homeless tears my children apart; but I keep encouraging them by saying that ‘we’re going to have our own place to stay; we’re going to find something, daddy will get a better job to feed you guys and things like that.’ And I won’t let go of my kids. I won’t let them turn them over to the system. I’m going to fight this out. I’m convinced of that. I’m gonna get a place to stay... It’s unfortunate I can’t afford to stay nowhere right now, and it is very frustrating, very hard. I will not split my family up. I don’t resort to crime to get an extra dollar, I just will not do it.”

WHAT HOMELESS PARENTS WANT TO SAY TO POLICY MAKERS

Homeless parents interviewed for this study were asked what they would like to say to policymakers. The findings and quotes in this section are a compilation and illustration of the answers homeless parents gave to that question.

Create More Housing

The most common response given to the question of what they would like to say to policy makers was that policy makers should create more affordable or subsidized housing large enough for families. One of the most common ways that respondents suggested policy makers could create more housing was to use vacant or boarded up buildings to create homes. Homeless parents also asked that policy makers address public housing waiting lists. One mother even offered to help the Housing Authority fix up units currently being rehabilitated in order to speed up the process: “Why not just fix the units and then let people move in, because there are a lot of people on these waiting lists and they have units open and its not making any sense. They need to just get on the people on housing authority ... people want to move in. I’m willing to fix up the place myself if I have to. Get the units done and fixed or let people volunteer to clean them up.”

A few homeless parents also mentioned that policy makers should open up more family shelters and improve the ones that exist. Others asked that policy makers

assist them with barriers to entering housing such as eviction history, back rent, and criminal records. Finally, a couple of parents said that families need better and safer housing than is currently offered via public assistance.

Assist Homeless Families

The second most common response that homeless parents gave to the question of what they would like to say to policy makers is that policy makers should be doing more to assist homeless families. One mother commented, “It’s not just me, lots of families need assistance. Millions of us have been out here over years, day by day fearing what’s going to happen the next day, where are we going to go.” Parents stressed that homelessness hurts families, and that policy makers should not just make promises but should take action to help them. One mother expressed her feelings on policymakers, “It’s hard out here, they keep brushing us off, they’re not doing anything.”

A number of parents asked that policy makers make family homelessness a priority, decreasing spending money on expenses like war and find increasing revenues for housing and homeless programs. One mother suggested, “I think they should tax people in the higher income bracket. And everybody always claims they care, and they do this and that. But they ain’t doing nothing. It should be mandatory because those people got so much money.”

A few parents specifically asked that policymakers think about the homeless children. As one mother said, “Do more for families, and especially for the kids. Because I don’t think anyone would like to be in shelter or on the streets.” A number of parents mentioned that policy makers should do more to prevent children from being removed from families by CPS and should assist families in the reunification process. One mother said, “Instead of paying the foster care for raising other people’s children; maybe help us out, get a roof over our head.” A few parents mentioned the need for increased services. A couple also spoke about a need for better service staff.

Understand Family Homelessness Better

Many respondents requested that policy makers make efforts to better understand family homelessness. In response to the question of what she would like to say to policy makers, a homeless mother said, “Put yourself in the shoes of a homeless family. What would you do and how would you feel if someone who had the power to change your life wouldn’t help you?” Another commented that policy makers should “spend a month truly living as a homeless person or family’s lives.”

Some respondents also said that policy makers need to understand that homeless people are not homeless by choice, but because of circumstances such as poverty, hardships, and adversities. One father expressed, “Homelessness is not a choice. It is a circumstance. If I had choice, I would not be homeless.” A couple

of parents also felt that the idea that homelessness is a choice is used to justify refusing assistance to homeless families. One mother noted, “There’s a lot more that society could do for homeless people, but they really don’t try to because some people think homelessness is there because you want to be homeless; and that’s not necessarily true.”

A few other parents suggested that it is too often assumed that homeless people are drug addicts or unwilling to work. One mother expressed that policy makers “need to treat every person as an individual, not look at every person off the streets as though they are on drugs, and they put themselves in this situation, they don’t want to work. That’s not the case. People do want to work. People do want to follow the guidelines. We want to get a place, but we want to have our family together and not live on the street.”

Finally, a few respondents said that policy makers need to recognize that homelessness can happen for many reasons. One mother observed, “People are homeless for several reasons other than drugs and not paying rent. I lost my place in a fire and am not able to find another affordable place to rent.” Another respondent encouraged policy makers to “be understanding. It’s very easy to become homeless and it’s hard to get out of.”

Access to Well Paying Work

A few homeless parents said policy makers should assist them in obtaining work. One way they suggested doing this was by increasing educational and employment opportunities. Some respondents also felt that policy makers should address their need for childcare in order to work. Some noted that jobs must pay more and provide more opportunities. One mother said policy makers should “raise the minimum wage because they know how much it costs just to stay out here. They need to try to help us.”

Respect

Finally, a few parents felt that policy makers and society in general need to treat homeless families with more respect. One father commented:

“I’ve tried to go around and ask people for housing, and it’s hard. Just trying to get a hotel room is ridiculous... We are treated like animals instead of like human beings. Nobody should have to be sleeping outside or be in the shelters where they don’t have control over their own stuff. I think society should be for the people, because we are people just like they are. They can help us, but they send us through a whole lot of turmoil, when they can help us. I just want to live, to raise my child. Watch her go to school and grow up like everyone else. She’s my first and only child, you know. It’s scary to go down the streets in the middle of the night. It’s scary with a child that young. I just try to save my money and hope for

the best, see if something's coming on that I'm waiting for. I've been waiting for a long time."

RECOMMENDATIONS

Increase in Housing

- All housing initiatives (bonds, master leasing etc.) must include money for family-sized units that include kitchens and private bathrooms. In new housing developments, include safe play areas and on-site childcare. Guarantee new family housing in every development!
- Continue to rehabilitate remaining vacant San Francisco Housing Authority (SFHA) family units and monitor the process so we never return to hundreds of units boarded up while families are homeless!
- Fully implement the recently passed Surplus Property Legislation and develop new housing. Put homeless people to work building this housing!
- Expand homeownership through sweat equity. Let homeless families participate in the building process.
- Establish a family liaison in the SFHA, improve training for agency staff and make the agency more accountable to the community.

Housing Preservation

- Every public official, local state and federal must work with community groups to defeat the Bush Administration's cruel cuts to Section 8!
- We don't just want to fight the cuts. We want more vouchers!

Finances

- No more cuts to Calworks until there are Living Wage jobs and adequate support for people from move from welfare-to-work.
- Give Cost-of-Living increases to Calworks recipients.
- Implement the Revolving Fund for back rent through the Department of Human Services.
- Welfare reauthorization must include second chance strategies for families with evictions, bad credit or conviction records. Train workers to identify these problems.

- Increase help for move-in cost assistance.

Employment

- 24-hour hotline to call and set up childcare for work.
- Provide free PO Box, voicemail or message center for homeless families.
- Book and material vouchers for those in training and school.
- Assistance for disabled workers.
- Adequate parental leave.

Preserving Families

- Provide housing subsidies for every child under the age of 18, according to the household income. every child under 18 who is going to school should have a housing subsidy funded by the city and/or the state.
- Dedicate CPS funds to housing parents and intact families.
- Create a community advisory committee to oversee child protective services.
- Focus CPS on reunification and parent support.
- Ensure fair hearings.
- Support maintenance of family contact.

Childcare and Healthcare

- Provide universal childcare at low or no cost.
- Establish culturally competent community childcare collectives where parents can help each other.
- Guarantee access to all forms of healthcare (physical, mental etc.) and ensure that child appropriate healthcare is available.

RESEARCH REPORT ON HOMELESS LATINO IMMIGRANTS

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

Since 1970, California has experienced a five-fold growth in its foreign born population, which increased from 1.8 million to 8.9 million. During this period, just over half of these migrants came from Latin America, and one third from Asia.^{xxxii} Among those immigrants who arrived in the last decade, 46% are from Mexico.^{xxxiii} California was itself once a part of Mexico and continues to bear the mark of this past. Moreover, as part of United States territory, California has had a long legacy of economically depending upon and drawing Mexican labor. Mexican workers work many of the most arduous and least well paid jobs in the state.

Despite the importance of Mexican immigrants to California's economy over the past two decades and despite California's historical connection to Mexico,^{xxxiv} Latino immigrants face tremendous difficulties in California. Latino immigrants experience a substantially higher rate of poverty than that of the native born population or of other immigrants. The poverty rate of Latino immigrants in California has been estimated to range between 23-31%, compared to a poverty rate of 18% for all immigrants and a poverty rate of 12% for Californians originally born in the United States.^{xxxv} Moreover, Latino immigrants are more likely to live in crowded housing and in rental residences than other immigrants, and Latino immigrants are less likely to have had educational opportunities than other immigrants. Nearly 80% of recent Latino immigrants live in crowded conditions, and nearly 70% have less than a high school diploma.^{xxxvi}

Living in impoverished conditions, facing low paid and unstable work opportunities combined with a series of recent measures that have restricted their rights and access to public services and benefits, Latino immigrants may often find themselves sleeping on the streets or crowded into low-end hotel rooms with their families. Despite their difficult situation, little research has been conducted to try to understand the specific problems and needs of homeless immigrants. A majority of the research that has been conducted on immigrants draws on census data that cannot identify undocumented and homeless immigrants; these studies thus fail to describe the specific experiences of these individuals. Moreover, the situation of homeless Latino immigrants is rarely addressed in public policy discussions about homelessness. This is true even in San Francisco, a city with a substantial Latino immigrant population.^{xxxvii}

To further exacerbate the policy discussions' neglect of issues faced by homeless Latino immigrants, homeless policy forums rarely involve input from immigrants experiencing homelessness. Homeless Latino immigrants are triply marginalized from policy arenas: first, because they are homeless; second, because many did not arrive in the United States through official documented channels, and thus lack the legal rights of residency or citizenship; and third, because their primary language is Spanish.

This study aims to ensure that the needs and voices of homeless Latino immigrants do not continue to be disregarded. As a society, we must come to recognize that our punitive and exclusionary approach to immigration has failed. We must find a way to ensure that all people residing in the United States have an opportunity to find work, housing, and maintain a decent livelihood. In order to do this, we must begin by listening to the voices and concerns of those immigrants who are experiencing the most severe difficulties

The National and International Context of Latino Immigration

1 in 8 people in the United States are of Latino or Latin American origin, and 2 out of 5 of Latinos are foreign-born immigrants.^{xxxviii} Since the 1950's, immigration to the United States from other "developed" countries has declined, and immigration from "less developed" countries, including Latin America, has sharply grown. The largest group of these immigrants is from Mexico. Since 1970, 26% of immigrants arriving in the United States were originally from Mexico, and Mexican born immigrants now comprise 22% of the total foreign-born population in the United States.^{xxxix}

One of the primary responses of the United States to Latin American immigration has been militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border and restriction of immigrants' rights. These measures have abysmally failed to stem the flow of immigration, while generating significant costs for the United States government, for local communities, and principally for the immigrants themselves. While evidence demonstrates that militarization of the border has not reduced total migrant flows, it has succeeded in increasing the number of migrants who have died attempting to cross the border.^{xi} An estimated 350 migrants died in 2003 alone.^{xii}

Increasing militarization of the borders is ineffective in stemming immigration because the intensity of the economic forces that drive migration flows outweigh the potential personal costs that militarization creates for migrants. Restriction of the rights of immigrants, such as through the 1996 Welfare Reform Act or Proposition 187 in California, have also been unable to stem immigration, because immigrants do not come to the United States in search of public benefits.^{xiii} Generally, immigrants from Mexico and Central America come to the United States in order to work and because of economic hardships in their country of birth. The economic dilemmas and crises in Mexico and Central America motivating these immigrants' decisions, however, are themselves largely shaped by the history of exploitative economic imperialism by the United States over these nations.

The international disparities that drive migration flows have only been exacerbated by the economic dynamics resulting from the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The implementation of NAFTA at the same time that the United States has vastly increased military patrol of the border is one of the great ironies of free trade. While capital and products may move freely, people may not. Yet it is the very economic dynamics engendered by NAFTA that lead to an

increase of immigration flows.^{xliii} Moreover, NAFTA itself has only hurt Mexican workers and diminished their economic prospects in Mexico.^{xliiv}

Of course, Mexican migration is not simply the unintended consequence of economic crisis in Mexico and the history of US economic imperialism. Mexican labor has historically been actively brought into the United States to work some of the most difficult and lowest paid jobs in the country. An early example of the formal recruitment of Mexican labor was the Bracero Program, a temporary worker program initiated by the U.S. government in 1942. The Bracero Program was subsequently replaced in 1954 by Operation Wetback, during which thousands of Mexican workers were rounded up in quasi-military fashion and deported back to Mexico.^{xlv} Nevertheless, thousands of Mexican workers driven by economic need continue to migrate north every year in search of a better life for themselves and their family. Mexican migration can also be attributed to the fact that much of the United States was itself once a part of Mexico. Throughout the United States, the majority of Mexican communities continue to be in areas that were former territories of Mexico.^{xlvi}

Efforts to reduce immigrant's rights, to militarily restrict the flow of migrants at the border, and to socially marginalize immigrants have proven expensive, ineffective and deadly; the response of cities across this nation can no longer be to ignore the presence of these immigrant workers. Given the permanence of these populations, efforts to ensure their well-being are an investment in the next generation of American citizens.

Latin American immigrants to the United States, particularly undocumented immigrants, face significant barriers to providing a decent livelihood for themselves and their families. Barriers of language, legal status, and racism often force these immigrants to work dangerous, poorly paid, and unstable jobs. Many end up caught in poverty, and many end up homeless. This study – based on interviews and focus groups with 98 homeless Latino immigrants in San Francisco, California – aims to communicate the challenges, barriers, needs, and thoughts of this group of United States residents. Its ultimate goal is to bring these issues to policy discussions, with the hopes that such discussions will help to diminish the multiple marginalizations of homeless Latino immigrants.

METHODOLOGY

The findings of this report are based on one-on-one interviews and focus groups with homeless Latino immigrants. Research was conducted in March and April of 2004. A total of 98 Latino immigrant respondents were interviewed. Of those, 88 homeless Latino immigrants were interviewed on the streets, in shelters, and in homeless service or community resource facilities. An additional 10 Latino families living in single room occupancy hotels (SROs) were interviewed. Families living in SROs both were included in the study since San Francisco officially defines

families living in SROs or in “doubled-up” conditions as homeless, given that people frequently shift between living in SROs and living on the streets or in shelters.

One of the greatest challenges to investigating the situation of homeless Latino immigrants is that many are undocumented and steer away from attempts to collect information about them. In order to overcome this challenge, Spanish speaking Latino immigrants with experience working with the homeless Latino population in San Francisco conducted the interviews. Most interviews were not tape recorded, and all were conducted under the guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity.

Respondents were asked open-ended questions about their needs, problems, and the challenges they face. They were also asked why they came to the United States, why they were homeless, whether or not they used public benefits and services, and whether they believe policy makers are concerned with the situation of homeless immigrants. Respondents also answered a number of demographic questions as well as short-response questions about work, how long they have been homeless, how long they have lived in San Francisco, and their legal status. Answers to open-ended questions were coded, counted, and sorted in order of frequency mentioned. Answers to demographic and short-response questions were statistically tabulated.

Surveys, interviews, and focus groups were primarily designed and conducted by currently and formerly homeless immigrants. The research design was geared to providing currently homeless respondents an opportunity to discuss their own situation through these interviews. Unlike many policy reports on homeless individuals that involve an expert researcher’s assessment of homelessness, this research provides homeless Latino immigrants with an opportunity to assess their own situation. This report primarily serves to aggregate and communicate that assessment. The closed-ended and demographic questions were intended to supplement this assessment and are not intended to provide fine tuned demographic estimates of the homeless Latino immigrant population of San Francisco. Demographic characteristics of respondents are as follows.

Country of Origin:

Mexico	74%
El Salvador	9%
Guatemala	8%
Honduras	3%
Nicaragua	2%
Brazil	1%
Peru	1%

Gender:

77% of respondents we spoke with are male; 23 % are female.

Age:

The average age of respondents is 36.

18-25 years old	18%
26-35 years old	38%
36-45 years old	26%
46 years and older	18%

Marital Status:

Single	52%
Married	37%
Divorced	6%
Widowed	3%
Separated	2%

Children:

70% of interview respondents had children. Among respondents with children, the average number of children was 2.3. 40% of respondents reported that their children live in the United States; 60% reported that their children live in their home country. Some respondents have children living in both the United States and their home country.

Immigrants in SROs:

The demographics of the ten immigrants living in SROs who were interviewed for this study differ from the general demographics just described. Notably, of the ten SRO respondents, 2/3 were female and all had children.

BASIC DEMOGRAPHIC FINDINGS**Most Homeless Latino Immigrants have lived in the United States for a substantial period of time.**

The average time that the homeless Latino immigrants interviewed have lived in the United States is 9 years, and half have lived in the United States for 5 years or more. The average time homeless Latino immigrants have lived in San Francisco is 4.8 years, and 60% have lived in San Francisco for one year or more. Thus, the

overwhelming majority of these homeless immigrants have been in this country contributing to its economy for a significant period of time.

Homeless Latino immigrants contribute to the economy, often working in the lowest paid and most unstable jobs.

The occupations which immigrants reported are (in order of frequency): general labor/day labor, construction assistance/carpentry, restaurant work, cleaning, painting, gardening, moving, and janitorial jobs.

The instability and poor quality of these jobs, however, often leads to homelessness or makes it near impossible to exit homelessness.

69% of the homeless Latino immigrants said that they are either currently unable to find work or are unable to find stable work. The inability to find work is reflected in respondents' answers to the question of why they are homeless. The most reasons given for their homelessness were: the lack of work, inability to afford rent, low paying jobs, the lack of job stability, and the high cost of housing.

Many homeless Latino immigrants are chronically homeless.

The average time homeless Latino immigrants have been homeless is 1.5 years. (This figure does not include people living in SROs, who reported living in SROs for twice as long.) Nearly half have been homeless for one year or longer, and 27% have been homeless for two years or more.

Homeless Latino immigrants face severe barriers to exiting homelessness, including legal status, racism, and language.

Legal Status:

80% of homeless Latino immigrants are without legal immigration documents. This lack of documentation was repeatedly stated as one of the largest problems that homeless immigrants feel they face.

Racism:

80% of homeless Latino immigrants interviewed felt that racism is a cause of homelessness. Racism and discrimination are among the major problems that homeless immigrants feel they face.

Language:

Spanish was the first language of all of the immigrants interviewed, except for one who spoke Portuguese. Language barriers are another major problem that homeless immigrants feel they face.

REASONS HOMELESS LATINO IMMIGRANTS CAME TO THE UNITED STATES

“Vine aquí para buscar el sueño americano. Lo que encontré fue un país solitario. Para me es un infierno.”

“I came here to find the American dream. What I found instead was a lonely country. For me it is hell.”

(Note: This and all quotes that follow are by homeless Latino immigrants.)

The most common reason homeless immigrants said they came to the United States was to better themselves and to create a better life and future for themselves and their families. Many immigrants reported coming to the United States to find economic opportunities that were absent at home. A few simply said that they had come in search of the American dream. A few others stated that they migrated to the United States in order to study. A couple of respondents reflected on their reasons for coming to the United States, saying that though they came here thinking that their life would be better in this country, it turned out to be worse.

The second most common reason for immigration to the United States was poverty and economic crisis in the immigrants’ home countries. Some immigrants also said they came to the United States fleeing war, persecution, or political abuse in their home country. A few others reported coming to the United States to escape personal problems or domestic violence.

A third key set of reasons that respondents expressed for coming to the United States was to help their family - both their family in the United States and their family in their country of origin. A number of respondents also said they hoped to provide a better life for their children, and a few spoke about wanting their children to have the opportunity to study. Others said that they had come to the United States to reunite with family members who were already here.

REASONS FOR LATINO IMMIGRANTS’ HOMELESSNESS

Homeless Latino Immigrants are homeless primarily because of economic reasons: the lack of good stable work, poverty, and the high cost of housing

When respondents were asked why they were homeless, the most common answers were related to economic issues. About one-fourth pointed to the lack of available work opportunities, another quarter pointed to the lack of money, and a fifth pointed to the instability or bad pay of the work they have. Many respondents also said high rents and the high cost of living was the main cause of their homelessness.

Other reasons that homeless Latino immigrants are homeless

The following explanations for their homelessness were mentioned by less than 5% of respondents. They are listed in order of frequency mentioned:

- Because I do not have legal documents.
- Because I cannot work or rent without legal documents.
- Because I separated from my family. (Note: all who said this were women.)
- Because immigrants do not have access to work.
- Because I do not have access to public assistance or services.
- Because of housing discrimination.
- Because I am a single mother.
- Because of family problems.
- Because of substance abuse.
- Because I am sending money to my family.
- Because of language barriers.
- Because I can't afford move-in costs (deposit, first and last month fees)
- Because I hurt myself at work.
- Because I was laid off.
- Because I do not have an education.
- Because I have mental illness.
- Because I am stupid.

PROBLEMS AND NEEDS OF HOMELESS LATINO IMMIGRANTS

Housing

“No hay lugares donde inmigrantes pueden rentar a bajo precio.”

“There are no places where immigrants can rent at a low cost.”

“Hay dificultad para encontrar un lugar, las viviendas están caras y controladas por las agencias de real estate. Piden mucho información y reportes de crédito.”

“It's hard to find a place; housing is expensive and controlled by real estate agencies. They ask for lots of information and credit reports.”

“No tengo acceso a vivienda por ser inmigrante e ‘ilegal’.”

“I don’t have access to housing because I am an immigrant and ‘illegal’.”

The most common necessity that homeless immigrants mentioned was housing. Particularly, respondents said that high rents are a problem and they need housing that is affordable. Some respondents also mentioned the need for stable housing, and one said that the housing available to him was unhygienic and unsafe. Some Latino immigrants with families said they face particular housing problems because they need an apartment large enough for themselves and their children. Some also expressed difficulties finding housing with children.

Not having housing, in turn, leads to further difficulties. A major impact of not having housing it is being forced into the difficult and dangerous situation of sleeping on the streets. A few respondents also mentioned that not having housing, an address, or a telephone complicates attempts to obtain work.

Other respondents stated that the lack of legal documentation made it difficult for them to rent housing, and to go through the necessary legal and financial checks to obtain an apartment. Some respondents also said that they had experienced housing discrimination as Latino immigrants.

Work

“El latino esta clasificado como trabajador. Trabaja como burro y aunque gana poco pero ni aun así tenemos mucho trabajo.”

“The Latino is classified as a worker. He works like a mule, earns little, and not even then is there much work to be had.”

“No tengo mucho trabajo para pagar la renta. Si no tengo trabajo, no tengo para pagar vivienda. Es simple. Básicamente todos queremos trabajar, pero no hay trabajo, está muy bajo.”

“I don’t have much work in order to pay rent. If I don’t have work, I don’t have money to pay for housing. It’s simple. Basically, all of us want to work, but there is no work, it’s really low.”

The second most commonly mentioned problem by homeless Latino immigrants was the lack of work. Many respondents said that the work that they could find was of such low wage that they could not afford to pay rent. Another common difficulty for the respondents was the instability and temporary nature of the work that they could find. The occupations which immigrants reported working in are (in order of frequency): general labor/day labor, construction assistance/carpentry, restaurant work, cleaning, painting, gardening, moving, and janitorial.

A few respondents said they needed more hours at their job. And some said that they worked in poor or dangerous conditions, and were exploited by employers who sometimes withheld pay. One respondent reported that an injury at work directly led to his homelessness.

A number of respondents also mentioned legal status, racism, and language barriers as inhibiting their ability to secure decent work. Some homeless immigrants pointed out that their lack of legal documents kept them from securing decent, formal employment, and that they were subjected to low wages and mistreatment due to their legal status. A few respondents also felt that they were discriminated against in the labor market both as Latinos and as immigrants. Others said that it was difficult to find work because they do not speak English.

Personal Finances and Poverty

“No tengo dinero para pagar renta.”

“I don’t have money to pay rent”

The third most common problem reported by homeless Latino immigrants was lack of money. Of course, the lack of money is related to the lack of access to good work and the high cost of housing. The most frequent monetary problem reported was having insufficient funds to pay rent. A couple of respondents also pointed to the high cost of move-in fees and deposits as a major obstacle to securing housing. Some homeless immigrant respondents also mentioned the lack of credit as a barrier, and a few of them felt discriminated against in this regard.

Some immigrants expressed that they did not have enough money to send back to their family in their country of origin. One respondent mentioned that it was difficult to own certain property without legal documentation, and that this created a financial barrier for Latino immigrants. Finally, one respondent lamented the difficulty of having no place to store his belongings, which he always had to carry with him.

Health and Well-being

Another difficulty commonly reported by respondents was health. A number of respondents said they suffered from some sort of health concern or illness. They needed medical care, yet were unable to access it. A number of respondents also reported having insufficient food, and lacked a place in which to prepare their own food. A couple of immigrants interviewed lacked sufficient clothing; others reported having problems with alcohol or mental health; a number of others pointed to the lack of hygiene due to being homeless. A few respondents also mentioned that homelessness inhibits family life, either because they had no home in which to have a family or because homelessness caused family separation.

Services

“Esa es una de las desventajas que nosotros tenemos en comparación con los ciudadanos, porque no podemos gozar de ciertos beneficios por los que no calificamos; simple y sencillamente así de grande es la diferencia”

“That is one of the disadvantages that we have compared with citizens, because we cannot enjoy certain benefits because we do not qualify; simply and sincerely that is the large difference.”

75% of homeless Latino immigrant respondents said that they do not use public benefits or services. Overwhelmingly, the most common reason that respondents said they do not use services is because as immigrants and as people without legal documents, they have no access to services, do not qualify for programs, or are prohibited by law from receiving public assistance. There are indeed many public benefits that immigrants are legally barred from, and over the last decade initiatives such as Proposition 187 and the 1996 Welfare Reform Act (PRWORA) have further barred immigrants from receiving needed assistance. At the same time, there do exist some services accessible to undocumented immigrants in San Francisco, but there is a perception among these immigrants that they cannot access these. Thus, while many homeless Latino immigrants use some services in the city, many do not because they believe that they are not permitted to, or because they are undocumented and fear service providers will report them to immigration or the police. Information collection requirements on services can often add to this fear and further deter immigrants from using services. For example, a recent survey showed that finger-imaging systems used for admission into city homeless services has led many Latino immigrants to stop accessing services.^{xlvii}

Another reason given by respondents for why they did not use public services or benefits was lack of information about the services available to them. This lack of information is exacerbated for some by language barriers. A few respondents also said they did not access services because they did not want to be a public burden, or because services would make them lazy. One man explained, “I came here to work, not to live off the government.”

Among those immigrants who did use services, some reported difficulties with them. To begin with, some respondents said that there are not sufficient services and that shelters fill up, leaving no available beds. Some also pointed to the inferior conditions of services and shelters, and reported poor treatment by staff members. A number of respondents had experienced discrimination by service staff. Finally, a few respondents mentioned difficulties with shelter rules, particularly the requirement to be in the shelter early, as this made it difficult to find work.

BARRIERS THAT HOMELESS LATINO IMMIGRANTS FACE

Legal Status, Racism, and Language Barriers Underlie Many of the Problems Homeless Latino Immigrants Face

“En este lugar, en San Francisco, en este país donde estamos viviendo, necesitamos educación, vecindarios sanos, unos vecindarios vivos, en donde

nuestros hijos crezcan sanos...Se habla de las oportunidades, se habla de la educación ... pero que pasa cuando están cortando la educación también a los pequeños, la educación bilingüe; Y que pasa con la ley 187 Y el 227? Que pasa con nuestros ancianos que ya no pueden trabajar?”

“In this place, in San Francisco, in this country where we live, we need education, healthy neighborhoods, lively neighborhoods, where our children can grow healthy...They talk about opportunities, they talk about education...but what happens when they are cutting education even for the little ones; bilingual education? And what happened with Proposition 187 and 227? What will happen to our elderly population who can no longer work?”

The most commonly mentioned problems that homeless Latino immigrants reported experiencing are (in order of frequency): lack of housing, work, and money; barriers due to legal status, racism, and language; health problems and the lack of access to public services and benefits. While barriers due to legal status, racism, and language were reported as challenges in their own right, respondents also pointed to the roles that these barriers played out in other problems, such as housing and work. The following table presents many of the statements made by respondents about how legal status, racism, and language barriers affect their problems and needs as homeless people. There are many other examples that could be included here, but this table presents only comments made by homeless respondents in this study.

	Legal Status	Racism	Language
Housing	Difficult to find housing without papers. Cannot rent without papers.	Housing discrimination.	Difficult to communicate with property owners/landlords.
Work	Have less work opportunities without papers. Receive less pay for work or are ripped off because do not have papers.	Job discrimination. Not being able to work without papers is racist.	Difficult to communicate with employers.
Financial	Cannot own certain property without papers. Cannot have driver's license.	Credit and financial discrimination.	Lack of bilingual classes in schools, leading to financial issues.
Health	Lack of access to medical care. Do not benefit from state protection against violence. Face the threat of deportation by police.	Environmental racism: Latinos live in the worst and most dangerous neighborhoods.	
Services	Cannot access benefits or services without papers.	Discrimination against Latinos by shelter and service staff.	Lack of bilingual resources and staff.

Legal Status

“Yo pienso que como inmigrante sin papeles mis necesidades son todavía mas grandes que las de un ciudadano estadounidense”

“I think that as an immigrant without papers, my needs are even greater than those of an American citizen.”

80% of homeless Latino immigrants interviewed reported never having the opportunity to attain legal immigration documents. This lack of documentation is one of the principal problems that homeless immigrants feel they face. Many

immigrant respondents - including a few who do have documentation - said that they have less rights and privileges than people born in the United States.

Immigrants reported that not having documentation inhibits their ability to find housing, and some immigrants said they are not able to rent housing without papers. Respondents also commonly mentioned that not having papers diminishes their opportunities for work prevents them from working. Other interviewees reported receiving less pay or being mistreated because of their legal status. In short, the lack of documentation often forces immigrants into hyper-exploitative conditions where they are paid extremely low wages, well below the legally guaranteed minimum, where they may be subject to dangerous work conditions and unstable employment, and where they are sometimes not even paid by employers after completing work.

A few respondents also reported that the lack of legal immigration status causes difficulties because they do not benefit from protection by the country's legal systems and police, and because they face the constant threat of police or other agencies taking them to immigration officials. One respondent mentioned that his lack of legal documents inhibits his ability to own certain property and thus to improve his financial situation.

Racism

“He intentado buscar trabajo pero hay mucha discriminación para nosotros los latinos... Somos gente honesta; lo único que queremos es una oportunidad. Somos gente honesta que nos gusta trabajar. Trabajamos los peores trabajos, los peores sueldos. Queremos igualdad.”

“I’ve tried looking for work, but there is so much discrimination for us Latinos... We are honest people; the only thing we want is the opportunity. We are honest people who like to work. We work the worst jobs, for the worst wages. We want equality.”

“Claro que si el inmigrante sin vivienda esta afectado por el racismo. Hay mucho americano que crean que les viene a quitar el trabajo, y no es así. Pero que hay racismo, sí hay racismo. Hay gente también de color, no es por hablar mal de ellos, porque yo no soy racista, pero también unos no quieren a latinos.”

“Of course the homeless immigrant is affected by racism. There are lots of Americans who think we come to take their jobs, but that’s not how it is. But is there racism? Yes there’s racism. There’s also people of color, and it’s not to talk ill of them, because I am not racist, but they too do not like Latinos.”

Racism and discrimination were other common problems reported by the homeless Latino immigrant interviewed. 80% of respondents believed that racism is a contributing factor to their homelessness. These respondents pointed out that both direct discrimination and institutional racism affected their situation. Many felt that Latino immigrants faced discrimination in finding both work and housing.

Many also felt that the hardships they experience due to their lack of immigration papers are an example of institutionalized racism. Another commonly reported example of racism was discrimination in homeless services and shelters and by service staff. Some also felt that they experienced language discrimination due to their inability to speak English or to speak it fluently.

Many respondents pointed to a general anti-immigrant and anti-Latino sentiment. They felt that people look badly upon immigrants or despised them as immigrants. A few pointed out that discrimination and prejudice was not only due to mistreatment by white people, but also by other people of color. A couple of respondents pointed out that there also exists discrimination and prejudice amongst different groups of Latino immigrants with different countries of origin.

Other examples of racism reported by respondents include: lack of opportunity and resources for Latino immigrants, experiences of being attacked and robbed in the shelters or streets because of their race, discrimination in schools and the lack of access to education, the lack of state or police protection, and the fact that Latinos are located in the worst neighborhoods. Finally, one respondent felt that it is obvious that racism is connected to homelessness because homeless people are by majority people of color.

Language

Spanish was the first language of all of the Latino immigrants interviewed, except for one who spoke Portuguese. Many immigrants reported that language barriers are a major obstacle. Language barriers affect their ability to find and secure housing and work, to access services, and in their children's education. A couple of respondents also pointed out that their difficulties stem not only from linguistic differences, but from cultural differences as well. They reported that differences between the cultures in the United States and in their country of origin made it difficult at times to navigate critical situations.

ARE POLICY MAKERS CONCERNED ABOUT THE PROBLEMS OF HOMELESS IMMIGRANTS?

“Como vamos a creer en nuestros lideres... en nuestro policia, cuando nunca se han preocupados de nosotros?”

“How are we to believe in our leaders, in our police, when they have never been concerned with us?”

“Pienso yo que los políticos solo se preocupan que es la clase privilegiada y la clase adinerada.”

“I think that politicians only worry about the privileged and wealthy classes.”

“Cuando están en campaña hasta hablan Español, luego ya no se acuerdan de nadie.”

“When they are on campaign, they even speak Spanish, but then they don’t remember anyone.”

“No sé porque se van a preocupar de nosotros; no tenemos papeles. Aquí no somos nadie.”

“I don’t know why they would worry about us; we don’t have papers. Here we are no one.”

“Los políticos no piensan en nosotros. Ellos no saben en realidad lo que sufrimos para llegar aquí y después para conseguir trabajo.”

“The politicians don’t think about us. They have no sense of what we suffer through to arrive here and then later to find work.”

When respondents were asked whether they believe policy makers or politicians think about or are concerned with the problems that homeless immigrants face, over 95% answered no. Only one person said yes. Another 4 of respondents responded that some politicians are concerned about immigrants, and some are not. The vast majority of respondents, however, believed that policy makers and politicians are not concerned about and do not think about the problems they face as homeless immigrants.

Respondents offered many explanations of why they think politicians are not concerned with their situation. The most frequent statement was that “politicians only think about themselves.” Respondents felt that politicians are already comfortable and have no need to think about people born in other countries. Another common response was that politicians primarily concern themselves with the rich, and some respondents pointed out that Latino immigrants do not have money to fund election campaigns, and so are ignored. Another common response was that politicians are not concerned with homeless immigrants because many do not have legal papers, and therefore cannot vote. Some respondents felt that politicians are not concerned with Latinos in general.

A number of immigrants interviewed commented that politicians say they are concerned about immigrants and Latinos, and make promises to immigrants, but never actually do anything; they just use these promises to win elections. A few respondents pointed out that politicians use Latinos, speaking some words of Spanish during election campaigns to feign concern for Latinos. Issues Latinos face, however, are forgotten once the elections are over. A couple of respondents pointed out that politicians are not concerned about homeless immigrants because they do not know what it is like to be a Latino immigrant or to be homeless. One respondent said that politicians do little for homeless immigrants, thinking that the little that they already do is sufficient; another respondent felt that politicians are not concerned with Latinos because of racism.

Throughout the interviews - and especially in response to the question about whether policy makers and politicians are concerned with their situation - respondents stated that Latino immigrants must struggle for equality and defend the rights of immigrants. One homeless man commented, “Creo que todos

somos iguales, personas y nada debe haber desigualdad. Todos somos humanos, todos tenemos los mismos derechos que todos, no? Hay que seguir luchando por los derechos de igualdad.” (*“I think that we are all equal, people, and there should not be inequality. We are all human; we all have the same rights, no? We have to continue struggling for the rights of equality.”*) Another man commented that assisting and assuring the rights of Latino immigrants would be best for the United States as a whole because if immigrants were able to work and live with stability, they would be more productive workers for the nation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Housing

- Assure access to low-income housing for undocumented immigrants, whether individuals or families.
- Ensure rental protections and rights for undocumented immigrants.
- Create a city program that allows for credit check substitute for undocumented immigrants.
- Rent control.
- Equality in housing subsidy programs. Make subsidies available to undocumented immigrants. Create a special local fund to offset lack of funding from federal and state sources.
- Use city property to create housing.

Work and Personal Finances

- Ensure equality for all workers.
- Extend the Sanctuary Ordinance to protect the labor rights of immigrants, regardless of legal status,
- Create a cooperative connecting immigrant workers directly with good paying jobs in business. Have city enforce the proper treatment of workers in this hiring hall. Jobs should be offered for both men and women.
- More vocational training for immigrants.
- Create programs that really assist people in shelters and homeless service to obtain living wage work. Create job banks and encourage businesses to hire homeless people.
- Increase information about the ability to open checking account by undocumented immigrants.

Healthcare

- Increase free Spanish community clinics.
- Create risk free hospital registration for undocumented immigrants.
- Provide more bilingual health professionals.

Public Services

- Ensure equality of access to decent work for all people, especially for seniors and disabled, regardless of documentation status.
- End the biometric imaging (fingerprinting) system for homeless services. This system wastes huge amounts of city money, creates a barrier for homeless immigrants to access needed services and is unnecessary in meeting federal guidelines.
- Create a community commission formed by city agencies, community representatives, and homeless people to monitor shelters and homeless services, in order to assure equitable treatment.
- Provide bilingual staff and services.
- Provide diversity and anti-racism training for city employees.
- Repeal proposition 187.

Legal Status

- Offer general amnesty for all undocumented residents.
- End militarization of the US-Mexico border.
- Permit driver's licenses and ID cards for undocumented immigrants.
- Create local sanctuary city in which there is no distinction made between undocumented immigrants and citizens.

Education Aimed at Reducing Racism and Language Barriers

- Support public education campaigns against racism against Latinos and immigrants.
- Provide more English classes.
- Provide bilingual education in public schools by requiring all students to become fluent in a language other than their "home" language.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS: THE HIDDEN VOICES OF HOMELESS FAMILIES AND HOMELESS LATINO IMMIGRANTS

ANALYSIS OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

Connecting the Studies of Homeless Families and Homeless Latino Immigrants

The research presented in this report separately analyzes the situations of homeless families and homeless Latino immigrants. It is clear, however, that homeless families and homeless Latino immigrants are not mutually exclusive groups of people. Many homeless Latino immigrants are parents of homeless families. The study of homeless Latino immigrants thus included interviews with families, and the study of families included interviews with Latino immigrants. In total, these two studies involved interviews with over 230 individual homeless people in San Francisco. In addition, the studies were designed and conducted by over 20 currently and formerly homeless people, with the assistance of professional researchers.

One of the common threads connecting homeless Latino immigrants and homeless families is that both groups are among the “hidden” homeless, as opposed to the more commonly acknowledged “visible” homeless. They are groups of homeless people commonly excluded from policy discussion and media portrayal of homelessness. As a result, they are groups of homeless people whose interests are frequently overlooked by local homeless programs and spending.

It is also overwhelmingly evident in both studies that the major problems faced by both homeless families and homeless immigrants stem largely from systemic failures of our society and economy. These include the lack of affordable housing, poverty, the lack of access to stable, living wage jobs, inadequate health care and childcare systems, and an underfunded social safety net. At the same time that these hidden homeless people are frequently overlooked by local homeless programs, they suffer much of the brunt of federal cutbacks in housing, restrictions on welfare, and displacement through urban revitalization initiatives such as Hope VI.

Also apparent in both studies is the substantial role that racial dynamics play in the experience of both homeless families and homeless Latino immigrants. 68% of the homeless parents interviewed for the homeless families study were African-American; further, these African-American parents reported being homeless twice as long as parents of other races. While the study was not primarily intended to collect demographic information, previous counts of families staying in shelters in San Francisco have also reported a huge over-representation of African-Americans.^{xlviii} Moreover, on a national level, African-Americans are estimated to comprise between 40-50% of all homeless people, and only 12% of the total population.^{xlix}

Race also emerged as a prominent issue in the study of homeless Latino immigrants. 80% of homeless immigrants interviewed felt that racism is a cause of homelessness, and racial discrimination was one of the barriers to exiting homelessness most frequently mentioned by homeless immigrants. Homeless immigrants reported experiencing discrimination in housing and labor markets as well as in social services. Many also pointed to legal status and language barriers as forms of institutionalized racism that adversely affected them.

Recognizing the Hidden Homeless

The studies undertaken in this report were motivated by the Coalition on Homelessness San Francisco's longstanding experience of the exclusion of family and immigrant issues from public policy discussion on homelessness. This critical policy oversight was documented in the *Homelessness In San Francisco* report.¹ The report demonstrates that despite acknowledgement of homeless families by individuals involved in San Francisco homeless policy, there is little significant analysis by core policy makers of the specific needs and issues that these families face. The *Homelessness In San Francisco* report also shows an almost total lack of discussion by policy makers about the specific challenges faced by homeless immigrants.

Public policy discussion and media portrayal of homelessness often ignores the existence of and the challenges faced by hidden homeless communities such as families or immigrants. Instead, their attention focuses on the most "visible" homeless people – those homeless people most frequently seen in public and on the streets. Many of these visibly homeless people face significant mental health and substance abuse challenges. Thus, as media and policy forums primarily focus their attention upon these visibly homeless people, homelessness itself is depicted as stemming primarily from personal problems such as mental illness and substance abuse.

It is, of course, true that there are many visibly homeless people in San Francisco who require significant supportive assistance to exit homelessness. It is true that there are many homeless people in San Francisco in need of substance abuse treatment and mental health care. And it is true that San Francisco provides grossly insufficient substance abuse treatment, mental health care, and supportive services to meet the demand. However, by basing our understanding of homelessness primarily on the visible homeless and their personal challenges, we run the risk of falsely classifying all homeless people as substance abusers or mentally ill. We run the risk of incorrectly conceiving of homelessness as stemming primarily from individual personal problems. We run the risk of losing sight of the humanity and the complexity of diverse people, including those who suffer mental health and substance abuse challenges. And we run the risk of further ignoring and marginalizing the "hidden" homeless such as families and immigrants, and of continuing to exclude them from homeless program funding allocations.

The portrayal of homelessness primarily in terms of the personal problems of the visibly homeless neglects the larger systemic causes of homelessness: the decimation of affordable housing and social safety net programs over the last twenty years, growing poverty, declining real wages for workers, racial disparities, and discrimination. It also neglects the way that systemic factors such as poverty and the lack of access to health care underlie the relationship between homelessness and substance abuse or mental health challenges. Substance abuse and mental illness are not independent causes of homelessness, but can lead to homelessness in combination with poverty, a lack of affordable housing, and a lack of access to health care. Many other individuals besides the homeless have substance abuse or mental health issues, yet they remain housed either because they have sufficient resources to do so or because they are able to access the health care or treatment needed to address their personal challenges.

Further, depicting substance abuse and mental illness as the cause of homelessness overlooks the way that these challenges are themselves often exacerbated by homelessness. The painful experience of being homeless – with the constant threat of police harassment or punishment by other public agencies – often leads homeless people to experience psychological disorders or to use substances as a form of self-medication or as an escape from the discomfort of homelessness.

The emphasis on the “visible” homeless in policy and media forums has supported the creation of policies that aim to move visibly homeless people out of sight, rather than to address the systemic conditions underlying homelessness. One of the primary ways that San Francisco has tried to move homeless people out of sight – and out of town – has been by issuing criminal citations to homeless people for such “quality of life” infractions as sleeping in public. This approach has consistently and utterly failed; not only is it extremely expensive for the city, but it also saddles homeless people with fines they cannot pay, and warrants or criminal records which further inhibit their ability to exit homelessness. Another common approach to resolving visible homelessness has been to increase social control of homeless people, either by expanding the legal capacity to forcibly “treat” homeless people or by eliminating welfare cash entitlements to homeless people as a way to “help” them. Again, these approaches fail to resolve the root causes of homelessness, and often create additional barriers for homeless people.

More constructive attempts to addressing visible homelessness have also been undertaken, such as the building of shelters and supportive housing units. While many of these efforts are indeed positive, they have been grossly inadequate to meet the demand for them by homeless people, and they have failed to resolve the overall lack of affordable housing, health care, and living wage jobs in our community. Further, these efforts have rarely addressed the needs of hidden homeless communities, such as families and immigrants. They have thus failed to resolve homelessness and have instead placed important but inadequate band-aids over the problem and served as a distraction from the systemic causes of homelessness.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Business Interests and Homeless Policy

The *Homelessness in San Francisco* report demonstrates that the pervasive portrayal of homelessness as primarily stemming from personal problems and the consequent push to address visible homelessness through criminal and social control measures is chiefly associated with big business interests. San Francisco's influential downtown business organizations, along with the city's moderate and conservative sectors, claim that homeless people are harmful to the economy and to the quality of life in the city, and therefore must be removed from sight.

As documented in that report, big business organizations feel that visible homelessness harms their ability to generate profits garnered from attracting tourists, consumers, and new businesses into the city. They therefore push for the removal of homeless people from sight. This push is particularly powerful in the city's homeless politics because business organizations have much more resources than other community sectors. These resources allow San Francisco's business organizations to fund political candidates, election ballot initiatives, and advertising campaigns. Moreover, many mainstream media organizations are themselves large businesses and reflect the business community's perspective in their coverage of homelessness.

A homelessness policy focus on the visible homeless and their individual problems further serves the interests of big business by denying the systemic failures that cause homelessness. Such a framing allows big businesses to spurn systemic approaches to reduce homelessness, and effectively argue that they have little obligation to pay increased taxes to fund housing, employment, childcare, welfare, educational, and health programs. Big businesses thus maintain personal and corporate taxation rates substantially lower than many other industrialized nations.

The focus on personal causes of homelessness also serves big business interests by obscuring the causal role of economic and housing markets in homelessness. In both the homeless family and homeless immigrants studies presented in this report, high-rents and low-wages are two of the most frequently mentioned causes of homelessness. High rents and low wages, in turn, are two of the primary ways that big business generates profits. And so it is in the interests of big business to deflect discussion of homelessness away from these issues and towards issues relating to deviant and service-resistant visibly homeless people. As a result, despite the monstrous gap between rich and poor in this nation, much of the public perceives little relationship between the immense concentration of wealth in the hands of very few and the suffering of millions of homeless and impoverished people.

Ironically, while pervasive public and media portrayals depict homelessness as stemming from individual deviances and personal challenges, the majority of

people involved in homeless policy in San Francisco do not believe that homelessness is caused by individual problems. As the *Homelessness in San Francisco* study demonstrates, people who are familiar with the experiences of the homeless, such as those involved in administering and implementing homeless policy, or directly working with or organizing with homeless people point to systemic conditions such as unemployment, low wage jobs, and the high cost of housing as causes of homelessness. The economically powerful minority on the right, however, uses its greater access to resources and political pressure to dominate the policy arena and to influence the media with their perspective.

Race, Gender and the International Dimensions of Homelessness

In addition to the significant lack of discussion on homeless immigrants and homeless families in the San Francisco homeless policy arena, The *Homelessness in San Francisco* report also shows there is very little discussion of the relationship between race and homelessness. This absence serves to maintain the structures of racial inequality that underlie many people's experience of homelessness and poverty.

Omitting consideration of the racial dynamics of homelessness allows us to pretend that racism and institutionalized racial inequalities were ended in the United States by the civil rights movement. It allows us to ignore the way that racist historical legacies - including slavery, segregation, colonialism, native genocide, and anti-immigrant sentiments - connect to homelessness today. It also allows us to ignore racial inequalities in our social institutions, including prisons, schools, housing systems, financial institutions, child protection services, welfare systems, criminal justice systems, immigration institutions, employment markets, and health care systems. Racist historical legacies play out through these and other institutions and are evident in social processes such as gentrification, de-industrialization, and the concentration of environmental toxins in places where people of color live. The racial factors noted in the research reports of this document hint at the importance of a racial analysis of homelessness, but the reports do nothing more than scratch the surface of the question and point to the importance of asking it.

The fact that most of the parents interviewed in the homeless families studies were women also points to gender as an important dimension in understanding homelessness. National research has similarly found that a majority of homeless families are headed by single mothers.ⁱ The research also determined that most homeless women have experienced some form of domestic or sexual violence. 57% of homeless mothers who previously lived with a spouse cited domestic violence as a reason for leaving their spouse.ⁱⁱ Other studies have found that two-thirds of homeless mothers reported having experienced domestic attacks, and more than one-quarter reported having needed medical treatment as a result of domestic attacks. Perhaps due to this violence, homeless mothers are reported to suffer twice the rate of major depressive disorders and three times the rate of post-traumatic stress disorder of the total female population.ⁱⁱⁱ

The study of homeless Latino immigrants presented here also brings to attention the global context of homelessness. International economic and political dynamics shape immigrants' choices to come to the United States. People from Mexico and Central America come into the United States largely for economic reasons and because of economic hardships in their country of birth. The economic dilemmas and crises in Mexico and Central America, however, are shaped in large part by the history of exploitative economic imperialism by the United States over these nations.

The current push towards free trade and open markets between the United States and Latin America, such as through the North American Free Trade Agreement, only sustains historically unfair trade relationships, and has not lead to any significant improvement of the standard of living or wage level for Mexican people. It has, however, allowed American corporations to abandon factories in the United States in order to set up Maquiladoras across the border, where they can pay lower wages and are subject to less environmental regulation. The result has been devastating in terms of the loss of good, stable jobs for Americans, human rights abuses faced by workers in Maquiladoras, and displacement within Mexican communities.^{liv}

The global context of homelessness, however, is not simply about the way that international economic dynamics shape immigrants' choices. The push for multinational free trade agreements, such as NAFTA, in recent decades corresponds with a global transformation of the way that governments throughout the world are responding to the social needs of their citizenry. This transformation has been spurred in the developing world by US dominated international financial agencies, such as the IMF, which have forced nations to cut back on social programs and economic regulations designed to protect the poor in exchange for loans or foreign investment.^{lv}

Such recent transformations in the way that governments relate to their citizenry are often referred by the term "neoliberalism." Ideologically, neoliberalism draws upon the misguided claim that government bureaucracies and social programs are inherently inefficient, and that the best way for society to allocate its resources is through unregulated free markets. The main role of a neoliberal government is not to provide for its citizens, but to engage in penal and military activity that will eliminate any impediments to a "pure" free market.^{lvi} In the United States, neoliberal transformations are apparent in government dismantling of social and safety net programs, in the undercutting of economic regulations, in the increase in prisons, and in the expanded military spending over the last two decades. The ascendancy of this ideology in the United States is often associated with Ronald Reagan; it has since been used to counter the Keynesian economic theories upon which New Deal and other social welfare programs were based.^{lvii}

The hypocrisy of neoliberalism in the United States, however, is that despite its faith in the free market as the best way to allocate resources, in practice, policies wrought by neoliberal adherents directly violate principles of free market competition through tremendous expenditures on corporate welfare. In fact, the

sum of government subsidies, give-aways, and tax breaks for the nation's wealthiest corporations far eclipse government spending on social welfare programs.^{lviii} Thus, big business interests have managed to put in place an economic ideology that justifies reduced spending on social programs and reduced regulation of business. Further, these interests have had the lobbying power to insure that they receive the lion's share of government expenditures and tax breaks.

The global neoliberal transformation has mostly been motivated by big business as well. That is, giant multinational corporate interests have used structural adjustment, free trade, and other neoliberal policies to insure international access to unregulated labor and product markets with low taxation rates. The result has been vast corporate profits, and the largest global gap between rich and poor in the history of the world.^{lix} The importance of large corporate interests in pushing the global neoliberal agenda provides insight into an important connection between global transformations and local homeless policy in San Francisco. Just as San Francisco big business interests push for city policies that focus on social control of homeless individuals rather than on the structural causes of homelessness, global big business interests push governments across the world to lessen regulations and social spending that protect their poor. Global neoliberalism justifies the obliteration of social programs by the ideological belief that government bureaucracy and social spending is inherently inefficient. Likewise, big business interests in San Francisco call for cutbacks in homeless programs, claiming that they are an abysmally failing self-perpetuating bureaucracy. Finally, on both the local and the global level, those disproportionately harmed by these neoliberal policies are people of color – third world peoples throughout the globe and racial minorities within the United States.

Inadequate Initiatives to End the Realities of Homelessness

The problems and challenges of homeless families and immigrants presented in the two studies presented in this document occur within many larger social, economic, and political contexts. The intent of these two research reports is to provide snapshots of the local realities experienced by homeless families and homeless immigrants in San Francisco. The studies aim to allow the voices of homeless families and immigrants – two groups of homeless people who are commonly hidden from public view and ignored in public discussion – to assess their own circumstances and needs. These two studies differ substantially from the *Homelessness In San Francisco* report that initially spurred them. While the *Homelessness In San Francisco* report documented the perceptions and worldviews held by people who make decisions about homeless people's lives, the studies presented here document the reality that homeless people experience based on what homeless people themselves say.

Understanding the experience of hidden homeless families and immigrants is especially important in light of the Bush administration's current initiative to end chronic homelessness. The Bush administration's chronic homelessness initiative

defines chronically homeless people as unaccompanied individuals with severe barriers such as mental illness, substance abuse challenges, and disabilities. The Bush administration also explicitly defines these chronically homeless individuals as the 10% of homeless people who are the most “visible” homeless.^{lx} The Bush administration’s initiative again reinforces the invisibility of the “hidden” homeless. It again perpetuates public policy focus on the problems of individual homeless people and steers discussion away from the systemic causes of homelessness. The Bush administration’s pledged funds for its chronic homeless initiative are microscopic compared to other current federal expenditures such as war, and compared to past federal expenditures on human welfare and housing. Still, the chronic homeless initiative will reinforce local communities’ focus on visibly homeless single adults, and reinforce their disregard of families, immigrants, and other hidden homeless populations.

The Bush administration’s emphasis on chronic homelessness is disingenuous. For at the same time that the administration is pushing communities across the country to develop 10-year chronic homelessness plans to compete with each other for a miniscule pot of federal funding, the Bush administration is also proposing to gut the Section 8 housing voucher program. If successful, the proportion of Section 8 vouchers for the extremely poor will decrease and the proportion of income that section 8 recipients must pay in rent will increase.^{lxi} The Bush administration’s success will mean that the biggest losers are low-income families, seniors, and disabled people; the end result will be increased homelessness.

These proposed cutbacks to Section 8 – whether or not they are ultimately approved by Congress – are only the latest round in a 20-year assault on federal affordable housing programs. Between 1978 and 2002, the budget of the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) was cut by almost 63%. During this time, Project-Based Section 8 and public housing construction halted, and HUD went from producing or subsidizing over 430,000 new units of low income housing in 1976 to adding less than 8,500 new two decades later in 1996.^{lxii} As a result, the waiting period for subsidized housing is now several and there has been a devastating increase in homelessness nationally.

By defining chronically homeless people as unaccompanied adults, the Bush administration omits homeless families from consideration. In doing so, the Bush administration’s initiative ignores the fact that many homeless families themselves are chronically homeless. Parents interviewed for the homeless families study reported being homeless an average of 2.6 years. 73% of parents reported being homeless for one year or more. Moreover, these families face particular barriers to exiting homelessness. Family needs such as childcare, larger housing units, and resources sufficient to care for both parents and children, pose tremendous obstacles to escaping chronic homelessness. Previous research suggests that homeless parents are less likely to have substance abuse challenges than single adults. Moreover, it also suggests that homeless mothers are highly likely to have experienced violent attacks and sexual abuse, and perhaps due to this experience

of violence, to experience high levels of traumatic stress or depressive disorders.^{lxiii}

By omitting homeless families from efforts to address chronic homelessness, the Bush administration's initiative also ignores the devastating cycle of chronic intergenerational homelessness. It ignores the simple fact that many chronically homeless single adults were themselves once family members who have been separated from their children because of homelessness. Allowing families to dissolve before providing them assistance often condemns homeless children to become a part of the foster care system. Once in foster care, the cycle of homelessness continues, as an estimated 27% of homeless people reported living in foster care, a group home, or other institutional setting as a youth.^{lxiv} The terrible irony of this situation is that oftentimes expenditures on foster care would easily have subsidized the housing needs of homeless families.^{lxv}

Similar to homeless families, many homeless Latino immigrants are also chronically homeless and experience significant barriers to exiting homelessness. Respondents interviewed for the homeless immigrant study reported being homeless on average 1.5 years; nearly half have been homeless for one year or longer, and 27% have been homeless for two years or more. Moreover, respondents reported experiencing particular obstacles to exiting chronic homelessness, such as legal status, racism, and language barriers.

The findings of the studies presented here, however, address concerns far broader than those of Bush's narrowly focused initiative to end chronic homelessness; just as they address aspects of homelessness far broader than those usually considered in media outlets and public policy debates. This is in part because the findings presented here are based upon the voices of homeless families and immigrants themselves – voices that have far too often been excluded from homeless policymaking. It is only by taking the time to listen to these hidden voices, and then by investing the necessary resources and making the necessary systemic changes to address their concerns, that we may truly end homelessness in the United States. It is only by truly addressing the root systemic causes of homelessness, rather than simply attempting to remove visibly homeless people from sight, that we might resolve homelessness and ensure that all people in this nation have a home in which to live and thrive. This document offers itself as one small piece in that effort.

FACT SHEET 1

FACT SHEET ON HOMELESS FAMILIES AND CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS

Summary

Homeless families must be included in efforts to address chronic homelessness and as part of the definition of the chronically homeless target population. To not do so would ensure the continuation of family homelessness, intergenerational cycles of homelessness, and the dissolution of homeless families. In short, it would insure that localities and the nation as a whole cannot end chronic homelessness. This fact sheet is based off outreach to over 130 homeless parents in San Francisco.

Context

The federal government has recently shifted its homeless policy to focus on “chronic homelessness.” One of the major dangers in this shift in focus is that “chronically homeless” people are being defined as unaccompanied individuals with severe challenges who have been serially homeless or who have been homeless for over a year. The focus on chronically homeless unaccompanied individuals is explicitly an attempt to address “the most visible form of homelessness.”^{lxvi} Homeless families are not amongst the most visible forms of homelessness often because they hide away in fear of losing their children or because by the time they become “visible” they have already been separated from their children. On a national level, homeless families are estimated to comprise between 35-40% of homeless people.^{lxvii}

While addressing the needs of chronically homeless single adults is critical, focusing exclusively on visible unaccompanied individuals while overlooking the plight of homeless families runs the risk of ignoring the intergenerational cycle of homelessness as well as the ways that homelessness tears families apart. It ignores the simple fact that currently unaccompanied homeless individuals were themselves almost all once a member of a family unit, and that many unaccompanied homeless individuals actually have children but have been separated from them. In short, exclusive focus on unaccompanied individuals will allow the continuation of chronic family homelessness as well as the creation of a new set of chronically homeless individuals and families.

Perhaps one of the most devastating aspects of family homelessness is the harm caused to homeless children, such as in their physical and psychological health and in their schooling.^{lxviii} At times, these homeless children are taken from their parents and placed into foster care at a cost that would easily have subsidized the housing needs of homeless parents.^{lxix} Once in foster care, however, the cycle of homelessness continues, as an estimated 27% of homeless people reported living in foster care, a group home, or other institutional setting as a youth.^{lxx}

Methodology

Unlike many policy reports on homeless families that involve an expert researcher's assessment of family homelessness, the outreach upon which this fact sheet is based was designed to provide homeless families an opportunity to assess their own situation. This fact sheet serves primarily to aggregate and communicate that assessment to policymakers. It involved written surveys, taped interviews, and focus groups with homeless parents. 133 homeless parents were interviewed or surveyed. These include parents in shelters, transitional housing, doubled up, in residential treatment, in SROs, living in cars, and on the streets. 68% were African-American, 17% Latino, 8% Asian, and 6% white. 87% were male and 13% female. 79% are single parents. The average number of children per family is 2.1.

KEY FINDINGS

Many Homeless Families are Chronically Homeless

The average length of homelessness for parents interviewed was 2.4 years. 65% of parents reported being homeless for one year or longer.

Homeless Families Need Family Housing

The single most frequent comment made by homeless parents is that they need housing. In particular parents need affordable housing which is large enough to fit themselves and their children (often 2-3 bedrooms) and which is safe for their children. The most common fear of homeless parents is not having anywhere to go or ever being able to afford housing. While 3 out of 5 homeless parents reported receiving cash assistance, cash levels have been insufficient to exit homelessness. As one homeless mother explained, "I need an apartment that's affordable; and I don't mean affordable only if you make over 18,000 a year. I mean affordable at the \$704.00 monthly amount which is what I get from welfare, so I could probably afford \$250.00 for rent and still live comfortably enough to take care of myself and my children properly."

Homeless Families Are Trying to Exit Homelessness But Lack Access And Opportunity

One of the most common comments of homeless parents is that they have tried looking for housing, tried filling out applications for housing placements, tried signing up for subsidized housing waiting lists, tried looking for work or working, tried shelters, and tried staying at friends and families places, but none of it has enabled them to exit homelessness. 23% reported they are currently working.

Moreover, all but one of the parents who was on welfare reported that they would rather join the workforce than stay on welfare. 68% have been on welfare for no more than 1 year, and more than half have exited welfare at

some time in the past. Many homeless families expressed doing everything they could to exit homelessness, a determination to keep their family together, and a strong motivation to secure a place of their own and for their children. Despite the hard efforts of these parents, they face severe barriers as homeless families.

Homeless Families Face Particular Barriers

Like many homeless people, homeless families reported that a major barrier to exiting homelessness is the lack of money. However, homeless families also reported many barriers that single adults do not face such as: the need for childcare, the inability to work because of nursing or young children, the difficulty of moving around with children, the increased cost of caring for and providing housing for children, the difficulty for finding housing large enough for children, and the inability to rent much low-end housing such as SROs with children.

Homelessness Impairs the Ability to be a Family

When asked how homelessness affects their family, parents frequently spoke of the difficulties caused by instability. They also spoke of the difficulties of functioning as a family when they lack their own home, sufficient space, and privacy. Parents reported that moving from place to place, and the lack of privacy and space is especially difficult for children. Parents reported that homelessness lead to a great deal of stress and psychological difficulties for themselves and their children. Many also reported illness amongst their children stemming from homelessness, and reported that homelessness adversely effects their children's education. Experiencing these and many other adverse affects of homelessness, many parents reported that homelessness makes it difficult to stay together as a family. Relatedly, the second most common type of fear reported by homeless parents is that they will be separated from their children or that the Child Protection Services will take their children away.

FACT SHEET 2

FACT SHEET ON HOMELESS LATINO IMMIGRANTS AND CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS

Summary

To end chronic homelessness we must address the specific needs of homeless immigrants. Many homeless immigrants have been without a home for over one year, and face severe barriers that prevent them from exiting homelessness and from effectively accessing work, housing, or social services. These barriers include legal status, language, and racism. Any plan that hopes to end chronic homelessness must find a way to address the challenges faced by Latino immigrants and must ensure that their needs are addressed in labor markets, housing markets, the homeless service system, and in society as a whole.

Methodology

Unlike many reports on homeless people that involve an expert researcher's assessment of them, the study on which this fact sheet provided homeless Latino immigrants an opportunity to assess their own situation. This fact sheet serves primarily to aggregate and communicate that assessment. In total, 98 people were interviewed in San Francisco as part of this outreach. 88 Latino immigrants were interviewed on the streets, in shelters, and in homeless service or community resource facilities. An additional 10 Latino families living in single room occupancy hotels (SROs) were interviewed. We decided to interview families living in SROs both because San Francisco officially defines families living in SROs or in doubled-up conditions as homeless, and because people frequently shift between living in SROs and living on the streets or in shelters. Of the total 98 people interviewed, 77% were male, and 23% female. The average age was 36, and only 18% were older than 45.

KEY FINDINGS

Many homeless Latino immigrants are chronically homeless.

The average time homeless Latino immigrants have been homeless is 1.5 years. (This figure does not include people living in SROs.) Half have been homeless for one year or longer, and 27% have been homeless for two years or more.

Most homeless Latino immigrants in San Francisco have lived in the United States for a substantial period of time.

The average time homeless Latino immigrants have lived in the United States is 9 years, and half have lived in the United States for five years or more. The average time homeless Latino immigrants have lived in San Francisco is 4.8 years, and 60% have lived in San Francisco for one year or more. The overwhelming majority of

these homeless immigrants are not newcomers to the country. They have been in this country contributing to its economy for a significant period of time. The most common reasons that homeless Latino immigrants first came to the United States were (in order of frequency mentioned): for a better life and future, because of poverty and economic crisis in their home countries, to find work and earn money, to help their family, to provide a better future for their children, to escape war or political persecution, and to reunite with family already in the United States.

Homeless Latino immigrants contribute to the economy, often working in the lowest paid and most unstable jobs. The instability and poor quality of these jobs, however, often leads to homelessness or makes it nearly impossible to exit homelessness.

The occupations which immigrants reported in order of frequency are: general labor/Day labor, construction assistance/carpentry, restaurant work, cleaning, painting, gardening, moving, and janitorial. However, 69% of the homeless Latino immigrants said that they either are currently unable to find work or are unable to find stable work. This difficulty in finding stable, well-paid work is reflected in the homeless immigrants responses when asked why they are homeless. The most common reasons that homeless Latino immigrants gave for being homeless were economic: the lack of work, the lack of money sufficient to afford rent, low paying jobs, the lack of job stability, the high cost of housing, the lack of housing, and the bad economy.

Homeless Latino immigrants face severe barriers to exiting homelessness including legal status, language, and racism.

Legal Status:

80% of homeless Latino immigrants are without legal immigration documents. This lack of documentation is one of the largest problems that homeless immigrants feel they face. Many said that as a result, they have less rights or privileges than people born in the United States. They reported that not having documents inhibits their ability to find stable and good paying work, to rent housing, and to access public benefits or services.

Language:

Language barriers also significantly affect homeless immigrants and inhibit them from exiting homelessness. Spanish was the first language of all of the immigrants interviewed, except for one who spoke Portuguese. Correspondingly, a number of immigrants reported that language was a major barrier for them. Language difficulties affected their ability to find work and housing and to access public services.

Racism:

A third major barrier that homeless Latino immigrants face to exiting homelessness is racism. 80% of homeless Latino immigrants interviewed felt that racism is a cause of

homelessness. One of the most common ways that homeless Latino immigrants understand racism to cause homelessness is through employment discrimination. Many Latino immigrants also feel that legal status and language barriers are themselves institutionalized forms of racism. Many respondents also spoke about the difficulties of housing discrimination and discrimination by homeless service staff. Additionally, Latino immigrants commented that they felt disliked or looked badly upon by other people, including other people of color.

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