

Metro Homelessness: A Study of Family Experiences

Introduction

The prevalence of homelessness in Des Moines is rising in both public and political discourse. Despite the increasing occurrence of family homelessness, research surrounding the phenomenon is limited. In January 2023, the *Unsheltered Des Moines Study* (Talbert & Record, 2023) provided valuable insight into unsheltered homelessness and the use of emergency shelters. It focused on the experiences of individuals living unsheltered, but not those of multiple people living together as a family unit with children. This study captures the unique experiences of families who lack housing.

Methodology

This study is an extension of the Unsheltered Des Moines study and uses a similar methodological framework drawing from in-depth interviews, ethnography, and qualitative analysis to construct a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of this marginalized population.

This research followed a diverse group of 10 Des Moines metro families either currently experiencing homelessness or who had recently experienced homelessness. The methodological framework used captured the personal experience and societal perceptions associated with homelessness.

Findings

Through this process, families revealed a diverse array of experiences, all of which were underscored by the precarious nature of life close to the poverty line and the desire for a stable home life for their children.

Respondents discussed past traumas that led to bouts—or years—of financial instability, certificates or degrees that were difficult to use during times of family upheaval, children who were both a lot of work and joy, and many other aspects of lives lived at the financial and social margins of the communities to which they contribute to and in which they hope to find permanent homes.

Family shelter is a temporary refuge in a time or lifetime of crisis.

Recommendations

The research suggests several possible policy responses that would lead to better outcomes for precariously housed and unhoused families in the Des Moines metro. The following six recommendations are a starting point with more detail provided in the full report.

Increase the supply of emergency housing units and amenities that promote private living in non-congregate shelter for families experiencing homelessness. Families need private space for sleeping as well as other daily activities of living. While emergency housing for homeless families exists, the amount is drastically insufficient to meet the needs.

Increase the supply and availability of permanent supportive housing and truly affordable housing in general. Permanent supportive housing is the most effective response to homelessness. Our current shelter system should transition to a system that prioritizes moving families into permanent supportive housing with wraparound services as soon as possible.

Make the expectations, process, and important benchmarks of moving through the system of homelessness services transparent and learnable. Implement a basic course on how to navigate the system and processes needed to become housed and employ a staff person to provide navigational assistance to families in shelter.

Provide a central hub of information about the requirements of local landlords. Create and maintain a public, searchable housing portal that compiled and filters available rental properties by accepted programs and provides transparency regarding fees, deposits, and upfront housing costs. Require or incentivize landlords to accept vouchers or housing program participants.

Better regulate the number and amount of application fees and deposits an individual low-income family needs to make. Advocate for regulation and more aggressive enforcement action, fines, and prosecution against landlords who charge abusive fees and deposits.

Implement a program to ease the transition during a move to Des Moines from another location and from Des Moines to another location. Hire a liaison who can assist with connecting with other municipalities' Continuum of Care to ease transitions between CoC's.