



## RESEARCH BRIEF

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### A Sector Wheel Approach to Understanding the Needs and Barriers to Services among Homeless-Experienced Veteran Families

#### Authors



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#### What Do We Know?

Veterans experiencing homelessness with their children remain a significant issue in the United States. Despite concerns about Veterans experiencing homelessness with their children, there are limited studies examining this issue. One study found that 9% of male Veterans experiencing homelessness and 18% of male Veterans experiencing unstable housing had children in their custody, while 30% of female Veterans experiencing homelessness and 45% of female Veterans experiencing unstable housing had children in their custody.<sup>1</sup>

Our purpose is to better understand the experiences of homeless-experienced Veterans and their children to inform care for Veteran families both within the VA and the community. We conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with homeless-experienced Veteran parents (homeless within the past two years) and homeless service providers. We developed a data elicitation tool called the “Sector Wheel for Under-Resourced Populations,” to guide the interviews (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup>

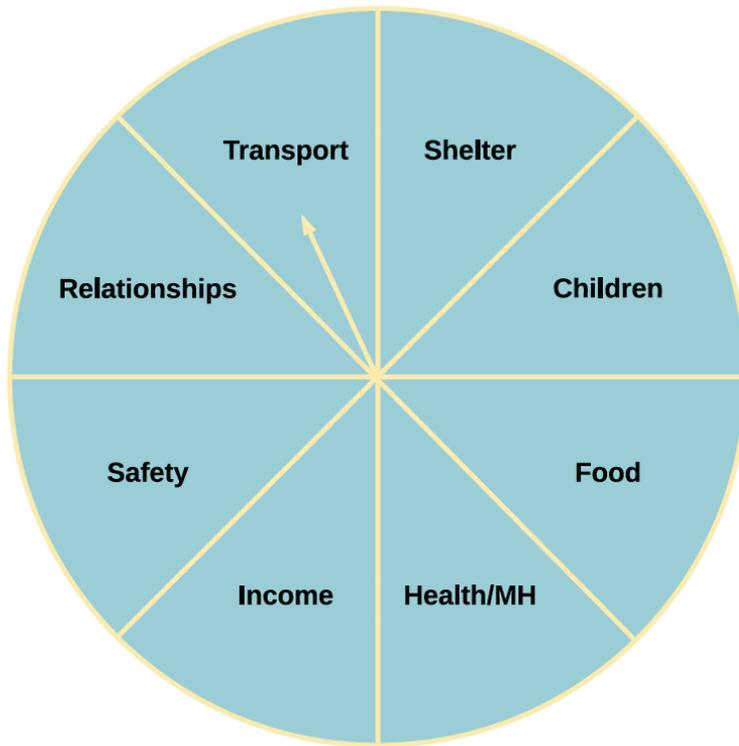


Figure 1. Sector Wheel for Under-Resourced Populations.

The sector wheel consists of eight sectors of a family’s life affected by homelessness (health and mental health, children, transportation, shelter, food, safety, income, and relationships) arranged around a wheel. The sectors were chosen with the input of Veteran parents with lived experience and homeless service providers. The wheel was developed so that the participant could take control over and guide the interview by spinning an arrow on the wheel to choose which sector to land on and which sector to discuss next, while sharing a wide range of concerns about the different sectors affected by homelessness.

### **New Information Provided by The Study**

We identified three major themes across the sectors that pertained to the experiences of Veteran families experiencing homelessness.

#### **Household Stress**

Parents and providers revealed that the stress of homelessness reverberated across the household, resulting in worsening family mental health. Parents described grappling with multiple roles and demands while experiencing homelessness, which resulted in a lack of time to parent. Parents also experienced heightened Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms and depression, with trauma histories more prominent among mothers. One mother voiced concern about the risk of further victimization of women with Military Sexual Trauma (MST) while homeless and the need for increased services for homeless-experienced women with MST. Many parents interviewed detailed worsening mental health of their children while homeless. One parent described the need for mental health resources for children, *“I know my kids also have the residuals of that [parental PTSD] because me and their father served. . . . I see that they are trying to help every Veteran, but I got kids and they [VA] cannot help.”*

## **Housing Stability**

Parents and providers described that permanent housing was critical before addressing needs in the other sectors, such as school for their children, employment, and mental health.

## **Barriers to Services**

Parents and providers described barriers navigating medical, mental health, and social services for families. First, many parents received helpful services at the VA for themselves; yet, they often had difficulties obtaining community resources for their families, such as enrolling children in Medicaid services. Second, parents emphasized a need for VA family services that went beyond housing. One parent communicated, “. . . *There’s no family health as far as through the VA. There’s no counseling. . . There’s no child stuff.*” Third, parents were often restricted in accessing housing due to having children. A provider discussed a limit to the age and number of children at one housing program, “. . . *the children have to be under the age of 12 and there can only be two [children].*” When searching for permanent housing, parents reported stigma and being unable to find housing in high-opportunity and safe areas.

## **Recommendations to Improve Services for Homeless-Experienced Veteran Families:**

- Enhance linkage to community services (e.g., medical services, mental health services, and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) for Veteran’s children and non-Veteran partners.
- Disseminate family therapy and parenting programs tailored to the needs of homeless-experienced Veteran families.
- Train service providers on the unique and distinct needs of homeless-experienced Veteran families.
- Increase access to affordable permanent housing in safe and high-opportunity areas by building landlord relationships, helping Veterans with children who have housing vouchers secure housing, prohibiting discrimination against voucher holders, and incentivizing developers to include affordable rental units.

## **References**

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2. Ijadi-Maghsoodi R, Feller S, Ryan GW, Altman L, Washington DL, Kataoka S, and Gelberg L. A Sector Wheel Approach to Understanding the Needs and Barriers to Services among Homeless-Experienced Veteran Families. *The Journal of the American Board of Family Medicine*. 2021;34(2):309-319.