



RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

**Hispanic Families
Experiencing Homelessness**

Jill Khadduri, Douglas Walton, Michael López, and Martha R. Burt



Introduction

Hispanic families comprise 16 percent of families that use emergency shelter, according to administrative data that have been used annually since 2007 to track national patterns of sheltered homelessness and report to Congress.¹ Hispanic families are less likely to experience sheltered homelessness, given the number of Hispanic families in deep poverty (with incomes below 50 percent of the federal poverty level). In 2014, a similar number of Hispanic families and African American families lived in deep poverty; however, the number of Hispanic families in shelter was substantially lower than that of African American families (16 percent of families in emergency shelter were Hispanic, while 48 percent were African American).²

While the Family Options Study does not provide insight about why Hispanic families may enter shelter at lower rates than expected given their share of all deeply poor families, the study can help us start to answer questions about whether Hispanic families that did enter shelter have different experiences from other families. This snapshot provides some initial analysis on these Hispanic families' characteristics and experiences, including how they differ from those of non-Hispanic white and African American families.

Hispanic families who use emergency shelters showed some resilience

Hispanic families who do become homeless appear to show some resilience that helps them avoid further adverse experiences. Twenty months after a shelter stay, there were no differences in the rates at which Hispanic families and non-Hispanic African American and white families³ had been homeless during the past six months (in shelter or in a place not suitable for human habitation).⁴ However, Hispanic families were doing somewhat better on other measures of housing instability.

- Fewer Hispanic families reported doubling up with another household because of inability to find or afford housing compared with non-Hispanic African American families.
- Hispanic families had moved less frequently than either African-American or white non-Hispanic families.
- Hispanic parents reported somewhat lower rates of psychological distress than non-Hispanic white families.
- Hispanic parents were less likely to report that their child had health problems, and their children had changed schools less frequently and had exhibited fewer behavior problems than children in non-Hispanic white families.⁵

Methodology

This research snapshot is part of a series of briefs commissioned by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to take advantage of data collected for a randomized controlled trial sponsored by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the [Family Options Study](#). For additional information on the larger study and the analysis conducted for HHS, [see other briefs in this series](#).

This snapshot provides descriptive information on the characteristics of Hispanic families who entered emergency shelters and their experiences during the next 20 months, regardless of the study intervention to which they were randomly assigned. Among the 1,857 families that responded to the 20 month survey, 21 percent (381 families) identified themselves as Hispanic (of any race), providing a rare opportunity to examine the way in which Hispanic

families experience homelessness. Of those not identifying as Hispanic, 18 percent (343) were white and 42 percent (777) African American. To put the experiences of Hispanic families in perspective, this snapshot makes comparisons among these three groups of families.

The snapshot makes some comparisons between Hispanic families who entered the study while in emergency shelters in different parts of the country. Those comparisons omit families in sites in which fewer than 10 percent of families identified as Hispanic. The two regions of the country with substantial numbers of Hispanic study families are the Northeast (Boston, MA and New Haven and Bridgeport, CT) and the West (Alameda County, CA; Denver, CO; Phoenix, AZ; and Salt Lake City, UT).

¹ This finding focuses on families who enter shelter programs, based on administrative data reported in HUD's Annual Homeless Assessment Report. National data on rates of doubling up as an alternative to going to a shelter are not available.

² In 2014, about 21.1 million individuals were in families in deep poverty, with income below 50 percent of the federal poverty level. About 5.1 million (24 percent) were Hispanic, and 4.9 million (23 percent) were African American. Although Hispanic and African American families made up roughly similar shares of the deeply poor population, the poverty rate differs between the two groups. In 2014, 9.4 percent of Hispanics were deeply poor, compared to 12.7 percent of African Americans. These numbers are based on calculations from the 2014 American Community Survey.

³ The analysis presented in the rest of this brief is based on categorizing the study families as Hispanic (any race) and *non-Hispanic African American* and *non-Hispanic white*.

⁴ The rates were 19 percent for both Hispanic families and non-Hispanic African American families and 21 percent for non-Hispanic white families, with no statistical difference.

⁵ These outcomes at 20 months are for the entire study sample, regardless of the intervention to which they were randomly assigned. Subgroup analysis shows similar effects of the study interventions for Hispanic families as for non-Hispanic African American and white families.

EXHIBIT 1: EXPERIENCES OF HISPANIC AND NON-HISPANIC FAMILIES 20 MONTHS AFTER A SHELTER STAY

	Non-Hispanic white families	Non-Hispanic African American families	Hispanic families	Significant difference between white and Hispanic families	Significant difference between African American and Hispanic families
Reported 20 months after stay in shelter					
At least one night homeless in previous 6 months	21%	19%	19%	No	No
At least one night doubled up in previous 6 months	23%	29%	22%	No	Yes***
Psychological distress	8.6	7.2	6.7	Yes***	No
Number of places lived in previous 6 months	1.7	1.7	1.5	Yes**	Yes***
Child well-being reported by parent					
Poor or fair health (%)	4.3%	7.0%	2.8%	No	Yes***
Behavior problems	0.8	0.5	0.5	Yes***	No
Number of schools attended since random assignment	2.1	1.8	1.8	Yes***	No

Source: Family Options Study 20-month followup survey

Notes: *** indicates significance at the .01 level, ** at the .05 level, and * at the .10 level.

“Psychological distress” is measured with the Kessler-6 scale and ranges from 0 to 24, with higher scores indicating greater distress.

Number of schools is top-coded at 4 or more schools.

“Behavior problems” outcome is measured as the standardized Total Difficulties score from the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ).

Twenty months after a shelter stay, Hispanic families in the West fared somewhat worse than Hispanic families in the Northeast

The overall pattern of Hispanic families’ resilience twenty months after entering shelter appears to comprise statistically significant regional differences.

- In the West, Hispanic families were more likely to have been homeless or doubled up in the past six months than Hispanic families in northeastern cities.
- More Hispanic families in the West reported recent alcohol dependence or drug abuse 20 months after a shelter stay, compared to Hispanic families in the Northeast.
- Hispanic families in western cities were less likely to have worked for pay in the prior week than those in northeastern cities.
- More Hispanic families in the West reported psychological distress, compared with Hispanic families in the Northeast.

EXHIBIT 2: EXPERIENCES OF HISPANIC FAMILIES IN WESTERN AND NORTHEASTERN CITIES

	Hispanic families in Western Cities	Hispanic families in Northeastern Cities	Significant difference?
Reported 20 months after stay in shelter			
At least one night homeless in previous 6 months (%)	24%	12%	Yes**
At least one night doubled up in previous 6 months (%)	27%	13%	Yes***
Child well-being reported by parent			
Psychological distress	7.6	5.4	Yes***
Drug or alcohol abuse (%)	18%	4%	Yes***
Adult employment 20 months after shelter stay			
Worked for pay in previous week (%)	26%	42%	Yes***

Source: Family Options Study 20-month followup survey

Notes: *** indicates significance at the .01 level, ** at the .05 level, and * at the .10 level.

“Psychological distress” is measured with the Kessler-6 scale and ranges from 0 to 24, with higher scores indicating greater distress.

Alcohol dependence is measured with the Rapid Alcohol Problems Screen-4 and drug abuse is measured with 6 items from the Drug abuse Screening Test-10.

Many of these regional differences were also present among *non-Hispanic* families

The regional differences in how Hispanic families were faring 20 months after a shelter stay may reflect differences in the characteristics of Hispanic families using shelters in western and northeastern cities, or may reflect differences between the larger economic, housing market, shelter, or social service systems or policies in different parts of the country. Ultimately, it was not possible to disentangle racial and ethnic differences from regional differences.

While Hispanic families in Western cities were more likely to have two adults in shelter compared to those in the Northeast, there was a similar, though not statistically significant, difference for white, non-Hispanic families. As the table below indicates, nearly all of the differences between Hispanic families in western and northeastern cities also existed between at least some non-Hispanic families in these two regions.

EXHIBIT 3: FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS AND OUTCOMES FOR HISPANIC, NON-HISPANIC AFRICAN AMERICAN, AND NON-HISPANIC WHITE FAMILIES IN WESTERN AND NORTHEASTERN CITIES									
	Hispanic families			Non-Hispanic African American families			Non-Hispanic white families		
	West	Northeast	Significant Difference?	West	Northeast	Significant Difference?	West	Northeast	Significant Difference?
Baseline characteristics									
Two adults in shelter	31%	18%	Yes***	16%	15%	No	41%	26%	No
Three or more children	37%	24%	Yes***	18%	15%	No	24%	9%	Yes**
History of domestic violence	57%	44%	Yes***	57%	36%	Yes***	53%	56%	No
Psychological distress	25%	16%	Yes***	28%	16%	Yes***	21%	21%	No
Drug abuse	19%	7%	Yes***	11%	7%	No	26%	9%	Yes**
Alcohol abuse	14%	1%	Yes***	13%	4%	Yes***	12%	6%	No
History of eviction	33%	10%	Yes***	29%	17%	Yes***	41%	18%	Yes**
Felony convictions	18%	4%	Yes***	18%	6%	Yes***	24%	15%	No
Outcomes 20 months after shelter stay									
Homeless last 6 months	24%	12%	Yes**	22%	11%	Yes***	20%	24%	No
Doubled up last 6 months	27%	13%	Yes***	25%	16%	Yes**	22%	5%	Yes***
Psychological distress	8%	5%	Yes***	7%	6%	Yes*	8%	9%	No
Alcohol or drug abuse	18%	4%	Yes***	15%	6%	Yes***	18%	5%	Yes*
No work for pay past week	74%	58%	Yes***	70%	63%	Yes*	76%	75%	No
<i>Sample Size:</i>	<i>209</i>	<i>124</i>		<i>228</i>	<i>144</i>		<i>217</i>	<i>34</i>	

Source: Family Options Study 20-month followup survey

Note: *** indicates significance at the .01 level, ** at the .05 level, and * at the .10 level.

Conclusion

While this research snapshot adds some information about how Hispanic families fare after experiencing homelessness, many questions remain. As the snapshot has shown, overall, Hispanic families who had experienced crises that led them to enter emergency shelters appeared to retain some of the resilience that seems to help other Hispanic families living in poverty avoid going into shelters. However, the overall observation that Hispanic families were doing somewhat better than African American or white families following an emergency shelter stay masks important regional differences among Hispanic families who become homeless in different parts of the country. Importantly, since many—but not all—of the same regional differences were observed for non-Hispanic African American and white families, it is likely that institutional factors such as the way the shelter system, economic or housing market, and/or broader social services system operates at the local, state, or regional level have at least as much – if not more – importance as diversity among Hispanic families.

Much more evidence is needed to help policy makers and providers of services to homeless families understand how to reach out to families experiencing homelessness and serve different communities. For example, a deeper investigation of how different subgroups of Hispanic families cope with housing crises, an examination of the characteristics of families who rely on extended family and social networks as an alternative to entering shelters, and other areas of further research could strengthen local policy and practice for serving diverse families experiencing homelessness in different regions of the country.

*Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE), Administration for Children and Families,
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PROJECT OFFICERS:
Emily Schmitt, OPRE, ACF
Carli Wulff, OPRE, ACF
Amanda Benton ASPE, HHS

PROJECT DIRECTOR:
Lauren Dunton, Abt Associates

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4550 Montgomery Avenue
Suite 800 North
Bethesda, MD 20814-3343

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