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Research Argument: Single Parent

Whether people know it or not, a good chunk of Americans experience homelessness at least once in their lifetime. This can be due to multiple factors such as inadequate housing, cuts in income, labor market changes, and it can even be a generational thing. Research has shown that more men experience homelessness than women. However, when it comes to being a single parent, more single mothers tend to experience homelessness than men. The causes are slightly distinctive when it comes to mothers. These include violence, lack of social support, and the focus on family. Being homeless is hard enough, but for a single mother with children, this could make her life harder.

To illustrate the unique risk factors that single mothers face, there are various elements that could lead her to homelessness. First, is violence either experienced during their childhood or in their relationship. In, *Understanding Mothers Experiencing Homelessness: A Gendered Approach to Finding Solutions to Family Homelessness*, many women have expressed the violence they've endured from their partner, most of them the father of their children. If it's not physical abuse, it's emotional abuse or even both. They often feel like they don't have a safe space but aren't able to do anything about it since almost if not all of them are dependent on their

partner. That's why once they find the courage to take their children and leave, they aren't able to find sustainable housing because most of the money was made by their partner. The physical and emotional abuse could also lead to lack of social support from outside sources. Because of the abuse at home, the men tend to isolate the mothers from her friends and family members, a tactic used to make her depend on him. However, once they do leave, they have no one to fall back on temporarily because of that isolation. Lack of support is another reason why single mother become homeless because they have no one to help them except for the shelters. Even if mothers do find a short-term home for their family, it usually doesn't take that long for them to become homeless again. In "*Understanding Mothers Experiencing Homelessness*", women mentioned that after a while they had to focus on their children's needs and that can lead to their homelessness. One of the women interviewed stated that she lost her job because she had to stay home to take care of her sick son (Milaney 11). Another woman mentioned how she was doing well while juggling two jobs but after a while the pressure got too much between her jobs and her children and that it forced her into homelessness. All of these reasons that can lead to homelessness can be physical and emotional, but at the end of the day these are hard to overcome when you are alone with no support.

Even before homelessness starts in adulthood, it can be traced back to factors in an individual's childhood. A study conducted by Daniel B. Herman, *Adverse Childhood Experiences: Are They Risk Factors for Adult Homelessness?*, for the American Journal of Public Health focused on how childhood hardships may affect homelessness later in life. The focal factors of this study included sexual and physical abuse and insufficient parental care during childhood years. With differences like age, sex, race, and more in mind, the

aforementioned aspects of a group of 92 households in the United States that had been homeless formerly were compared to the experiences of a group of 395 individuals. To determine whether or not a person's parental care was adequate, Herman utilized a scale that originated from the Childhood Experience of Care and Abuse Interview created by Bifulco. Individuals were asked "Before you were 18, were you ever severely beaten by an adult and badly bruised or injured?" to decide if they had been physically abused as a child (Herman 251). The question "Have you ever been sexually molested, abused, or raped [before the age of 18]?" was asked to individuals in both groups to determine if they had experienced sexual abuse as a child (Herman 251). Afterwards, the results of the group that had previously experienced homelessness were compared to the results of the group that had never resulted homelessness. Unsurprisingly, individuals who had lived through trauma during childhood were more likely to experience homelessness later in life. In the conclusion of the study, individuals who had encountered insufficient parental care, physical abuse, or both were shown to have a much higher chance of experiencing homelessness in the future. However, people who have experienced sexual abuse during their childhood years had a higher percentage of going through homelessness, the difference in percentage are not as drastic compared to people who have experienced either physical abuse, insufficient parental care, or both that caused them to be homeless. Perhaps caused by these occurrences, children of homeless adults have to live with the effects of being on the streets instead of living in a consistent and healthy environment.

Consequently, when homelessness affect single mothers, it also affects children in more ways than just robbing them of a place to live and grow up in. More specifically, it affects the

development of their brain and certain skills. In *Developmental Status and Social–Emotional Functioning of Young Children Experiencing Homelessness*, Mary E. Haskett writes about a study conducted to examine the differences in areas of competency between a group of 328 children living in shelters or housing programs in North Carolina and the general juvenile population. To assess each child’s abilities, 10-15 minutes were spent with each person on tasks that determine their language, motor, and cognitive skills (Haskett 122). After the individuals were all tested, it became clear that the overall developmental skills of the children with an unstable living environment were generally much lower than the group with a stable living environment. Although age and gender can affect this, the difference between the two groups is most significantly shown in their language and communication skills. This study revealed that gender does not cause much of a distinction between the development in infantile homeless children and only starts to create a contrast in abilities when the children get older. As they got older, girls typically scored higher on tasks requiring motor and academic skills than boys. On the other hand, boys tend to have more problems with mental health while the girls tend to have fewer developmental problems wholly. Although it is true that girls in homeless shelters and housing facilities are less likely to have mental health issues, about 25% of parents of the 328 children in the group were concerned about the state of their child or children’s mental health. Furthermore, about 25% of the children that were tested seemed to require mental health services to improve their state of mind (Haskett 122). There may be variability in functioning skills in children that have experienced homelessness, their average usually falls short of the “normal” population, mainly in skills pertaining to language and skills that deal with social and emotional situations. Being homeless has its obvious effects on all children that experience it, but parents,

more specifically, mothers, can play a large role in helping shape their children's development while in a shelter or housing program.

When it comes to a homeless mother and her children, a lot of people don't realize how influential she can be during a time of crisis. Suggested in a research called "*How Does Homelessness Affect Parenting Behaviour?*" positive parenting, especially on children who are facing homelessness, can act as a cushion against developmental problems that can grow in the future. For instance, positive parenting can improve a child's academic achievements, their relationship with their peers, and regulate emotions (Bradley 95). However, this is easier said than done. Depending on her current living situation and how dire it is, a mother's stress can reflect her parenting style. In the study conducted by Caroline Bradley and two others, three mothers have admitted that the stress and strain of being homeless have made them emotionally unavailable to their own children, resenting them in some way (Bradley 102). Though, not all mothers are like this. A repeating theme that was present in the sample was negative self-concept in the parental role. Mothers felt ashamed and blamed themselves for not doing enough to prevent her family from going into homelessness (Bradley 102). One of the participants stated, "All I could do for them, I did: make sure they didn't get hurt; make sure they got food. It was hurting me, like I was doing them wrong." (Bradley 102). The shame and guilt, however, prevented them from accepting help and made it harder for them to discipline their children. Even when the mothers do find a place to temporarily live in, usually a shelter, it is still not enough for the children to effectively develop. Some shelters have a set guideline that every family must follow, for example, they have to eat and sleep at a certain time. Mothers also have to keep a close eye on their children at all times, and this means that they are in close contact

24/7. The closeness is good, but after a while, the mothers tend to reveal their emotional difficulties to their children, creating unnecessary burden on their shoulders. Living in a shelter also prevented close bonding between the mother and her children. Residing with other families meant that the children and the mother aren't able to share their own personal histories, their own emotions, and their needs (Bradley 103). In spite of all the obstacles, the mothers in the sample have already thought of ways they could improve their parenting techniques. Many have talked about reframing their thinking, telling themselves that the situation they are in right now is only temporary and that everything will work itself out (Bradley 104). Their positive thinking and resilience gave them the strength to not give up and continue parenting their children. In addition to that, they have transferred their own resilience and positive thinking onto their children in hopes that this could shield them from the emotional difficulties faced by their current situation (Bradley 104). As indicated before, rules in shelters made it difficult for families to have one on one time with one another. But some families have implemented their own family time and spend it together whenever they can.

From an outside point of view, people who aren't homeless or people who are single parents but are financially stable have a negative connotation of single parents who are homeless. Which makes sense because they compare their own experiences to that of single mothers who are homeless. Single parents who aren't homeless and are financially stable worked really hard to get that life and live comfortably. Which is valid because a lot of single-family household can relate, so it's hard to empathize when the solution is as clear as day and families who are struggling don't take that chance to fix their life. Even if it's a generational thing, hard work is key to overcome anything. Yet, when there's a negative, there's a positive and that was

demonstrated in the study above. Not a lot of people realize how hard it is to overcome homelessness physically and mentally, especially when it's hard to get support. But many single mothers were able to use what they got and made life better not only for themselves but for their children.

Mothers, especially single mothers with children to take care of, are affected by homelessness and the struggles that come with it. Statistically, men are much less likely to take care of their children while homeless, leaving the mother with the responsibility. Along with having to worry about themselves and their own wellbeing, the women have to worry about the health of their child or children, putting even more on their plate. *Mental Health Services for Single Homeless Mothers with Children*, written by Andrea Zermeno, focuses on how to help single mothers that are homeless with their mental health and the most effective way to provide help for them. Having to fret about basic human needs like employment, housing, food, clean water, and more while also having to take care of her children, homeless single mothers barely have the time to think about anything else. As a result, their physical and mental health tend to both deteriorate. Depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and substance abuse are all more likely to be experienced by a single mother who is homeless (Zermeno 8-9). It is probable that the sporadic emotions that she feels, like anger, anxiety, and self-blame may affect this. To make it worse, most homeless women are without much support, particularly in the emotional sense, as many family members and friends tend to not provide it for them. These women's poor mental health affects not only their ability to build and keep healthy relationships, but also may cause their children to fall in the same hole of bad mental health. Not only does homelessness create struggles for single mothers to overcome like stress over food, housing, money, and more,

they also have to figure out how to best take care of their children. Meanwhile, not having a stable living situation causes mental strain on their health, which does not at all help their pre-existing problems.

It is a known fact that single mothers face the most stress, juggling her work life while also creating a sustainable living environment for her children. In addition to that, she also has to face the societal stigma of being homeless and a single mother. In the study conducted by Bradley, many mothers have shared how their current title has limited their opportunities to find employment and adequate housing. Ever since the housing crisis of 1980, families headed by single mothers have not been able to find proper housing for themselves. This in turn created a new poor (Mulroy 51). The housing crisis created an issue with affordability and availability especially for single-income families. Census data in 1988 have shown that the median income for single mothers between the age of 25-34 was \$11, 161. Compared to a two-parent family, with the median income of \$31, 358, the gap between the two is astronomically huge. Over 15 years that gap has widened. The median income for single-parent families has reduced due to unemployment, underemployment, and welfare benefits (Mulroy 53). Even when single mothers do find a place they want to live in, they hesitate to tell their future landlord of their current situation, in fear that they would turn them away. This is because landlords might find them ill-suited tenants, lacking the proper responsibility to pay rent and so on (Bradley 103).

Discrimination against single mothers in the housing is higher than most people think. Federal, state, and localities law don't protect single families with children, meaning they have no obligations to deem them as important enough to protect against discrimination. Even if there are laws put in place to protect single families, it is a lengthy process to file a report of

discrimination and usually cost a lot of money (Mulroy 57). So, most families don't even try to fight back because they know their efforts will be wasted, and it is hard to prove that they've been discriminated against. Expensive housing is another reason why single mothers stay homeless for so long and seek out help from local shelters.

To briefly summarize, anyone who is homeless struggles in their own ways and overcomes their strain and stress in their own ways. However, when it comes to single mothers, their stress and struggles are harder to overcome, balancing the need to prioritize their children, work, and their own mental health. But many are strong and are working harder every day to overcome their struggles, not only for themselves but for their children.

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