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Family Homelessness in Hennepin County

A Mixed Methods Examination of the Rapid Exit Program and Patterns of Shelter Mobility

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Executive Summary

This paper addresses family homelessness in Hennepin County through analysis of the patterns of shelter mobility and the county's Rapid Exit Program. Rapid Exit is a national rapid re-housing model and is a key component of the County's plan to end homelessness by 2016. This study used administrative data on 2,602 families that entered a public shelter between 2004 and 2007 to analyze the determinants of shelter exit and re-entry and to document residential mobility before and after shelter stays. In addition, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with twenty-five current and former shelter residents provided perspectives on the experience of navigating the transitions between public shelter and private housing. Four key findings resulted from this study:

Housing stability is influenced by a complex set of barriers. Most families interviewed reported that despite enrollment in public programs, unemployment and insufficient income were major barriers to housing stability. Troubled rental histories, difficulties with landlords, and insufficient social networks further burdened families experiencing homelessness.

Perceptions of, and services provided by, the Rapid Exit program vary widely. Available administrative data suggests that only about half of the families staying in shelter for longer than two weeks received Rapid Exit services, and types of services received differed. This is consistent with program participant reports that experiences with the program varied widely depending on the recipient and the provider.

Homeless families in Hennepin County experience relatively short shelter stays and high rates of return to shelter. Compared with studies using similar methodologies, the average shelter stay in Hennepin County is relatively short: 31.6 nights between 2004 and 2007. Despite short stays, more than 20 percent of families returned to county shelter within three years of their first homeless episode. Families receiving a ranking of 4 out of 5 in terms of the Rapid Exit housing barriers assessment are more than twice as likely to return to shelter.

Leaving shelter does not necessarily lead to stability. Homeless families in Hennepin County have high rates of residential mobility both before and after exiting shelter.

Based on these findings, recommendations for improving both policy and program assessment are provided in the full report.

Introduction

Policy Background

In early 2011, Hennepin County entered year five of its ten-year plan to end homelessness. Heading Home Hennepin, a public-private collaborative focused on prevention, housing affordability, and streamlined service delivery, is part of a national movement to end homelessness. Among Hennepin County's efforts at preventing and reducing family homelessness is Rapid Exit, a rapid re-housing program designed to move families out of emergency shelter and into stable housing as quickly as possible.

Rapid Exit and other rapid re-housing programs are based on the premise that homeless families are categorically different from chronically homeless single adults and require a unique treatment model. Low-income families are more mobile than the general population; poverty, the lack of affordable housing, strained interpersonal relationships and difficult personal choices lead to housing instability (Cohen and Wardrip 2011), but for most families, homelessness is temporary (Cunningham 2009; Culhane et al. 2007). Rapid re-housing programs provide short-term assistance to families experiencing temporary homelessness, helping families return to housing and reducing the strain on shelters, while ensuring that families have the services they require to achieve housing stability.

Rapid re-housing programs usually involve landlord outreach and education, housing search assistance, financial assistance in the form of rental subsidies, and case management to facilitate a smooth transition into housing and promote housing retention. Typically, home-based services are offered for a transitional period and aim to maximize the use of services that already exist in the community to support low-income families (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2008).

Hennepin County's Rapid Exit Program has gained national attention for its success in preventing participating families from returning to homeless shelters. A 2001 Wilder Research report showed that although 34 percent of Rapid Exit program participants entered the program as repeat homeless shelter users, only nine percent returned to a shelter within one year of receiving services, and just 15 percent returned to shelter within two years (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2001).

More recently, federal policy initiatives have given momentum to rapid re-housing models. In 2009, the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) designated $1.5 billion through the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act of 2009 for the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program (HPRP). HPRP grantees may allocate funds to financial assistance, housing relocation and stabilization services, data collection and evaluation, and administrative costs.

Federal attention, a growing body of literature on mobility's negative effects on children (Masten et al. 2008), and concerns that some families might require more intensive interventions have provided impetus for this study of Hennepin County's Rapid Exit program. Earlier research pre-dated the current economic recession, which has increased the number of families in shelter (Hennepin County 2011). Additionally, reports from shelter and social service agency staff indicate that a growing share of their shelter population are repeat users, suggesting that there may be a need for broader measures of how Rapid Exit affects family well-being.

Purpose

The primary purpose of this study is to address the following project goals, as requested by the Hennepin County Office to End Homelessness:

- Identify the characteristics of families in shelter, including repeat users of shelter services.
- Identify and evaluate the services clients receive in the Rapid Exit program and the effectiveness of these services in addressing barriers to stability.
- Identify individual and programmatic factors that influence the amount of time until families exit shelter.
- Identify factors that affect housing stability after exiting shelter and the factors that affect the probability of returning to a public shelter.

Literature Review

Family Homelessness

While the majority of homeless people in the United States are single adults, the proportion of families among the homeless population is rising. In 2009, more than 170,000 families (including

more than 535,000 people) were in shelters or transitional housing, a 30 percent increase over the 2007 number of sheltered homeless families (HUD 2010). In line with national trends, children and their parents have been the fastest-growing segments of the homeless population in Minnesota (Wilder Research 2010). In 2009, 1,795 families in Hennepin County sought emergency shelter in county-funded shelter (People Serving People, St. Anne's Place, or an overflow shelter) or a privately-funded shelter (Mary's Place or Families Moving Forward) (Hennepin County 2011). This is an increase of 6.5 percent over 2008 estimates. As is true nationally, racial and ethnic minority families are overrepresented in the homeless population in Minnesota; African American and Native American families are 30 times more likely than White families to be homeless (Wilder Research 2010).

Research suggests that homeless families more closely resemble other low-income families than they do homeless adults (Cunningham 2009). Like other low-income families, homeless families are commonly headed by a single woman, belong to an ethnic minority group, and experience high housing instability and mobility (Cunningham 2009; Rog and Buckner 2007; Shinn et al. 2005). Homeless families have lower rates of substance abuse and mental health challenges than homeless adults (Cunningham 2009; Rog and Buckner 2007; Culhane et al. 2007). Characteristics that may distinguish homeless families from other low-income families include frequent family separations (typically mother from children) and homelessness as a child among heads of household (Rog and Buckner 2007). Research has found that there are multiple and often interconnected sources of risk for family homelessness (Hersberger 2007; Rog and Buckner 2007). Much of the literature argues that a lack of affordable housing is the primary driver of family homelessness (Cunningham 2009; Burt 2001; Shinn et al. 2005).

Shelter Exit, Re-Entry, and Housing Stability

Existing research has identified demographic characteristics, physical and mental health, public assistance use, employment status, and length of shelter stay as factors that influence shelter exit for homeless families. Additionally, previous studies suggest that rental subsidies and housing location are important correlates to shelter re-entry.

Culhane and colleagues (2007) investigated family homelessness in Philadelphia, New York City, Columbus, Ohio, and the state of Massachusetts to determine a typology of homeless families and the predictors of shelter exit and return. The authors found that average shelter stays

ranged from 52 days in Columbus to 202 days in New York City.[1] The authors also found that families with longer episodes of shelter use were those with high levels of TANF receipt at first admission, and those that experienced issues related to inpatient psychiatric treatment, disability and unemployment.   Similarly, Rog and Henderson (2010) suggest that families who test positive for drug or alcohol use prior to shelter entry remain in shelter longer than families who do not test positive.

Other research suggests that the longer families have stayed in shelter, the more difficult it becomes to exit. According to Wong, Culhane, and Kuhn (1997), the probability of exiting shelter was highest for families during the few months immediately following admission to a shelter and declined over time.

Many studies highlight the importance of housing subsidies and housing location as factors influencing stability once a family has exited shelter. Wong, Culhane, and Kuhn (1997) found that within two years of exit, families discharged to a prior residence or apartment had a re-entry rate of 13 percent, compared with families discharged to subsidized housing, of whom only 7.6 percent returned within two years. Families discharged to an unknown housing arrangement had the highest rate of return at 37 percent. Likewise, in their longitudinal study of more than 200 families in New York City, Stojanovic et al. (1999) found that the majority of families that had received subsidized housing were still in housing five years later, while half of those who had gone to live in unsubsidized housing had returned to shelter. The literature discussed provides methodological and analytical guidance to our study of the dynamics of family homelessness and our exploration of the factors that predict shelter exit, shelter re-entry, and housing stability.

Rapid Exit Program Description[2]

In Hennepin County, families apply for emergency shelter at Century Plaza, the County's central application point for public assistance. Here, families are "vouchered in" to one of two county shelters: People Serving People (PSP), which has 98 rooms, or St. Anne's Place, which has 15 rooms. If both shelters are full, families are temporarily housed in overflow shelters, such as

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[1] Shelter stay refers to days per episode, with episodes defined as ending with a 30-day gap in shelter use.

[2] Hennepin County Publications, Existing Evaluations of the Rapid Exit program and interviews with Rapid Exit case workers informed the program description.

The Drake Hotel. Families might also seek shelter outside the county system at faith-based private shelters in the area. Mary's Place has 92 rooms and Families Moving Forward can accommodate 10 families per night. In 2009, 1,343 families were served in county-funded shelter and 442 families were sheltered in Mary's Place. The average length of stay in Mary's Place, 61 days, is nearly twice as long as the average stay in county shelter, partially explaining the discrepancy in number of families served between county and private shelter (Hennepin County 2011).

Families who enter the county shelter system are eligible for Rapid Exit, Hennepin County's rapid re-housing program. The program is designed to move families out of emergency shelters and into housing quickly, through the early identification of a family's "housing barriers." Like other rapid re-housing programs, Rapid Exit prioritizes the return of families to permanent housing and assumes families are best equipped to address other barriers to stability only after they are housed (Hennepin County 2006).

Target Population

Rapid Exit aims to serve families who face moderate to serious barriers in obtaining housing and who are currently residing in county-funded emergency shelters. Within the first week of entering a shelter, every family is referred to a Rapid Exit Coordinator at the Century Plaza public assistance center for a mandatory assessment of housing barriers. Using a scale of 1 to 5, the Rapid Exit Coordinator assigns each family a "barrier level": 1 indicates minimal barriers and 5 indicates severe barriers (see Appendix A for screening tool). The Rapid Exit Coordinator also performs criminal, credit, and rental history checks.

Based on this initial assessment, families are referred to one of several resources. Those identified as facing moderate to serious barriers are referred to a Rapid Exit case worker at one of two contracted social service agencies: St. Stephen's Human Services or Elim Transitional Housing. Families with minimal barriers receive an informational packet and sample rental application form, but are not referred for Rapid Exit services. These families may return to the Rapid Exit Coordinator later for help with application fees, moving expenses or deposit assistance. Families with severe barriers are referred to more intensive re-housing programs in Hennepin County.

Services Provided

The primary purpose of the Rapid Exit program is to locate and secure appropriate housing for shelter-users. To that end, housing search assistance is the primary service provided in the program. Rapid Exit case managers work with landlords to match families to the best available vacancy based on the family's needs, the landlord's risk tolerance and the unit

> *Anything that keeps the person maintained in housing—we do it. If it means advocating between client and property owner, putting names on mailboxes, setting up referrals, making sure the rent is paid—the question should be 'what don't we do?'*
> *-Rapid Exit Case Manager*

location. Hennepin County links approval for continued shelter stay to progress on the plan developed between the family and Rapid Exit worker (Burt, Pearson and Montgomery 2006). Once the Rapid Exit worker locates housing that he or she believes is appropriate for the family, the family may elect to move into this housing or continue the housing search process on their own.

Financial support varies for clients who are placed into housing through Rapid Exit. For many clients, county-funded Emergency Assistance covers the first month's rent and other housing start-up costs. For those not eligible for Emergency Assistance, Rapid Exit assures coverage of these costs, on average $1,200 to $1,500 (Hennepin County 2011). Rapid Exit funding also provides short-term rental subsidies for certain clients. Subsidies are meant to bridge the gap between the client's income and his or her monthly rent payment; the value of the subsidy varies depending on family size, income, and rent amount, and the subsidy can last from one to six months. Most clients, however, do not receive any subsidies after being re-housed (Hennepin County 2011).

Rapid Exit is a highly individualized program; services vary depending on each client's unique needs. Other services provided in the program include case management; information and referrals to income support programs, education and work training, childcare, and physical and mental health services; landlord-tenant mediation; and financial and rental education and counseling. As one Rapid Exit case manager explained: "Anything that keeps the person maintained in housing—we do it. If it means advocating between client and property owner, putting names on mailboxes, setting up referrals, making sure the rent is paid—the question should be 'what don't we do?'"

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative Methods

Sample

The quantitative analysis portion of this study analyzes a cohort of 2,602 families who entered a publicly-funded Hennepin County emergency family shelter between January 1, 2004 and December 31, 2007 and who had no record of shelter use between January 1, 1998 and December 31, 2003. Shelter data was available through December 31, 2010, allowing us to track shelter use for all cohort members for at least three years after shelter entry.

Data Sources

The depth and breadth of variables needed for analysis required Hennepin County staff to extract data from multiple sources. Data were matched by MAXIS case number, social security number, or other ID, and were de-identified by county staff prior to analysis. Data sources included:

- ***Hennepin County Shelter Data:*** Entered by shelter staff, shelter data includes number of adults and children in shelter, code for shelter of residence and dates the family was "vouchered"[3] in and out of county shelter.

- ***MAXIS***: Entered by county and state (Department of Human Services) social service and financial workers, MAXIS is the state's data management system for public benefit programs such as the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP); data extracted includes demographic information for each case (race, ethnicity, birthdates of household members) and program usage (enrollment in MFIP, Food Support, General Assistance, etc.). In addition, county staff geo-coded family addresses with 2000 Census Tracts to measure family mobility.

- ***Medicaid Management Information System (MMIS)***: The state's health care payment system; data retrieved included a dummy variable for whether families had certain medical claims during a certain month; included mental health services, chemical dependency services, developmental disability screening, and emergency room usage.

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[3] Families are given "vouchers" for stay in county shelter if they do not have the resources to stay elsewhere. Vouchers are generally given for only a few nights, after which the family must reapply for another voucher.

- ***Offender Management System (OMS):*** Data from the Adult Correctional Facility on convictions, grade of crimes, and incarceration of the head of household.
- ***Homeless Management Information System (HMIS):*** The federal Housing and Urban Development (HUD) system for tracking homeless information; data retrieved included information on enrollment in and services provided by the Rapid Exit Program.
- ***Rapid Exit Screening Data:*** Entered by the Rapid Exit screener at Hennepin County, data included dates of assessment and barrier levels assigned to families.

Method of Analysis

This study provides descriptive statistics on demographic characteristics and tabulations of services received through the Rapid Exit program. This study also uses a Cox Proportional Hazard model to analyze the determinants of length of time until shelter exit or shelter re-entry.

In alignment with the literature, an exit from a homeless shelter is defined as a departure lasting a continuous 30 days or longer. Similarly, re-entry to shelter is defined as a return to county shelter after being out for 30 days or longer. Using these definitions, data on dates of shelter use were aggregated into spells (i.e. episodes) of shelter use and time remaining out of shelter. The Cox Hazard model was then used to analyze changes in the likelihood that a family exited or re-entered shelter, given that the family had not exited or re-entered shelter by a point in time.

In this study, the definition of the hazard rate of shelter exit is the probability a family will exit shelter in time *t*, given that the family has not exited shelter prior to time *t*. Similarly, a hazard rate of re-entry is the probability a family will re-enter shelter in time *t*, given that the family has remained out of shelter prior to time *t*. The key assumption under the Cox Proportional Hazard model is that the covariates (all the variables included in the model) have the same proportional impact on the hazard rate. A hazard ratio can be interpreted as the proportional effect on the hazard of a unit change in the corresponding covariate.

Limitations

Analysis of this data should be interpreted with an understanding of the limitations. The most significant limitation in the quantitative analysis is missing data. Families residing in Mary's Place or another private shelter are not accounted for because this data is not tracked by the county or state systems. Returns to shelter are likely underestimated because families moving from a public shelter to a private are indistinguishable from families successfully moving to an

apartment. There were also missing observations for many families in various data sets. This was especially problematic for the Rapid Exit screening and service data; it is unknown whether our data accurately reflects the program because so many families did not appear in the data at all.

Another limitation is that some potentially relevant information was not available for quantitative study. Rental history, information about unlawful detainers, housing quality, and income level from employment or public cash assistance are a few examples of unavailable data that may have significantly influenced exits from or returns to shelter.

Descriptive Statistics

The characteristics of our sample were examined in five categories: demographic characteristics, criminal history, prior medical service use, prior welfare service use, and shelter use. We also looked at the differences between *repeaters,* families with two or more shelter stays and *non-repeaters,* families with only one shelter stay, and applied t-tests at the 95% confidence level (p≤.05) to determine whether a statistically significant difference exists between the means of the variables of interest.

Demographic Characteristics

Table 1 shows that upon first entry into the shelter system, 92.9 percent of head of households in the cohort were female (82.4 percent were single mothers). The average age of the head of household was 29, with an average family size of three. More than half (51.9 percent) of heads of household had less than a high school education.

74.6 percent of the head of households were African American, 15.1 percent were White, and 5.5 percent were Native American. 4.4 percent of the head of households were immigrants,[4] and more than half of those with immigrant status (51.3 percent) were refugees.

On average, families had 1.9 children[5], with an average of one child under the age of six. In addition, 44.6 percent of the cohort was age 19 or younger when they had their first child.

The heads of families that repeated shelter were significantly different from non-repeater family heads in age at first entry into shelter, level of education, race, immigration status, and age at

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[4] This may underestimate the true number of immigrants in the cohort, as immigrant status is changed to "non-immigrant" in MAXIS once someone becomes a naturalized citizen.
[5] Children were defined as 21 years of age or younger

first childbirth.   The heads of households for repeaters were younger, less educated, more likely to be African American, less likely to be White, less likely to be an immigrant, and more likely to have been a teenager at the first childbirth.

TABLE 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Study Cohort

	Total Cohort	Repeaters	Non-repeaters
Gender (n=2,557)			
Female	92.88 %	93.28 %	92.78 %
Age (n=2,600)*			
21 and under	22.42 %	29.76 %	20.54 %
22 to 30	38.54 %	38.41%	38.57 %
31 to 40	25.04 %	21.27 %	26.00 %
41 and above	14.00 %	10.53 %	14.89 %
Family size (n=2,602)			
1	6.30 %	1.69 %	7.48 %
2	35.63 %	36.72 %	35.35 %
3	28.25 %	28.25 %	28.25 %
4	16.30 %	19.21 %	15.55 %
5 & more	13.52 %	14.12 %	13.37 %
Education (n=2,315)			
High school & higher*	48.12 %	41.21 %	50.08 %
Less than High school*	51.88 %	58.79 %	49.92 %
Race (n=2,602)			
Black*	74.56 %	78.15 %	73.64 %
White*	15.10 %	12.24 %	15.84 %
Native American	5.46 %	6.78 %	5.12 %
Other	4.88 %	2.83 %	5.41 %
Immigration status (n=2,602)			
Immigrant*	4.42 %	0.75 %	5.36 %
Age at first birth (n=2,369)			
Teen mom*	44.58 %	50.21%	43.14%

*Significant difference between repeaters and non-repeaters (p≤0.05)

Criminal Record, Prior Medical Service Use, and Prior Welfare Service Use

Table 2 shows past criminal, medical, and welfare service use. 8.6 percent of heads of household in the cohort had a criminal record prior to entering shelter. 4.5 percent had been convicted of a felony. Repeaters had slightly more criminal records but the difference was not statistically significant.

About 70 percent of families received some type of medical service in the five years prior to entering shelter. Emergency room use and mental health services were widely used by families in the cohort. Repeaters were more likely to use medical services than non-repeaters. Repeaters had received more emergency room and chemical dependency services.

During the five years prior to entering shelter, 62 percent of the cohort had been beneficiaries of various cash programs. More than half of the cohort (50.9 percent) used Emergency

Assistance prior to shelter. 9.6 percent of the cohort received RSDI or SSI. Repeaters had received more months of cash assistance than non-repeaters.

TABLE 2: Criminal Records, Prior Medical Service, and Prior Welfare Receipt

%	Total Cohort	Repeaters	Non-repeaters
Criminal record (n=2,602)			
Any	8.61 %	10.36 %	8.16 %
Felony	4.53 %	5.84 %	4.20 %
Medical service (n=2,602)			
Any*	70.06 %	78.53 %	67.89 %
ER*	65.53 %	73.07 %	63.59 %
PCA	3.04 %	4.90 %	2.56 %
Mental Heath	42.12 %	47.46 %	40.75 %
Chemical Dependency*	24.79 %	29.19 %	23.66 %
Welfare service (n=2,602)			
Cash Program*	61.99 %	68.36 %	60.36 %
Emergency Assistance	50.88 %	56.50%	49.44 %
RSDI or SSI	9.57%	10.36%	9.37%

*Significant difference between repeaters and non-repeaters (p≤0.05)

Shelter Service Use

Table 3 shows how many times during the three years after first entering shelter homeless families used shelter (shelter episode), how many total nights they spent in shelters on average (total nights), and how many nights they spent in shelter per episode (average nights per episode). Most families (79.6 percent of the cohort) had only one shelter episode, while the average number of shelter episodes was 1.25.

On average, shelter users stayed in shelter a total of 39 nights during the three years after first entering the shelter system. During each episode, families stayed an average of 32 nights. There was no significant difference between repeaters and non-repeaters in the average nights per episode.

TABLE 3: Shelter Service Use in the Three Years after First Shelter Episode

	Total Cohort	Repeaters	Non-repeaters
Shelter Episode (n=2,602)			
1	79.59 %	-	100 %
2	16.49 %	80.79 %	-
3 & more	3.92 %	19.21 %	-
Total nights (mean)	39.1	67.3	31.9
Avg. nights per episode (mean)	31.6	30.7	31.9

Rapid Exit

The following section provides a description of Rapid Exit service use within the cohort. In order to evaluate the impact of the Rapid Exit program on homeless families, this section describes who received Rapid Exit services and what they received.
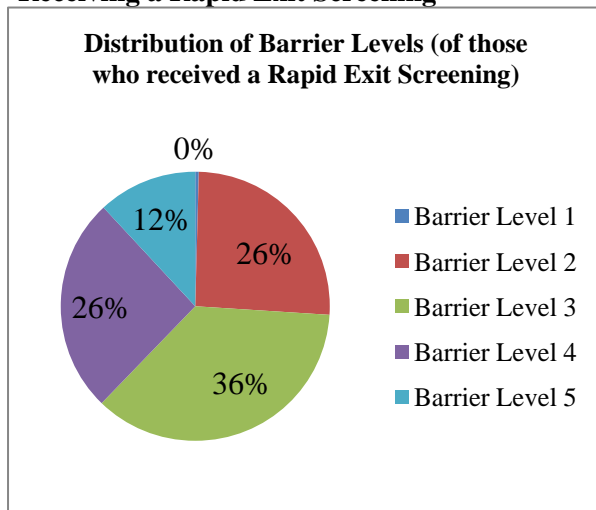
Rapid Exit Screening and Enrollment

1,199 families, or 46.1 percent, of our cohort received a Rapid Exit screening and subsequent barrier level assignment from the Rapid Exit Coordinator at Century Plaza. Of those staying in shelter for more than two weeks, 56.4 percent received the screening. The percentage receiving a screening increased the longer a family stayed in shelter (see Table 4).

TABLE 4: Percentage of Families Receiving Certain Rapid Exit Services

Length of First Shelter Stay	Received a Rapid Exit Screening (Barrier Level)	Received Any Rapid Exit Services (Excluding Screening)	Received Any Rental Subsidy	Enrolled in Rapid Exit and Received Any Rental Subsidy
Less than 2 weeks	24.68%	21.61%	6.61%	30.60%
At least 2 weeks	56.41%	49.00%	21.03%	42.91%
At least 1 month	59.65%	52.07%	23.00%	44.16%
At least 2 months	62.79%	55.04%	24.81%	45.07%
All families	**46.08%**	**40.08%**	**16.33%**	**40.75%**

Families who received a Rapid Exit screening were given a "barrier level" between 1 and 5 (see Appendix A). County staff stated that most people in shelter had at least moderate barriers to finding housing, and therefore most families in shelter had a barrier level of 3, 4, or 5. The data confirms this sentiment. Of those in the cohort who received a Rapid Exit screening, 74 percent received a barrier level of 3 or higher, representing those with moderate to severe barriers to finding housing. Thirty-six percent were barrier level 3, 26 percent were barrier level 4, and 12 percent were barrier level 5 (see Figure 1).

Rapid Exit workers noted that generally barrier level 1 and barrier level 5 do not receive Rapid Exit services. Sixty percent of those who were

FIGURE 1: Barrier Levels of Families Receiving a Rapid Exit Screening

Distribution of Barrier Levels (of those who received a Rapid Exit Screening)

- 0%
- 12% — Barrier Level 1
- 26% — Barrier Level 2
- 26% — Barrier Level 3
- 36% — Barrier Level 4
- Barrier Level 5

given a level 1 or 5 received Rapid Exit services, however when including those who did not receive a barrier level assignment, less than six percent of the total cohort were a level 1 or 5. 73.6 percent of those with a Rapid Exit screening of 2, 3, or 4 received Rapid Exit services beyond a screening (see Figure 2). 40.1 percent of our study cohort received some Rapid Exit services[6] between 2004 and 2007 (see Table 4). Of those who stayed in shelter longer than one month, 52.1 percent received some Rapid Exit services.

FIGURE 2: Percentage of the Total Cohort Receiving Rapid Exit Services, by Barrier Level
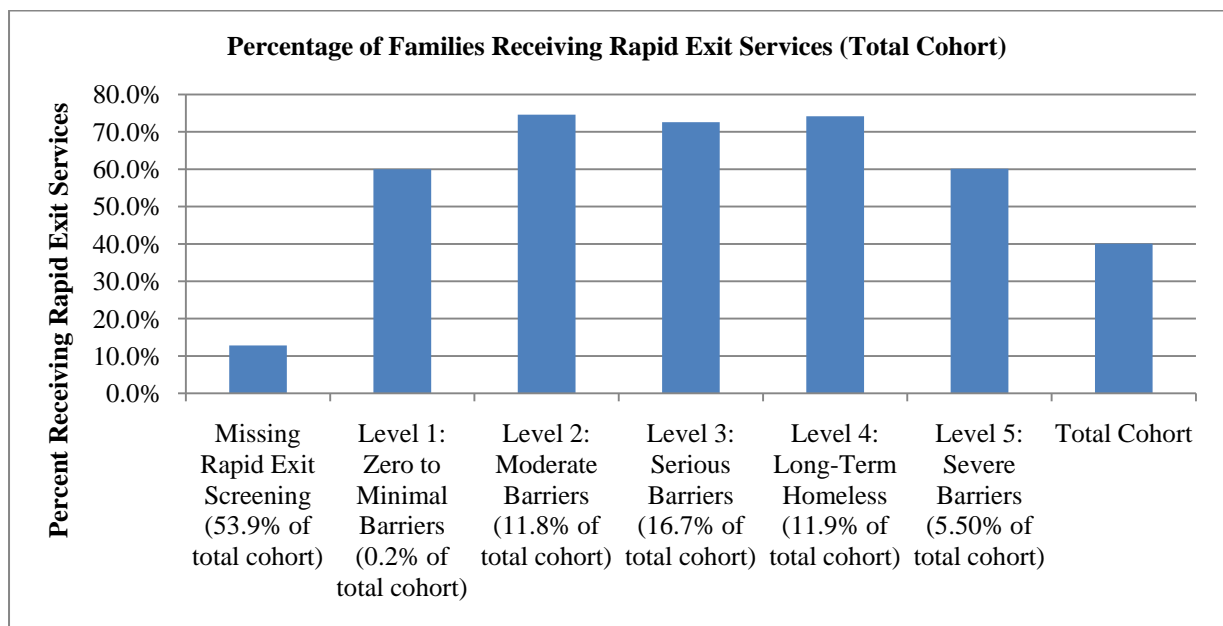
Receipt of Rapid Exit services varied with certain demographic and health characteristics, the most evident variation being in terms of race (see Table 5). Of those staying in shelter longer than a month, 56.8 percent of African American head of households received some Rapid Exit services, while only 38.9 percent of White head of households did. Similarly, differences in receipt of Rapid Exit services occurred with age of the head of household, age of head of household at first birth, mental health and chemical dependency usage, and mobility prior to shelter. There were not significant differences between those receiving cash assistance or SSI and those who were not.

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[6] "Some Rapid Exit Services" is defined as at least one service noted in the dataset provided from HMIS and does not include the Rapid Exit screening, or "barrier level" assignment.

TABLE 5: Percent of Families Receiving Rapid Exit Services, within Samples of Shelter Users Staying Longer than 1 Month During the First Episode

Characteristic	Percent	Sig.
Black	56.81%	*
White	38.89%	*
Head of Household 27 years or younger (median age)	55.34%	*
Head of Household older than 27	48.76%	*
Head of Household had first child at 19 or younger	55.91%	*
Head of Household had first child at 20 or older	50.16%	*
No MH or CD usage	56.21%	*
Both MH and CD usage	41.67%	*
No moves in the year prior to shelter	56.89%	*
One or more moves in the year prior to shelter	44.94%	*
Receive SSI/RSDI	55.88%	*n.s.*
Do not receive SSI/RSDI	51.83%	*n.s.*
Cash program prior to shelter	49.39%	*n.s.*
No cash program prior to shelter	53.59%	*n.s.*
Total Cohort	**52.07%**	

* Significant difference between samples (p≤0.05)

Rental Assistance

Much of the existing literature ascribes stability after homelessness to receiving subsidized housing (Wong, Culhane, & Kuhn 1997). Within our cohort, 40.8 percent of those enrolled in Rapid Exit received some rental assistance[7] between 2004 and 2007, representing 16.3 percent of the total cohort (see Table 4). Of those in shelter longer than two months and enrolled in Rapid Exit, 45.1 percent received some rental assistance. Assuming that caseworkers input rental assistance as one service per month, 90.1 percent of those families receiving any rental assistance received one year or less subsidized rent. 74.1 percent received six months or less, and 18.6 percent received just one month of rental subsidy.

It is unknown whether these findings suggest low use of the Rapid Exit program, or incomplete data. According to the data, 17.3 percent of those who received some Rapid Exit services never received a Rapid Exit screening. This could be indicative of missing information.

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[7] Rental Assistance was defined as a service coded as Rental Assistance, Deposit Assistance, or Mortgage Assistance. All services with these codes were included, whether or not the caseworker had noted a cost associated with the service.

Exit Analysis

This section analyzes the determinants of exiting public shelter in Hennepin County. Three different specifications of Cox models are used here (see Table 6). Model 1 includes only constant variables[8] that do not change within each shelter spell; Model 2 added in the Barrier Level assessment variables; Model 3 adds in the time-variant variables[9].

All three models show that certain demographic variables affect the probability of exiting shelter. For example, whether the head of household was 19 or younger when she had her first baby increases the probability of exiting shelter. All else being equal, these families have about a 12.65 percent higher probability of exiting shelter than other families in all three models. Moreover, the number of children also influences a family's probability of exiting shelter. The more children a family has, the more likely the family will exit the shelter. This might indicate that families with more children are likely to be targeted to receive services, or that they are more motivated to leave shelter because of the difficulty of maintaining a big family in shelter. Past criminal record, on the other hand, does not have much effect on the exiting probability estimate in any of the three models.

Receipt of health services also plays a role in the likelihood of shelter exits. Having a PCA increases the likelihood of exiting shelter for a family. Conversely, families that received emergency room or mental health services within the month were less likely to exit shelter in that month. Receiving chemical dependency (CD) services prior to shelter also decreased the probability of exiting.

SSI/RSDI use appears to have an opposite impact on predicting shelter exit than prior usage of other public cash assistance programs. While the number of months of cash assistance received prior to shelter decreased the probability of exiting shelter, the number of months of SSI or RSDI received prior to shelter increased the probability of exiting shelter. Similarly, while receiving cash assistance within the current month decreased the probability of exiting shelter, receiving SSI or RSDI within a given month increased the probability of exiting. One possible explanation is that people who received the two different income transfer programs have different characteristics. For example, among the age group of our cohort, recipients of RSDI and SSI are

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[8] Constant variables include non-changing demographics, like gender, race, age at first shelter entry, etc.
[9] Time-variant variables include medical and welfare service use in a given time period.

likely disabled. The program is more generous and stable compared to the other cash assistance programs.

Mobility is also a significant predictor of shelter exit. All three models suggest that the indicator for the number of moves in the three years prior to entering shelter is positively associated with exits from housing.

The county assessment of housing barriers also has a significant impact on predicting probability of shelter exit. Compared to families with barrier levels 1 and 2, families with barrier level 3 were 32.2 percent less likely to exit from shelters; families with barrier level 4 were 40.5 percent less likely to exit; and families with barrier level 5 are 39.3 percent less likely to exit. Given the fact that families were assigned these levels based on their barriers to obtaining stable housing (see Appendix A), these figures make sense. It is interesting to note that the missing barrier assessment variable is significant in predicting exit in Model 2 but not in Model 3, which may be because Model 3 includes the variables impacting the probability of exit captured by the missing barrier dummy variable. Interestingly, receiving a Rapid Exit service in the current period was negatively associated with the probability of exiting shelter. Families receiving Rapid Exit services were 37.12 percent less likely to exit the shelter compared to families who did not receive services. This may be because program services are targeted to individuals with the highest difficulties in finding housing.

In the first two models in this table, families who are in their first homeless episode have lower probabilities of exiting shelter. The calendar year of entering the shelter also impacted shelter exits. Using 2009 and 2010 as the base year, families who entered shelter in 2004 to 2008 were much less likely to exit the shelter than in 2009 and 2010.

TABLE 6: Hazard Model for Exiting Public Shelter

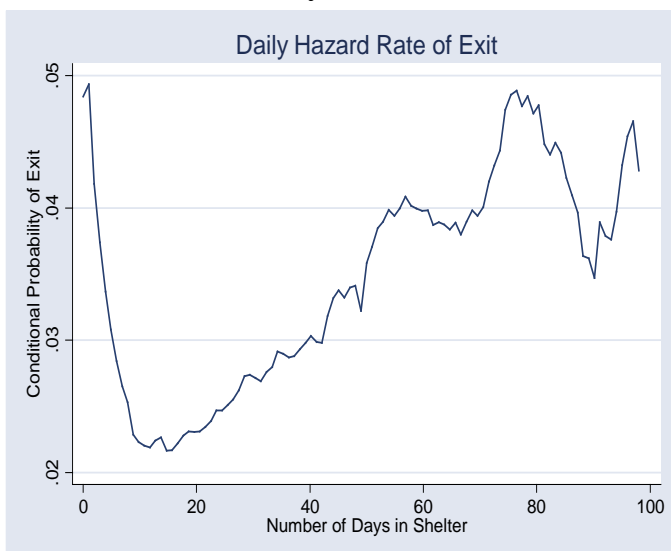| Determinant	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Demographic			
Age of household head	0.997(0.002)	0.997(0.002)	0.998(0.002)
Teen mom at 1st birth	1.127**(0.048)	1.140**(0.049)	1.132**(0.047)
High school graduate	0.964(0.037)	0.9634(0.037)	0.952(0.036)
Number of adults	0.935(0.045)	0.927(0.044)	0.998(0.048)
Number of kids	1.035**(0.016)	1.030**(0.016)	1.012(0.016)
Black or Native American	0.935(0.047)	1.026(0.047)	1.042(0.048)
Immigrant	1.035(0.099)	1.082(0.101)	0.989(0.094)
Crime			
Crime	1.068(0.065)	1.090(0.066)	1.025(0.063)
Health			
ER service use prior to shelter	1.000(0.002)	1.001(0.002)	1.001(0.002)
PCA service use prior to shelter	1.014**(0.006)	1.013**(0.006)	1.016**(0.006)
MH service use prior to shelter	0.999(0.002)	1.000(0.002)	1.000(0.002)
CD service use prior to shelter	0.996(0.005)	0.996(0.005)	0.992*(0.005)
ER service use within the month			0.858**(0.033)
MH service use within the month			0.912**(0.031)
CD service use within the month			1.000(0.088)
Welfare			
Cash program prior to shelter	0.996**(0.002)	0.996**(0.002)	0.997**(0.002)
RSDI or SSI prior to shelter	1.009**(0.003)	1.009**(0.003)	1.001*(0.003)
Cash program within the month			0.795**(0.035)
RSDI or SSI within the month			1.603**(0.128)
Mobility			
Annual average move prior to shelter	1.103**(0.027)	1.108**(0.027)	1.110**(0.028)
Barrier Level			
Barrier 3		0.678**(0.045)	0.789**(0.054)
Barrier 4		0.595**(0.040)	0.716**(0.050)
Barrier 5		0.607**(0.063)	0.650**(0.068)
Missing barrier assessment		1.171**(0.089)	0.987(0.079)
Rapid Exit			
Receive RE this spell			0.629**(0.029)
Other			
First spell for the family	0.825**(0.033)	0.829**(0.033)	1.051(0.057)
Year 2004 or 2005			0.1968**(0.0161)
Year 2006 or 2007			0.215**(0.017)
Year 2008			0.135**(0.012)
Number of observations	3550	3550	3550

Significance level: * 5%, ** 10%
Some other variables are tested but left out because of their insignificance, such as MFIP usage, average family size, etc.

Missing value dummy variables are created and modeled but not reported for teenager at first childbirth, high school diploma, average annual moves prior to shelter

Figure 3 shows the "hazard rate" or the conditional probability of exiting shelter in each day, given that a family has not yet left shelter. The X axis shows the number of days in each shelter spell, and the Y axis shows the conditional probability of exiting. This graph illustrates that the hazard rate decreases throughout the first 20 days in shelter. After the first 20 days, the probability of exiting increases as time in shelter increases, indicating that the longer a family stays in shelter, the greater risk the family will exit the shelter. Figure 4 shows the survival probability for a family staying in shelter in each day. The probability that a family remains in shelter declines rapidly during the first three months, suggesting that the longer a family stays in shelter, the less risk of continuing to stay in shelter.

FIGURE 3: Daily Hazard Rate of Exit   **FIGURE 4: Cumulative Probability of Staying in Shelter**
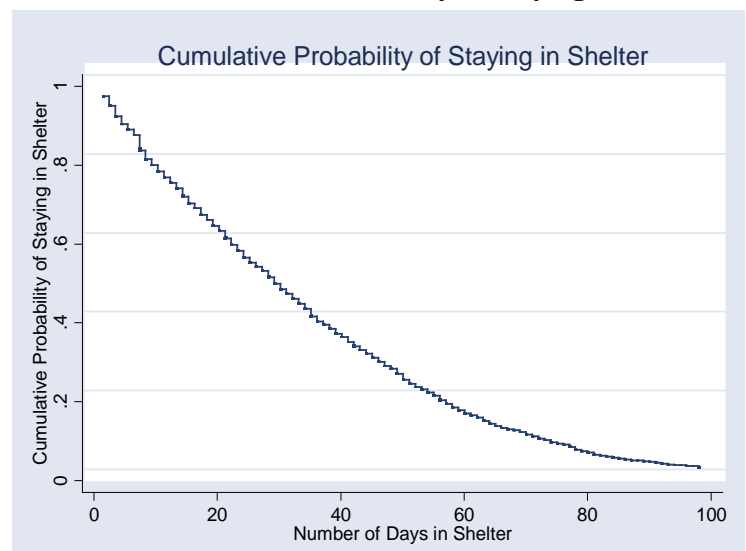
Analysis of Re-entry into Public Shelter

This section provides an assessment of the demographic and programmatic factors affecting the length of time between shelter exit and subsequent shelter re-entry. Results from this section may make it possible to better target services to increase housing stability and prevent returns to shelter.

Like the exit analysis, three models were estimated to analyze the determinants of returns to shelter. The first model excludes the housing barrier assessment indicators but includes all of the constant variables. The second model includes indicators for barrier levels 3 to 5 (thus treating barriers 1 and 2 as the base group). Because of the large number of families with missing barrier assessments, this model also includes an indicator for whether families received

an assessment. The final model includes all variables of interest, both constant and time-varying. In Table 7, the hazard ratio, standard error of the coefficient, and an indicator of statistical significance is reported for each variable.

All three models show that demographic factors played important roles in predicting re-entry, resulting in the following findings: 1) The older the head of household, the less likely the family was to reenter. 2) Families in which the head of household has a high school diploma were less likely to re-enter. 3) The larger the family, the more likely it was to re-enter. 4) Black or Native American families had a higher probability of re-entering. 5) Immigrant families were less likely to re-enter. 6) Families with female heads of household that were teenagers at the birth of their first child were less likely to re-enter.

Previous criminal record[10] increased the probability of shelter re-entry in Model 1. However, the criminal record variable becomes insignificant when the barrier level assessment is included in Model 2. This is likely because the barrier assessment proxies in part for prior criminal history.

Use of County-provided health services also had impacts on shelter re-entry, especially use of chemical dependency (CD) services. All three models show that families with more CD service use prior to their first shelter stay were more likely to re-enter. CD services within the current month, however, decreased the probability of re-entry. The re-entry probability increased if any of the family members used county-provided ER services in the current month.

Similar to the exit model, SSI/RSDI had a different impact on re-entry than cash programs. Receiving cash assistance in the current month was strongly correlated with an increase in the probability of re-entering, while receiving RSDI or SSI decreased the probability.

The barrier level assessments are highly correlated with the probability of shelter re-entry. Families with barrier level 4 were two times more likely to return to shelter than those with barrier levels 1 to 2, while families with level 5 were 1.4 times more likely to re-enter shelter. There was not a significant difference between people with level three and those with one or two.

The Missing Barrier Assessment variable indicates that compared to 1s and 2s, those who did not receive assessments were less likely to re-enter. This is likely because they had fewer

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[10] Criminal record is defined as having been convicted of a crime prior to shelter entry.

barriers to finding housing and left before receiving a Rapid Exit assessment. The estimates show that barrier level assessment "absorbs" the effect on probability of re-entry of other variables such as education, criminal history, chemical dependency, and prior shelter use. This is not surprising because the assessment is designed to reflect these factors.

Receiving Rapid Exit in shelter appears to work well in preventing families from re-entering. Compared to other families, families that received Rapid Exit services in their last shelter spell are 35 percent less likely to re-enter. However, receiving Rapid Exit services in the current month does not necessarily make the family less likely to reenter in that month.

Other factors also influencing the probability of re-entry are 1) Families with multiple shelter stays were generally more likely to re-enter compared to those with only one shelter spell, 2) The longer a family had stayed in shelter, the less likely they were to re-enter once they exited. This counter-intuitive finding actually resonates with the literature. Long-term shelter dwellers are usually not episodic users. 3) People are less likely to go back to shelter during the winter and 4) the year difference is also interesting. Using 2010 as the base year, people who had exited shelter had the highest probability of re-entry during the years 2004 and 2005, and second highest during the years of economic recession (2008 and 2009).

To summarize major determinants of re-entry: 1) African American and Native American families were 32 percent more likely to re-enter compared to other racial groups while immigrant families were 77 percent less likely to re-enter compared to non-immigrant; 2) receiving ER services in a given month made families 87 percent more likely to re-enter; 3) receiving cash program assistance in a given month is related with 60 percent increase in the probability of re-entry, while receiving RSDI or SSI made families 22 percent less likely to re-enter; 4) families with barrier level 4 and barrier 5 five were respectively 100 percent or 40 percent more likely to re-enter compared to the 1s and 2s, and receiving Rapid Exit services before exiting shelter decreased the probability of re-entry by 35 percent.

TABLE 7: Hazard Model for Re-entering Public Shelter

Determinant	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Demographic			
Age of household head	0.968 (0.005) **	0.972 (0.005) **	0.980 (0.005) **
Teenmom at 1st birth	0.801 (0.065) **	0.809 (0.066) **	0.794 (0.067) **
High school graduate	0.842 (0.062) **	0.869 (0.064) *	0.911 (0.065)
Family size	1.094 (0.029) **	1.091 (0.029) **	1.088 (0.029) **
Black or Native American	1.355 (0.127) **	1.356 (0.128) **	1.317 (0.126) **
Immigrant	0.250 (0.080) **	0.265 (0.085) **	0.234 (0.075) **
Crime			
Crime	1.213 (0.132) *	1.118 (0.123)	1.034 (0.114)
Health			
ER service use prior to shelter	1.004 (0.004)	1.002 (0.004)	1.260 (0.121) **
PCA service use prior to shelter	1.010 (0.010)	1.010 (0.010)	1.007 (0.011)
MH service use prior to shelter	0.996 (0.003)	0.995 (0.004)	0.993 (0.004) *
CD service use prior to shelter	1.015 (0.008) **	1.016 (0.008) *	1.016 (0.009) *
ER service use within the month			1.874 (0.137) **
MH service use within the month			0.947 (0.053)
CD service use within the month			0.780 (0.106) *
Welfare			
Cash program prior to shelter	0.999 (0.003)	0.998 (0.003)	0.995 (0.0032) *
RSDI or SSI prior to shelter	0.998 (0.005)	0.999 (0.005)	0.999 (0.006)
Cash program within the month			2.604 (0.212) **
RSDI or SSI within the month			0.784 (0.102) *
Mobility			
Annual average move prior to shelter	1.011 (0.047)	0.999 (0.046)	0.955 (0.044)
Barrier Level			
Barrier3		0.890 (0.118)	0.820 (0.109)
Barrier4		2.172 (0.258) **	1.991 (0.237) **
Barrier5		1.550 (0.235) **	1.396 (0.215) **
Missing barrier assessment		0.657 (0.0760) **	0.468 (0.060) **
Rapid Exit			
Receive RE during last shelter stay			0.652 (0.057) **
Receive RE this month			1.009 (0.198)
Other			
First spell for the family	0.698 (0.052) **	0.885 (0.068)	0.849 (0.077) *
Winter			0.699 (0.059) **
Log length of previous shelter stay			0.931 (0.030) **
Year 2004 or 2005			1.468 (0.249) **
Year 2006 or 2007			1.119 (0.146)
Year 2008 or 2009			1.238 (0.132) **
Number of observation	3549	3549	3549

Significance level: * 5%, ** 10%
All the hospital and welfare services received prior to shelter traced back to five years before 1st shelter stay
Annual average move prior to shelter covers mobility information three years before 1st shelter stay
Some variables were tested but not reported due to insignificance, such as kids age, inpatient service usage, MFIP exemption
Because of missing values, missing value dummy variables are created but not reported for teenager at first childbirth, high school diploma, average annual moves prior to shelter

Figure 5 shows that the hazard rate, or the conditional probability in each period, for individuals who have mean sample characteristics. As shown, the probability of re-entry declines gradually as families remain out of shelter, meaning families become less likely to re-enter as time goes by. In addition, the cumulative probability of staying out of shelter for families with mean characteristics is shown in Figure 6. It tells the same story from a different perspective – how many families have successfully stayed out of public shelter as time goes on. After 500 days, about 93 percent of the subjects are out of shelter; after 1000 days, the number decreases to 87 percent; and after 1500 days, only about 82 percent of subjects have "survived" (not reentering shelter).

FIGURE 5: Daily Hazard Rate of Re-entry
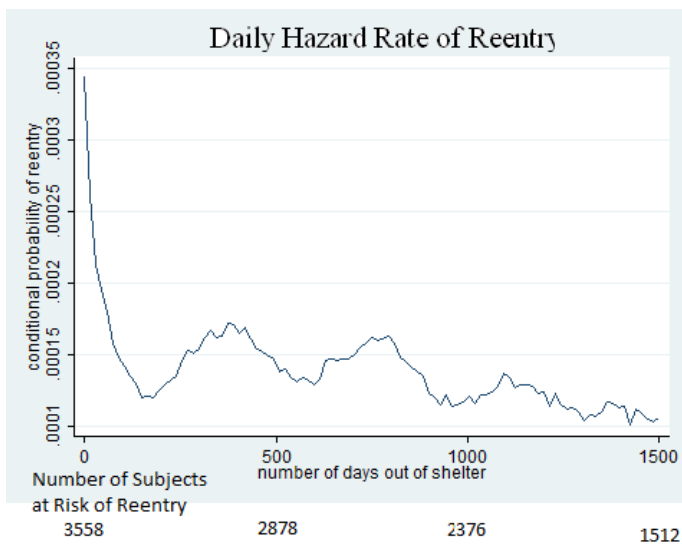
FIGURE 6: Cumulative Probability of Staying out of Shelter
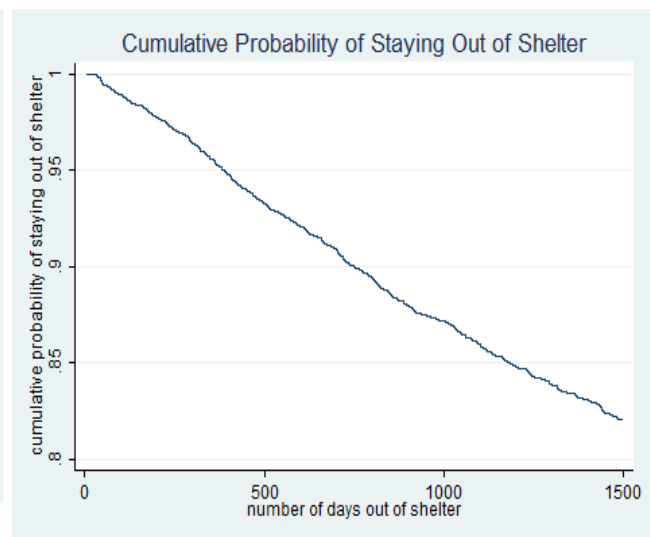
Predictive Model

The hazard model provides us with a chance to predict a family's probability of re-entry based on demographics, past welfare assistance received, health condition, criminal history, and barrier level assessment, etc., at the time of their entry into shelter. If this model predicts re-entry correctly, it would allow for services to be targeted to those with a higher probability of re-entry.

To confirm the accuracy of our model prediction, a simulation was used to estimate the re-entry probability for each family in our sample at a given time, based on the hazard model we identified above. We define that families are "expected to re-enter" if the estimated probability

is larger than 25 percent, and then compare the estimate with whether they actually re-entered. The cross-tabulation of the prediction and the observed behavior is shown below.

TABLE 8: Comparison between Model Prediction and Actual Reentry

		Predict no re-entry	Predict re-entry
No actual re-entry		1,752	510
	row percent	77.45%	22.55%
	column percent	83.71%	52.74%
Actual re-entry		341	457
	row percent	42.73%	57.27%
	column percent	16.29%	47.26%

As shown in Table 8 above, the model is reasonably effective in predicting shelter re-entry: of those predicted to re-enter, 48% actually returned to shelter, compared to only 16% of the remaining group. If special services are targeted at those predicted to re-enter, 457 families will be correctly identified, or roughly 57.3 percent who actually re-entered, but 341 families who actually reentered would not receive this service because they are predicted not to re-enter. 510 families who did not re-enter even without the service would still get the service because of they would be incorrectly identified as potential repeaters.

Mobility

Mobility Prior to Entering Shelter

Existing literature suggests that frequent moves can be detrimental to children and to family stability, especially when the moves are far enough to require a school change, or the establishment of new networks or social supports (Buerkle & Christenson 1999). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, families living at or below the poverty level are more mobile than the general population. 27.6 percent of families below the federal poverty level move every year, compared with 16.1 percent overall. Individuals aged 20 to 24 years move the most; the Current Population Survey in March 2000 reported that 35.2 percent of people in this age group move each year (Schachter 2001).

Our findings suggest that families in our study cohort are more mobile than other families living in poverty. 60.3 percent of the cohort[11] moved at least once in the year prior to entering

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[11] Including only the families for whom we received address data both in the year prior to shelter entry and the year after shelter exit.

shelter. Mobility was equally unstable for the three years prior to shelter. Families had an average of 1.09 moves in the year prior to shelter, and an average of 0.93 moves per year in the three years prior to entering shelter, but missing data may bias these results (see Table 9).

Mobility after Exiting Shelter

Our findings also revealed that families continue to be unstable after exiting shelter; 91.5 percent of families moved at least once in the year following shelter exit. 56.3 percent moved twice or more, with an average of 1.92 moves in the year after exiting shelter. However, our findings suggest that families may get more stable as time passes: by the time two years have passed since exiting shelter, only 64.3 percent moved each year. In the three years after exiting shelter, families moved 1.44 times per year on average (see Table 9).

TABLE 9: Average Moves Before and After Shelter

Avg. moves in 1 year prior to shelter mean (*std. err.*)	Avg. moves in 1 year after exiting shelter mean (*std. err.*)	Avg. moves *per year* in the three years prior mean (*std. err.*)	Avg. moves *per year* in the three years after mean (*std. err.*)
1.085* (*0.028*)	1.922* (*0.030*)	0.932* (*0.020*)	1.444* (*0.020*)

* Significant at the 99% confidence level, p⊴0.01
Includes only those cases in which address data is available in the year prior to shelter entry and year following shelter exit. This sample size is 1,774 or 68.18% of our cohort.

Migration Before and After Shelter

Our findings suggest that in our cohort there is a great deal of movement between neighborhoods, cities, and counties when comparing the months before shelter with the months after shelter (see Table 10) Only 14.7 percent of families resided in the same 2000 Census Tract before shelter as after, suggesting that even families who remained in the same city or county moved to a different neighborhood after exiting shelter. 19.7 percent of the cohort were living in a different county in the months after exiting shelter from the county they lived in during the months prior to entering shelter. Of families living in Hennepin County prior to shelter, 11.9 percent lived in a different county after shelter. Of those residing in the 7-county metro area prior to shelter, 1.7 percent lived in a non-metro county after shelter. More often, those residing outside the metro area before shelter ended up in the metro area after shelter (91.1 percent).Surprisingly, of the families for whom we had 2000 Census Tract data in the months prior to shelter, only about 88.4 percent were living in Hennepin County, with 65 percent of the cohort living in Minneapolis. The difference between the percentage residing in Minneapolis and the percentage residing in Hennepin County may suggest that family

homelessness is more of a suburban problem than previously understood, or that families might be moving around the metro area in order to stay with family and friends before entering shelter. It could also suggest that missing data might be biased, as there could be a lag time between the actual move and reporting a new address to the county.

Of the families living in Minneapolis in the months prior to shelter, only 78.7 percent of families remained in Minneapolis after shelter. Nearly 10 percent of families living in Minneapolis before shelter were living in suburban Hennepin County after shelter. Of those enrolled in Rapid Exit who had Census Tract information available, 76.9 percent of those who lived in Minneapolis prior to shelter also lived in Minneapolis after shelter, compared with 79.8 percent of those not enrolled in Rapid Exit. These percentages are not significantly different. Movement into Minneapolis after shelter exit seems to be more prevalent; of families living outside Minneapolis prior to entering shelter, 57.1 percent ended up living in Minneapolis in the months after exiting shelter (see Table 10).

TABLE 10: Percentage of Families Residing in the City/County Before Entering Shelter (rows) who are Residing in the City/County Listed in the Top Row after Exiting First Shelter Stay

		City/county of residence after exiting shelter (first shelter stay)				
		Minneapolis	Suburban Hennepin County	Ramsey County	Other Metro County	Non-Metro
City/county of residence before entering shelter	Minneapolis (n=957)	**78.68%**	9.82%	4.28%	5.32%	1.88%
	Suburban Hennepin County (n=342)	54.39%	**32.46%**	6.43%	5.25%	1.46%
	Ramsey County (n=49)	53.06%	8.16%	**34.69%**	4.08%	0.00%
	Other Metro County (n=30)	60.61%	15.15%	9.09%	**15.15%**	0.00%
	Non-Metro (n=79)	69.62%	12.66%	6.33%	2.54%	**8.86%**

Includes only those cases in which a census tract or notation for "non-metro" was available before and after shelter. Sample size of 1,460 or 56.11% of the total cohort.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative Methods

In order to present a robust picture of the experience of homeless families as they move in and out of the shelter system, this study used in-depth interviews to collect data for qualitative analysis. Qualitative inquiry captures individuals' feelings, perceptions, stories, and experiences and places them in an appropriate context, adding information to our evaluation that is impossible to gather using quantitative methods. In March and April of 2011, researchers conducted a series of interviews with heads of households at two Hennepin County shelters (St. Anne's Place and People Serving People) and one privately-funded shelter (Mary's Place). Participants were first-time shelter users, repeat shelter users, or currently housed former shelter users.

Sample

Purposeful sampling, which involves the selection of "information rich cases" (Patton 2002), was used to recruit interview participants who had experience with the Rapid Exit Program. Shelter staff identified current or former residents who were either currently receiving services or had received Rapid Exit services in the past. In one shelter, staff individually approached potential participants, explaining the purpose of the research and providing written information. In the other two shelters, shelter managers posted information about the research in a common room and asked interested parties to speak with them if they wished to volunteer. To reduce any potential coercive effects of being asked to participate by a shelter manager, all potential participants were given at least 24 hours to consider their involvement in this study before agreeing to speak with us.

Twenty-five individuals were interviewed during 24 interviews.[12] Five were conducted at St. Anne's Place, five were conducted at Mary's Place and 14 were conducted at People Serving People. Twenty respondents were repeat shelter users, two were first-time shelter users, and two were currently housed former shelter users. All but one participant was female. The mean age of the respondents was 33.6 years. On average, respondents had 3.5 children and the majority had completed twelve years or less of schooling. The racial and ethnic make-up of our

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[12] One interview was with a married couple.

sample was similar to that of the administrative data used in analysis: Approximately 60 percent were African American, 17 percent were White, eight percent were Native American, four percent were Hispanic, and eight percent were mixed race (see Appendix B).

Data Collection

In-depth interviews were semi-structured in nature. Four individuals conducted interviews using an interview guide (see Appendix C for interview guide). Interviewers pursued the same basic lines of inquiry in each interview but were also free to explore, probe, and ask questions to illuminate a particular subject (Patton 2002). Interviewers used an oral informed consent process to preserve participant anonymity. Interviews were conducted on weekdays, lasted between fifteen and sixty minutes, and were audio-recorded with the permission of the respondent. Participants were remunerated for participation with a $20 Target$^{©}$ gift card.

Interview subject areas were informed by a review of existing research on family homelessness, qualitative evaluation methodology (Patton 2002), and direction from the Hennepin County Office to End Homelessness (see Appendix C for interview guide). Interviews covered the following subject areas:

- ***Housing History*.** Interview questions regarding housing history were designed to elicit conversation about the quantity, quality and variety of housing arrangements of homeless families in Hennepin County prior to and after receiving placement through Rapid Exit. Questions about housing history also aimed to gather data regarding mobility among Hennepin County shelters and private shelter (Mary's Place) at the request of the Office to End Homelessness.

- ***Barriers to Housing.*** Open-ended interview questions aimed to identify respondents' perceived barriers to housing.

- ***Life at Shelter*.** Certain interview questions were designed to get a sense of the full range of services respondents were receiving while in shelter.

- ***Rapid Exit***. Questions about Rapid Exit aimed to evaluate and document individual experiences and outcomes and to identify any gaps in program design and implementation. These questions were designed to elicit information about what clients in the program experienced, which services they received, and how they interacted with Rapid Exit staff.

Data Analysis

Researchers transcribed the twenty-four recorded interviews in order to conduct a content analysis of the interview transcripts using both deductive and inductive approaches. Researchers derived codes prior to analysis based on research questions, but also added new codes as themes emerged. The NVivo software system was used to store and organize data during and after analysis. The same researchers who conducted interviews coded and analyzed the data.

Limitations

A variety of factors compromise the validity of our findings. First, the sample selection in this study was limited by the scope of our project. As the only criterion for respondents' participation was experience with the Rapid Exit program, there is no way of knowing whether families identified by staff for participation were typical or atypical among shelter users. In two shelters, residents self-selected for participation, introducing self-selection bias. Additionally, because the majority of our participants were repeat shelter users, we are unable to make any inferences about individuals who do not re-enter shelter, a group that might have distinctly different assessments of the Rapid Exit program. Ideally, we would have employed a more purposeful sampling strategy in which we selected a more diverse group of respondents with regard to shelter use history.

Generally, the sampling technique of category saturation determines the sample size. This method involves interviewing and analyzing until no new data is being collected on predetermined subjects of interest. While this research reached saturation in certain interview subject areas, it is unknown if saturation was reached with regard to housing mobility and barriers to housing.

In addition, it is important to note that retrospective self-reported information may be susceptible to faulty memory (Patton 2002). While respondents were asked to recall information from only the last year to minimize this risk, some respondents voluntarily shared information from many years in the past, increasing the possibility that some accounts of event may have been inaccurate.

Finally, research involving multiple interviewers always contains some level of interviewer bias. In this study, interviewer flexibility in sequencing and question-wording within the

interview guide meant there were variations between interviews, reducing the comparability of responses from different interviews. It is also possible that the gender of the interviewer affected our results, since three interviewers were female and one was male. However, interviewers did not observe any significant difference in content between the male-led and female-led interviews

Findings

Finding 1: Respondents Faced a Complex and Interwoven Set of Barriers to Stability

In this paper, we will use the phrase "barriers to stability" to refer to two types of barriers: those that led respondents to become homeless initially and those that made it difficult for respondents to remain stably housed. We label all of these challenges "barriers to stability" because, regardless of whether they precipitated or prolonged homelessness, the challenges forced respondents to live highly mobile lives. Often, the challenges that precipitated homelessness were the same barriers that the respondent faced as he/she worked towards attaining (and maintaining) a stable housing situation. It is worth noting that many of the barriers respondents discussed are not traceable in the quantitative analysis, illustrating the need for qualitative analysis in this study.

And it's just, everybody is trying to get that same job, one hundred to one. Applying for one job. It's hard. - Respondent

When asked the question, "What types of things make it hard to find and keep housing?" respondents were usually unable to identify one single factor as responsible for their instability. Instead, they attributed instability in their lives to a complex and interwoven set of barriers. While each respondent's story was unique, four major barriers to stability emerged in nearly every interview: insufficient income, difficult landlords, having an unlawful detainer (UD) on one's rental history, and social networks that were themselves unstable.

Insufficient income

The most prevalent theme from interviews was that having no or insufficient income was a major barrier to stability. For some, loss of income was the primary reason they had become homeless. For one respondent, a cut in hours led to an inability to cover rent. Another respondent described being laid off from corporate work—her employer fought unemployment

benefits, and in the interim, the respondent could no longer pay rent. Still another respondent told how the business she worked for was shut down, and all of the employees lost their jobs. For others, however, losing a job was the catalyst to a series of events that lead them to becoming homeless. One respondent, for example, had her hours cut at work when she became ill and was unable to make mortgage payments as a result. When her health problems became more severe, she lost her job completely, had to move in with friends, and eventually entered an emergency shelter.

In addition to directly causing homelessness, losing a job or insufficient income was seen by many respondents as prolonging their homelessness and adding instability and uncertainty. One respondent, for example, identified joblessness as one part of a vicious cycle that contributed to instability: While living in a shelter and trying to find housing were challenges in and of themselves, she felt that finding a job was equally challenging: "…*and it's hard to find a job too. And it's just, everybody is trying to get that same job, one hundred to one. Applying for one job. It's hard."* Several other respondents were also searching for work at the time of the interviews, usually with limited success. Barriers to housing stability, such as criminal records, physical or mental disabilities, low levels of education, and lack of childcare, were also barriers to getting and keeping a job.

Many respondents who had enough income to cover their rent from programs such as MFIP, SSI or RSDI still believed that not having a job prevented them from being stable. They felt unemployment (as opposed to lack of income) was the fundamental barrier to stability, explaining that exiting a homeless shelter and moving into their own apartment was dependent on first having a job. One respondent pointed out that potential renters were skeptical of renting to her because her only source of income was MFIP. Without income from a job, she felt, she would never be accepted into a healthy, stable housing environment.

A currently housed respondent affirmed this sentiment. Asked if she felt stable, this respondent said, "*We are not stable…the ones who don't have no source of income, so the ones who would need jobs, and that's hard to come by when you have kids, and you don't have no training, you don't have no hands-on training…And it's hard to find jobs, so that's the main thing is to keep stability is to have an income."* For this respondent, joblessness was crucial to stability, but a multitude of other barriers made getting a job very difficult.

In addition to inadequate income, most respondents spoke at length about difficult landlords (many of whom they described as "slumlords") who took advantage of their tenants' vulnerabilities. One respondent defined slumlords as landlords who "*wanna take our money and they wanna give us slums. You know, they want us to live in conditions they wouldn't even live in themselves.*" Problems with landlords were the precipitating events that led some respondents to initially become homeless, while other respondents who found housing, moved out of shelter, and became homeless again attributed their continuing instability, in part, to landlord negligence or mistreatment.

In some interviews, respondents shared that their primary reason for becoming homeless was landlord neglect—for example, landlords failing to pay bills on their properties, properties going into foreclosure due to landlord neglect, and landlords who failed to follow through on repairs and maintenance. Several respondents withheld rental payments from their landlord or put their rent into escrow because they felt their landlords were not upholding their responsibilities. In some cases, this action led to landlords challenging their tenants in court or tenants acquiring an UD on their rental history. As one respondent explained, while she had paid her rent on time, her landlord had not made timely mortgage payments: "*We found out the house was going into foreclosure. Not paying no more money. If you're not paying the mortgage, why am I paying you? And I'm going to be out on my butt soon. So me and the girl downstairs, both of us mutually agreed, we're not giving these people no more money. They took us to court, and we settled. But the UD is still on my record because once it's filed it stays there.*" Whether or not the court recognized that landlords had failed to uphold their obligations, respondents were still penalized for withholding rent, and the recorded violation became yet another barrier to stability.

Nearly all respondents expressed the belief that their landlords took advantage of low-income families and were neglectful because their tenants were poor and had few housing options. One described how, "*For the people that do work hard, and do what they're supposed to do, and these landlords can just get over on them because they're low-income. I don't even know if there is anything that can be done. That's a huge barrier, I think.*" Difficult living conditions, such as apartments with no running water or with infestations of bugs, often forced families to leave their homes and search for a new place to live; frequently, that new place was a homeless

shelter. Several respondents reported that the only apartments they had ever lived in (prior to or after living in a shelter) were characterized by unhealthy conditions, and that most landlords were unresponsive to their tenants' requests for maintenance. This added to respondents' convictions that they were being taken advantage of. Many respondents, unwilling to put themselves or their children at risk by remaining in dirty, unsafe apartments, chose to move out of their apartments and re-entered a cycle of instability.

Unlawful Detainers

One reason respondents felt stuck dealing with "slumlords" was that many had UDs on their rental histories. Nearly every respondent reported that having a UD made it virtually impossible to get into a good housing situation. Many landlords refused to rent to clients who had a UD on their rental history, even UDs that were from two or three years in the past. For those unable to find a landlord willing to work with them, having a UD prevented respondents from moving out of shelter and into an independent living situation. In other cases, it drastically reduced respondents' ability to choose a healthy housing situation and forced them to move into apartments or rental properties managed by negligent landlords. Some respondents reported that they were penalized for having a UD by having to pay higher rent and deposits than they would have otherwise. One respondent believed her landlord was illegally charging her extra fees because of a UD but had not way of addressing her concern: *"I called the rental agency and they told me they work with UDs, but you have to pay extra deposit. So I called my worker and she said, no, that's illegal. You need to report them. Call Legal Aid and report them. You know, people around here, 'Oh that's not illegal.'"*

Social Networks

While a few interviewees were new to the area, the majority shared that they had friends or family nearby. Some respondents who were currently in shelter continued to make regular trips to take care of or visit with family members. However, many felt their social networks, though present, were unable or unwilling to support them.

For some respondents, living with a friend or family member was a last attempt to avoid shelter. Respondents described these experiences as unsuccessful, primarily because these family members and friends were similarly unstable, or had existing strains on their financial or housing situations. In several interviews, respondents shared that living in a shelter was actually

preferable to living with family, because it was a more stable option. One said, "*I didn't want to come* [to shelter], *but I was tired of living house to house with family members."*

In some cases, respondents' social support systems were more taxing than supportive. For example, one respondent felt her family wasn't capable of supporting her and felt her life would be "*more stressful being with them"* than it would living in shelter. Many of the barriers respondents themselves faced (joblessness, poor housing situations, poverty) were challenges for respondents' social networks as well—consequently, when respondents attempted to utilize their social networks to alleviate instability, their own instability was often intensified.

Finding 2: Respondents' Perceptions of Rapid Exit Varied Greatly

The reported experiences of Rapid Exit participants varied widely. While many believed that the services they received effectively met their needs, just as many had experienced a programmatic disconnect in addressing their individual barriers to housing stability. Respondents frequently praised the Rapid Exit program for the services it provided, but the

People say Rapid Exit and they act like it's one program. And it's not. - Respondent

services were not standardized for every participant, and some participants felt confused about what to expect from the program. Generally, respondents reported mixed experiences with Rapid Exit and mixed approaches to the provision of Rapid Exit services by program staff.

The wide range of respondents' expectations of Rapid Exit services hinted at inconsistencies in program delivery. Most respondents expected to receive some sort of subsidy and security deposit upon being placed into housing, however, their expectations of the size and duration of the subsidy varied greatly. Expectations of receiving a subsidy were not universal; some did not mention subsidies at all or felt that they were ineligible to receive any subsidies. In addition to subsidies, respondents noted having received or expecting to receive a variety of other services, including household furnishings, help with moving, housing leads, referrals to other agencies or organizations, and landlord mediation. While Rapid Exit offers an array of services, it was unclear from the interviews whether approaches are being tailored to each individual family or if programmatic constraints play a larger role in influencing the provision of services. Unfortunately, our quantitative analysis is also unable to answer this question, as the quality of Rapid Exit data from HMIS is questionable.

Individual Rapid Exit workers seemed to play a role in the varied application of services. Though it was not specifically elicited through the interview instrument, a theme regarding differences between Rapid Exit providers arose in conversations. "*People say Rapid Exit and they act like it's one program. And it's not. …You might have a Rapid Exit worker from St. Stephen's, and they've got this set of guidelines, but you might have a Rapid Exit worker from Elim, and they have this set of guidelines. So when you're in here, and other people are saying, my Rapid Exit worker just got me this, this, this. This is what's happening… they're all excited and then you go to get the same thing, and they're like, no. So that can be a little confusing.*" Additionally, different Rapid Exit workers seemed to have different strategies for handling clients' housing needs. Some respondents noted that their Rapid Exit workers had told them to find a job before they looked for an apartment: "*So right now, they gave me a Rapid Exit worker. She's like, 'Well, we can't help you until you get an income.'*" On the other hand, many other respondents reported that their Rapid Exit workers began helping them to find apartments before they had sufficient incomes to maintain an apartment.

While respondents' perceptions of Rapid Exit services varied, many praised the Rapid Exit caseworkers' abilities to connect clients to and mediate with landlords. One respondent, for example, appreciated, "*Just the fact that I have someone there that can advocate for me when I need her to. You know, 'cause when I get to the point that I think I found something, maybe they're just not sure because I do have two UDs. Then she can go in and she can talk to them.*" Like this respondent, many relied on their Rapid Exit workers to act as advocates with landlords. Because nearly every respondent felt landlords were skeptical of working with them for various reasons (UDs, poor rental histories, employment histories, etc.), the advocacy provided by Rapid Exit was vital in connecting those in the program to landlords willing to rent to them.

Respondents saw these connections to landlords as one of Rapid Exit's strengths, but felt the quality of landlords recruited was a severe weakness. Frustrated participants either didn't understand the process by which they were placed or were distrustful of how they were being connected to the landlords, as hinted by a few of the respondents. As one respondent explained, "*They [Rapid Exit] helped me get out of PSP but they were also – well, him and the manager had something, because every person that lived there, I come to find out we all had the same Rapid Exit worker, so something wasn't right with that.*" Perceptions such as these eroded

respondents' confidence in the program, and in some cases led respondents to move out of their new residences.

Many individuals also noted that a lack of communication colored their experiences with Rapid Exit workers. Some respondents had been in shelter for weeks without meeting with their caseworker. One respondent noted, "*By the time I actually talked to my Rapid Exit worker, it was about a month from the time that I'd been in here.*" Others had made initial contact but had difficulty maintaining sufficient communication to meet their needs. "*If I can see them twice a week for a hour, perfect. If I can, you know, exactly know who she is and get to meet her the way I want meet her, perfect. Unfortunately she has a lot of people that she has to deal with and I'm one of them that's not getting too much time.*"

Moreover, respondents noted that some Rapid Exit workers were not responsive to participants' housing needs and wants. Respondents prioritized safety, proximity to good schools, living conditions, and decent landlord relations in housing. However, both respondents and Rapid Exit workers who were interviewed reported that Rapid Exit's primary goal was to get participants into housing as quickly as possible, not necessarily to satisfy the client's needs or desires in housing. As one Rapid Exit worker explained, "*This is not a real estate agency.*" These competing priorities led some respondents to dismiss Rapid Exit as irrelevant and unhelpful. Some reported leaving the program to find housing on their own when these needs were not met. As one respondent described of the housing being offered, "*She's [the Rapid Exit worker] the one that wanted to push us into [near west suburb]. Because she knew the landlady, or landlord or whatever you call her there, and it's like, we don't want to go there.*" In addition to location, quality of housing also came up as a concern. One respondent illustrated the commonly heard concern that potential housing was unlivable, saying, "*I have went and seen a couple places that my Rapid Exit worker offered me. They're like run-down and just not sanitary… It's a lot of people that move out and then move back in like a day, two days later just because of the circumstances of the apartment buildings that the Rapid Exit worker sent you to.*"

Despite potential concerns about the responsiveness of Rapid Exit to their needs, most respondents had used or intended to use any services offered through the program. One respondent felt satisfied with both the relationships she'd had with her workers and with the program's ability to get her into housing: *"Some people have had personal problems, but I've*

never experienced that. I've been in shelter twice, and both times I've been processed into my own residency." Another respondent was extremely happy with her Rapid Exit worker and the scope of services she was receiving: *"My experience in it is great ... I think the program is really good."* Even among respondents who were dissatisfied with the program, some believed that it would still help them get into housing quickly.

> *It's really hard to keep track… and it all builds up. - Respondent*

Finding 3: County Services Sometimes Help, Sometimes Frustrate Shelter Residents

Competing Priorities and Lack of Coordination

Rapid Exit, like other services offered to shelter residents, is designed to help residents achieve housing stability. In many cases, however, respondents felt that requirements tied to receipt of such services were burdensome. One respondent felt overwhelmed by all she had to do: *"It's really hard to find that balance between where you're keeping them all happy and there's, for your employment counselor, you have to put in 35 hours a week."* Another explained, *"It's really hard to keep track…you're supposed to be hunting for a job 35 hours a week but you're supposed to be talking to these people for four hours a week and these people for three, and these people for an hour, and it all builds up … if all those people could communicate together would probably help me."*

Several noted feeling overwhelmed by competing priorities while in shelter and felt that they did not have enough time to meet the demands of all of their counselors and caseworkers. One respondent explained that each counselor, shelter staff worker, and MFIP worker thought his/her work should be the respondent's priority—because the various workers didn't communicate with one another, the respondent felt constantly pulled in multiple directions. Another respondent explained that her shelter required attendance at numerous "emergency" meetings, and felt all the time she spent in those meetings was time she otherwise could have spent searching for a job or housing. As one respondent put it, *"…It's like the Rapid Exit workers and the county are on two different pages. The county say go to your Rapid Exit worker, meet with them, they're going to get you a place to go. I go to the Rapid Exit worker and they tell me*

they can't do nothing unless I have a job. So I go to the county and they tell me to look for apartments. I'm like, how am I supposed to look for an apartment without a job?"

Respondents were similarly frustrated by their experiences accessing county services at Century Plaza. They shared that they dreaded the prospect of having to *"spend an entire day at the county, filling out all the paperwork,"* and hated that the process took two to three hours in some cases or an entire day in others. Similar to feeling that social service providers and caseworkers didn't coordinate efforts, respondents felt there were duplicated efforts at Century Plaza: *"I think their main problem is communications. One hand doesn't seem to know what the other is doing half the time."*

Varied Shelter Experiences

While many respondents felt there could be improvements in service delivery and communications at the County level, their experiences within shelters varied greatly. Several were happy to be getting assistance accessing public benefits, receiving on-site childcare, and receiving help from compassionate staff who went out of their way to help shelter users, while others were appreciative of on-site amenities such as computer labs, free phone service, and health clinics.

Other respondents, however, were highly critical of the shelter environment. A commonly heard critique was that some shelter policies deprived shelter residents of their independence. Respondents disliked not being allowed to cook for themselves or their children, having limited choices about when or where to eat, being subject to security screenings every time they returned, and having to surrender their income (MFIP, food stamps, child support) to the shelter as payment for their stays. Several respondents described the shelter environment as drama-filled, unfriendly, and even hostile. One respondent was so unhappy that she left to live with a friend before she had a chance to work with Rapid Exit to find stable housing. A few months later, she had returned to shelter.

The frustration of shelter users may act as a push factor out of shelter, and for some, the push may eclipse the pace of services in the Rapid Exit program. For some respondents, frustrations with shelter life compelled them to exit shelter quickly, in some cases exiting to unstable housing conditions and leading to further episodes of homelessness. In several interviews,

respondents described leaving shelter to stay with friends or family or going straight to Mary's Place to avoid county shelter.

Mary's Place as an alternative to county shelter and services

Because the majority of respondents were repeat shelter users, interviews provided insight into their mobility within the shelter system. Though some returned to the same shelter they had been in initially, others who had gone through county shelter elected to move in to Mary's Place, a private shelter, during their next episode of homelessness. Respondents at Mary's Place described their experiences there as enabling independence and providing them greater freedom than the county shelters had, in part because Mary's Place allowed them to cook for their families and had mandated a savings program. When deciding between county shelter and a private shelter, the ability to retain income may be a pull factor that leads families to opt into private shelters such as Mary's Place.

Finding 4: Leaving Shelter Does Not Necessarily Enhance Stability

Once in housing, respondents felt they had no guarantees of permanency. Many of the contributing factors to homelessness discussed previously (insufficient income, job loss, UDs, and landlord issues) remained unaddressed. Even families who were in housing at the time of interviews feared returning to shelter. One respondent who was currently in housing and receiving services summed up the tension between being housed and being stable: *"I know that I don't have stability because I don't have a stable income. I can't walk out of my house, and… be able to pay my monthly rent every month without having to depend on somebody else to do it. When I have stability will be the time I don't have to worry about somebody else paying my rent. I can get up and pay my own rent."*

> *When I have stability will be the time I don't have to worry about somebody else paying my rent. I can get up and pay my own rent. - Respondent*

For respondents, housing was only one of several factors that created stability. Their stories repeatedly revealed the interconnectedness of barriers, which they sensed could compromise housing security despite the efforts of Rapid Exit workers and others. Specifically, respondents felt most vulnerable to instability when Rapid Exit services (particularly financial assistance) ended. The short duration of program services was repeatedly identified as an obstacle for

repeat users of Rapid Exit. Once supportive measures came to an end, former participants were frequently unable to sustain their current housing, and many were left to depend on government programs such as MFIP or SSDI to cover all their expenses; this reliance on public assistance was exacerbated by the fact that so few had stable jobs. As one Rapid Exit worker stated, "*The six-month subsidy isn't enough for everyone — some need permanent supportive housing, transitional housing. Getting into housing as quickly as possible doesn't work for everyone. [The] program started in 1993 when a MFIP/AFDC grant would cover rent, not true anymore.*" This Rapid Exit worker's concerns were reflected by the worries of unemployed participants: "*Without a job, even if you get income-based housing or whatever, it's gonna be too much. You're not going to be able to afford to live off of, for me with one kid, it's gonna be $400 a month.*"

Rapid Exit workers felt they were doing the best that they could to get clients into housing, but realized that they were unable to address all the interconnected barriers to stability. Neither Rapid Exit workers nor respondents perceived housing alone as sufficient means to attaining stability. One Rapid Exit worker explained her ability to find housing was useless unless clients also had jobs, but job counselors, like Rapid Exit workers, also had large case loads and a limited mandate: *"Job counselors are so overwhelmed with paperwork and clientele that they don't have time to do paperwork and skill assessment to help them find jobs—to connect [clients] to community resources like Goodwill for clothes, jobs. We need to coordinate that to make the housing work."*

Conclusion

The Rapid Exit program's stated goals are to quickly and stably house homeless families arriving in the Hennepin County shelter system. Our analysis suggests that Rapid Exit meets its goal of quick re-housing: Hennepin County families average a shorter length of stay in county shelters when compared to other major US metropolitan areas. However, relatively high rates of return to shelter persist, particularly among certain subsets of the population, indicating that many families are not maintaining stable housing once they exit shelter.

Our research suggests the interconnected nature of the barriers facing homeless families is only partly addressed through the Rapid Exit program. Housing might be quickly attained, but stability is not guaranteed. Families may still face job loss, dangerous housing conditions,

insufficient income, and poor relationships with landlords. We believe the challenges facing homeless families are larger than the Rapid Exit program itself and symptomatic of greater environmental conditions.

Recommendations

In light of our analyses, we have the following recommendations for the Hennepin County Office to End Homelessness and Rapid Exit service providers.

Programmatic Recommendations

Revisit performance goals: Track other outcomes and the broaden definition of success. Hennepin County defines stable housing as staying out of shelter for six months. However, with 20 percent of homeless families in our study returning to shelter within three years, the working definition of stability should be revisited. Other outcomes that track remaining barriers to stability (such as insufficient income or housing conditions) should be built into the definition of success for the Rapid Exit program, since qualitative analysis reveals that these factors weigh heavily in determining respondents' perceptions of stability.

Streamline inter-agency communication and coordination. Interview respondents repeatedly discussed the divergent set of responsibilities incumbent upon them while in shelter. The competing priorities of finding a job, looking for housing, and taking care of children left many respondents feeling overwhelmed. Rapid Exit needs to be cognizant of participants' competing priorities and work, when possible, in tandem with other government agencies and community-based service providers when providing services. The related nature of the barriers to housing stability requires a unified approach.

Provide additional assistance to subsets of the population. While Rapid Exit may be effective for a large portion of its clients, families with more barriers to housing/stability may need additional assistance in order to ensure stable housing after shelter. The analyses presented in the study reveal the important role certain characteristics play in determining exit and re-entry rates for participants. Hennepin County might consider strategic interventions to increase housing stability for groups at highest risk of shelter return. We believe service providers should continue to use the barrier level assessment in determining risk, since the system captures instability well and thus can be used as a predictor for particular populations.

Revisit relationship-building strategies with landlords. Respondents consistently identified difficult landlord relationships as contributing to their instability. Programmatic constraints, limited client resources, and landlord risk tolerance add challenge to the task of building relationships with reputable landlords offering safe, high-quality housing. Still, strengthening favorable landlord relationships and building new ones may increase the likelihood of clients staying in housing found through Rapid Exit.

Data Collection Recommendations

Improve data collection practices. Missing observations and missing information limit the usefulness of studies such as this. While addressing some of the missing data may be outside of Hennepin County's control, program-specific data collection practices should be revisited and improved. For Rapid Exit services, tracking requirements should be uniform across all agencies; descriptions of services provided, dates and amount of cash assistance provided, as well as the reason for any missing barrier level assessment should be documented. The importance of data collection should be impressed upon direct service employees in order for future studies to more fully illustrate the Rapid Exit program from a quantitative analysis.

Collect more information regarding family history and characteristics. Several factors were identified as important determinants of stable housing either through our qualitative analysis or review of the literature that are not currently captured in administrative data. Collecting information on characteristics such as rental and employment history and experiences with domestic violence might help inform future changes to program design.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Screening Guidelines[13]

Level 1: Zero to Minimal Barriers

Level 1 famlies have realtively good rental histories that do not include evictions, criminal involvement, active chemical dependency or domestic violence. These families receive a informational packet and sample rental application form, but will not be referred for rapid exit case management. These families may return to the Rapid Exit Coordinator for help with application fees or housing start-up expenses.

Level 2: Moderate Barriers

Level 2 families do *not* have criminal histories, active chemical dependency or alcohol abuse issues or more than one eviction, but they will have one or more of the following barriers:

- Lack of rental history
- New to area
- Large family
- One easily explained eviction
- History of domestic abuse, but the abuser is not in the area
- Non-English speaking
- No high school diploma
- Physical Disabilities that affect housing
- One parent/child household
- Needs financial help moving, furniture, or other household goods
- Head of household under age 18
- Limited income

Depending on service availability, level 2 famlies may be referred to a rapid exit agency for short-term services.

Level 3: Serious Barriers

Level 3 families may have some barriers listed above as well as some of the following:

- Poor rental histories that include late payments, lease violations, minor porperty damage, and up to three evictions
- Recent relocation from an area that is non-responsive to requests for information about criminal or housing histories
- Recent minor drug or criminal history
- Adults and/or children with mild behavior barriers
- Male teenager in home
- Recent domestic violence, and the abuser remains in the area
- Recent release from jail
- History of substance abuse, though not currently abusing drug
- Open child protection case

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[13] Screening Guidelines come from Elim Transitional Housing's 2010 Rapid Rehousing Manual, authored by Sue Philips.

Level 3 families are referred to a rapid exit agency for case management or longer-term services. Transitional housing services may be appropriate for some level 3 families.

Level 4: Long-term Homeless

Level 4 families meet the definition of long-term homeless: at least four documented episodes of homelessness in the last three years or one continuous year of homelessness. Most level 4 families will also have some of the housing barriers described under levels 3 and 5. They are eligible for any of the services offered.

Level 5: Severe Barriers

These families may have some barriers listed above as well as some of the following:

- Very poor rental histories that may include judgments for unpaid rent, moderate to serious property damage, serious lease violations and/or four or more evictions
- Active chemical dependence or abuse
- Recent serious criminal history
- Current sexual abuse within the family unit
- Current domestic violence, with the abuser remaining in the family unit

Some level 5 households will be unable to obtain and retain rental housing. Households can be referred to organizations that provide long-term intensive case management and housing services.

Appendix B: Interview Sample Descriptive Statistics

Mean Age	33.6
Mean Number of Children	3.5
Gender	
Male	4%
Female	96%
Self-Identified Race/Ethnicity	
African American	62.5%
Native American	8.3%
White	16.7%
Hispanic	4.2%
Mixed Race	8.3%
Educational Attainment	
Less than High School	25%
High School Diploma or GED	29.2%
Some College or Vocational School	33.3%
Associate's Degree	8.3%
Bachelor's Degree	4.2%
Shelter Use	
First-time user	8.3%
Repeat user	83.3%
Currently Housed	8.3%

Appendix C: Interview Guide

HOUSING HISTORY

- Can you tell me the story of how you and your family came to be at [shelter name]?
- Is this your first time in shelter?
    - **If no:**
        - How long have you been here at [shelter name]?
        - Thinking about the last year, where else have you lived besides [shelter name]?
        - Thinking about the last time you left shelter, what made you able to leave?
        - What was it like living on your own after being in shelter?
        - How did you feel about the place you were living after you left shelter? How was the neighborhood? What was the landlord there like?
        - What worked about that housing? What didn't work? [could we add something here like: What was good about this housing? What wasn't good? This assumes they haven't already said so, but it might be good...]
        - [If at Mary's Place] Why did you come to Mary's Place instead of county shelter this time?
        - What's it like searching for a place to live?
        - Looking forward, what support do you need to get into housing now?
    - If **yes:**
        - How long have you been here at [shelter name]?
        - Thinking about the last year, where else have you lived besides [shelter name]?
        - What was it like to live in those places?
        - What's it like searching for a place to live?
        - What kind of help do you get in this process?
        - What support would you need to get into housing now?

BARRIERS TO HOUSING:

- What makes it hard for you to find and keep housing? *[Categorize response into one of the following]*
    - **Income/financial constraints** (income, lack of employment, affordability concerns)
    - **Family or domestic situation** (abuse/physical safety concerns in the home, family composition, support network, number of children, lack of childcare)
    - **Health** (physical or mental health, chemical or alcohol dependency)
    - **Housing Problems** (problems with landlords, apartment or neighborhood safety of options, previous evictions)
- What types of things make it easier/have made it easier to find and stay in housing?
- What will you look for in your next apartment or house?
- What will you try to avoid in your next apartment or house?
- What kinds of things made you/would make you leave an apartment or house?

LIFE AT THE SHELTER

- Tell me about a typical day at [name of shelter].
- In the course of a day or week, what kind of help do you get from people at the shelter?
    - Prompts: (What about rapid exit workers, employment counselors, other case workers, or anyone else?)

RAPID EXIT

- One thing I really want to know more about is Rapid Exit. I'm interested in hearing anything you can tell me about Rapid Exit and your experience in it.
- What types of support do you receive in the Rapid Exit program?
    - Housing search?
    - Financial support?
    - Help with rent?
    - Help with security deposit?
- What do you like about the Rapid Exit program? Why?
- What's not working about the Rapid Exit program? Why not?
- Are there services you wish you were receiving/had received?
- What is your relationship with your Rapid Exit worker like?

CLOSING QUESTION

- That about covers all the things I wanted to ask- is there anything else you would like to add?

FINAL DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

- How old are you?
- What do consider your race or ethnicity to be?
- How many children do you have?
- How far did you go in school?
- *Make note of gender*