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ABSTRACT
Linked administrative records were leveraged to characterize the demographics, prevalence and timing of child protection system (CPS) involvement of families receiving services from a homeless services agency in Los Angeles County, California between 2013 and 2016. Results revealed that nearly two-thirds of families seeking homeless services between 2013 and 2016 had concurrent or historical CPS involvement. Given that CPS involvement most often preceded the families’ first homeless service encounter, the results not only underscore the value of cross-system coordination in the provision of family supports, but also highlight opportunities for prevention.

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Child maltreatment; family homelessness; child welfare services

Introduction
Family homelessness emerged as a major national social and public health issue in the 1980s (Grant, Gracy, Goldsmith, Shapiro, & Redlener, 2013). Since then, the number of homeless families with children rose sharply, then plateaued and began to fall around 2009 (Grant et al., 2013), now constituting 33% of the overall homeless population (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), 2017). Some researchers argue the proportion is likely higher, as families are more likely than other homeless populations to fall among the “uncounted homeless” (Brush, Gultekin, & Grim, 2016). This general upward trend is particularly alarming given the short- and long-term deleterious physical and mental health effects homelessness can have on children and families. In addition to the immediate stress and disruption housing instability and homelessness can cause, homeless children and families often experience a number of negative exposures and life events that compound to increase risk for poor health outcomes in the long-term (Cutuli et al., 2017; Felitti et al., 1998; Ma, Gee, & Kushel, 2008; Park, Fertig, & Allison, 2011; Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). The experience of homelessness is often cyclical for families (Grant et al., 2013); many homeless children and youth find themselves in families struggling with deep poverty, family instability,

Despite the clear adverse implications of the cyclical nature of homelessness, the pattern inherent to the experience could signal important service needs that ought to be addressed by homeless services providers. Additionally, it could highlight potential opportunities for prevention. For example, linkage and analysis of administrative records has documented significant overlap among the homeless and child protection populations (Culhane, Webb, Grim, Metraux, & Culhane, 2003; Park, Metraux, Brodbar, & Culhane, 2004; Park, Metraux, & Culhane, 2005; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2017; Zlotnick, 2009). This research also suggests that child protection involvement often precedes the first encounter with homeless service agency. In fact, Putnam-Hornstein et al. (2017) found that 50% of homeless young adults receiving homeless services in San Francisco County, California had been reported as being maltreated at least once during childhood.

Much of this research, however, has been conducted at the child- or youth-, rather than family-level. Given that families are the unit of service for the child protection system, and that families have different service trajectories within the homeless service system, better understanding their unique experiences and service needs has implications for service delivery. The only study addressing this gap is a recent investigation by Rodriguez and Shinn (2016). They found that, among a small sample of homeless families (n = 258), 52.8% had at least one referral to child protective services (CPS) within two and a half years before emergency shelter entry.

Understanding the timing and prevalence of child protection involvement among families seeking homeless services could help providers better tailor their supports, and ultimately, better serve their clients. It also could help county agencies leverage initial touch points to change these families’ trajectories at an earlier stage, and potentially prevent homelessness down the line. The goal of the current study is to examine the prevalence and timing of child protection involvement of families accessing homelessness services in Los Angeles County, California through linkage and analysis of administrative records, with an eye toward identifying implications for service delivery and prevention.

**Methods**

The current analysis was based on a linkage between countywide administrative homelessness services records from Los Angeles County, California and statewide administrative child protection records. Homeless Management
Information System (HMIS) records for all individuals with homeless service encounters from January 2013 through December 2016 were provided through a data use agreement with the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority. These records identify persons within a family seeking services, dates and types of services provided, and related information for identifying program enrollment. Child protection records collected through Child Welfare Services/Case Management System were available through a long-standing university-agency research partnership with the Department of Social Services (DSS). Child protection data were based on an extract from the fourth quarter of 2016 and included information dating back to 1998. Child welfare data includes records of allegations of abuse and neglect, perpetrator information, and outcome of investigations. Both linkage and analysis fell under approved university and state human subjects protocols.

**Record linkages**

Records from both data sources were coded and standardized for linkage. HMIS records for the population of clients who had a service encounter with Los Angeles County’s homelessness services system between January 2013 and December 2016 were first subset to the population of individuals 18 years of age or older (i.e., Head of Household; HoH) \( n = 115,175 \) at the date of first homeless service encounter during the study window. Separately, we identified individuals in the data who were minor children (i.e., under age 18) on the date of first service encounter \( n = 28,686 \). Then, using HMIS Case and Grouping keys, minors were matched to HoHs. Minors seeking services who were not attached to parents \( n = 3,270; 11.4\% \) of all minors identified) were excluded from the analysis. Finally, children in HMIS were probabilistically matched to children who were involved with the child protection system at any point since 1998 \( n = 4,680,314 \). CPS records were left-censored (unavailable prior to 1998) due to California’s transition to a new data collection system. In order to improve the validity of the child-to-child matches, an analogous process was completed using the CPS records as the universe. Specifically, analysts identified children alleged to be victims within CWS/CMS, confirmed that guardian information was attached to these children, and then probabilistically matched these children to children in HMIS.

Record linkage software was used to generate matched pairs (ChoiceMaker, Version 2.7.1). Records were probabilistically linked on a non-networked workstation based on a combination of unique (i.e., Social Security number) and nonunique (i.e., first name, middle name, last name, date of birth, gender) personal identifiers. A customized algorithm applied a set of logical clues to assess select fields for each comparison of two records. Each clue used personally identifying information to determine if the two records were the same person (match clues) or different persons.
(differ clues). Match probabilities based on these clues in excess of 0.8 were deemed a sufficient probability of matching and included in the linked dataset. After records were linked using confidential information, all direct identifiers were stripped and a restricted research dataset was constructed for statistical analysis.

This matching procedure yielded a population of HoHs seeking homeless services who had at least one minor child attached to them at any point during the study period, hereafter referred to as “Parents” ($n = 12,283$).

**Variables**

**Parent demographics**

HMIS records served as the source file from which all demographic characteristics were derived. Parent age, defined as client age at the date of the first homeless shelter service encounter recorded during the 2013–2016 window, was used to identify the parent as a Transitional Age Youth (TAY) (i.e., ages 18–24) or Non-TAY Parent (i.e., ages 25 and older). Because the universe of parents included in the record linkage was conditioned on age between 2013 and 2016, there were no records in which date of birth was missing. Parent gender was coded as Male, Female, or All Other Cases, which included Transgender (i.e., MTF, FTM), Other, Client Doesn’t Know, Client Refused, and Data Not Collected, comprising 0.3% of records ($n = 31$). Parent race and ethnicity was derived from separately recorded fields in the HMIS data to create five categories: Black, Hispanic, White, Asian/Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander and Other, which included Non-Hispanic American Indian/Alaska Native, Multiple Race Stated, Missing, and No Race Stated. Using the family Grouping key, we then calculated the number of distinct children who were attached at any time during the time window per parent (1 child, 2 children, 3 children, 4+ children). Child age was defined based on child age at the date of the parent’s first homeless shelter service encounter recorded during the 2013–2016 window (Parents with children under age 5 at first encounter, Parents without children under age 5 at first encounter). Parents without children under 5 at first encounter includes children whose date of birth is after the household’s entrance into the program.

**Homeless service project type**

Receipt of various homeless services (referred to within HMIS as Project Types) also was recorded. Project types include: Public Housing (PH)-Rapid Re-Housing; Transitional Housing; PH-Permanent Supportive Housing (Disability req. for entry); Homeless Prevention; Services Only; Street Outreach; Emergency Shelter; and Coordinated Assessment.
**Child protection history**

Interaction with CPS was first defined for each child attached to a parent, and then rolled up to the parent level to identify parental CPS involvement for any child. Parental CPS involvement in California (i.e., CPS involvement of any child in that family at any point since 1998) was defined at four levels: Any history of alleged maltreatment (Referred), substantiation as a victim of maltreatment (Substantiated), case opening for CPS services (Case Open), and foster care placement (Placed in Out-of-Home Care). We then defined the timing and level of CPS involvement for descriptive purposes relative to the timing of homeless service interaction.

**Analyses**

The final analytic dataset from the record linkage procedure outlined above consisted of the full population of Parents (i.e., clients seeking services in 2013–2016 who were 18 years of age or older and had at least one minor child attached to them at any point during the study period (n = 12,283)). For each parent and attached child, linkages to statewide CPS data were used to establish a longitudinal record of childhood allegations of abuse and neglect, substantiated allegations of maltreatment, open cases for services, and placements in out-of-home foster care. For descriptive purposes, we calculated the prevalence and timing of CPS involvement among the entire population of parents. We used Chi-square tests to assess the statistical significance of observed differences.

**Results**

**Population**

As depicted in Table 1, the number of individuals, Heads of Households, and parents seeking homeless services increased substantially between 2013 and 2016. Homeless Parents accounted for an average of 11% of all Heads of Households seeking homeless services in Los Angeles County in this time frame.

**Demographics**

As shown in Table 2, more than half (57.8%) of the parents in this cohort (n = 12,283) were between the ages of 25 and 39. Almost a quarter (24.6%) of parents were 40 or older, while 17.6% were between the ages of 18 and 24 (TAY). The distribution of race was 48.4% Black, 38.4% Latino, 8.8% white, and 1.5% Asian/Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander. The vast majority (83.2%) of parents were Female. During the study window, 40.9% of parents
had one minor child attached to them at any point, 29.7% had two, 16.7% had three, and 12.7% had four or more. Over half of homeless parents (58.1%) had children under the age of 5 at first encounter.

**Homeless services provided**

As shown in Table 3, nearly two-thirds (61.1%) of all parents in this cohort received Coordinated Assessment, 39.1% received Rapid Rehousing, and 10.8% received Transitional Housing. A chi square test of proportions indicated there were significant differences between no CPS involvement compared to any CPS involvement over homeless services provided ($\chi^2 = 93.9$, $p < .001$). Post hoc analyses with a conservative Bonferroni correction
identified Homeless Prevention as having a significantly lower proportion of families with CPS involvement versus all other categories. Conversely, Permanent Supportive Housing (71.4%) had a significantly higher proportion of families with CPS involvement than Rapid Re-housing (64.5%) and Coordinated Assessment (63.8%). Other comparisons of homeless services between CPS involvement group proportions were not significantly different.

**Child protection history**

Table 4 shows 63.4% \((n = 7,832)\) of homeless parents in this cohort \((n = 12,283)\) had at least one child who had been referred to child protective services for alleged abuse or neglect since 1998, 31.9% had at least one child who had been substantiated as a victim of abuse or neglect, 27.8% had at least one child protection case opened for services, and 16.7% had experienced the removal of one or more children to out-of-home placement. Table 5 presents an analysis of timing of child protection involvement relative to first homeless services interaction. It was found that 84.5% of families with a child who had been reported for alleged maltreatment experienced their first referral before their first homeless services encounter. Additionally, 80.8% of families with a child who had a substantiated claim of maltreatment experienced their first substantiation before their first homeless services encounter. Finally, 23.2% of homeless parents who were CPS-involved had a CPS case open at the same

**Table 3. Types of homeless services provided.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall ((n = 12,283))</th>
<th>Any CPS</th>
<th>No CPS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PH-Rapid Re-Housing</td>
<td>4,800</td>
<td>39.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitional Housing</td>
<td>1,321</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PH-Permanent Supportive Housing (Disability req. for entry)</td>
<td>871</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeless Prevention</td>
<td>1,204</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services Only</td>
<td>1,579</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street Outreach</td>
<td>374</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergency Shelter</td>
<td>2,847</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinated Assessment</td>
<td>7,511</td>
<td>61.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4. Child protection involvement of families seeking homeless services between 2013 and 2016.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall ((n = 12,283))</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Referred</td>
<td>7,832</td>
<td>63.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substantiated</td>
<td>3,935</td>
<td>31.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Opened</td>
<td>3,429</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placed in Out-of-Home Care</td>
<td>2,057</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
time or subsequent to receiving homeless services; 32.7% had a concurrent or subsequent out-of-home placement.

**Discussion**

This data linkage study generated important insights that have implications for both child protection and homelessness programs and policies. First, a full two-thirds of homeless families identified in this study had at least one referral to CPS for alleged abuse or neglect. For the vast majority of parents identified as both homeless and CPS-involved, their first contact with CPS occurred before they sought homeless services. It is unknown whether earlier prevention supports and coordination of case services could have helped resolve problems at an earlier stage and potentially prevented later family homelessness, but the trajectory is intriguing. One potential avenue could be to address housing instability among CPS involved families; an issue research suggests is common in this population (Barth, Wildfire, & Green, 2006; Courtney, McMurtry, & Zinn, 2004; Fowler, Farrell, Marcal, Chung, & Hovmand, 2017; Fowler, Toro, & Miles, 2009). To address that need, a subset of child welfare agencies are incorporating housing supports into their responses to cases of child abuse and neglect. A review of these approaches has identified the following strategies: Partnering with public housing agencies and leveraging resources; assessing housing needs of CPS involved families; prioritizing CPS involved families for housing resources; housing first strategies; developing housing stability plans and shared case plans; screening families into, as opposed to out of, housing; providing help with housing search, and adopting a Supportive Housing approach to the provision of housing (Cunningham & Pergamit, 2015; Landsman & Rosenwald, 2015). More research is needed to assess the effectiveness of their application – either individually, or in combination – within the context of child welfare in preventing homelessness, and

### Table 5. Timing of child protection involvement of families seeking homeless services between 2013 and 2016.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Overall Frequency</th>
<th>Percent (col)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Referred</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st Ever Occurred Before 1st Homeless Services Interaction</td>
<td>6,620</td>
<td>84.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st Ever Occurred Concurrently With or After 1st Homeless Services Interaction</td>
<td>1,212</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Substantiated</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st Ever Occurred Before 1st Homeless Services Interaction</td>
<td>3,180</td>
<td>80.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st Ever Occurred Concurrently With or After 1st Homeless Services Interaction</td>
<td>755</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Case Opened</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st Ever Occurred Before 1st Homeless Services Interaction</td>
<td>2,564</td>
<td>76.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st Ever Occurred Concurrently With or After 1st Homeless Services Interaction</td>
<td>775</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Placed in Out-of-Home Care</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st Ever Occurred Before 1st Homeless Services Interaction</td>
<td>1,384</td>
<td>67.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st Ever Occurred Concurrently With or After 1st Homeless Services Interaction</td>
<td>673</td>
<td>32.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
also promoting child safety, permanence, and well-being, but early evidence is promising (Cunningham & Pergamit, 2015; Fowler, 2017).

Second, the results show that the number of individuals, HoHs, and parents accessing homelessness services in Los Angeles County appears to be increasing, with the number of parents seeking services nearly doubling between 2013 and 2016, from 2,475 to 4,672. It is uncertain how much of this increase is due to improvements in data collection related to parental identification versus true increases in family homelessness, but the trend is consistent with literature documenting increases both at the state and national level, and within Los Angeles County during the study window (U.S. HUD, 2017). It should also be noted that, despite the apparent increases, the total number of parents identified in this study is likely an undercount. First, the proportion for which homeless parents accounted was lower than national estimates (11% of all HoHs seeking homeless services in the current study vs. an estimated 33% (or more) of the homeless population nationwide (Brush et al., 2016; U.S. HUD, 2017)). Second, researchers have found that a substantial number of mothers (~20%) become separated from children just before or at emergency shelter entry (Cowal, Shinn, Weitzman, Stojanovic, & Labay, 2002; Gubits et al., 2016), whereas others have placed that percentage at closer to 40% when describing families in shelters who had a child living away from them, either before or during their shelter stay (Walton, Wood, & Dunton, 2018). Our methods would lead to a misclassification of individuals who did not have physical custody of their children during the study window as non-parents. It is therefore possible that increases in family homelessness are larger than those observed, but are unable to be detected using this methodology.

Finally, the results should contribute to needed discussions about the appropriateness of earlier child welfare responses to families who subsequently sought homeless services. Among CPS-involved homeless families, more than half had not had any case opened for services (58.4%). Certainly, these numbers call into question whether earlier or current responses were adequate in intensity, duration, format, or content. Future research could explore the trajectories of children and families from CPS interaction to homelessness, and, specifically, to assess differences in the rates of subsequent homelessness between children who have had either a case opened or not, and between children who received community-based supports but no foster care vs. those who experienced a removal. Further explicating the intensity, duration, format, and content of CPS responses is absolutely possible using administrative data, and could help to further our understanding of not just the nature of and diversity in responses, but also lead to the development of “precision-oriented” approaches.

In sum, more research is needed to better understand the characteristics, needs, and experiences of these families so that service providers can tailor supports and develop coordinated cross-sector responses. One thing, however, is clear: The high degree of overlap in these populations highlights opportunities for increased cross-system coordination. Not only could this coordination
facilitate the generation, refinement, and evaluation of programs for families touching both systems, it also could lead to the development of cross-cutting, tailored programs and services that proactively serve families’ needs.

**Note**

1. Repeated examination of score distribution has consistently supported a 0.8 threshold.

**Acknowledgments**

We wish to acknowledge collaborating colleagues at the USC Children’s Data Network and the UC Berkeley California Child Welfare Indicators Project. This analysis would not be possible without the partnership of the Los Angeles County Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA), Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), and California Department of Social Services (CDSS). Their ongoing commitment to evidence-driven program and policy development is truly a model for public transparency and accountability.

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**Notes on contributors**

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*John Prindle,* PhD is a Research Assistant Professor with the Children’s Data Network. His research focuses on longitudinal and predictive modeling of the impacts of maltreatment on
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systems providing child welfare, juvenile justice, and early care and education services.
Currently, McCroskey co-leads the multi-university child welfare evaluation team funded
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Services in understanding the impact of a variety of community-based service initiatives,
including the DCFS Family Preservation Program and Prevention Initiative Demonstration
Project. She also leads a cross-disciplinary research roundtable of researchers from USC,
UCLA and Cal State LA in the Los Angeles County Probation Data Project funded by the
Keck Foundation under the auspices of the Advancement Project. Through earlier efforts she
helped to create the Family Assessment Form, working with the Children’s Bureau of
Southern California to develop, test and disseminate a practice-based assessment instrument
now used in child and family service settings across the country and abroad. Through her
work with county, city and school district policy makers and philanthropists, she has
investigated inter-agency collaboration and community partnerships across a broad range
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Emily Putnam-Hornstein, PhD is an Associate Professor at USC’s School of Social Work and
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California Child Welfare Indicators Project. Emily’s current research focuses on the applica-
tion of epidemiological methods to improve the surveillance of non-fatal and fatal child abuse
and neglect. Her analysis of large-scale, linked administrative data has provided insight into
where scarce resources may be most effectively targeted and informs understanding of
maltreated children within a broader, population-based context. Emily graduated from Yale
University with a BA in Psychology, received her MSW from Columbia University, and
earned her PhD in Social Welfare from the University of California at Berkeley.

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