Homelessness is a worldwide epidemic (Dychter & Tarsak, 2002). In the United States alone, approximately 2 to 3 million people are homeless at any given time; about one-third of this population is children and youth (Rion, 2009). On any single night, there are between 1,700 and 1,900 children and youth experiencing homelessness in the Omaha metropolitan area (Owen et al., 2007). Thirty-seven percent of this population are single mothers who are homeless with their children (Owen et al., 2007). Various social, economic, environmental, and psychological factors lead families into homelessness. Experiencing these precursors can affect the occupational needs of this marginalized population at any age.

This study is significant because the findings help guide targeting of minimizing precursors of homelessness and improving negative environments. By understanding the precursors associated with homelessness, prevention efforts and intervention resources can be utilized to help this population. More importantly, the findings of this study can better help community health occupational therapy practitioners understand the occupational needs of families facing homelessness.

Participants

This study was designed to explore and understand precursors to family homelessness in the Omaha metropolitan area. In particular, the study aimed to understand the occupational needs of families in situations living at three different shelters.

Methods

Design: This study was exploratory and descriptive, using an intrinsic collective case study design to gather qualitative data.

Participants: The study used purposive sampling. The sample was recruited through three different shelters that comprised the Omaha metropolitan area: MCI-CH, Open Door Mission, and Siena Francis House. A total of 11 families were interviewed for this study.

Data Collection: Two methods of data collection were used: a semi-structured interview and an 11-item demographic questionnaire. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Interviews ranged from 20 minutes to one hour.

Data Analysis: Constant comparative analysis was used after a single round of interviews. Three coding systems were applied to this research: open, axial, and selective coding. Each researcher conducted their own coding and the codes were compared. Then axial coding was compared with open coding. Selective coding was used in the identification of themes. Data analysis was not used in data analysis due to technical problems with the audio recording.

Results

Table 1. Summary of Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Theme 1: Alcohol and substance abuse</td>
<td>A history of alcohol and substance abuse was apparent in the majority of participants. In many cases, it was apparent that the participant was born into an environment of alcohol and substance abuse and exposed to its negative effects as young children. One participant mentioned that she never even knew her mother, who passed away at the age of 26. They say she was a drunk. &quot;I was first in the trap&quot;</td>
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<td>Theme 2: Lack of support</td>
<td>Participants indicated a variety of support levels; the majority of cases lacked direct social and emotional support from family and friends. One participant described her family as the &quot;families that are there in America. We don't have no one like that in our family that will come to another and help them. If you fall, they kind of push you down some more... It's really not a good type of close knit family.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme 3: Confronting variables that contribute to homelessness</td>
<td>There were several factors that were discussed throughout the interview process that could serve as confronting precursors of homelessness including mental health disorders, having a child with a disability, job pressures, and unstable home environments that affected daily occupational functioning.</td>
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</table>
| Theme 4: Spirituality | Spirituality, mostly involving the Christian faith, was frequently mentioned by participants. Some participants indicated they had found support from their faith, and others indicated that they had the support of their faith. "We are God's children... He is watching over us."

| Theme 5: Occupational needs | Occupational needs of the participants experiencing homelessness were a major factor affecting their current situation. All 11 participants were currently working either individually or with career planning programs on finding employment. Structured and stable housing was another need. Occupational needs also included having social and emotional support. Participants mentioned establishing positive relationships, not returning to previous relationships that centered on drugs and alcohol, and finding someone to serve as a mentor or sponsor. Many participants mentioned needing daycare, reliable transportation, and financial assistance. |

Discussion

Implications for Practice

| Precursors of homelessness are difficult to define as they are generally a part of a more complex situation rather than referring to just in the homeless situations.
| Alcohol and substance abuse was a major theme across participant narratives. There were generational cycles of alcohol and substance abuse that led participants to feel they were deprived of treatments and programs and, in some, out of the homeless shelters.
| Support systems vary among families experiencing homelessness. Participants revealed varying strengths and weaknesses that negatively impacted their situation while other participants had qualified relationships with family, friends, or mentors.

Researchers noted that spirituality was important particularly with individuals living at the faith-based mission. Participation in Bible studies and chapel services were provided and appeared to serve as a source of support and empowerment for the families.

This study identified confronturing variables that contribute to homelessness including mental health issues, domestic violence, job pressures, and having a child with a disability. There are often community support programs that offer assistance with life skills training or financial guidance, however, participants of this study alluded to barriers of utilizing such programs. Eligibility, ambiguity and complicated application processes hinder use of services.

References

• Tarasuik, P. (2005). A qualitative study of the experiences of homeless mental health clients in shelter-based gospel mission. Participation in Bible studies and chapel services were provided and appeared to serve as a source of support and empowerment for the families.

This research project would not have been possible without the support of many people. We would like to thank Dr. Paladino who was abundantly helpful and offered invaluable assistance, support and guidance throughout the project. We are also thankful to the people who were interviewed from MCI-CH, Open Door Mission and Siena Francis House because without their participation this project would not have been possible. Finally, we would like to thank Mr. Chang who was immensely helpful and we deeply appreciate it.