



Center for
Transforming Lives
From Poverty to Prosperity. Together.

HIDDEN HOMELESS: FAMILIES LIVING IN MOTELS

AN UNIQUE ANALYSIS OF FAMILIES EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

HIDDEN HOMELESS: FAMILIES LIVING IN MOTELS

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and other generous donors for their support.

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With gratitude to Erika L. Thompson, PhD, MPH, CPH
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Family homelessness is hidden in our community. In 2016-2019, the Center for Transforming Lives led an alliance of 39 agencies in Tarrant County to assess and understand conditions for children experiencing homelessness. The major conclusion of this work is that children and families experiencing homelessness are a hidden population in our community. Moreover, families experiencing homelessness face unique challenges compared to single adults, including lack of affordable childcare, space for families, and added resources to support a family.

Children who experience homelessness consequently experience more trauma that can impact their development, educational outcomes, emotional health, and physical wellbeing. Several federal initiatives recognize the direct impact of homelessness of children and, for that reason, school districts and early childhood education programs (e.g., Head Start) provide support services to help mitigate the impact.

The path out of homelessness is not linear for families. In 2019, in partnership with the University of North Texas Health Science Center, the Center for Transforming Lives published The Journey Mapping Report that mapped the journey of families experiencing homelessness in Tarrant County. The goal of this work was to understand the journey and challenges for families as they sought secure and stable housing. Of the 24 families interviewed, families reported an average of four location transitions during their path through homelessness and, for many, that journey included a number of short-term stints in motels or extended stay properties. Unfortunately, this study was unable to interview a person living in a motel at that time, but the journey mapping shined a light on a less-understood phenomenon and unanswered questions – *why were families living in motels and what could help them reach stable housing?*



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A motel is not
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A significant proportion of children experiencing homelessness live in motels. What further limits our ability to assess the needs of families living in motels is knowing how many families this represents in our community. Unfortunately, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) does not consider families living in motels as “homeless” and, as a result, these families are largely ineligible for most housing programs. But because of the detrimental impacts of unstable housing on child outcomes, the U.S. Department of Education considers children living in motels to be homeless based on the McKinney-Vento Act.

As of the 2017-2018 school year, approximately 1,305 school-aged Tarrant County children were living in motels – representing 15% of children identified as homeless that school year. Of concern, this was a 116% increase in the number of children living in motels since 2012-2013. These estimates of children living in motels are likely underestimated, as the estimate does not include younger children not enrolled in public school districts in Tarrant County. Using the HUD statistic that 51% of children experiencing homelessness are under the age of 6, we can estimate that 2,663 children resided in motels in Tarrant County during that year. Moreover, the impact is likely exacerbated by the financial challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic resulting in more instability for families.

A motel is not a home. We know from prior work that to break the cycle of homelessness and reach stable housing, families need three things: childcare, employment/income, and transportation. Given that motels are often a short-term solution and add to the stress and instability during a family’s journey through homelessness, there was a critical need to understand the distinctive challenges families face while living in motels and how our community might better support these families.

¹ Guarino, K., & Bassuk, E. (2010). Working with families experiencing homelessness: Understanding trauma and its impact. *Zero to Three*, 30(3), 11.

² Thompson, E. L., Galvin, A. M., Rohr, D., Klocek, C., Lowe, H., & Spence, E. E. (2020). Navigating the system for families experiencing homelessness: a community-driven exploration of barriers encountered. *Journal of Children and Poverty*, 26(2), 253-267.

³ Public Data Request from Texas Education Agency.

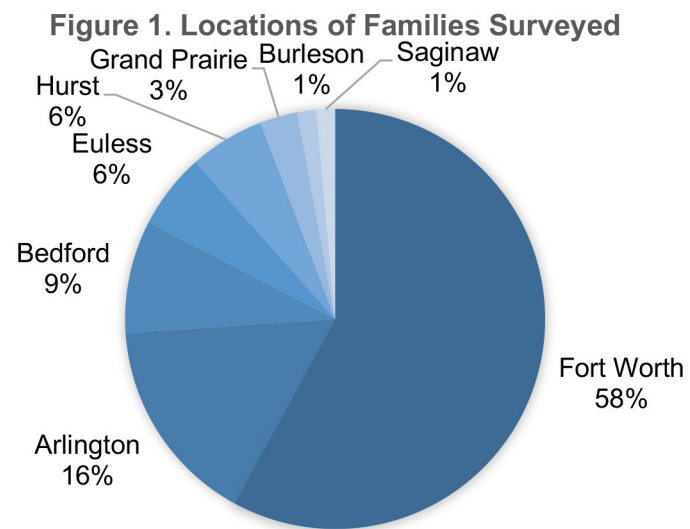
⁴ Coughlin, C. G., Sandel, M., & Stewart, A. M. (2020). Homelessness, children, and COVID-19: A looming crisis. *Pediatrics*, 146(2).

FAMILIES AND MOTELS NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Unraveling the unique needs for families experiencing homelessness in Tarrant County is essential. The issue of families living in motels was brought to the forefront in Fort Worth when the City recently purchased an extended-stay property with the goal of converting it into Permanent Supportive Housing units, boosting our system’s ability to respond to chronic homelessness in Tarrant County. Many involved in that process were surprised to learn a large number of families were living in the property on a full-time basis and unfortunately would be displaced by the project. While the families would not qualify for HUD programs, it was clear they were experiencing homelessness and that this was an issue we needed to learn more about as a system. *What circumstances brought these families here? What did they need to get into more stable housing?* Rather than make assumptions, the Family Homelessness Committee under the Tarrant County Homeless Coalition called for a community needs assessment and developed a survey to assess several issues related to housing, education, and services used.

The Center for Transforming Lives led the project and conducted surveys with families who were living in motels or extended stay properties throughout Tarrant County. These surveys were collected February through October 2021. The survey included questions about the circumstances leading to living in a motel, barriers to stable housing, and assistance needs for the family. We received input on the survey content from the Family Homelessness Committee, the Tarrant County Homeless Coalition, and other local experts.

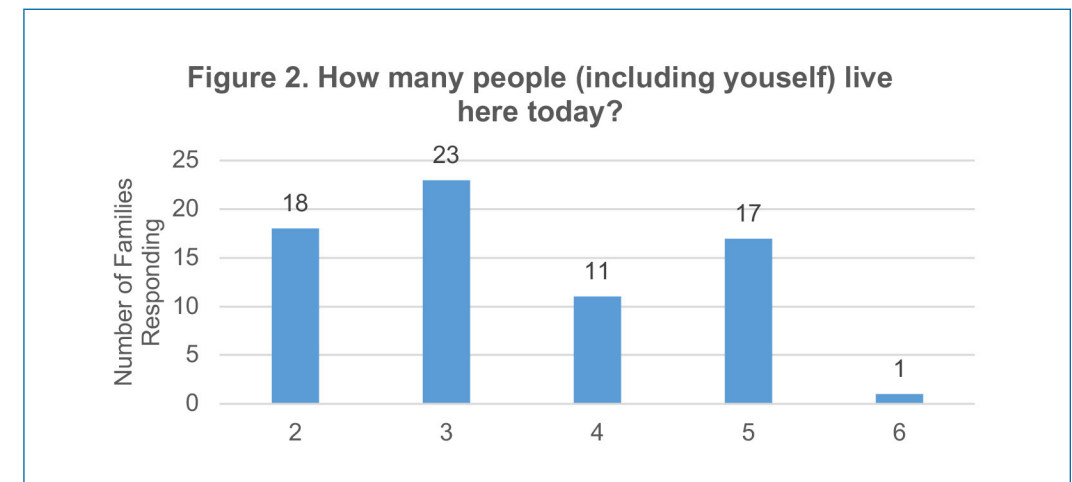
Surveying families in motels had challenges. During the nine-month period, 70 families were surveyed on-site at motel locations in Tarrant County. Among the families surveyed, a majority were from Fort Worth (58%) or Arlington (16%), but also comprised of suburban areas such as the mid-cities and north Tarrant County (Figure 1). The survey process was challenging for a number of reasons. In many instances, property managers were not welcoming and did not allow team members to engage with anyone living at the motel. Some mothers were willing to visit with our survey team, but refused to share any details regarding their children out of fear of being reported to Child Protective Services and separated from their children. To ease their fears and ensure their privacy, all surveys were conducted anonymously and no identifying information was collected.



NEEDS ASSESSMENT FINDINGS

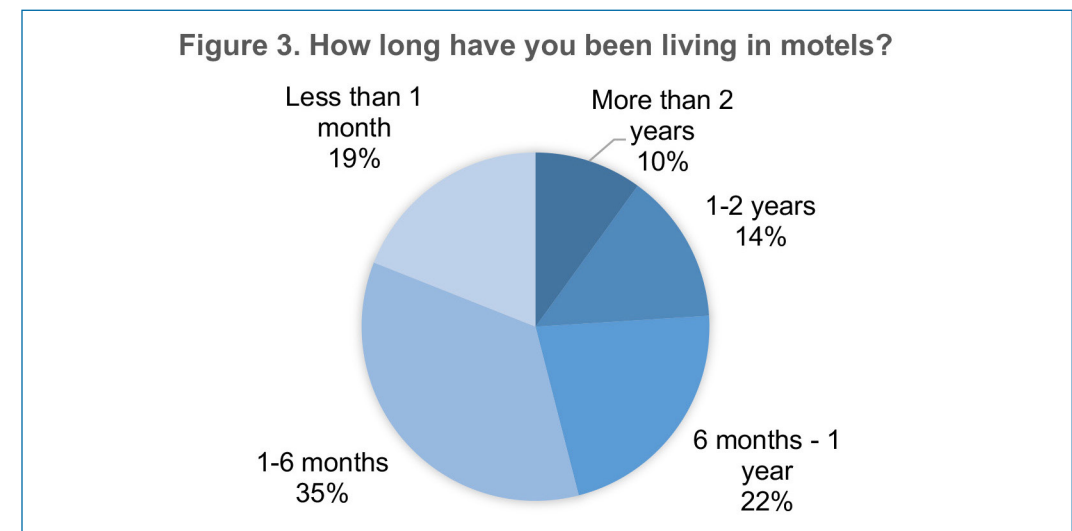
Who are the Families Living in Motels? Single-parent women represented the majority of families surveyed. Two instances of three generations of a family sharing a single room were identified. As is also the case in the homeless services system, Black families were disproportionately represented in this sample, making up nearly half (45%) of the respondents, followed by White/Caucasian (30%) and Hispanic/Latino (25%) respondents.

Moreover, families surveyed ranged in size of two to six, totaling 240 people (see Figure 2). Of the 240 reported living in these families, more than half were children under the age of 18 (n=138). Just under a third of children living in these families surveyed were under the age of 6 (29%), meaning these children would not likely be visible in school-reported data.

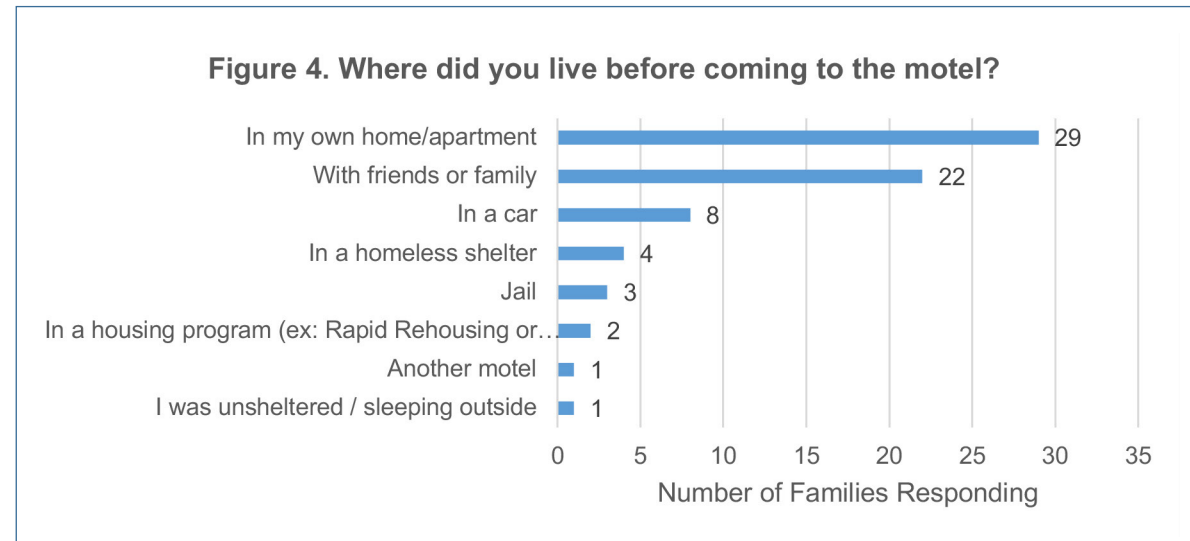


Note: Three of the 3-people families lived in one unit together at the time of survey

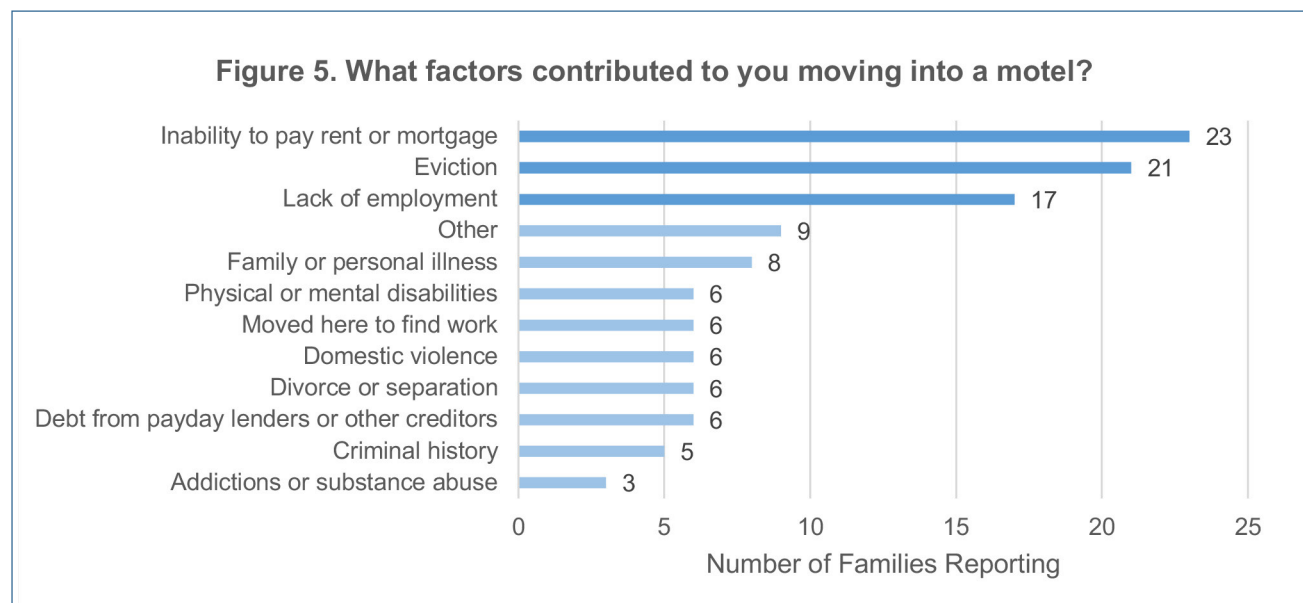
While motels often are seen as a short-term solution for families, over one-third of families surveyed had lived in a motel for more than six months (Figure 3).



How did Families End Up in Motels? When asked about where they lived prior to moving into the motel, the most common response from families was that they had lived in their own homes or apartments (41%), but several families also reported living doubled-up with friends or family (31%) or having stayed in cars (11%) (Figure 4). Only 9% had lived in a homeless shelter or housing program prior to the motel, and thus would have come to the attention of housing programs for assistance.



As documented in other projects in Tarrant County, a range of factors can contribute to the slide into family homelessness. For these families in motels, the most frequently reported factors were *inability to pay rent or mortgage* (33%), *eviction* (30%), and *lack of employment* (25%) (Figure 5). Inability to pay rent or mortgage is a symptom of larger issues, including inadequate income and lack of affordable housing. Moreover, while a one-time eviction may precede a move into the motel causing the loss of their previous housing, the eviction creates a downstream barrier to being approved for a new lease.



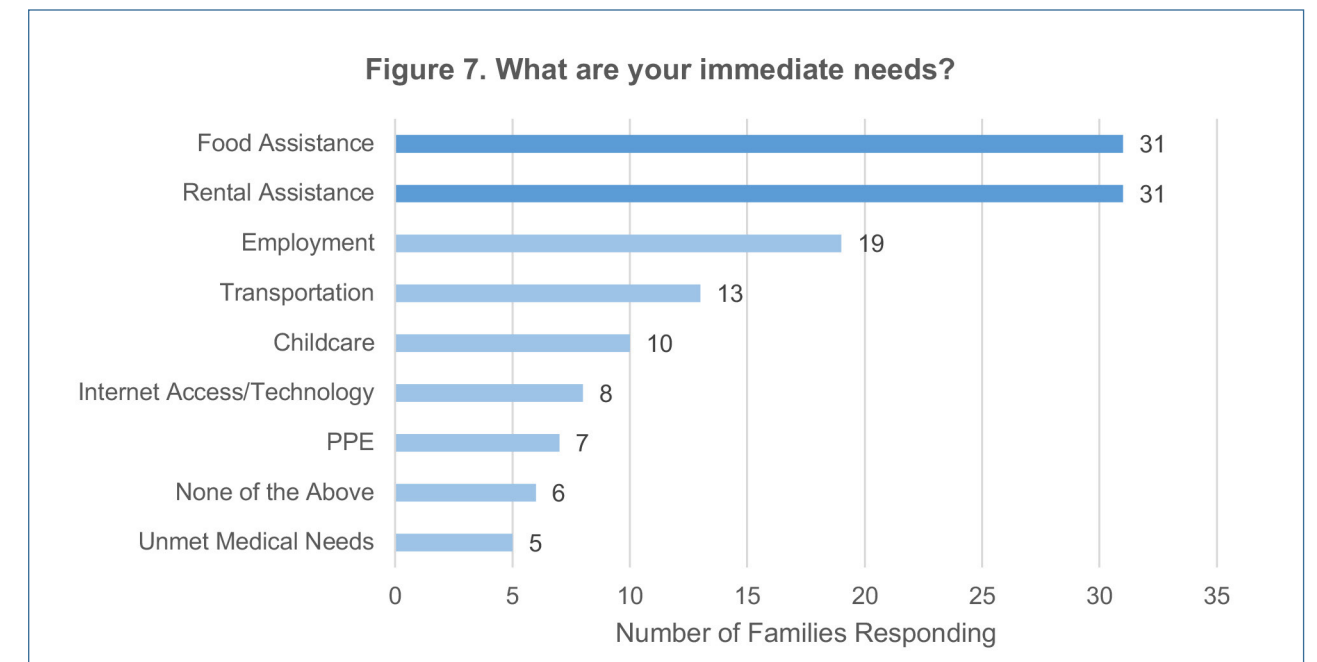
What is Life Like for Families Living in Motels? Life in the motel may have some benefits for low-income families (e.g., furniture is provided, most utilities are paid), but there are many downsides that may include a lack of privacy, safe sleeping areas for infants, cold food storage, or cooking areas. Our survey sites included motels and extended-stay properties with kitchenettes. A motel is where our team discovered one room where nine people were sleeping – three mothers and six children. The room contained two small beds and no kitchen, but as one of the mothers said, “at least we can lock the door and keep our babies safe.”

This sentiment was shared by many of the families in the survey – the motels were seen as a better choice than the alternatives considered to be options for their families. That may explain the discrepancy in the responses to the following questions related to acceptability of the current living situation and perceptions of safety (Figure 6):



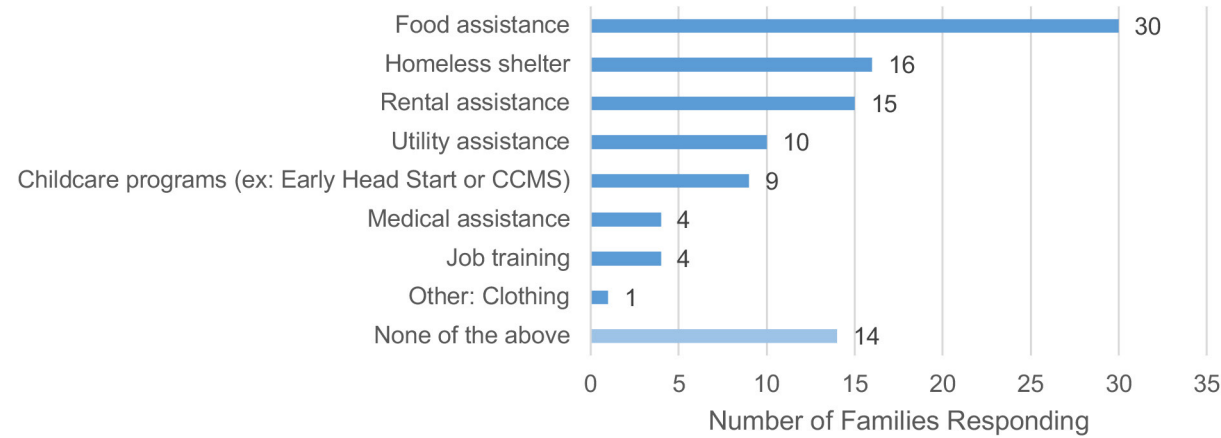
On average, the surveyed parents did not “like” living in the motel, but many felt it was their safest choice. Almost half of the respondents reported receiving mail at the motel (48%), indicating the motel served as their permanent address for the foreseeable future.

Families were asked about their immediate needs during the survey. *Food and rental assistance* were the most commonly reported (Figure 7). Given this needs assessment was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, personal protective equipment also was cited as an immediate need for some families.



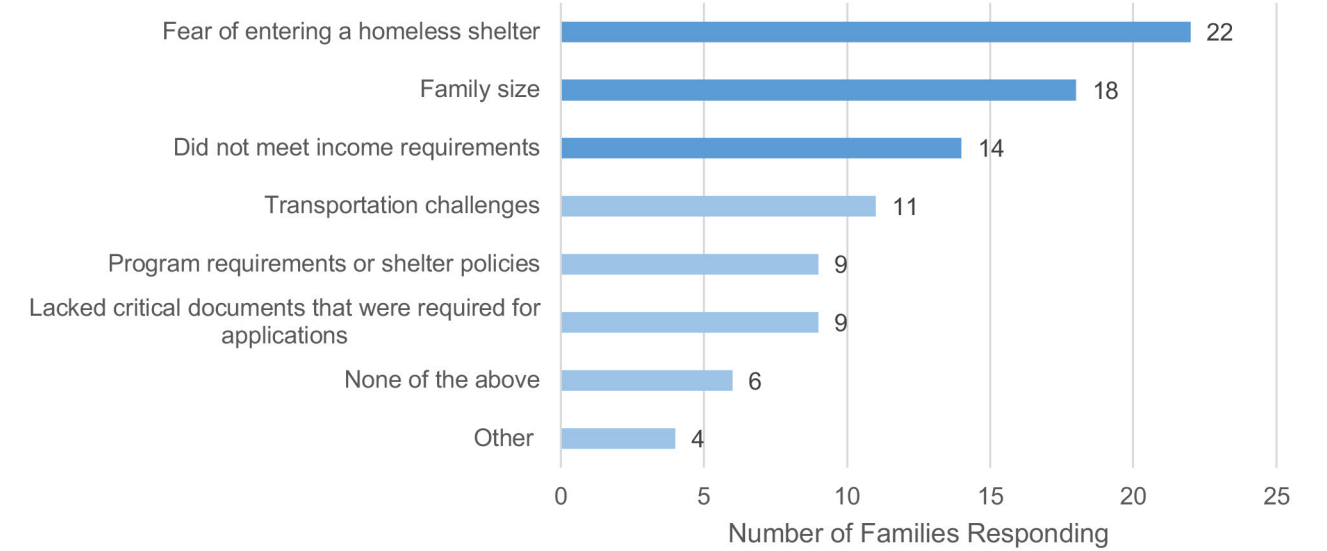
To help address these immediate needs, families described accessing a range of assistance programs to meet their basic needs. Food assistance was the most commonly sought-after program by the families surveyed for this project (Figure 8). This may indicate some parents are spending nearly all of their available funds on the motel room itself, with little left over for things like food, diapers, and hygiene items. As one parent noted, *"I do what I have to do to stay here. It's better than the streets."* Given that every respondent in this survey is caring for children, the occurrence of food insecurity is extremely concerning. Along with difficulty obtaining food, safe food storage and a place to prepare fresh meals (21%) were unavailable to many families living in motels and could have a serious impact on child development. Finally, almost a quarter of families attempted to access homeless shelters in the past year for assistance.

Figure 8. Which assistance programs have you tried to access in the past year?



A variety of barriers made it difficult for families to access housing assistance programs. The primary barrier reported was the *fear of entering a homeless shelter*, which aligns with our prior Journey Mapping Project (Figure 9). One observation from our team was that many people surveyed for this needs assessment did not consider themselves to be homeless or think they would qualify for any support, so they did not pursue it.

Figure 9. What are some of the barriers you encountered while trying to access assistance programs?

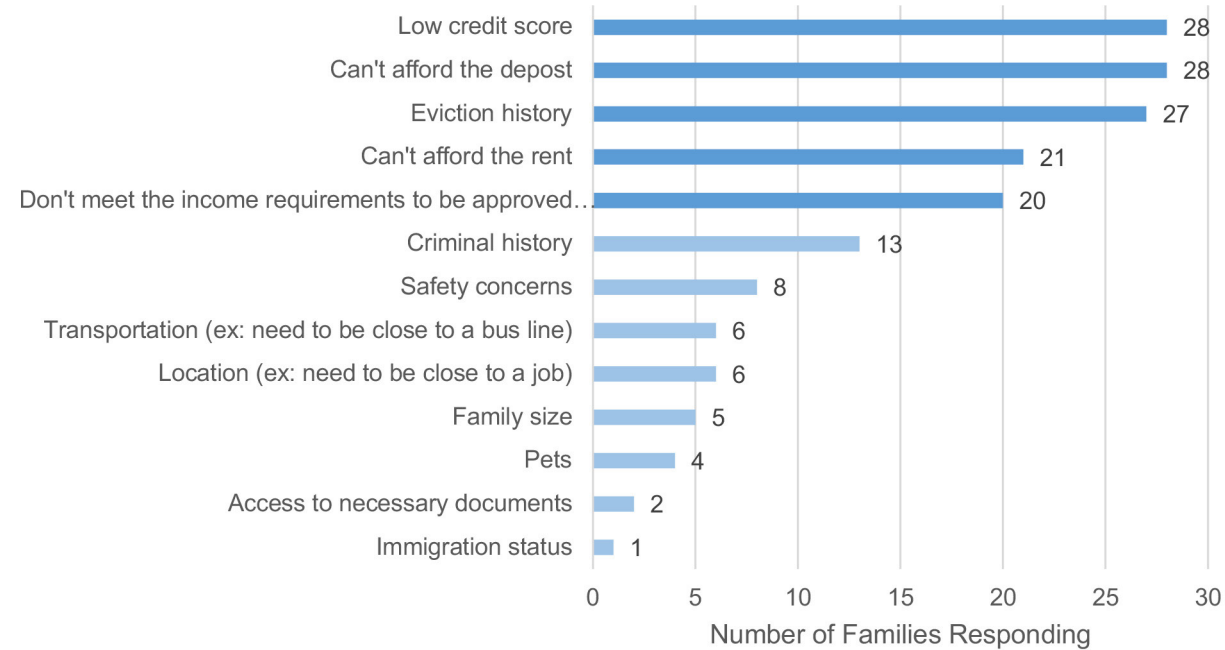


When examining the responses just for families specifically reporting they tried to access a homeless shelter at some point in the previous year, the top three barriers reported were fear of entering a homeless shelter (44%), family size (38%), and transportation challenges (25%). Family size may be an issue for families based on available space at shelter locations, especially for larger families, or shelter policy on the composition of families (e.g. single parent with no more than four children). Transportation can be a challenge as a shelter may not be located near a family's source of income or schools.

What is Keeping Families from Stable Housing?

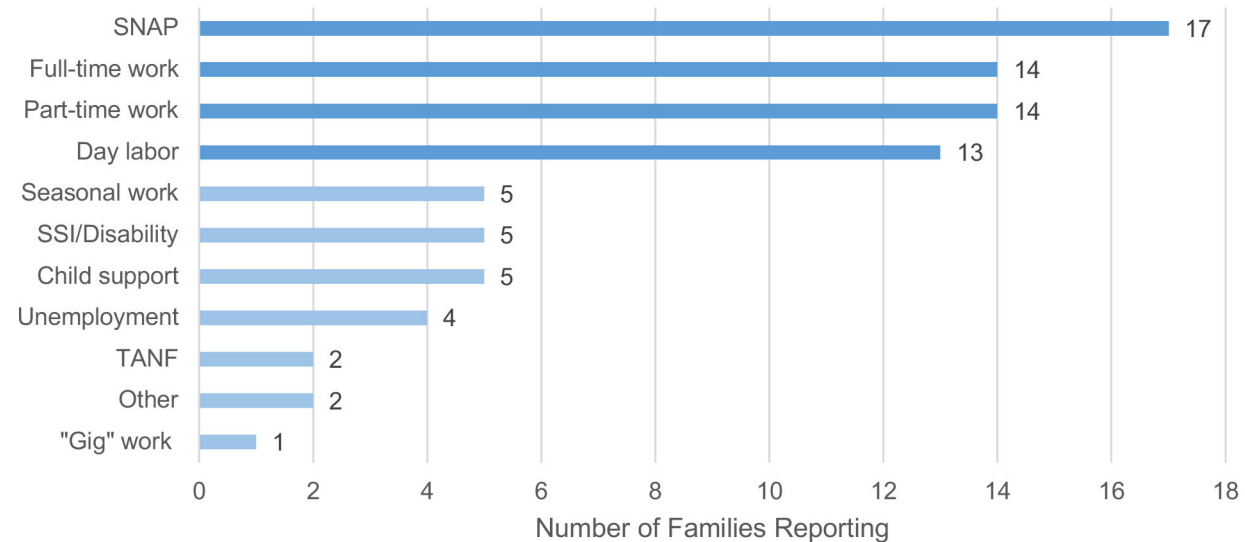
More than half of the families surveyed reported "moving into my own home" as a goal, with several noting they hoped to move into a safe home with a yard for their children. All families indicated they had interest in moving into more stable housing. Yet, several barriers – mostly related to housing affordability or evictions – were preventing families from their goal of a home (Figure 10). When asked, "What would it take to help you move into an apartment or more stable housing tomorrow?" nearly half of the parents responded simply, "money."

Figure 10. What barriers may prevent you from moving into an apartment or house?



Building on the finding related to economic barriers, the survey also included questions about income, employment, and finances. Families reported income from a variety of sources, including full-time work, part-time work, or day labor (Figure 11). Positions like day labor are especially precarious, as they do not offer any stability for income.

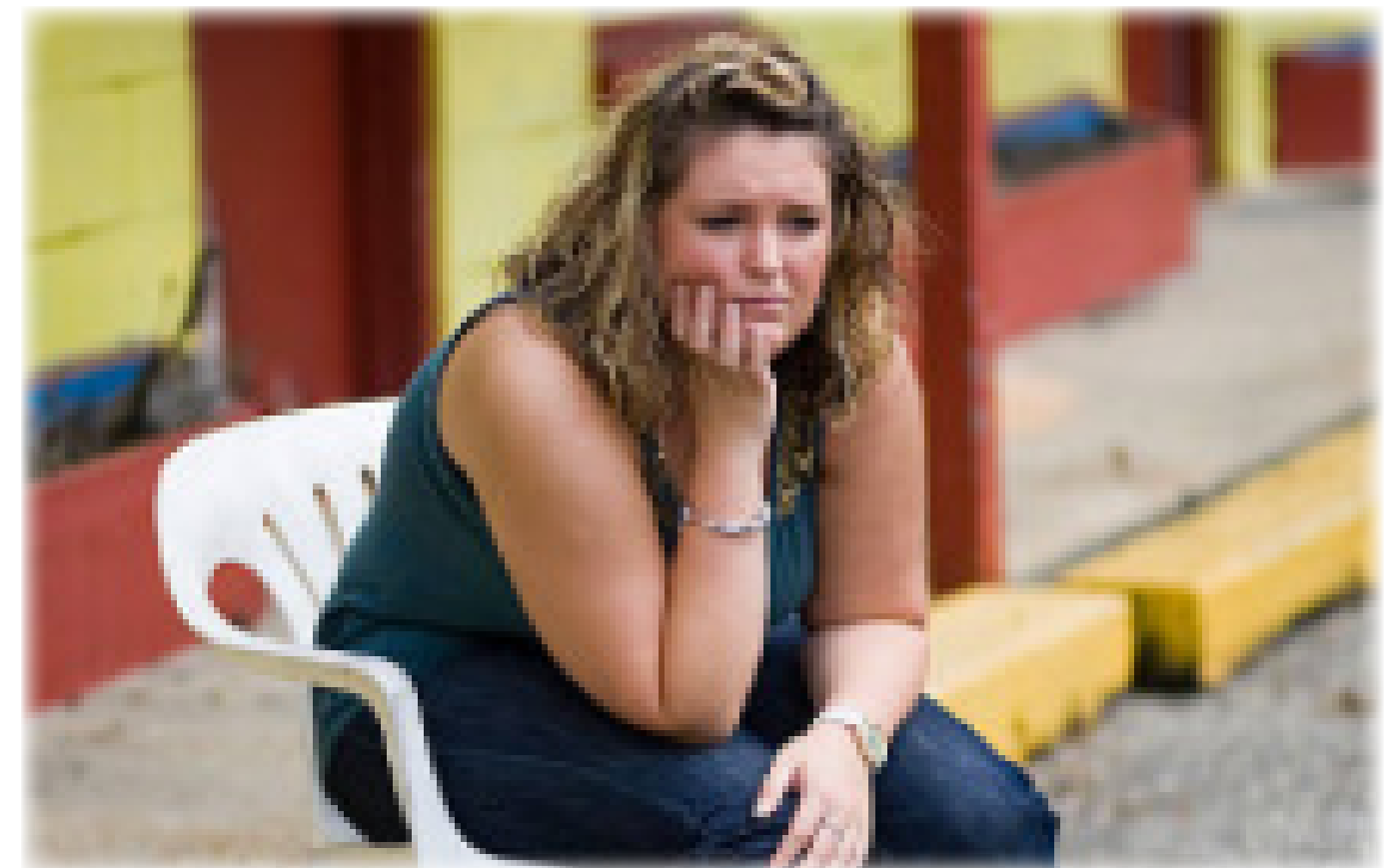
Figure 11. What are your sources of income?



Some families received supplemental income in the form of benefits like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or Social Security, but few were receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) income. Participation in the workforce is difficult for some parents who lack access to childcare or transportation, as has been documented by our Journey Mapping Project. Some respondents shared with our survey team that the pandemic also had negatively impacted their livelihood, through either a job loss or a reduction in hours.

Even with income, most families seem to be struggling financially, with only 16% reporting they paid for their motel stay on a monthly basis. The majority of families (67%) were paying rent on a weekly basis, and the remainder (17%) were paying for the room one night at a time. Some mothers shared that they slept in their cars with their families on the nights when they could not afford a room.

When asked to comment on the payment arrangements at the motels, several families indicated it was incredibly stressful to have to come up with money on a daily basis and that it was difficult not knowing if they would have a place to sleep the next night. Without a lease, there are no tenant protections in a motel setting, so even when eviction moratoriums were in place to keep tenants housed during the pandemic, these families were subject to being evicted from their rooms at any time for non-payment. Unbanked families also face challenges related to accessing motels. Nearly half (46%) of the people surveyed did not have a bank account and had to rely on motels that accept cash payments.



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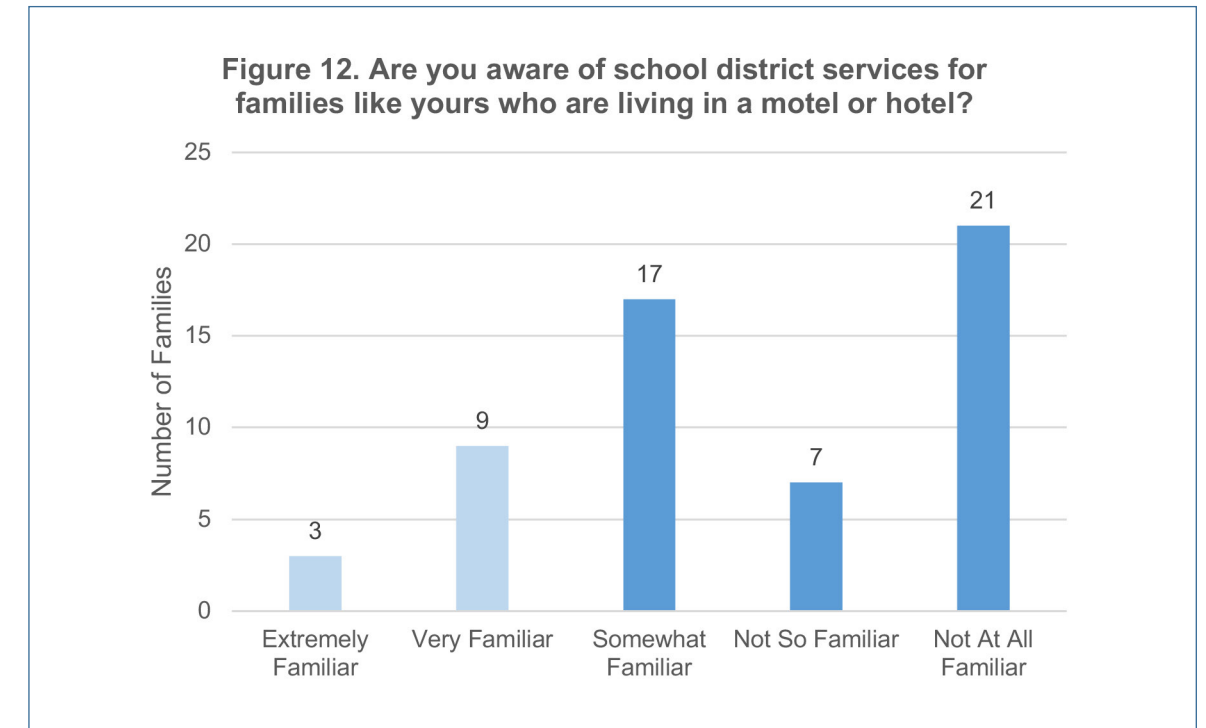


What about the Children Living in Motels? As previously mentioned, children experiencing homelessness represent a population with unique needs, including childcare, education, and other support services. A final portion of this needs assessment specifically focused on childcare needs for families, especially with young children, and support for academic success for school-aged children.

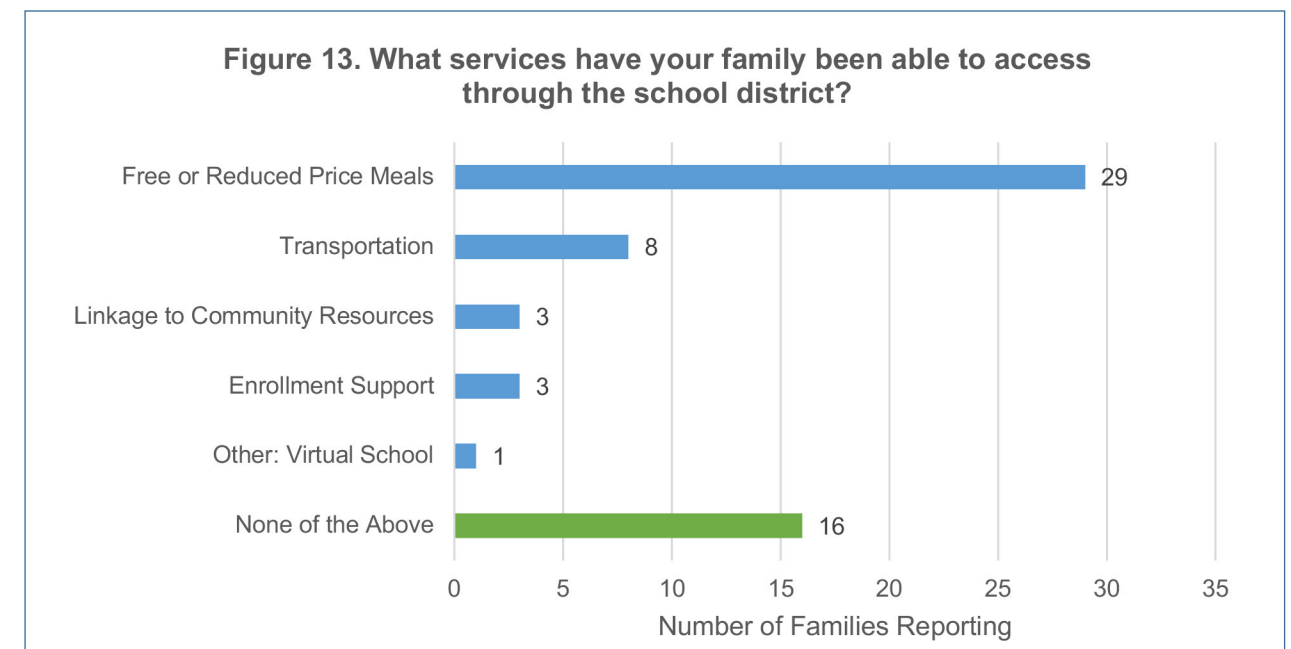
Access to Affordable Childcare. Equitable access to high-quality childcare benefits the entire family. Yet, as previously described, childcare continues to be an immediate need. For that reason, families lacking a fixed, permanent address (including those living in motels) typically qualify for subsidized childcare through a number of programs including Child Care Management Services (CCMS) and Early Head Start. However, there was a lack of awareness of these programs among the families surveyed. When surveyed, 68% of families with children under the age of 5 reported they were not aware that they qualify for subsidized care while living in the motel. Only nine of the 70 families surveyed reported they had applied for childcare services of any kind, with five successfully receiving services and four being placed on a wait list.

School Support Services. Public schools offer a number of supportive services for school-aged children experiencing homelessness including transportation, enrollment support, free or reduced-price meals, and others. These services are federally mandated by the McKinney-Vento Act and are intended to provide school stability for students who may be highly mobile, including those who are living in doubled-up situations or in motels.

Of the 58 families surveyed that included school-aged children (5-17), more than one-third reported they were “not at all familiar” with supportive services available for their students (Figure 12). Just 12 families shared that they were “extremely” or “very” familiar with district services.

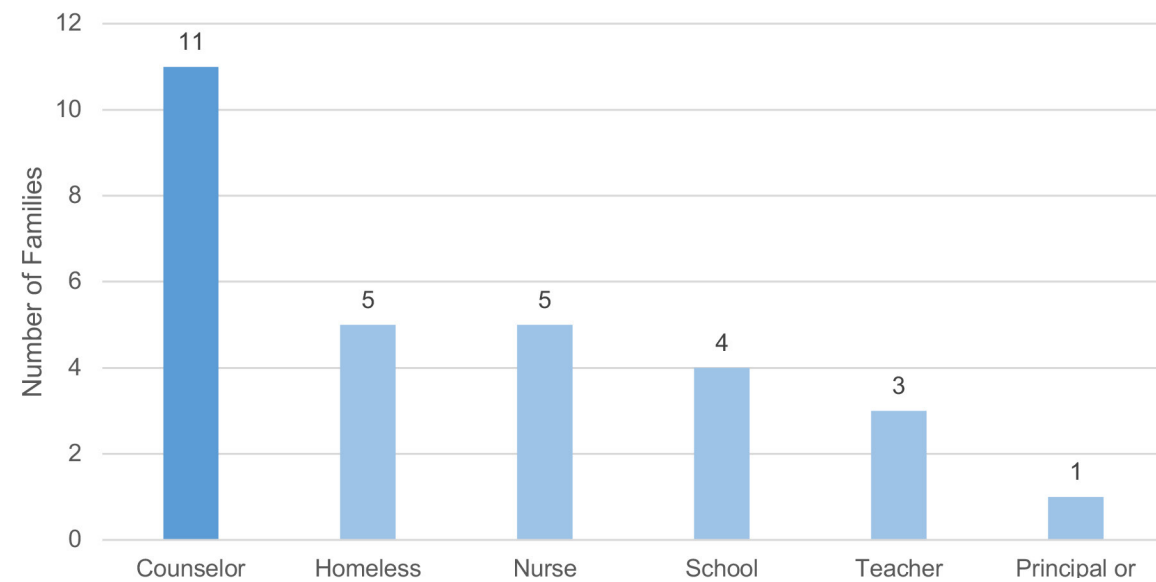


The supportive service used most frequently by the families surveyed was *free or reduced-price meals* (Figure 13). However, this finding may be skewed by the fact that several area school districts are currently offering meals at no charge at all campuses using U.S. Department of Agriculture funding provided in response to the pandemic. For free meals in most districts in 2021, no enrollment process is required. *Transportation* was the second most common service used from the school district..



For those families who were receiving services, school counselors were most likely to be the ones who served as the entry point to connect students with supports (Figure 14).

Figure 14. If you are receiving services, who has helped you with that process?



Note: Answered by 29 families. Twenty-six families reported not being able to access services from the district.

IMPLICATIONS

This was the first needs assessment of families experiencing homelessness in motels in Tarrant County. This report is a piece to the overall blueprint to understanding and eliminating family homelessness in our community. Overall, two key themes emerged. The families surveyed as part of this needs assessment mirror the unsheltered and shelter-based homeless population in a number of ways (e.g., demographics, reasons for homelessness). As one person within the homeless services system put it, “this is the pipeline” to our homeless population in Tarrant County that is served by HUD programs. Our community needs to have upstream strategies focusing more on prevention and diversion.

That leads to the second major takeaway from this project: families living in motels experience extraordinarily stressful situations while seeking stable housing. Many of the families are paying their rent on a daily basis, unsure if they will be able to afford rent the next night. Despite this day-to-day struggle, some families are paying totals of up to \$1400 per month, a small bit at a time. Even during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, these renters were not protected from being evicted for non-payment. One woman, who paid daily, told our surveyor that “*being able to pay for a whole week would be such a blessing.*” This instability is incredibly stressful, especially for families with young children, leading to long-term trauma and reduced ability to plan for the future and succeed in the work force.



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Furthermore, some of the barriers described within this report reflect ongoing challenges within our community. The Journey Mapping Project elucidated the three key factors needed for families to reach the goal of stable housing: *employment, childcare, and transportation*. Without affordable, accessible, and high-quality childcare, participation in

the workforce is nearly impossible, leaving families stuck in poverty. This is especially true for single mothers. Moreover, having accessible transportation can be challenging when the location of motels may not be on city-transit bus lines, thus affecting transportation to childcare and employment. As stated by the families in this report, additional economic resources are needed to move out of the motels.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this assessment, we propose the following recommendations to prioritize the needs of families living unstably in motels:

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1. Regularly assessing the number of families living in motels and the conditions of motel living would be beneficial for the homeless services system, city, and county planners, as well as policymakers who allocate current and future resources.
 2. Homeless services should consider families living in motels, especially those who alternate between living in cars and motels, as homeless for determining admission to homeless services programs.
 3. To be effective with families, outreach programs should inform families living in motels about eligibility of services and basic needs assistance.
 4. Shelters should consider conducting outreach to assist families in understanding the safety and quality of local shelters, and that these shelters are the entry-point to services and housing.
 5. Local leaders should review the legality of operating motels as de facto long-term housing and the implications of avoiding tenant protections that apply to landlord-tenant relationships.
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To fully address the issue of homelessness in Tarrant County, it is crucial that our systems look at the needs of these families living in motels when allocating funding and developing programs. In the interest of reduced childhood trauma, increased workforce participation for parents, and greater opportunity for success in school for children, we should look upstream to serve these families where they are, rather than waiting until they slip into unsheltered homelessness.



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