



Assessment Checklist for Families Who Are Experiencing Homelessness

Families experiencing homelessness struggle with structural and psychosocial issues.

Severe poverty, un/underemployment, and lack of affordable housing drive children and families into homelessness, necessitating structural solutions. In addition, these families demonstrate a near universal exposure to interpersonal violence and trauma (Bassuk, DeCandia, Beach, & Berman, 2014; Hayes & DeCandia, 2012; Hayes, Zonneville, Bassuk, 2013). As a result, many homeless mothers develop medical and mental health conditions (Bassuk et al., 2014; Bassuk & Beardslee, 2014), and their children often exhibit developmental delays, mental health and learning problems (Bassuk, Richard, & Tsertsvadze, 2014; Haskett, Armstrong, Tisdale, 2015) that can go untreated for years.

Historically, the full range of needs for homeless families has not been routinely assessed. Currently, evidence regarding the risk profiles of homeless families has not been systematically included in assessment protocols for homeless families (DeCandia, Bassuk, Richard, in press). For example, despite the fact that “children living in poverty are more likely than other children to have mental health problems and their conditions are more likely to be severe” (Institute of Medicine, 2015, pp. 120), homeless children are rarely assessed (DeCandia et al., in press). Inadequate assessment and poor access to mainstream services leave homeless families significantly underserved (Hayes & DeCandia, 2012; Shipman & Taussig, 2009).

Homeless families like other highly marginalized populations have complex, interrelated needs requiring a holistic approach to care (Smyth, Goodman, & Glenn, 2006). Evidence-informed assessments that incorporate an ecological perspective—simultaneously considering structural, familial, and individual needs of all family members—are recommended to ensure service referrals are targeted to their specific needs (DeCandia, 2015; DeCandia, Bassuk, Richard, in press).

THE CHECKLIST

The Assessment Checklist for Homeless Family Providers was created to assist service providers in conducting comprehensive, evidence-informed assessments of the families they are serving. Based on a review of the literature, this checklist covers 8 domains known to be relevant to the care of homeless families: (1) family demographics, (2) immediate safety needs, (3) housing and homelessness, (4) self-sufficiency, (5) service use, (6) parent functioning, (7) child development, and (8) use of standardized screening instruments (e.g., child development, trauma, depression, parenting, social supports). Parental functioning has been further developed to capture the various aspects of a mother and/or father's life that can impact family functioning and child development: health, mental health, substance use, trauma, criminal justice involvement, social supports, and parenting styles and skills. As mothers represent the majority of parents in homeless families, their particular risk profiles are accounted for through questions related to interpersonal trauma, intimate partner violence (IPV) and maternal depression.

HOW TO USE THE CHECKLIST

The Assessment Checklist for Homelessness Family Providers is an easy-to-use, self-assessment tool to help service providers conduct assessments for their program or as part of a community-based coordinated assessment process. The checklist provides guidance on what to assess, what types of questions to include, and what type of standardized instruments to use in the assessment process.

Using the self-rating scale, providers can determine if they are strong, adequate, or in need of improvement in a particular assessment category. To use the Assessment Checklist:

- Review your assessment protocols and check off each item that is present.
- Place an X in the box for items that are absent.
- Within each category, under the "Self-Rating" column, rate yourself as:
 - **Strong** if greater than 50% of the items in the category are checked as present on the program's assessment protocol.
 - **Adequate** if 50% of the items listed under a category are checked.
 - **Needs Improvement** if less than 50% of items in a category are checked.
- Use the results to identify gaps in the assessment protocol.
- Add questions or add standard assessments where absent.

For guidance on how to construct a comprehensive assessment of homeless families, specific instruments to use, types of questions to ask, please email cdecandia@bassukcenter.org.



Assessment Checklist for Homelessness Family Providers

Domains	Information to be Gathered	Self rating: Strong (>50%), Adequate (50%), Needs Improvement (<50%)
Family Demographics	<input type="checkbox"/> Identifying information <input type="checkbox"/> DOB <input type="checkbox"/> Gender <input type="checkbox"/> Marital status) <input type="checkbox"/> Veteran status <input type="checkbox"/> Race/ethnicity <input type="checkbox"/> Primary language <input type="checkbox"/> Family Composition <input type="checkbox"/> Pregnancy status <input type="checkbox"/> Custody status <input type="checkbox"/> Children’s schools and grades	
Immediate Safety Needs	<input type="checkbox"/> Immediate/emergency needs <input type="checkbox"/> History of domestic violence <input type="checkbox"/> Current risk for DV/if have a restraining order <input type="checkbox"/> Risk of harm to self, or others, by any family member <input type="checkbox"/> Health/medical issue of any family members requiring attention	
Housing History and Needs	<input type="checkbox"/> General housing questions: (e.g., Where did you stay last night? Can you return? Do you have a place you can stay?) <input type="checkbox"/> Housing history <input type="checkbox"/> Evictions <input type="checkbox"/> Residential Instability (e.g., # of moves in past year) <input type="checkbox"/> Homelessness history <input type="checkbox"/> Duration of previous homelessness <input type="checkbox"/> Housing needs and wants (location/community preference)	
Self-Sufficiency	<input type="checkbox"/> Parents’ employment and income <input type="checkbox"/> Benefits <input type="checkbox"/> Debt/credit history <input type="checkbox"/> Savings and payment plans <input type="checkbox"/> Highest level of education and current school <input type="checkbox"/> Employment history <input type="checkbox"/> Job skills <input type="checkbox"/> Preferences for next steps <input type="checkbox"/> Access to transportation <input type="checkbox"/> Child care needs	
Service Use	<input type="checkbox"/> History with service providers <input type="checkbox"/> Health insurance <input type="checkbox"/> SSI benefits for all family members <input type="checkbox"/> Medical providers <input type="checkbox"/> Mental health providers <input type="checkbox"/> Substance use treatment <input type="checkbox"/> Providers involved with children	
Parent Functioning		
Physical Health	<input type="checkbox"/> General health question (e.g., How is your health?) <input type="checkbox"/> Parent’s physical health status (e.g., Illnesses/diagnoses) <input type="checkbox"/> Medications <input type="checkbox"/> HIV status <input type="checkbox"/> Disability status and supports	
Mental Health	<input type="checkbox"/> General mental health question (e.g., Do you have a mental health issue?) <input type="checkbox"/> Parent’s mental health diagnosis <input type="checkbox"/> Medications taken for mental health disorder <input type="checkbox"/> History of hospitalizations for mental health issues	
Substance Use	<input type="checkbox"/> Parent’s substance use history (e.g., How long? What type?) <input type="checkbox"/> Parent’s current substance use (e.g. denied, sober, declined)	
Trauma	<input type="checkbox"/> Exposure to trauma in lifetime <input type="checkbox"/> Exposure to trauma as adult <input type="checkbox"/> PTSD and symptom severity	
Criminal	<input type="checkbox"/> Parent’s criminal background (e.g., arrests, probation, charges)	
Social Supports	<input type="checkbox"/> General support question <input type="checkbox"/> Formal social supports (e.g., providers, community groups) <input type="checkbox"/> Informal supports (people who can be called upon to help)	
Parenting	<input type="checkbox"/> Parent’s report of quality of relationship with each child <input type="checkbox"/> Parenting skills <input type="checkbox"/> Routines <input type="checkbox"/> Discipline methods	
Child Development	<input type="checkbox"/> Each child’s developmental status <input type="checkbox"/> Physical health <input type="checkbox"/> Medical diagnosis <input type="checkbox"/> Mental health diagnosis <input type="checkbox"/> Learning needs <input type="checkbox"/> Special education services <input type="checkbox"/> Early intervention	
Standardized Screening Instruments	<input type="checkbox"/> Standardized assessment protocol (e.g., Family VI-SPDAT) <input type="checkbox"/> Standardized depression and trauma screeners <input type="checkbox"/> Social support scale <input type="checkbox"/> Parenting instrument <input type="checkbox"/> Child development screener	



References

Bassuk, E. L. & Beardslee, W. (2014). Depression in homeless mothers: Addressing an unrecognized public health issue. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *84*, 73–81.

Bassuk, E.L., DeCandia, C.J., Beach, C. A., & Berman, F. (2014). *America's youngest outcasts: A report card on child homelessness*. The National Center on Family Homelessness at American Institutes for Research. Waltham, MA. Retrieved from www.homelesschildrenamerica.org

Bassuk, E. L., DeCandia, C. J., Tsertsvadze, A., & Richard, M. K. (2014). The effectiveness of housing interventions and housing and service interventions on ending family homelessness: A systematic review. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *84*, 457–474.

DeCandia, C. J., Bassuk E. L., & Richard, M. K. (in press). Assessment of families experiencing homelessness: Analysis of current practice. *Advances in Child and Family Policy and Practice*, Springer Publishing.

DeCandia, C.J. (2015). *Assessment of homeless families: A guide for practitioners and policy makers*. Boston, MA: Homes for Families, Inc.

Haskett, M. E., Armstrong, J. M. & Tisdale, J. (2015). Developmental status and social–emotional functioning of young children experiencing homelessness. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 1-7.

Hayes, M., & DeCandia, C. J. (2012). *The SHIFT Study: A cost analysis of housing and services for families*. Needham, MA: The National Center on Family Homelessness.

Hayes, M., Zonneville, M., & Bassuk, E. (2013). *The SHIFT Study final report: Service and housing interventions for families in transition*. Needham, MA: The National Center on Family Homelessness.

Institute of Medicine (2015). *Poverty and childhood disability*. In Mental Disorders and Disabilities Among Low-Income Children. Boat, T.F. and Wu, J.T. (Eds). Institute of Medicine, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. The National Academies Press. Washington, D.C.

Shipman, K., & Taussig, H. (2009). Mental health treatment of child maltreatment and neglect. *Pediatric Clinics of North America*, *56*, 417–428.

Smyth, K.F., Goodman, L. A., & Glenn, C. (2006). The Full-Frame Approach: A new response to marginalized women left behind by specialized services. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *76*, 489-502.

Suggested citation: DeCandia, Bassuk, Richard (2015). Assessment Checklist for Families Experiencing Homelessness. The Bassuk Center on Homeless and Vulnerable Children and Youth Needham, Ma.

