



2022

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Recommended Citation

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Effectiveness of Occupational Therapy Services on Quality of Life Among Chronically Homeless Mothers with Children

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***This resource was written by doctoral-level students in fulfillment of the requirements of the Occupational Therapy course “OT 403 - Clinical Research Methods in Occupational Therapy” at the University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences, under the advisement of Professor/Course Director Anne Haskins, Ph.D., OTR/L, Assistant Professor Breann Lamborn, EdD, MPA, Professor Emeritus Gail Bass Ph.D., OTR/L, and Research and Education Librarian Devon Olson Lambert, MLIS.



Dullum, S. A., Fussy, C. F., & Jacobson, C. M., 2022

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Focused Question

To what degree does providing occupational therapy services for chronically homeless mothers improve their overall quality of life?

Case Scenario

Homelessness is a highly prevalent issue in the United States with 3.5 million Americans falling within this population (Finfgels-Connett, 2010). Of the 3.5 million homeless Americans, 17% were single women, and 30% were families with children. These statistics show that the United States leads all nations in numbers of homeless women and children (Finfgeld-Connett, 2010). Homeless families typically consist of the mother alone with their children. Women who are homeless often have a history of trauma, violence, and abuse in their childhood. These mothers endure a lot of stress along with mental and physical health issues (Schultz-Krohn et. al., 2021).

The Housing Urban Development (HUD) Exchange defines chronically homelessness as “an individual living in a place not meant for human habitation, a shelter, or a safe haven for at least 12 months or 4 separate times within 3 years” (US Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2015, p. 1). The effects of being chronically homeless can lead to many different issues and occupational deprivation. Schulz-Krohn et., al (2021) defined occupational deprivation as the experience when an individual faces external barriers to engaging in occupations. Some of these problems they face include depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), high incidence of chronic health conditions, mental health issues, poor physical health, increased stress, loss of social support, and deterioration of parental roles (Schultz-Krohn et., al. 2021). Primary causes of homelessness among women include domestic violence, mental illness, and substance abuse (Finfgeld-Connett, 2010). The effect of mothers being chronically homeless can also negatively impact their children. Children with chronically homeless mothers experience higher than typical rates of physical and mental health problems and problems at school (Finfgeld-Connett, 2010; Shinn et. al., 2015). These effects of being chronically homeless can occur due to how the environment impacts the mothers and their occupations.

When considering a theory that aligns with the focus question the Person-Environment Occupation (PEO) Model was chosen. This model focuses on the best fit between the person, environment, and occupation (Baptiste, 2017). With the population of chronically homeless mothers the environment was observed and showed how it can affect their occupations. The shelter may include its physical space, shelter rules, social policies, work, and childcare. “Lack of privacy and center rules are typical in shelters and may diminish one’s sense of autonomy and feelings of capability, as a mother and primary caregiver in this environment” (Rybski & Israel, 2017, p. 349). These diminished feelings of capability impact the mother’s self-efficacy, which impacts the parents' sense of confidence which is due to their environment (Rybski & Israel, 2017). Having a negative impact on their self-efficacy impacts the homeless mothers’s occupations of caring for their children, health and personal hygiene, and social participation (Bassuk et., al, 1996; Hodnicki & Horner, 1993; Memmott & Young, 1993).

Homelessness can be looked at in three categories: transitionally, episodically, and chronically. For the purpose of this critically appraised topic, the chronically homeless population will be the focus and can be defined by when a homeless individual uses a shelter for



a long-term basis (Grandisson et al., 2009). While staying at a homeless shelter the individual is provided safety from the outside elements, however, the individuals do not always have access to the different services that would be beneficial. Schultz-Krohn et al., (2021) stated “The environment of a homeless shelter does not typically provide these services as a means to diminish stress and promote health and well-being” (p.121). Evidence has shown that there are gaps in the needs of these individuals and barriers in accessibility to the services. After reviewing seven different studies in a systematic review, Thomas et al., (2001) identified four areas of occupational therapy needs. Those areas included employment and education, money management, coping skills, and leisure skills (p. 47).

Occupational therapists have a unique approach whereby they provide care in a client-centered manner. There is a belief that an individual that engages in personally meaningful occupations will have better health and quality of life (Thomas, et al., 2011). For the purpose of this critically appraised topic, quality of life can be defined as “an individual’s perception of their position in life in the context of culture and value systems in which they live, and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns” (World Health Organization, 2012 p. 12). Tryssenaar et al., (1999) suggested that developing occupational therapy programs in homeless shelters builds on the profession’s vision of decreasing barriers to participation. “They indicated that the role of occupational therapy is well justified for this clientele, who have identified work and contribution to society as being important” (Grandisson, et al., 2009 p. 492). Improvements in the areas of physical health, mental health, and social living skills have been found to lead to improvement in the areas of acquiring stable housing, work or school, and parenting (Finfgeld-Connett, 2010). Occupational therapy focuses on all the areas that have been found to lead to improvements in homeless women. Occupational therapy could benefit this population by identifying areas of occupation that are deprived, and necessary to improve the wellness and quality of life of women who are chronically homeless with children (Thomas, et al., 2011 and Grandisson, et al., 2009). An occupational approach that has been tried is providing mothers with the opportunity to partake in engaging in a craft group where others watched their child during that period of time. Schultz-Krohn et al., (2021) found that “engaging in craft groups also provides the opportunities to practice various process skills, such as planning and problem-solving, and gain social support that imparts a sense of acceptance, community, and improved self-esteem” (p. 121).

Purpose Statement

Chronically homeless mothers face many challenges with their quality of life due to trauma, mental illness, substance abuse, and stress that impacts the person, their environment, and occupations. Currently there is a lack of occupational therapy interventions for improving the quality of life for this population. The purpose of this critically appraised topic is to address the role of occupational therapy within the population of chronically homeless mothers and how it can improve their quality of life.

Methodology

An initial literature search was conducted from March 4, 2022, to March 8, 2022. Searches occurred on education and multidisciplinary databases, which included, Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), the School of Medicine and Health Sciences (SMHS) library resources page which has access to PubMed CINAHL, OT Search, etc.,



and PubMed. When searching for literature, no limitations were applied, due to the lack of research done on chronically homeless mothers. The following terms were used when searching for literature: “occupational therapy,” “chronic homelessness,” “mothers,” “children,” “homeless,” “homelessness,” “caring,” “issues,” “occupational needs,” “occupation,” “homeless mothers,” “needs,” “systematic review,” “interventions,” “family,” “families,” “occupation,” “problems,” and “difficulties”. The boolean search term “AND” was used in search phrases to generate more defined search results.

Types of Articles Reviewed

A total of 30 articles were reviewed and 27 were selected for further review. Of the 27 articles reviewed in-depth, 5 were level I studies (Cutuli & Herbers 2019; Guo et al., 2016; Oppenheimer et al., 2016; Shinn et al., 2015; Upshur et al., 2015), 1 level IV study (Bassuk et al., 1996), 2 level V studies (Rybski & Israel, 2017; Thomas et al., 2011), and 16 level NA (Cunningham & Slade, 2019; Davis & Kutter, 1998; Finfgeld-Connet, 2010; Grandisson et al., 2009; Gültekin et al., 2014; Hodnicki & Horner, 1993; Lloyd & Bassett, 2012; Memmott & Young, 1993; Salsi et al., 2017; Schultz-Krohn et al., 2006; Schultz-Krohn et al., 2021; Tischler et al., 2007; Tryssenaar et al., 1999; Tyminski & Gonzalez, 2020; Vazques et al., 2020; Zabkiewicz et al., 2014). Other resources reviewed included an occupational therapy practice framework (American Occupational Therapy Association, AOTA, 2020) and government websites (US Department of Housing and Urban Development 2015; World Health Organization, 2012).

Synthesis

Theoretical Base

The goal of this critically appraised topic (CAT) was to gain an understanding of how occupational therapy interventions and services can support chronically homeless mothers. To understand these topics the CAT was looked at through the Person-Environment-Occupational (PEO) model. The literature provided evidence on how person and environment factors impact the occupations of chronically homeless mothers. Their person factors may include trauma, substance abuse, depression, anxiety, and negative feelings of self-efficacy when parenting (Rybski & Israel, 2017). The environmental factors that can affect the occupations include the shelter, the rules within the shelter, social policies, and their place of work. These factors lead to difficulties with occupations of survival and occupations of self-management. An occupation of self-management that is negatively impacted is the lack of privacy and rules in the shelter may diminish feelings of capability the mother has (Rybski & Israel, 2017).

Impact of Chronic Homeless on Occupational Participation

Impacts on Physical Health

Homelessness impacts many individuals in a variety of different ways. The effects can range from short to long-term, and have an impact on their physical and/or mental health. A study done by Oppenheimer et al., (2014) assessed data that was obtained from the cross-sectional, 2011 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) the findings showed individuals experiencing homelessness, compared to individuals who are low-income but housed, have a greater chance of death at an earlier age and an increased chance of developing



preventable conditions. These individuals also have a higher prevalence and severity of acute chronic illness as well as not having many of their health needs being met (Oppenheimer et al., 2014). Oftentimes the individual's physical health becomes impacted due to the lack of access and attention from a variety of people including doctors and family members. Some of the different physical health problems that these mothers are facing include asthma, anemia, ulcers, and dental problems (Guo et al., 2015). “Thus, a family experiencing homelessness is not only at risk for the short-term health implications of housing instability, but they are also at risk for diminished educational and mental health outcomes as well as increased behavioral problems” (Gültekin et al. 2014 p.4).

Impacts on Mental Health

Many homeless mothers often experience some form of a mental health disease. This is because of the pressure that they put on themselves and the pressure of having another human being dependent on them for basic care and assistance. In a comparative analysis, Hodnicki and Horner (1993), interviewed a group of 6 homeless mothers where they summarized the mothers' statements about sacrificing limited resources to give support to their children. In the interviews the mothers' talked about how their children are dependent on them, the focus is on their children, and they will do more for their children than themselves because their children are the top priority in their lives. Along with prioritizing their children before their own health, many of the mothers face the stigma that comes with having a child and being homeless. The pressures that these mothers face over time creates an overwhelming feeling and many of the mothers express the experience of dealing with major depression (Hodnicki & Horner, 1993). Rates of major depression in mothers who experience homelessness are in ranges of 45-85% (Guo et al., 2015 and Rybski & Israel, 2017).

Role of Occupational Therapy in Homelessness

Benefits of Occupational Therapy

The goal of occupational therapy services for chronically homeless women is to promote participation in occupations that are desired and necessary for a better quality of life. Overall, occupational therapists assist clients who feel excluded, isolated, hopeless, or worthless and help them become a part of their social world by ensuring the client's environments and social networks are as supportive as possible (Lloyd & Bassett, 2012). A qualitative study done by Grandisson et. al., (2009) included twenty-two occupational therapists and looked at their perceptions of their role with people who are homeless. Grandisson et. al., (2009) found that specific areas occupational therapists assist this population with are through training in financial assistance, along with basic daily life skills, and skills that would help them contribute to society. These needs align with the values of occupational therapy, making this an ideal population for occupational therapy to work with (Grandisson et. al., 2009). Areas occupational therapists could assess include cognitive abilities, environmental status, environmental resources, safety need, behavioral need, and psychosocial need (Grandisson et. al., 2009). Other skills training occupational therapy could provide is training in independent living skills training, money management and budgeting, and self-validation activities (Grandisson et. al., 2009). Homeless mothers are typically a vulnerable population, and a finding of a two-group cross sectional study done by Rybski & Israel (2017) indicated that occupational therapy can help build mothers' parenting self-efficacy and enhance their parenting skills.



Limitations of Occupational Therapy

Occupational therapy is useful in helping improve homeless mothers' quality of life through participation in meaningful occupations, but there are some limitations when attempting to provide services for this population. One limitation is healthcare accessibility. Many people in this population do not have health insurance and would not be able to afford service even if they want it (Grandisson et al., 2009). Another issue that often arises is the ability to get referrals. Typically, this population does not have a residential address, therefore they are outside of the referral access channels (Grandisson et. al., 2009). Occupational therapy is a profession that people are often unaware of, which results in people not understanding how occupational therapists can assist the homeless population (Grandisson et al., 2009). One final limitation is occupational therapists' perception and confidence with their role of assisting homeless mothers. A qualitative study by Grandisson et. al., (2009) found that occupational therapists recognize their value and role within this population, but often feel unprepared. Many occupational therapists said there is a need for educating undergraduate students in the area of homelessness as well as providing continuing education courses for occupational therapists currently practicing.

Current Services

Impact of Services

There have been multiple programs implemented to help benefit homeless mothers that have shown positive results. According to Schultz-Krohn (2006), part of implementing interventions involves building a trusting relationship between the therapist and mother. The reason behind building this trust was to show the mother her opinions were validated, and her goals could be implemented. In the United Kingdom there have been day centers or other accommodation services created. These services offer occupational opportunities such as sports, leisure, cultural, and educational activities

(Grandisson et. al. 2009). Other life skills such as budgeting and cooking are also offered at these centers for homeless mothers. Granisson et. al., (2009) also stated that the occupational opportunities in these day centers are done with group therapy. Group therapy is valuable to the homeless mothers because it provides a sense of belonging and shows that they are not alone (Grandisson et., al, 2009).

Summary

Overall, 30 articles were initially reviewed and 18 were used as evidence throughout this CAT. The articles were written on topics related to mental health, physical health, and occupational therapy, and how they impact chronically homeless mothers. The following main points were found:

- Occupational therapy's values align with the needs of chronically homeless mothers with children, and can help areas that impact the person, environment, and occupations by providing training in financial assistance, along with basic daily life skills, and skills that would help them contribute to society (Grandisson et. al., 2009)



- Physical and mental health in chronically homeless mothers is greatly impacted. Homeless mothers with children have higher prevalences of chronic illness and many other health needs being unmet due to lack of access and attention from healthcare providers or family (Oppenheimer et. al., 2014)
- The pressure of having a child and having to provide for them is one prevalent reason why homeless mothers experience some sort of mental health disease (Hodinicki and Horner, 1993).
- Programs to support homeless mothers have been shown to benefit them by providing interventions relating to life skills, education, culture, and personal interests (Grandisson et. al. 2009).

The purpose of researching these topics was to examine the literature regarding using occupational therapy as a tool for improving the quality of life for chronically homeless mothers. A review of literature shows that occupational therapy working with the homeless population is an emerging practice that needs more evidence to support the use of OT with this population.

Clinical Bottom Line

To what degree does providing occupational therapy services for chronically homeless mothers improve their overall quality of life?

While there is literature to show the importance of providing services to chronically homeless mothers there is little to show the role that occupational therapy has in providing the different services. To understand the effects of occupational therapy services to homeless mothers, the PEO model was used to look at how the person and the environment impacts the ability to engage in occupations and meet their occupational needs (Rybski & Israel, 2017). Chronically homeless mothers are negatively impacted due to contextual factors such as a lack of stability in housing and a lack of positive social engagement. Person factors that inhibit this population are socioeconomic status, life experiences, mental health, and physical health (American Occupational Therapy Association, AOTA, 2020). Addressing these contextual factors reduces the risk of the short-term or long-term health implications that homeless mothers and families have due to their housing instability and improves their education, mental health status as well as improving their overall quality of life (Gültekin et al. 2014).

After reviewing the literature for this CAT, it was discovered that there is limited information in regards to how homeless mothers meet their occupational needs. However, there are many articles that show the correlation between individuals being homeless and their mental health being negatively impacted (Guo et al., 2015; Hodinicki & Horner, 1993; Memmott & Young, 1993; Rybski & Israel, 2017; Tischler et. al., 2007; Zabkiewics et. al., 2014). The occupational therapy services provided at the shelters would help alleviate their struggles with mental health by incorporating programs and activities that allow the individuals to learn more on how to address these issues. Being able to address the issues that this population has will allow for a smooth transition back into society.

The literature that has been reviewed will be useful for guiding the implementation of occupational therapy services to address the needs of chronically homeless mothers. The role of occupational therapy within the homeless community is to promote participation in occupations that are designed to improve the overall quality of life for chronically homeless mothers through the use of training in finances, basic daily life skills, and skills to help them contribute to society



(Grandisson et. al., 2009 and Lloyd & Bassett, 2012). Current programs implemented offer engagement in leisure activities (Schultz-Krohn et. al., 2021), however, occupational therapists can implement programs that focus on evaluation and intervention in areas of social participation, instrumental activities of daily living, and remain client centered. These are unique areas in which occupational therapy focuses on and values.



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