Diaper Need Among Homeless Families in Illinois  
May 2017

Introduction

We all want babies to be happy and healthy. We do not want to see them suffer because they are born into families that have limited means to provide for their basic needs. During the first three years of life, one of babies' most basic needs is for clean diapers, but the families of the 183,000 infants and toddlers living in deep poverty often cannot afford a consistent supply of diapers. On average, babies need 6-10 diapers a day, which costs around $80 per month. A family of three in deep poverty lives on $850 or less a month; a full supply of diapers for one child consumes around 10% or more of their family’s income. Neither SNAP (food stamps) nor WIC program benefits can be used for purchasing diapers. The dollars needed to keep babies warm and dry must be stretched to also pay rent, utilities, and meet other basic needs. Families are forced to make tough choices between purchasing sufficient diapers and other daily necessities.

The consequences of diaper insufficiency can be harsh for children, for their parents, and for society.¹ When families cannot afford enough diapers, they may extend the use of diapers by not changing them as often as necessary or drying and re-using them.² This practice can lead to serious health problems including diaper rash, urinary tract infections, skin infections, and oral-fecal contamination. Norovirus, rotavirus, and other infectious agents can contaminate feces and leaking, soiled diapers can lead to the spread of these illnesses.³ Additionally, frequent hand to mouth behavior by infants can exacerbate the spread of germs from soiled diapers. Diaper dermatitis can progress to skin breakdown with secondary infections that may require hospitalization. Parents’ mental health is also affected when they cannot afford an adequate supply of diapers.⁴ Increasing the availability of clean diapers for families in need could improve health outcomes for children, reduce visits to the emergency room, and potentially reduce parental stress and depression.

This study of diaper need focused on families experiencing homelessness. Families with young children represent the fastest growing segment of the homeless population in the United

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¹ https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26201173
² Yale University School of Medicine through the New Moms Partnership examined a variety of supports and barriers to services across a sample of New Haven residents Among the 2,194 mother’s interviewed of the mothers with children under the age of 3, 52% reported diaper need Of mothers with diaper need, 32% said that they stretch the diapers they have when they run out.
States, and the National Center on Family Homelessness in 2013 found that approximately 50,000 children under the age 6 were identified as homeless in Illinois. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development describes infancy as a period of life when a person is at the highest risk of living in a homeless shelter. The experience of homelessness during infancy and toddlerhood is associated with moderate to severe acute and chronic health problems, and poor educational outcomes. Although it is well documented that parents and children who experience homelessness often have compromised health and well-being, few studies have examined the extent of unmet diaper need and its associated outcomes among homeless families in Illinois.

**Survey Methodology**

The Shriver Center distributed a 13 question electronic survey to Illinois homeless service providers. The survey was collected over a two week period and garnered 85 total responses from 50 different organizations across the state of Illinois with 8 respondents choosing not to name their organization. Respondents represented a wide variety of geographic locations across the state, including Cook, Lake, Will, Peoria, Kankakee, Madison, Champaign, Vermilion, DuPage, DeKalb, McLean, Fulton, Tazewell, Sangamon, Livingston, Christian, Mason, Menard, Logan, Woodford, and Kane counties.

**Summary of Findings**

1. **The high cost of diapers is a burden for young parents already experiencing economic insecurity, and contributes to homelessness.**

Many respondents described the difficult choices families have to make when trying to afford diapers and meet their other basic needs, including paying rent. Eighty-six percent of respondents indicated that homeless families are unable to afford diapers on a regular basis (at least once a month). “Our young Mothers who are trying to make ends meet on their own rarely can afford to purchase diapers.” Providing support to purchase diapers would “allow them to care for their children without making sacrifices, not paying their rent to obtain diapers for the child.” A respondent described a client who was stably housed and “is employed full time, but still struggles to

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provide for her children with the most basic of their needs” while another respondent shared a similar experience: “even after mom gets a job, it is often at minimum wage and diapers are expensive.” One respondent said that “nearly all of the young mothers that we serve have a high need for diapers/wipes.”

Although the survey revealed cost to be the main obstacle for homeless families with unmet diaper need, some service providers in Madison County also indicated that transportation is a barrier to obtaining diapers for families experiencing homelessness.

When asked, “how much would you say the cost for diapers contributes to a family becoming homeless or staying homeless?” 59% responded that the cost of diapers “often” or “somewhat” contributes to homelessness.

2. **Poor health outcomes result from diaper insufficiency among homeless families.**

When asked how families cope with unmet diaper need and given the option to check all that applied, 83% of respondents said families leave on diapers longer than they should. Respondents highlighted how the inability to afford diapers resulted in families purchasing low quality diapers and “leav[ing] them on children too long therefore causing rash and sometimes urinary tract infections.” If diaper need is not adequately or consistently met, the poor health outcomes babies experience can worsen, requiring medical or hospital treatment. Respondents noted that “Clients have shared that their babies have developed rashes from leaving diapers on longer than they should, either soil or urine, and have had to take baby to the doctor.” “It is not uncommon for children to have horrible rashes for which hospital treatment is needed due to diapers being left on far too long.”

3. **The mental health of parents suffers when they cannot provide diapers for their infants.**

Providing and changing diapers are a routine part of care giving, and the inability to meet this basic need can lead to high levels stress, guilt, and “discouragement to [the] parent by not being able to provide.” A respondent described an interaction with a “parent [who] was ashamed and overwhelmed about not having diapers, clean baby clothes, and opportunity to bathe the baby, so
she was defensive and evasive…” These feelings of inadequacy lead to mental health issues among parents, which can in turn have negative impacts on a child’s development and growth.

4. **Community resources to help meet diaper need are scarce.**
Of the agencies surveyed, approximately 68% received diaper donations to serve families. However, responding agencies expressed the challenge of not having an adequate “budget to provide a steady source of diapers” while always running out of “diapers and donations for diapers before we can meet all of our mothers’ and babies’ needs.” Another challenge identified was the inability to maintain a supply of the appropriate sized diapers. In addition, respondents noted that some children may have an allergic reaction to certain products. While communities are doing their best to combat diaper need, respondents described the need as ongoing and were “not sure about a permanent solution.”

**Recommendations**
These observations and reports from the people who directly serve homeless families throughout Illinois provide compelling evidence that unmet diaper need is a hidden crisis in our state, contributing to poor child health, poor parent mental health, and even homelessness. To address diaper need, we recommend:

1. **Create a diaper allowance for low-income families to help maintain the health and hygiene of infants and toddlers.** A diaper allowance will help families afford a sufficient supply of diapers to better the health and hygiene of young children while reducing the material hardship that low-income families with young children face.
2. **Highlight the issue of diaper need through education and outreach to the general public and the providers that serve infants and toddlers, including healthcare professionals.** Building awareness of the need and the consequences may help to promote advocacy for sustainable solutions.
3. **Increase the capacity of diaper banks to strengthen the ability of community based organizations to provide diapers to low income communities.** Diaper banks and the distribution of free diapers to community based organization are a vital component to ensuring families can access diapers when in need.
Additional survey responses

Poor health outcomes:

- “Parents often purchase no name diapers (poor quality) and leave them on children too long therefore causing rash and sometimes urinary tract infections.”
- “…it is not uncommon for children to have horrible rashes for which hospital treatment is needed due to diapers being left on far too long.”
- “…help her bathe the baby, who had developed an extremely serious diaper rash.”
- “Parents are leaving diapers on too long due to not having diapers, causing irritation and discomfort for baby, unsanitary…”
- “Clients have shared that their babies have developed rashes from leaving diapers on longer than they should, either soil or urine, and have had to take baby to the doctor…”
- “I have seen babies in our programs that contracted urinary infections and skin infections due to wearing re-used or dirty diapers.”
- “It is heartbreaking to see children come in with diaper rash and miserable…”

Need for diapers:

- “We receive calls from WIC, Public Aid and other social service agencies on a regular basis asking if they can refer Mothers to us for help with diapers. Diapers are very costly. Our young Mothers who are trying to make ends meet on their own rarely can afford to purchase diapers.”
- “I'm currently working with a young married couple (both 22 y.o) they have a 26 month old daughter and this family is staying in our shelters. The young woman recently found out that she's pregnant. Neither adults have employment and no support system in place to help them other than our organization. Homeless parents should [not] have to choose food over diapers/formula or medications over a child's basic needs.”
- “C.P. and her children are now stably housed and she is employed full time , but still struggles to provide her children with the most basic of their needs.”
• “Diapers would help needy families in need with providing for their children. This would allow them to care for their children without making sacrifices not paying their rent to obtain diapers for the child. Not paying their rent would lead to homelessness.”
• “Even after mom gets a job, it is often at minimum wage and diapers are expensive.”
• “Many of our mothers are fleeing domestic violence situations and have limited to no income which makes it difficult to purchase diapers and other necessary items. Leaving them to make a choice between diapers or food.”
• “Many young mothers only asked for diapers for their children”
• “Our young Mothers who are trying to make ends meet on their own rarely can afford to purchase diapers.”
• “When a young homeless Mother or Father come to us for housing needs and/or shelter the first thing they ask for is help with diapers and formula or milk”
• “Nearly all of the young mothers that we serve have a high need for diapers/wipes”

Mental health of parents/feelings of inadequacy:
• “the parent was ashamed and overwhelmed about not having diapers, clean baby clothes, and opportunity to bathe the baby, so she was defensive and evasive when other clients nagged her about her baby's smelly diaper...”
• “Parents are leaving diapers on too long due to not having diapers, causing...discouragement to parent by not being able to provide”
• “Clients have shared that their babies have developed rashes...have had to take baby to the doctor, and doctor threatens to call DCFS due to neglect.”

Lack of sufficient community resources:
• “We always run out of diapers and donations for diapers before we can meet all of our Mothers babies needs.”
• “A challenge though to keeping them on hand is that you might not have the appropriate size, or even a child might have an allergic reaction to the products. I think a voucher system might be a better help than handing out diapers.”
• “While we try to get as many donations as possible, our need is ongoing, in order to provide these women diapers for their children…”

• “...we're not sure about a permanent solution, since we have a limited supply of donated diapers and several clients who need them.”

• “As an agency, we provide what we can, but we don't necessarily have it in our budget to provide a steady source of diapers. Having legislation to support this need would be a great benefit to our homeless mothers.”

Authors & Researchers:

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