

Reclaiming Our Power: A Popular Education Support Group for Unhoused Parents Living in Shelters

Natalie E. Magana Resendez

California State University, Long Beach, 1250 Bellflower Blvd. Long Beach, CA 90840

Abstract:

The purpose of this thesis was to create a support group curriculum for parents in family shelters. Based on the method of popular education, the principles of prison abolition, and the use of counter-narratives inspired by critical race theory, the curriculum aims to help participants foster a sense of personal empowerment, agency, and autonomy while building community, increasing access to resources through self-knowledge, sharing and writing counter-narratives, and challenging societal views of family houselessness. The resulting 6-week curriculum, Reclaiming Our Power: A Popular Education Support Group for Unhoused Parents Living in Shelters, uses critical consciousness to cultivate agency, build a peer community, and develop self-determined problem-solving capacities.

Introduction:

- Approximately 771,480 people are experiencing houselessness nationwide, the highest number ever recorded, representing a one-year increase of 18.1% (118,376) individuals since 2023 (De Sousa et al., 2024). Out of the total national count of unhoused people, 259,473 were individuals in families with children.
- Unhoused individuals and families encounter various forms of injustice, disempowerment, shame, and stigma compared to those who are housed (Lambdin-Pattavina et al., 2020).
- Housing-oriented programs, services, stakeholders, and staff often play a significant role in reinforcing a sense of powerlessness by excluding, mandating, regulating, and limiting the choices of those experiencing houselessness (Anthony et al., 2018; MacDonald & Cote, 2022).
- Unhoused families utilize community services such as libraries, food pantries, schools, public school services, family, friends, and non-profits more frequently than government agencies (Matthews & Hamel, 2024; Cook-Craig & Koehly, 2011).
- Parenting satisfaction among unhoused parents showed that living in shelters produced more stress and increased the risk of depression in parents (Alleyne-Green et al., 2019)
- Psychological capital, such as cultural identity, hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and connectedness, serves as a protective factor through social connectedness and life satisfaction that can reduce the risk of houselessness (Rew et al., 2024).

Target Population:

This curriculum is intended for adult parents or legal guardians (ages 18 or older) of at least one child (under age 18) who is currently living in a shelter for unhoused families.

Objectives:

- Objective 1: Build self-efficacy by casting out self-blame
- Objective 2: Build collective sense of identity and power with other unhoused families
- Objective 3: Cultivate a strong peer support system where parents can feel comfortable asking for help within their peer group
- Objective 4: Recognize systemic factors that affect the overall well-being of parents and their families
- Objective 5: Build skills and capacities for participation and advocacy for social change

Curriculum:

Reclaiming Our Power: A Popular Education Support Group for Unhoused Parents Living in Shelters is designed to be implemented once a week for 90 minutes over a total of 6 weeks in emergency family shelters. This curriculum aims to support unhoused parents in cultivating agency and autonomy, building a peer community, and developing self-determined problem-solving capacities.

The guidebook details childcare, youth enrichment, volunteers, interns, and staff roles to ensure that parents and their families are well taken care of during each session.

The format of each session starts with a check-in or icebreaker, proceeds with a group activity based on the session's objectives, and concludes with a 15-minute reflection. The sessions cover the following themes:

- Session 1: Group introduction and community agreement.
- establishment
- Session 2: Exploring counter-narratives
- Session 3: Identifying and addressing barriers
- Session 4: Acknowledging personal and community strengths
- Session 5: Sharing strengths and collective insights
- Session 6: Reflecting on and celebrating community achievements



Session four activity: Exploring Personal Assets Worksheet.

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Implications:

- Implications for practice and policy include reorienting services for unhoused parents from a deficit-based framework towards self-determination and building support networks that have the potential to extend past the shelter stay.
- This curriculum seeks to counteract the practices of criminalization, surveillance, and stereotypes imposed on unhoused families. It can serve as a tool for social workers and housing-oriented professionals to address and deconstruct social norms.
- This curriculum empowers unhoused families to collectively express their needs, barriers, and strengths without relying on typical social work methods or presenting unhoused individuals with a menu of options created by social service practitioners.
- This curriculum challenges this method of support by centering the voices of the unhoused and rooting their power in community and collective liberation.
- The evaluation in this curriculum aims to document demographic data and measure objective achievement to support evidence collection, serving as a step toward practice-based research on interventions grounded in popular education, critical race theory, and prison abolition.

Conclusions:

The complexity of experiences, obstacles, and challenges parents face while unhoused could be mitigated by interventions that bring parents in ways that support their sense of community and collective capacity for social change. These interventions may include consciousness-raising and action-oriented support groups focused on fostering personal growth and building community.

Contact:

Natalie E. Magana Resendez
Natalie.maganaresendez01@student.csulb.edu

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