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Families' Experiences of Doubling Up After Homelessness

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Abstract

This study examined experiences of doubling up among families after episodes of homelessness. *Doubling up* refers to two or more adults or families residing in the same housing unit, which has been an increasing trend in the United States in recent decades. Within the past 14 years, the number of households containing more than one family, related or unrelated, has more than tripled. Although doubling up is increasingly common among families at all income levels, this study seeks to understand the experiences of doubling up among families who have been homeless. Through qualitative interviews with caregivers of 29 families, we analyzed advantages and disadvantages of doubling up with the caregiver's parent, other family, and nonfamily. Experiences were rated on a four-point scale—(1) mostly negative, (2) negative mixed, (3) positive mixed, and (4) mostly positive—and coded for various positive and negative themes. Overall, we found that doubling up was a generally negative experience for families in our sample, regardless of their relationship to their hosts. Common themes included negative effects on children, undesirable environments, interpersonal tension, and feelings of impermanence and instability. For formerly sheltered families in this study, doubling up after shelter did not resolve their period of housing instability and may be only another stop in an ongoing cycle of homelessness.

Introduction

A report prepared for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) revealed that, between 2003 and 2009, the rate at which new households formed shrank, and the number of *doubled-up households*—containing an adult other than the householder and the householder's spouse, partner, or children under the age of 21—increased (Eggers and Moumen, 2013). The report used data from the American Housing Survey between 2003 and 2009 to calculate that doubled-up households containing relatives and nonrelatives increased by 7.5 and 12.1 percent respectively, whereas the total number of households increased only 5.6 percent. Households with an unrelated subfamily increased especially dramatically from 199,000 to 622,000 during the 6-year span. Although data incompatibilities make changes from 2009 to 2011 less certain, it appears that the number of households with related subfamilies continued to climb by 366,000 during this period, but the number with unrelated subfamilies fell by 80,000. The report linked the increase of Americans doubling up with the recent economic recession but suggested the need for further research to follow this trend.

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Doubled-up households reflect a wide range of experiences, and doubling up is motivated by many factors. The recession sparked an increase in the number of individuals, particularly young adults ages 18 to 34, doubling up with both family members and nonrelatives (Mykyta and Macartney, 2011). According to Norton and Glick (1986), single-parent families rarely own homes compared with two-parent families and have a higher rate of residential mobility, which may cause single parents to double up more often. Winkler (1993) found that single mothers tend to double up with either other single female relatives or a related married couple, and these mothers tend to be young with little education or work experience. Sharing homes can also be related to ethnic-racial cultural practices of those in the household (Koebel and Murray, 1999). In the United States, Asian and Hispanic households are more likely than non-Hispanic White and Black households to contain more people due to their historically close-contact societies and cultural heritage (Myers, Baer, and Choi, 1996). The experience of families who have been homeless may be less positive than for other groups, because many had already left doubled-up situations they found unsatisfactory or believe emergency shelters preferable to the doubled-up situations that are available to them.

In the Family Options Study of housing and service interventions for families experiencing homelessness, 85 percent of families were doubled up with other households as adults because they could not pay rent, and 45 percent of families reported living with friends or relatives immediately before entering the shelters from which they were recruited to the study (Gubits et al., 2015). The nearly 2,300 families from 12 sites were randomly assigned to special offers of long-term housing subsidies without additional services, short-term subsidies with some services focused on housing and self-sufficiency, transitional housing programs with extensive social services, or usual care. At 20 months after entering shelter, 31 percent of study families assigned to usual care, 12 percent of those offered long-term subsidies, 26 percent of those offered short-term subsidies, and 32 percent of those offered transitional housing reported spending at least 1 night in the past 6 months with a friend or relative because they could not find or afford a place of their own (Gubits et al., 2015). To better understand the implications of doubling up for formerly homeless families, this study looks at different doubled-up situations that a subset of Family Options Study families from all intervention groups experienced after an episode of homelessness.

Review of the Literature

Although little is known specifically about the consequences of doubling up for families experiencing homelessness, research on sharing homes provides insight into possible positive and negative effects (Ahrentzen, 2003).

Potential Positive Effects

Social and instrumental support—As data from the American Housing Survey indicate, many people choose to double up regardless of income, age, race, or marital status. For many experiencing crisis or otherwise life-changing events, doubling up can provide access to emotional and instrumental support (Despres, 1991; Hemmens, Hoch, and Carp, 1996). One study found that formerly homeless mothers in doubled-up living arrangements

received more childcare support compared with those in shelter, because more people were available to help with their children (Letiecq, Anderson, and Koblinsky, 1998).

Positive physical environment for child—Doubling up could lead to better physical environments for children. Low-income families that share homes may live in better neighborhoods or reside in better quality homes with fewer problems than those living on their own (Koebel and Murray, 1999; Koebel and Rives, 1993). Safer neighborhoods could allow for children to play outside and contribute to children’s mental health (Despres, 1991; Evans, Wells, and Moch, 2003).

Reduced expenses—Relieving the economic burden of owning or renting one’s own home is one of the primary reasons for doubling up (Despres, 1993, 1991). Family poverty rates of doubled-up households were lower than those of households not doubled up between 2008 and 2010, following the Great Recession. Additionally, family poverty rates were lower than personal poverty rates for doubled-up households, demonstrating that doubling up provided some economic relief for those in shared households (Mykyta and Macartney, 2011). Single mothers living with their own parents may have access to family income to supplement the costs of food and caring for children (Winkler, 1993).

Potential Negative Effects

Doubling up may also have negative consequences due to instability, overcrowding, interpersonal tension, or chaos.

Instability—Doubling up and not being a leaseholder have been identified as precursors to homelessness (Shinn et al., 2013; Wasson and Hill, 1998; Wright et al., 1998), suggesting the inherent impermanence of many doubled-up situations. Much research suggests the negative consequences of instability on adults and children. In children, residential instability is associated with increased behavioral problems, teenage pregnancy, and drug-related problems and often leads to school mobility (Jelleyman and Spencer, 2008). Both homelessness and residential mobility are associated with decrements in academic achievement (Cutuli et al., 2013; Fantuzzo et al., 2012; Obradović et al., 2009; Voight, Shinn, and Nation, 2012). Frequent school transfers can lead to peer rejection, social withdrawal, and the inability to form intimate relationships as a child and later as an adult (Jason et al., 1994; Purdie and Downey, 2000; Rubin, Coplan, and Bowker, 2009). Unstable housing is also linked to poor health in both adults and children (Evans, Wells, and Moch, 2003). Moving frequently as a child predicted marginally higher mortality rates in adults and generally lower levels of wellbeing (Oishi and Schimmack, 2010). Additionally, frequent movement between homes with short stays can negatively affect feelings of self-efficacy and control (Evans, Wells, and Moch, 2003; Vinsel et al., 1980).

Crowding—Much research has been done on the detrimental effects of crowding on health outcomes. Low-income households containing subfamilies are more likely to live in crowded homes than other home sharers (Koebel and Murray, 1999). Poor quality housing, which is more often found in low-income neighborhoods, increases the effects of crowding on psychological distress (Evans, Lercher, and Kofler, 2002). Children can be particularly

affected by crowding in homes where a lack of quiet space can harm concentration on schoolwork, and children in crowded households may be viewed as a burden or nuisance, leading to toxic family environments (Gove, Hughes, and Galle, 1979).

Interpersonal tension—Doubling up can lead to emotional strain and interpersonal tension, particularly for low-income households (Mitchell, 1971). Housing conditions can shape interpersonal interactions and poor housing quality is less likely to protect dwellers from social conditions that cause psychological distress or relationship strain (Altman, 1975; Evans, Wells, and Moch, 2003). Hemmens, Hoch, and Carp (1996) found that shared housing is stigmatized by society, and sharing homes is indirectly linked with negative effects on mental health and self-image. Halpern (1995) also found that negative stigmas surrounding housing affect one's perception of self. Internalization of injurious stereotypes could lead to stress and conflict within the household.

Chaos—Low-income living environments tend to be more chaotic, leading to adverse effects on children's socioemotional development (Evans et al., 2005). Noise, lack of structure, and lack of privacy all affect parents' interactions with their children and can negatively impact parental responsiveness (Evans, Maxwell, and Hart, 1999; Evans, Wells, and Moch, 2003; Wachs and Camli, 1991). In addition to harming crucial parent-child interactions, chaotic environments create instability in children's lives, which also has deleterious, long-lasting effects (Bronfenbrenner and Evans, 2000).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of families who have a doubled-up living situation at some point *after* leaving emergency shelter in 4 of the 12 Family Options Study sites. We reviewed interviews with formerly homeless families for evidence of themes related to doubling up that have been identified previously in the literature or novel themes that arose from the data. We also reviewed the interview transcripts to determine whether it matters with whom a household doubles up. Much of the increase in doubled-up households during the past decade is due to adult children moving back in with their parents or grandparents moving in with their children and grandchildren (Eggers and Moumen, 2013). It is possible that doubling up with a parent would be more stable or more positive than doubling up with someone else. This study seeks to understand whether doubling up is a good solution for families experiencing homelessness. Specifically, we seek to understand—

- What is the quality of doubled-up experiences?
- What were strengths and weaknesses of different doubled-up situations?
- Was doubling up with a parent more salutary than doubling up with other hosts?
- Might a doubled-up situation affect different members of the family differently?

Method

We analyzed a portion of the qualitative data previously collected from 80 families participating in the larger, multisite Family Options Study experiment. To be eligible for the

study, families had to have been in emergency shelter for a minimum of 1 week with at least one child age 15 or younger, and families also needed to meet the eligibility criteria for at least one of the active interventions.¹ Semistructured qualitative interviews were conducted with a nonrandom subsample of 80 caregivers from 4 of the 12 sites an average of 6 months after the families entered the study. Participants were approximately evenly distributed across all three active interventions and usual care. Each interview contained questions about the family's residential history after leaving shelter and lasted about an hour. Other topics included how families made housing decisions, how housing and service programs affected family processes, and experiences of separation of children from families (Fisher et al., 2014; Mayberry et al., 2014; Shinn, Gibbons-Benton, and Brown, 2017). Interviews were conducted in private, recorded, and transcribed. Participants received \$50 in payment. Institutional review boards at Vanderbilt University and Abt Associates, which conducted the interviews, approved these procedures.²

Sample

The initial sample for this study consisted of 35 of the 80 interviews in which respondents reported that they and her families lived with another household in the same housing unit at some point after leaving shelter, although only 29 of the interviews had enough information to code. Respondents were from Phoenix, Arizona (n = 7); Alameda County, California (n = 11); Kansas City, Missouri (n = 10); and New Haven or Bridgeport, Connecticut (n = 7). All respondents were female. The average age was 29.2 (standard deviation [SD] = 7.83), and ages ranged between 21 and 47 years. Most respondents (63 percent; n = 22) were Black, 17 percent (n = 6) were White, 14 percent (n = 5) were another race, and 6 percent (n = 2) were Native American. Two-thirds (69 percent; n = 24) of respondents were single and had never married, 17 percent (n = 6) were married or living in a marriage-like situation, and 14 percent (n = 5) of respondents were separated or divorced.

Procedures

Previously, a team of five analysts had coded where respondents were living and with whom they lived for each residence described in the interview (Mayberry et al., 2014). Analysts coded situations as doubled up if the respondent and her family lived with other people the respondent did not consider part of her family. Of the respondents, 44 described sharing living quarters, but we excluded 9 cases in which the doubled-up situation occurred *before* entering shelter. Of the 35 respondents with a postshelter episode of doubling up, 8 reported on more than 1 episode, yielding a total 43 episodes of doubling up. However, because the focus of the interview was not doubling up, 7 of these episodes did not have sufficient information to code. As a result, our final coded sample consisted of 29 interviews and 36 episodes of doubled-up living situations after leaving shelter.

Approach to Data Analysis

To understand these doubled-up situations, two researchers read a subsample of seven interviews independently and did open coding to generate themes. After discussion, the

¹For more information, see Gubits et al. (2016, 2015).

²See Mayberry et al. (2014) for additional detail.

researchers applied and modified the scheme successively in groups of 5 interviews, meeting weekly until 17 total interviews had been coded separately, and the coding scheme was fully developed and agreed on (exhibit A-1). One researcher coded the remaining interviews, returning to the initial interviews to revise and make coding consistent with the final coding scheme. In cases of uncertainty, the main coder consulted with the other researcher to make a joint decision. This researcher also coded with whom the respondent and her family were doubled up. To determine interrater reliability, the two researchers gave an overall rating of the doubled-up episodes on a scale from 1 to 4—(1) mostly negative, (2) negative mixed, (3) positive mixed, and (4) mostly positive. These ratings were based on the researchers' assessment of participants' responses to interview questions and not on the participants' own evaluation of their situation. Agreement across 22 episodes from 17 interviews indexed by Pearson's $r = 0.88$, indicating strong interrater reliability.

Results

We begin by describing the overall ratings, and we then discuss common themes in the interviews. Each of the doubled-up episodes ($n = 36$) is categorized using our 4-point scale and by the respondent's relationship to the host.

Ratings

Overall, about one-third of the doubled-up living situations were categorized as mostly negative ($n = 13$). A large group was mixed, favoring more negative ($n = 10$) or more positive ($n = 8$). Only a small number was categorized as mostly positive ($n = 5$). Episodes were also categorized by the respondent's relation to the person with whom she and her child or children were doubled up, referred to in this study as their host. These three groups were parent ($n = 13$); other family, such as aunts or cousins ($n = 11$); and nonfamily, including friends and boyfriends ($n = 12$). Exhibit 1 shows that the distribution of ratings was remarkably consistent across types of hosts (parent: mean [M] = 2.17, $SD = 1.19$; other family: $M = 2.18$, $SD = 1.17$; nonfamily: $M = 2.18$, $SD = 0.94$).

Mostly positive—A few participants told stories of doubling-up experiences that were positive overall. One parent moved into her cousin's house after leaving a negative doubled-up situation with a friend and described the experience as being much better for her and her children. She explained that the stability of her cousin's family provided an example to her children of what a comfortable, happy life could look like. She expressed love for her cousin's four children and described celebrating birthdays together. The mother also noted that being in a two-parent home created structure that she was unable to give her children by herself, and that her children's behavior improved while living at her cousin's house because the children respected him.

Another parent left her sister's house to move in with her mother. She identified her mother's support and the positive environment as being better for her and her family than previous living situations. When asked about the benefits of living with her mother compared with living with her sister, the respondent replied—

It's just a lot—it's stable, and it's a little bit more calmer, so I can get back on track with myself.

When asked about the difficult parts of living with her mother, she answered—

Nothing. There's really a lot of help, like, as far as my mom being here to help me with him, and then I can just—no. I don't know why it was so stressful at my sister's house.

Later in the interview, she mentioned that her mother's help and support made it easier for her to be a parent to her children. She also noted that the quiet, calm environment and good neighborhood helped her daughter get caught up in school and concentrate on homework.

Even the mostly positive situations were often last resorts. One parent was able to move in with her boyfriend and his brother after leaving shelter, noting that she had nowhere else to go because she didn't have family in the area. She felt the situation was beneficial to her family because of its positive effects on her daughter. Her daughter was able to stay enrolled in the same school, because her boyfriend's house was in the same area as the shelter, which pleased the respondent. She noted that changing schools was stressful for a child, especially one in the middle of transitioning homes. Her daughter and boyfriend also had a good relationship, and her daughter enjoyed living and spending time with him, even referring to the boyfriend as her father around her friends when he picked her up from school. The mother was particularly appreciative of the space and privacy they had at her boyfriend's house in comparison with shelter, although the situation was temporary. When asked why it was a better living situation, she replied—

He—it was—first of all, at his brother's house and his house, there's more space. [Child] doesn't have to worry about the kids taking her toys and trying to call her names. At the shelter we had a lot of kids that cussed and was violent. She's not like that.

Mostly negative—More than one-third of experiences were mostly negative, sometimes extremely so, endured because parents felt they had no other option. After leaving shelter, one parent moved in with her aunt, noting that she would have stayed in shelter longer if she could have. Her aunt's lifestyle involved alcohol, drugs, and partying with people in her home. She was not used to having children around and yelled at them for normal child play behavior. The parent felt that her aunt's attitude toward her children made it impossible for the house to feel like their own. Additionally, the parent was paying her aunt as much as she could have paid to rent her own place.

One parent moved back in with her alcoholic father, with whom she had lived prior to entering shelter, because she felt she had no other choice. She described the environment as uncertain and abusive.

... The environment was not good. My dad, he's an alcoholic, and he don't want my kids there. We were like in one foot, and out the next, so we're like either we're going to be homeless again, or we're going to be homeless again because he was throwing us out.... It was every day, so it was hell living there. It was not good.

At one point, she called the police on her father after he asked the owners of his house to kick her out. Additionally, the situation affected her parenting, because she constantly had to discipline her children so they would not interfere with her father's belongings. The constant discipline had negative effects on her children who, in turn, began exhibiting poor behavior.

Another respondent moved to and from her brother and friends' homes, eventually ending up at her mother's house. She and her family stayed in the unfinished basement, which she describes as more of an open storage space with a bathroom. The mother would lock the door at the top of the basement stairs, keeping them out of the main part of the house. When the mother was not home, the respondent and her children could not enter the house at all.

Once I leave out, I'm out until she comes home. It's not really consistent. And if she decides she's not coming home for the night, then I have to go somewhere else.

She said that this environment, lacking in privacy and stability, had detrimental effects on her children's behavior. She found it hard to gain her children's respect as a parent, in part because of her mother's interference in her parenting style. The mother threatened to kick her out if she disagreed with her.

One respondent was even forced to move back in with her abusive ex-husband. This experience was negative not only for her but also for her children. They began acting out and asking when they could leave the home and their father. She described him as butting in and talking down to her children, calling her daughter fat and lazy. Additionally, her mother-in-law and eight other relatives who lived downstairs interfered with her parenting. She felt the need to protect and defend her children from both the father and the other relatives. When asked in what ways living in this environment was better for her and her family, she responded that the only way in which it was better was that it kept her and her children together. After moving to her own place, she compared the two situations.

I don't have to look at him. I don't have to serve him. I don't have to listen to him... It was just all around horrible. But here it's just us. And that makes all the difference.

Mixed—Episodes classified as mixed contained references to both positive and negative aspects of doubling up. Some parents felt their living situations to be negative experiences for them but positive for their children. One parent moved back and forth between her boyfriend and mother's houses because of her relationship with her mother, describing her situation—

Well my mother. It's straight for now, but I know I'm gonna reach a boiling point and I don't want to be there. So I'm grateful that I do have somewhere to stay and supporting people. I'm not out on the street where I really have to do something crazy, so I'm really grateful and blessed for what I have; somewhere to lay me and my kids at. My mother, she would never push me away or tell me now.

Although she and her mother did not get along, she did appreciate her mother's help with her daughter and the safe environment, surrounded by family. She also mentioned that her child's social life had improved since living with her grandmother. Despite the interpersonal

tension, this parent saw the situation (classified as positive-mixed) as positive because of its effects on her children.

In several cases, doubling up was better than shelter in some regards but still lacking in others. These situations were also classified as positive mixed. One parent was appreciative of the autonomy she gained once out of shelter but felt that the environment at her cousin's house was very crowded with her and her cousin's families, with as many as 13 children under one roof. She was able to put her own rules and structure back in place, which was beneficial for her children. However, she noted that living with her cousin was not better than living in shelter because her cousin's house did not have enough space for everyone.

We also encountered numerous cases that were more negative than positive but in which respondents were grateful to be out of shelter and thus made the best of their situations. One respondent did not get along with her mother, disagreed about parenting styles and felt her own parenting was getting worse because of doubling up. She did not know whether living with her mother was an improvement for her daughter's wellbeing; only when compared with shelter did doubling up with her mother appear somewhat positive.

I don't know. I really don't know.... But at the shelter—you can tell that she was ready to go. That wasn't her cup of tea. You could say at the shelter she was kind of stressed.

These episodes were classified as negative mixed. Similarly, one respondent moved in with a friend whose lifestyle did not agree with her family and who complained about her children so much she had to leave; however, she mentioned the privacy and space she gained after leaving shelter as a positive aspect of that situation. Another parent appreciated having support around childcare when she left shelter to move in with a friend but could not tolerate the lack of space and feeling that it was not her own place.

Themes

The most common themes in the interviews were issues of autonomy, conflicting parenting styles, positive and negative effects on children, and feelings of impermanence. Exhibit 2 is a complete list of themes and their presence overall and by type of host. No chi-square test for differential endorsement of a theme across different hosts was significant at $p < .05$.

Children

Consistently across the three types of situations, parents were concerned about the effect of doubling up on their children. These effects, both positive and negative, were mentioned more frequently than any other theme. In general, mothers described more negatively the situations that were negative for children ($M = 1.68$, $SD = 0.82$) and described more positively situations that were positive for children ($M = 2.60$, $SD = 1.10$), but with the small sample size, this difference was not statistically significant.

Positive effects on children—A slight majority of respondents (56 percent) reported the doubled-up situations as beneficial for their child in some way. One mother noticed that her

child's behavior improved after leaving shelter because she was no longer exposed to bad influences.

Because when we stayed in the shelter, she was picking up bad habits from other kids. Wanted to go back into that baby stage. And my daughter, I knew she was way more mature than that, and she wanted to go back in that baby stage, goo-goo, ga-ga, 'cause she's looking at the other kids. And that's kinda like I—we were kinda like stayed in our room because it was like—we kinda did it to ourselves. We were like, we're just gonna stay in here because she's picking up habits, she's doing things. But now, at the cousin's house, she's the only kid.

One parent attributed her child's improved behavior to the stability provided by living with her mother.

[My daughter] used to hit me but she's not physical because there is no kids around and we're more stable for temporarily, like family. We're with her grandma.

Another mother appreciated her cousin's parenting style and family structure, as well as the freedom of living there offered her children.

Positive, because, like I said, [my children] could be more free in what they were doing and they had their independence and they could help us cook, they could help us clean and they didn't have to be confined to one room, playing in one little apartment. They could go outside at freewill and they could go run upstairs at freewill and not making a big mess.

Negative effects on children—Instances of parents reporting negative aspects of their doubled-up residence in regards to their children were equally common (53 percent). Moving between impermanent doubled-up situations could have negative implications for child's social life. One parent described it, regarding her son—

It's not bad, but it's making friends with somebody, and getting to know them, and then having to move, and not see them.

Interpersonal issues and tension in households also had negative effects on children. One parent stated that her negative relationship with her father affected her children's behavior when they moved in with him.

I'd say it does, because the way the kids acted over there was much worse. They could feel the tension in the house; they know. And I felt really bad for them.

Rules and restrictions put in place by the host household also affected children negatively. When asked about her sons being exposed to good or bad influences while living at her mother's house, one parent said—

I'll say the bad influence is he's less social because my mother's house is like a no talk house... I know it's a very—I mean to me it's a bad thing because he doesn't get to be a kid.

Parenting

Parents also discussed how these episodes affected their own parenting style or ability to parent their children around other household members, who often attempted *outside parenting*, or asserting themselves into a parent role. Common issues involved a lack of privacy and conflicts about how and when to discipline children. However, several parents identified the doubled-up situation as providing support around childcare and parenting, making it easier to be a parent to their children when compared with living in shelter.

Outside parenting—Parents often complained of others trying to discipline their children in ways they did not like or offering unsolicited parenting advice (33 percent). Although these complaints were reported with all hosts, it seemed particularly salient when respondents moved in with their own parents. One mother felt she had no choice but to let her own mother be the parent, for fear of getting kicked out of her house.

Like if [my mother] disagrees with what I'm doing or if she can't parent my kids, then she'll say okay, well you can leave.... It's difficult because I have to let her parent the way she wants to parent. Like I said, I have to abide by her parenting style.

Another mother disagreed with the way her cousin treated her children, which led to arguments.

And then sometimes the way my cousin would talk to him. I'm a very protective mom and if you talk to my child in a certain way I get very upset. And so we would fight about that a lot because she would talk to [child] in a derogatory way and I'm like okay—or I really don't like [child], how can you tell a 6-year-old you don't like them.

Most often, outsiders disagreed with how or when parents chose to discipline their children. One participant said—

Even now [mom] still says stuff about the discipline, discipline is always going to be an issue and how I handle it.

Individual parenting style—Doubling up also affected some participants' parenting more positively. This mother felt she could finally act as a parent compared with living in shelter.

We had the independence and I could choose what they were doing, when they were doing it, what they ate and more open.

However, other parents felt that their situations led to more negative changes in the way they parented their children. One mom felt forced to discipline her children more often while living with her father.

There was hardly—I disciplined them and everything, but they only got disciplined, because it was [my father's] refrigerator; it was his door; it was his life; it's his bathroom. So, the discipline came to where I had to tell them, 'No, no, no, no, no,' because it's not your house.

Another parent felt her ability to parent slipping when doubling up.

The parenting skills—if you are in an environment where you don't want to be, but you have to suck it up and deal with it anyway. I think if parenting skills kind of fall off a little bit... I can tell I have been slacking.... So I think that parenting does fall off when you are in an environment that you don't want to be in.

Support—Many participants (36 percent) found that they felt supported by their doubled-up situation, receiving extra help with their children or to get back on their feet. Instrumental support surrounding childcare was described frequently, as in these three situations.

... Like I'm washing dishes. He'll look after [my child] and play with her for a while.... Yeah. He is very helpful.

No, it's actually easier cause everybody likes to help in their own way like as far as say I'm in the kitchen cooking and I put [my child] on the couch, you know if he's doing something that he's not supposed to or dangerous somebody will do something. They're not just going to look at him fall [off] the couch and break his neck or something. You know, so it's a lot easier.

My mother, yeah. she'll help me get them ready. And then at that point we are in agreement because you need to get up... so we agree on that. That makes it easier.

This parent appreciated her mother's financial support in addition to the help looking after her daughter while she searched for a job.

Financially I think it has been a big help being that I don't have a job right now. Yes, if I need [my mother] to watch [my child], if I am going out to look for a job, I think that she has pretty much been there 100 percent. I think that is easier for me.

Interpersonal Issues

Positive relationships—A few participants found that their relationships with those in their doubled-up situations were positive. One participant said that the best part about living with her mother was that they got along. Another noted that living in her friend's structured home was comfortable and happy for all parties, including their children. Overall, however, only 11 percent of respondents reported positive interpersonal interactions across the different types of hosts.

Negative relationships—Many participants noted that doubling up involved conflict and tension. One parent described the tension that was created by living with her mother as she tried to take care of her own family.

I was her slave is how I put it, my mother is a really great person but I just didn't like that I already have a family and so I couldn't have that family how I can [in own place]. It was like okay you can't really be a family. You have a kid but no you're still a child so I didn't like that aspect about it, plus how hard she was on me and how much she wanted in need of her own freedom and space.

These two respondents moved out of their situations due to the conflict doubling up created with their hosts.

We bumped heads. Me and this female just bumped heads and I rather keep my friendship than lose it. I was like let me just go. I gotta go.

So you know how when people get really upset and it comes out in an argument? She kind of made it seem like I wasn't helping her at all. So it was kind of a falling out.

Exploitation—Although rare, experiences of feeling taken advantage of or used were expressed during interviews. One person left a doubled-up situation with an acquaintance to move in with another friend after feeling she had been unfairly treated. The respondent said she thought the money she had been giving the acquaintance was helping with bills but later found out the acquaintance had not been using the money properly. In addition, the acquaintance allowed another individual to move in who did not contribute monetarily to the household, which put extra financial and emotional strain on the respondent. When asked why living in her second doubled-up situation was better, the respondent said—

Because I wasn't feeling like I was being taken advantage of in someone else's household.

Mixed situations—Some respondents told stories that included both positive and negative elements, which we classified as mixed interpersonal. One mother's disagreement with her grandmother about discipline style created conflict, but she still expressed gratitude for her grandmother's help.

Yes, I would take my kids and leave. Like, go to the park or something, because I didn't want to overwhelm [my grandmother], she is old. And I had to be grateful that she let us stay there, you know?

Another respondent found that living with her mother made it difficult to be a parent, because her mom's health issues interfered with her children's sleeping routine. She said—

Well, one of them is my mom's disabled. And she needs help with a lot of different things, and I'm her daughter. I don't care how mad I am at her, I'll help her. I'm not going to just leave her hanging like that.

One respondent noted that although she and her mother did not get along, her daughter loved living with her mother.

She loves my mother. Sometimes I just can't deal with it, but you have got to take the good with the bad.

Family—The idea of being surrounded by family emerged several times throughout interviews, often as a benefit amidst other negative aspects of a situation. Despite one respondent's overwhelmingly negative doubled-up episode, she said that being with and seeing family members more often was the best part of her living situation, as opposed to living in shelter. One parent found benefit in raising her child in an environment surrounded by family.

I just want her to think smart and grow up smart. So she's in a safe environment speaking of me and her family.

Similarly, although one respondent did not have a positive relationship with her mother, when asked the best part about living with her, she responded—

Being with family. Seeing family more often than when I was at the shelter.

Another mother spoke positively about her doubled-up situation living with a friend due to their close relationship.

I consider [my friend] and her husband and kids my family because they treated me and my family like family treats family. And I'm like they didn't have to do that for us. So I would look at them as my family, as my sister and brothers and nieces.

Environment

Physical and social environment—Some parents found that the environments of their doubled-up situations, considering factors like the neighborhood, noise level, and number of people in the house, were positive or benefited them and their families. Despite other negative aspects, when asked if living with her friend has worked out for her family, one mother replied—

It's okay. My son is in a safe environment, that's the main point. It's not very comfortable though... so, it's not the best, but it's a safe, good, clean environment with good people.

Environments also had negative effects on doubled-up experiences. One mother was uncomfortable with the number of people crowding and touching her baby. Another mother felt the drinking and drug habits of her aunt were negatively influencing her children. Rowdy lifestyles of some of the people respondents lived with were also mentioned as negative aspects of their doubling up experiences. One person felt she never had privacy while living in her ex-husband's home.

Either he was there or [his family] were there or the both. And then some of the people from downstairs. And then some of his drinking buddies. It was just always something. Somebody.

Another parent felt the neighborhood in which she lived with her mother was unsafe for her child to play, negatively affecting his social life.

There's some more ghetto kids out here; there really are, a whole bunch of them. And they hang out up front... I don't really want him playing in the driveway... They [talk] foul, they throw trash everywhere, and kinds of stuff that I don't agree with at all. So, I really don't want him up there playing unless I'm sitting out there with him.

Physical space—Respondents also mentioned that the physical space of their living situations—such as size of the unit, number of bedrooms, or their sleeping arrangements—affected their overall experiences. Of the 20 respondents who discussed the number of rooms in their doubled-up situations, 15 shared their bedroom or living space with their children.

One respondent mentioned that her daughter enjoyed their doubled-up arrangement because she had access to a bathtub, which she did not have in shelter. However, another respondent

discussed the difficulty of sharing a futon with both her husband and her daughter, who often rolled onto her husband's injured leg during the night. Other than the physical pain her husband experienced, the respondent also felt a sense of guilt about their living arrangement as a parent.

I can't give [my child], her own room, her own space, her own bed, her own toys. My daughter's room was decked out with Dora and princess and everything, so she's used to that. And now she's looking like, a futon? What is that? So I'm more concerned with that, trying to give those things back to her, than trying to take some away from her.

One parent did not even have a bedroom to share with her child; instead, she slept in the living room of her friend's house on a couch with her son. She notes that the lack of space prevented any sort of privacy, caused her to worry about her child's wellbeing, and added a feeling of impermanence.

Sleeping on a couch, knowing your son—your child—is not in his own room, in his own house, and it's just another temporary stop.

Privacy—Physical space often led to concerns about privacy for respondents. Overall, about as many people reported feeling like they had adequate privacy in their doubled-up situation as those who said they did not. However, lack of privacy or inability to be alone sometimes led to tension and conflict.

I kind of, I know I did a lot of shouting there cause I was always just, you know, I just didn't have time for myself.

The respondent, who shared a room and a bed with her daughter and her husband, spoke of the way it prohibited them from being able to act like a married couple.

But it's kinda hard to have one-on-one time. Like, sometimes, when we have to have a conversation or we discuss things, we step outside, and we talk outside on the porch, just to have that space, that free time. And it's kinda hard. And then we—how you gonna get romantic when you have your daughter laying in the bed with you.

Sharing space with her son was awkward for another mother.

Well, my son and I have never had separate rooms; we've always shared the same space, but as he gets older it's harder to hide when you're dressing, things like that.

Autonomy

Compared with the rules and curfews of some shelters, some respondents (19 percent) found that their doubled-up living situations provided freedom and the ability to make decisions about their own lives. One respondent describes how living with her cousin was better than shelter.

In some ways, yes, because there was more freedom to do what we needed to do and not so many time constraints and curfew or classes and things that were related

to that program, because we could actually focus on what needed to be done and be gone all day if we needed to be.

Considering the restrictions she felt in shelter, another mother appreciated having the freedom to take her child on outings when and to places she wanted.

I couldn't think of one day this summer we weren't at the beach.... And it was like an every day thing. If it wasn't that day we was going to the park.

Lack of autonomy—A larger number of respondents (42 percent), however, felt that living under someone else's roof had negative consequences for their sense of autonomy. One respondent felt this difficulty while living with a friend.

Yeah, not being able to live our own life, and establish our own routine, and be free to be a mom, and cook what I want when I want, and do laundry when I want to, just everything.

Another respondent described the pressure and restrictions her brother put on her.

Hard things is like that [he] didn't want me to work. He just wanted me to be a mother to my child, like he just wanted me to just focus on her schooling, and just being there. He didn't want me to do anything like—not independent, just he didn't want me to make money for myself.

Limbo—Beyond having control of their lives, a few respondents expressed concerns about the uncertainty of their doubled-up living situations. One respondent described her life as being on hold while she was living with a friend and the discomfort it created. Another person described her situation after shelter as hectic and confusing, as she never knew exactly with whom she would stay next.

So I was just like whoever wanted to deal with me and my kids or like whichever room had the space, that's where I went, which wasn't where I wanted to be. It was just because I had to be there.

This uncertainty did not go away even when she lived with her mother. The same respondent referred to the worst part of that situation—

Just the uncertainty. Not knowing if I will be able to—how long I will be able to stay and just access.

Ownership

A small number of respondents (6 percent) expressed feeling a sense of ownership or belonging in their current doubled-up situations. One respondent described living with her mother positively in this way.

Because this is—this is home. This is where I grew up.

Lack of ownership—A much larger number (39 percent) of respondents lacked a sense of belonging and emphasized that their living arrangements belonged to someone else. One-third of respondents still lacked a sense of ownership when doubled up with parents.

Because at my mom's house, with her boyfriend there, I kind of felt like we had to move aside and hide, whenever they were home. We never felt like we were at home. It was like we were in a stranger's house. You could never feel comfortable to be yourself, and to just live your life. It was weird.

When asked about the worst part of living with her friend, one person responded—

I mean the only difficult thing is like it's not our place. Even though we can, you know we're free to do what we can but when it come down to it it's really not our own place. So that's pretty much it.

One respondent spoke about wanting to have her own space for her children, noting that living between her mother and boyfriend's houses was an unstable way of life.

It's like I am used to—since I experience having my own [place] and my daughter, she had her own room; she—it was fixed up with all her things in it and the apartment was really huge and I'm just used to having my own—I experienced it and for them, they deserve to be somewhere stable and have their own territory.

Another respondent living with her husband's cousin similarly spoke of feelings of instability created by the lack of a sense of ownership, which caused stress and frustration.

Because it's not my own. It's not mine. It's like, you're comfortable, but you can't get too comfortable, because it's not yours. You know that this is just temporary. And I'm tired. I am. I'm like, I'm frustrated, I'm tired, I'm stressed. And in the back of your mind, you're still thinking, my journey is not done yet. I still have to keep going.

Impermanence

Overwhelmingly, respondents emphasized this feeling of impermanence in their doubled-up arrangements, regardless of host or rating, for a variety of reasons. Some respondents expressed a desire for their own space and independence as reasons their stay was temporary. When asked whether she would be allowed to stay at her friend's house for as long as possible, this respondent replied—

I think so, but I wouldn't want to...Just 'cause I want to try get back on to being independent myself. I don't like staying with other people. It's not my thing.

Other respondents mentioned more immediate time limits to their stays that were set by the person with whom they were doubled up. One respondent described her friend permitting her to stay conditionally.

No, we can't stay there as long as we like. We have to actually, be leaving soon in the next few days.... They just—they took us in, and asked that we look for a shelter as soon as possible.

Although she said her friend's family were good people and her family benefited from their churchgoing habit, she later mentioned that knowing her situation was temporary was the most difficult part of doubling up with her friend. Another respondent described unspoken rules regarding length of doubled-up stays. When she was living with her friend, she felt it

was temporary because she and her friend both had children. She ended up moving because their children were bickering. She said—

It was just—When you stay with somebody that has children, it's not always recommended that you stay very long.

One respondent similarly left her father's house to double up with a friend because the number of people in the house made her feel as though she could not stay.

With my father, it wasn't an option to stay there. He had his family and only two bedrooms. He had two sons. So I wasn't going to stay there longer. With my son, it was too many people. So yeah, my dad let me stay there for a while, but I wanted to move.

The greatest proportion of respondents—more than one-half (54 percent)—reported feelings of impermanence while living with their parents. More than one-fourth (27 percent) of respondents with other family hosts and 42 percent of respondents with nonfamily hosts felt similarly. Even these numbers do not fully capture respondents' feelings of instability. Our final count of 36 doubled-up episodes does not include additional brief stays, during which the interviewer deemed the respondent had not moved in. For example, only the doubled-up stay with the mother was included for a respondent who reported—

Well like if I go stay with my friend for a few days, I'll wait a week, and then I'll go to my mother's house... then I'll go stay with my auntie. And I just—how do I go about this homelessness... alternating between my friend and my mama and my sons' daddy.... I just had to go where everybody told me to go because I had nowhere to go.

Discussion

We focused this analysis on four research questions: (1) What is the quality of doubled-up experiences? (2) What were strengths and weaknesses of doubled-up situations? (3) Was doubling up with a parent more salutary than doubling up with other hosts? (4) Might a doubled-up situation affect different members of the family differently?

Although a few respondents experienced more positive doubled-up arrangements, our sample reported predominantly negative experiences across all types of hosts. More than one-half of doubled-up episodes were categorized as negative (mostly negative or negative mixed), and negative aspects were also present in situations rated as positive mixed. Respondents reported feeling that they had no option besides returning to abusive relationships, living in chaotic homes dominated by substance abuse, or living in unsafe situations, such as being locked in an unfinished basement or being exploited by the primary tenant. Other examples were less severe but still reflected a predominantly negative experience.

Many negative experiences can be attributed to the housing situation, including lack of one's own space, lack of privacy, and issues related to the physical environment, such as noise, crowding, and neighborhood characteristics. Interpersonal issues also affected respondents' quality of life. Nearly three-fourths of respondents identified some level of negative

interpersonal interactions or relationships during doubled-up situations, which caused stress, conflict, and in some cases, ultimately resulted in respondents having to move out. In short, although many respondents expressed gratitude for not being in an emergency shelter, others would have preferred to stay in shelter, and doubling up did not appear to reflect a high-quality housing option for most families. Even in more positive situations, respondents often mentioned feelings of impermanence, lack of autonomy, and lack of a sense of ownership or belonging.

The ratings also showed that families doubled up with their parents were not necessarily better off than families doubled up with either other relatives or nonrelatives. Overall ratings were quite similar across types of hosts; if anything, three-generational families were seen as less stable than others. More than one-half of the doubled-up situations in which the respondent lived with their own parent trended negative. Respondents living with their parents reported lack of autonomy, impermanence, interpersonal tension, unwanted outside parenting, and negative effects on their own parenting. However, those living with parents also reported support and a benefit from being around family more often than those who were doubled up with others. Even in predominantly negative situations, the value of spending time with family was seen as a benefit or silver lining. For example, even when respondents reported tensions with their own parents, they often felt that their children benefited from living with their grandparents. Most other themes were present in relatively similar proportions across all types of hosts. Given the small sample size, it is difficult to make much of the observed differences.

The most positive aspect of doubling up was a positive effect on children's wellbeing, reported in more than one-half of doubled-up episodes although instances of negative effect on children's wellbeing were equally common. Children were mentioned throughout interviews more often than any other topic. The frequency could be because interviewers asked questions regarding the child's wellbeing in several different ways; it could also be because doubling up as a family poses unique challenges and rewards. Although the relationship was not statistically significant, parents tended to think about whether their situations were good or bad depending on whether they were beneficial or harmful for their children. Situations described as having negative effects on children were rated more negatively on average than situations in which children were affected positively. We observed positively rated instances in which the parent felt that doubling up was undesirable for herself but advantageous for the child.

Strengths and Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, because we looked only at episodes of doubling up after shelter, our sample size was somewhat limited. Additionally, the original 80 interviews included male respondents, but our subsample of respondents was all female, although 6 had a spouse or partner with them. Thus, we are unable to observe whether gender may play a role in the experiences of doubling up. Additionally, an assessment of doubled-up living situations was of the impetus for the original interviews—as a result, we encountered a few situations in which too little information was available to code. Exhibit 2 likely underrepresents the extent of respondents' experiences, because themes could not be coded

unless respondents raised them in response to open-ended questions. Finally, although effects on respondents' children were a frequent theme, we have access only to their mothers' perspectives; we do not have the perspectives of the children.

A strength of the study is that our sample came from four disparate geographical areas across the country. Although the sample size is small, the four sites provide diversity of geographies and rental markets. Our sample reported on nearly equal proportions of the three categories of host—parent, other family, and nonfamily—allowing for direct comparison. Finally, the study team achieved strong interrater reliability, verifying the consistency in coding between the two researchers.

Implications for Policy and Further Research

Although many of the mothers who were included in our sample expressed gratitude to be out of shelter, doubled-up living situations were still described as predominantly negative experiences for study families. Although individuals and households from all incomes, races, levels of education, marital, and employment statuses may share dwelling units for a variety of reasons, those who have been homeless have unique experiences. Our research indicates that doubling up after a shelter episode is not voluntary for most families but is often their last or only option. These situations typically felt temporary to our respondents, although an established end date may not have been determined when they initially entered that living situation or when they were interviewed. Current HUD policy identifies individuals and families that are doubled up as homeless only if their living situations will end within 14 days.³

Nevertheless, for formerly sheltered families in this study, doubling up after shelter has not resolved their period of housing instability. The interviewers in this study did not ask respondents to describe doubling-up situations before shelter, but many people spoke about them anyway. For these families, doubling up represents a return to the kind of instability that led them to shelter in the first place and may be only another stop in an ongoing cycle of homelessness.

In the larger Family Options Study from which our sample is drawn, 31.4 percent of families who received no special offer of assistance reported doubling up in the 6 months before the 20 month followup study, and 28.5 percent reported doubling up in the 6 months prior to the long-term 37 month followup. Had we asked only about doubling up in the full followup period rather than two 6-month windows, those figures would no doubt have been larger. One of the key benefits of priority access to long-term rental subsidies was a dramatic reduction in doubling up and residential mobility relative to both usual care and both of the other interventions (short-term rental subsidies and transitional housing). The qualitative data reported here help to illuminate what those reductions mean in the lives of families who have experienced homelessness.

³Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act of 2009. 111 U.S.C. §§ 896. https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/S896_HEARTHAct.pdf.

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Appendix

Exhibit A-1

Definitions of Coding Categories

Code	Definition	Examples
Autonomy (positive or negative)	Having the ability to make decisions for oneself (about what to eat, when to leave, and so on).	Positive: <i>In some ways, yes, because there was more freedom to do what we needed to do and not so many time constraints and curfew or classes and things that were related to that program because we could actually focus on what needed to be done and be gone all day if we needed to be...</i> Negative: <i>Yeah, not being able to live our own life, and establish our own routine, and be free to be a mom, and cook what I want when I want, and do laundry when I want to, just everything.</i>
Limbo	Feeling stuck, out of control (could be considered a combination or impermanence and lack of autonomy).	<i>So I was just like whoever wanted to deal with me and my kids or like whichever room had the space, that's where I went, which wasn't where I wanted to be. It was just because I had to be there.</i>
Effects on child (positive or negative)	Parent's perception of how the situation has affected her child or children, descriptions of the situation influencing a child's behavior, or interactions between someone and child.	Positive: <i>She used to hit me but she's not physical because there is no kids around and we're more stable for temporarily, like family. We're with her grandma.</i> Negative: <i>I'll say the bad influence is he's less social because my mother's house is like a no talk house... I know it's a very—I mean to me it's a bad thing because he doesn't get to be a kid.</i>
Environment (positive or negative) Physical Space (Positive or Negative)	Parent's perception of the physical space and how it affects them (excluding privacy); issues of crowding, hubbub, or chaos; concerns about child's safety.	Positive: <i>It's okay. My son is in a safe environment, That's the main point. It's not very comfortable though... so, it's not the best, but it's a safe, good, clean environment with good people.</i>
Exploitation	Feeling used or mistreated.	<i>Because I wasn't feeling like I was being taken advantage of in someone else's household.</i>
Family	Explicit statements regarding family's impact on situation; being with family (generally positive, sense of comfort) and its impact on situation.	<i>I just want her to think smart and grow up smart. So she's in a safe environment speaking of me and her family.</i>
Impermanence	Feeling that the situation is temporary or expressing the desire to move.	<i>When you stay with somebody that has children, it's not always recommended that you stay very long.</i>

Code	Definition	Examples
Interpersonal (positive, negative or mixed)	Positive: Feeling at ease, pleased with a situation. Negative: Feeling tension and mental or emotional strain. Mixed: Describing an instance or thought with explicit tension between negative and positive aspects.	Negative: <i>So you know how when people get really upset and it comes out in an argument? She kind of made it seem like I wasn't helping her at all. So it was kind of a falling out.</i> Mixed: <i>She loves my mother. Sometimes I just can't deal with it, but you have got to take the good with the bad.</i>
Outside parenting (positive or negative)	Instances of others (not the parent) parenting or attempting to parent; expressing opinions about a child, or respondent's parenting.	Negative: <i>And then sometimes the way my cousin would talk to him. I'm a very protective mom and if you talk to my child in a certain way I get very upset. And so we would fight about that a lot because she would talk to [child] in a derogatory way and I'm like okay—or I really don't like [child], How can you tell a 6-year-old you don't like them...</i>
Ownership (positive or negative)	Defining or experiencing possession of one's space; lack of ownership might involve feeling like an imposition or lack of sense of belonging.	Positive: <i>I can cook, clean, knock around the house, because it is ours. It's just—it's better here. It's better.</i> Negative: <i>Kind of just 'cause—just pretty much—just our own place and space... I like to be—I do like outside being around people, but when it comes to my own space—my own place—I like my own space.</i>
Parenting (positive or negative)	Parent's perception of how the situation has affected her parenting style or descriptions of parenting episodes or norms.	Negative: <i>There was hardly—I disciplined them and everything, but they only got disciplined, because it was his refrigerator; it was his door; it was his life; it's his bathroom. So, the discipline came to where I had to tell them, 'No, no, no, no, no,' because it's not your house.</i>
Privacy (positive or negative)	Having the ability to be alone, or to have one's own space.	Negative: <i>Well, my son and I have never had separate rooms; we've always shared the same space, but as he gets older it's harder to hide when you're dressing, things like that.</i>
Support	Being aided or assisted in some way (parent only).	<i>No, it's actually easier cause everybody likes to help in their own way like as far as say I'm in the kitchen cooking and I put him on the couch, you know if he's doing something that he's not supposed to or dangerous somebody will do something. They're not just going to look at him fall of the couch and break his neck or something. You know, so it's a lot easier...</i>

Exhibit 1

Percentage of Episodes With Each Overall Rating by Type of Host

Rating of Doubled-up Episode	Type of Host (%)			Total (n = 36)
	Parent (n = 13)	Other Family (n = 11)	Nonfamily (n = 12)	
(1) Mostly negative	46	42	18	36
(2) Negative mixed	15	25	45	28
(3) Positive mixed	23	17	27	22
(4) Mostly positive	15	17	9	14

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Exhibit 2

Percent of Episodes in Which Themes Were Present by Type of Host

Theme of Doubled-up Episode	Type of Host (%)			Total (n = 36)
	Parent (n = 13)	Other Family (n = 11)	Nonfamily (n = 12)	
Presence of autonomy	15	27	17	19
Lack of autonomy	31	55	42	42
Limbo	8	0	8	6
Child positive	69	55	42	56
Child negative	46	45	67	53
Environment positive	8	9	17	11
Environment negative	23	36	33	31
Physical space positive	15	27	33	25
Physical space negative	23	27	25	25
Exploitation	0	9	8	6
Family	46	9	17	25
Impermanence	54	27	42	42
Interpersonal positive	15	18	0	11
Interpersonal negative	38	36	58	44
Interpersonal mixed	46	18	8	25
Outside parenting positive	8	0	8	6
Outside parenting negative	54	36	8	33
Ownership positive	8	9	0	6
Ownership negative	31	55	33	39
Parenting positive	15	9	0	8
Parenting negative	38	18	17	25
Privacy positive	31	27	33	31
Privacy negative	23	9	33	22
upport	54	18	33	36

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