Homelessness is a manifestation of acute poverty accompanied by long-term unemployment, deficient human capital, problems with substance abuse, inadequate welfare benefits, and other vulnerabilities. Homeless people have problems that require sustained intervention strategies that will permit them the opportunity to enter the labor market, maintain permanent housing, remain healthy and functional, and take care of their families. To this end, more and more transitional housing programs have been opened—programs that provide shelter stays of longer duration than emergency shelters as well as an array of support services designed to help people move along the path toward economic independence. Do people do better after living in transitional housing? To address this question, this research monitored homeless families who “graduated” from a large transitional housing program in Baltimore. Following two cohorts of families for more than one year at several points in time, this research finds that families exhibited a series of positive changes in the lives of both adults as well as children. Families did not become economically self-sufficient as indicated by complete independence from income maintenance programs. This study suggests that the availability of income maintenance programs, particularly rental housing subsidies may be a critical factor in permitting homeless people to stabilize their life situations.
INTRODUCTION

Despite the escalation of attention placed on the blight of the homeless, an end to this problem does not appear to be in sight. Entrenched poverty, unaffordable housing, under-funded income maintenance programs, a dearth of housing subsidies, joblessness, as well as growing problems with substance abuse and mental illness, will continue to force many to join the ranks of the homeless. Without massive changes in public policy and the economy that substantially alter the condition that produce acute poverty, homelessness will remain a part of the metropolitan landscape—a legacy of Reagan/Bush policies, deindustrialization, and economic restructuring (Shlay & Rossi, 1992).

The growth of homelessness is manifested in macro structural changes. Nonetheless, programs and policies designed to ameliorate homelessness are not directed at altering macro forces such as the economy but at the micro conditions and circumstances of individuals and families. Approaching homelessness as the problem of individuals is often viewed as “blaming the victim” because the focus is on the character and skill deficits of people rather than faulting the larger social order that allowed these people to fall between the cracks. Yet, without the political will and wherewithal to transform macro forces (or even to tinker ever so gently) the problems of homeless people may be the only programmatic game in town. Hence, many programs designed to address homelessness specifically target the characteristics of individuals that appear to prevent them from maintaining a permanent abode.

This paper is about a group of people who participated in a small experimental program designed to address the problems of homeless families with children—the Transitional Housing Program (THP). Located in Baltimore, THP provides housing for a period of up to 2 years, combined with an array of supportive services that are intended to help people make the “transition” from being homeless to permanently domiciled.

Does participation in programs like THP help people alter their life circumstances and enter the social and economic mainstream? Using data collected as part of a THP monitoring project, this paper addresses the social and economic situations of families over several intervals after leaving the program. It provides information along several dimensions: household economics and human capital, health, problems, relationships and social networks, quality of life, and short- and long-term goals.

THE PROGRAM

The homeless population has become increasingly diverse. In the early eighties, homelessness was primarily the plight of homeless men