

# Stressors and Coping Mechanisms among Extended-Stay Motel Residents in Central Florida

Stephanie Gonzalez Guittar   
Rollins College, USA

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**Abstract:** Not having a permanent home means living in a constant state of stress. Though much has been written about homelessness and its stressors, very little research has focused on the experiences of those living in liminal housing, such as extended-stay motels. As affordable housing units dwindle in the US, more individuals and families with children have moved into extended-stay motels. In this study, I explore stressors that low-income families living in extended-stay motels experience, as well as their coping mechanisms. Through semi-structured interviews with 18 families with children living in extended-stay motels in the Central Florida region, consistent financial and emotional stressors were identified among all families. Additionally, gender and the community feel of a motel impacts the magnitude of the stress, as well as the ability to cope. Findings from this study suggest that, although families in motels experience constant environmental stressors, community building among precariously housed families may create an informal safety net for the families and thus, alleviate the financial and emotional crisis.

**Dr. Stephanie Gonzalez Guittar** is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Rollins College. She studies housing and food insecurity, racial and gender inequalities, and reproductive health matters. Her work has been published in the *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*, *Gender Issues*, *Teaching Sociology*, *Foucault Studies*, *Midwifery*, and *Advances in Medicine and Biology*.

**email address:** SGONZALEZGUITTAR@rollins.edu

**H**omelessness usually does not occur overnight; it is often the result of an accumulation of stressors such as the loss of a job or partner, loss of transportation, lack of healthcare, bad credit, et cetera (Milburn and D'Ercole 1991). These hardships and stress are more pronounced in families with children. According to Banyard and Graham-Bermann (1998:485), "stress and coping processes may not

be different for homeless and housed mothers, but they experience it at different magnitudes.” For those in an emergency shelter, the surroundings are a constant reminder of a lack of housing and hence, serve as a constant stressor. However, those who are struggling financially but stably housed may not be surrounded by others in the same situation and could potentially “tune out” their struggle. The existing literature has studied stressors among low-income individuals and/or those experiencing homelessness (see: Klitzing 2004; Wadsworth 2012; Scutella and Johnson 2018), but not much has been published about people in precariously housed situations, such as extended-stay motels. The present study seeks to address this gap in the literature by identifying the stressors experienced by families living in extended-stay motels with children, as well as some of their coping mechanisms.

Methodologies for enumerating homeless populations vary drastically by jurisdiction. Most estimates of homelessness rely on the annual point-in-time (PIT) counts conducted by agencies that receive funding from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). These PIT counts are largely done by volunteers in each city or county, mainly in urban areas, and thus make it difficult to compare numbers across the board. To complicate matters, the definition of homelessness varies such that if using HUD’s definition, an individual or family living in a motel may not be defined as homeless. But, according to the McKinney-Vento Homelessness Assistance Act, which provides the definition utilized by the Department of Education to identify homeless children in schools, a family living in a motel *is* defined as homeless. For example, a study of Central Florida’s homelessness among children found that, for the 2013-2014 school year, there were nearly 4,000 students who were

identified as homeless—of which it is estimated that about 800 of them were living in motels (Donley et al. 2017). The neighboring county had nearly 6,000 students identified as homeless, with close to 1,200 students living in motels (Donley et al. 2017). These figures provide a rough estimate of the number of families with school-aged children who live in motels in the Central Florida area—though this is not the only area where families are finding themselves living in a motel. For example, a recent New York Times report (Frazier 2021) stated that the Las Vegas school district had 2,035 students living in motels for the 2019-2020 school year.

Most people experiencing homelessness or transitional housing experience chronic stress from accumulated traumas over their lifetimes in addition to their current situational stressors. These traumas and stressors are particularly salient for women experiencing homelessness or transitional housing (Banyard and Graham-Bermann 1998; Klitzing 2004). In shelters, people experience stress not only due to a lack of permanent housing but also a lack of independence, having to meet shelter curfews and rules, as well as potential conflicts with other shelter users (Klitzing 2004; Fraenkel 2020). Those who live in extended-stay motels experience similar stressors due to the constant worry of overpaying their weekly rates to avoid street homelessness, but they do have more privacy and independence than those who live in an emergency shelter. This liminal housing situation, not stable enough to be considered permanently housed but not homeless (or “roof-less”) in a literal sense either, is one that needs to be explored further to identify the stressors and how they affect people in different situations.

There are only a few social scientists who have explored the experiences of those living in extend-

ed-stay motels (see: Brownrigg 2006; Lewinson 2010; Dum 2016; Gonzalez Guittar 2017). Lewinson's (2010) research on extended-stay motel residents focused on the "environmental" stressors that individuals experience, such as limited space and privacy in the motel room and the psychological distress that comes with those physical restrictions. In Lewinson's study (2010), residents coped by making physical changes to the rooms to make themselves more comfortable, changing their behaviors to accommodate their small living spaces, and getting away from the motel at times for distraction. Gonzalez Guittar (2017) focused on the stressors stemming from food insecurity among motel residents.

Brownrigg (2006) found that motel residents come from a variety of different socio-economic backgrounds and, as such, it is difficult to identify general patterns, particularly in their social networks and how they join or distance themselves from communities of residents. Some extended-stay motel residents avoid contact with others as a way to protect their privacy and anonymity, while others form or join social groups within the hotel ("cliques") or socialize with others outside the hotel (Brownrigg 2006). The function of these "cliques" in extended-stay motels has not been explored beyond providing some socio-emotional support. This is an area that needs further exploration since we know that social support can reduce stress and contribute to better mental health (Schutt, Meschede, and Rierdan 1994; Turner and Lloyd 1999; Klitzing 2003; Monroe et al. 2007). Ward and Turner (2007) found that informal networks were an important predictor for not relying on welfare benefits. However, it is not clear whether the numbers of social networks are serving as a substitute to welfare benefits or whether the numbers of social networks are related to ineligibility for Temporary

Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits. There are still gaps in the literature on social support and homelessness. Except for Lewinson (2010) and Brownrigg (2006), who focused specifically on extended-stay motel residents, most of the studies have focused on street homelessness or those in emergency shelters.

There are also differences in stressors by family type and other individual circumstances. Parents who are experiencing homelessness with their children commonly report worry over their children's safety and well-being (Choi and Snyder 1999; Ryan and Hartman 2000; Averitt 2003). Parents stress not only about childcare arrangements, children's development, and academic progress but also about their emotional well-being, including how others may react and treat their children if they found out they were homeless (Averitt 2003; Klitzing 2004). Studies have shown that the perceived financial stress that parents experience can lead to depression, anxiety, feelings of guilt over not providing for their families as they would like to (Conger and Donellan 2007; Paquette and Bassuk 2009; Holtrop, Mcneil, and Mcwey 2015).

Although caring for children while living in poverty is a source of stress, children also provide emotional support for their parents, which serves as a motivator and coping mechanism for the parents (Milburn and D'Ercole 1991). Studies of homeless families found that when parents were asked what kept them going through the hard times, they often replied that their children and their hope of a better future for them made them push through the difficult times (Milburn and D'Ercole 1991; Ryan and Hartman 2000; Vandsburger, Harrigan and Biggerstaff 2008). Also, homeless families often credit God, their faith, or prayer for getting them through dif-

difficult times (Milburn and D'Ercole 1991; Ryan and Hartman 2000; Vandsburger et al. 2008).

The present study expands the literature on housing insecurity and distress by focusing on the experiences of extended-stay motel families with children, their stressors, and related coping strategies. Furthermore, it elaborates on the findings from Brownrigg (2006) by exploring the functions of the cliques that may develop among extended-stay motel residents, as well as the function of these cliques and how they provide emotional and instrumental support for the families.

## Methods

### The Setting

Data collection occurred at various extended-stay motel locations in the Central Florida area, particularly the old highway (192) that leads to the theme parks in the area. In their heyday, these motels were filled with tourists visiting the local theme parks. As theme park companies designed and built their resort areas, the motels lost their appeal, and their clientele shifted. Today, as one social worker said to me, "these motels are *de facto* homeless shelters." The county where data collection took place does not have a housing authority or an emergency homeless shelter. Thus, when people are evicted or have nowhere else to go, the motels offer a semi-affordable short-term option. For the participants in this study, that "short-term" fix ended up becoming an over-extended stay that has made leaving the motel very difficult.

### Sample

Data for this study stem from semi-structured interviews with 18 families with children living in ex-

tended-stay motels in the Central Florida area. The participants had lived in a motel anywhere from 2 weeks to a little over 3 years, with an average stay of 11 months. Participants were recruited through flyers posted at social service providers, charity organizations, and motel lobbies, as well as referrals from social service providers and participants. Two families were referred to me by a social service provider, seven families responded to the recruitment flyers, and the other participants were either directly recruited by the author or were referred by a previous participant.

All but one of the households interviewed had children living in the motel room with them at the time of the interview. Ten of the 18 households (56%) were Latino. Two families were non-Hispanic Black, and the other six were non-Hispanic White. The high proportion of Latinos in this sample is representative of this particular region. The city where the study took place has a minority-majority population where 58.9% of their population is Latino, and the county population as a whole is 46.3% Latino (Census 2010).

Except for the one childless couple, the smallest household was made up of three persons and the largest consisted of seven people in one room (three families had seven members each). The median household size was four members per room. All families paid relatively similar weekly rates regardless of the motel where they resided or the number of people in the room. The rates ranged from \$160 to \$190 per week.

All but one of the households had some income coming in either from employment or social security disability income (SSDI). Not all income was earned legitimately. In a couple of cases, the jobs or side jobs

were done under the table for cash payment, but no one reported engaging in illegal activities for money. The employment histories of the motel residents were concentrated in three industries: construction, hospitality, and retail. Within the two-parent families, women were more likely to stay at home caring for the kids, but they still talked about having worked or looking for work in hospitality or retail.

Most of the interviews were done with one parent (only three were single parents) but there were five interviews conducted with both adults in the household, which led to a total of 23 participants. The participants came from seven different motels along the same highway in Central Florida. At the time of data collection, there were close to 100 extended-stay motels and/or hotels along this highway, which leads to the Lake Buena Vista area, home of the Walt Disney World complex. It was not uncommon for the families to move from motel to motel to seek a better environment or if they had issues with management. The motels were typical in their appearance, mostly two-stories with doors facing the parking lot. However, one location was a multi-story, two-tower hotel where one tower was “reserved” for extended-stay residents and the other for tourists. The practice of having sections reserved for tourists as separate as possible from the extended-stay guests was not unique to this location, which shows the awareness of motel staff of the use of motels as a form of affordable housing. Most, but not all locations, did have a pool that was maintained and available for the families to use regularly. There were no other entertainment areas or playgrounds for children at these locations. Outside of the pool, there were few amenities but an ice machine and maybe a laundromat room available to residents. These motels are all located in commercial zones and thus, are removed from the amenities that families need and/or fre-

quent regularly, such as supermarkets, parks, playgrounds, libraries, or their children’s schools. All of these motel locations were school bus stops, picking up children in the morning and dropping them off in the afternoon as part of the McKinney Vento Homelessness Assistance Act benefits the school district provides to the families in transition.

The initial plan for this study was to conduct interviews in a public location chosen by each participant, but transportation and child care constraints presented a challenge. Thus, five interviews were conducted outside of the motel, and the rest were conducted in the participants’ motel rooms. Zussman (2004:360) states the benefits and importance of studying people in natural settings because it allows the researcher to not only be “alert to what people said not just in interviews but also in vivo. Interviewing slops over into observation.” Spending time in the motel room with the families was beneficial for my understanding of the families’ narrative, experiences, and frustrations.

## Analysis

All interviews were conducted by the principal investigator. These interviews were digitally audio-recorded and later transcribed into Microsoft Word documents for analysis. The average interview lasted a little more than an hour, with the shortest interview lasting 35 minutes and the longest interview lasting three hours. All participants were assigned a pseudonym, and any identifiable characteristics were removed during transcription to protect participants’ privacy.

Given the limited data on extended stay motel residents, this study was primarily exploratory in nature. The study was designed to explore the expe-

periences of persons living in extended-stay motels in a more recent context and including families with children—which is a population that had not been the focus of previous studies of extended-stay motel residents. Following a constructivist grounded theory framework (Charmaz 2014), the goal of the broader study was to limit the use of a priori theoretical frameworks to emphasize letting the salient issues and experiences of these families emerge from the interviews organically. The constructivist grounded theory recognizes that narratives are mutually constructed phenomena, which develop between interviewer and interviewee. As such, care was put into crafting an interview schedule that included questions that are “sufficiently general to cover a wide range of experiences and narrow enough to elicit and elaborate the participant’s experiences” (Charmaz 2014:65). Analyses began with line-by-line open coding, followed by more focused coding. Themes were segmented into conceptual categories with the assistance of sensitizing concepts—groupings that served as starting points to help organize and understand the data. Across the course of data analysis, clear themes emerged—themes that were not purposively sought via questions in the interview schedule. Many of these themes became prominent themes in the current study.

For example, though “stress” was a prominent theme for every participant, this emerging theme did not stem from a specific question (i.e., they were not asked about stress or coping with stress). All interviews began with the question, “Tell me about your experience living in the motel.” From that very first prompt, stress was such a prominent theme that subsequent coding was focused on forms of stress, and later—coping mechanisms for the stressors. After initial coding, the “stress” theme was sub-categorized into the themes presented here: financial/

physical stress and emotional stress. As participants discussed their stressors—it was common for them to also mention what “kept them going” or ways in which they coped with the stress. Thus, the themes emerged organically and became the coping themes identified here of perpetual hope, children as motivation, and community building as coping mechanisms.

## Results

While the families in this study reported similar stressors as the individuals in Lewinson’s (2010) study of extended-stay motel residents (i.e., lack of space and privacy), the families in this sample expressed stressors that could be divided into two main categories: financial stress and emotional stress. Lack of space and privacy were prevalent and added to the stress of maintaining a household and caring for family members. For example, the motel rooms did not have kitchens, and so the families had to do all of their cooking using a microwave or small appliances and using the bathroom sink. The lack of privacy increased stress between family members, and especially for the parents as there was no separation from the children. However, here I focus on the worries they experienced related to finances and emotional concern for their family’s well-being.

### Financial Stress

Though most of the households had at least one employed adult, they lacked stable income and/or benefits (e.g., food stamps). Most had jobs that paid hourly wages, but others were paid by production instead (e.g., housekeepers, contract workers). This meant that even if they were assigned full-time hours, that did not always yield full-time pay. Mara,

a single mother of three, was a housekeeper paid by production. She described her job as physically demanding and for very little pay.

There are days where I feel I can't even get up. But, I have to go to work, and when I feel down, not motivated, I can't do all the work I have to do, I just can't... And there it's by production, sometimes I do one or two [rooms] and I can't anymore. There have been times where I've come home with \$13, that's it. One room and I couldn't do anymore, but I show up, so they don't say anything, \$13. Look, last week I got \$75 for 3 days. It's too little.

The motel room rents ranged from \$160-\$190 per week, depending on their location and conditions. The inconsistent income made it difficult for the residents to know whether they would be able to pay their weekly rent, and while this would not necessarily be different if they had permanent housing, the weekly hotel billing format did heighten their stress. When asked what the worst thing about living in the motel is, Luis, a father of one, responded:

Getting that money every week. Basically. Because it's not like you've got your house when you got a whole 30 days to come up with that money, you know what I mean. You can set aside a little every week. Nah, with these people it's, "you got it, or you don't."

Luis believed that if he had a monthly rent agreement like in an apartment, he would feel less stressed because there would be more time to gather the rent money rather than be at risk of eviction every week. While the families struggled to pay for their basic necessities (e.g., food, toiletries, transportation), the rent weighed heaviest on them, and most of the time was paid first above all other

needs to secure the roof over their heads. Laura, a mother of two, felt similar to Luis:

Figuring out how we're going to get through the week. That's how we've been. How are we going to get through the week? If he gets paid \$500 and we got \$400 to pay for the room, we have \$100, how are we going to make it through the week? Does the baby need diapers? Especially with the food situation...

The weekly formatting of the rent dues placed these families in a continuous state of housing insecurity and fear of being on the street. The motel rooms included utilities, so they did not have to worry about electricity, water, or even Internet in some motels, but the stakes were high each week having to come up with "rent" to avoid sleeping on the street.

Furthermore, these families were extremely precariously housed in that they were paying more than 50% (for some 80-90%) of their income towards their room rates. Despite their desire to obtain permanent housing and their vigilant scouring of resources, this made it extremely difficult to save the money necessary to exit the motel and move into a rental housing unit. Previous evictions, criminal records, and/or bad credit all made moving into a rental apartment or home much more expensive, and this created a sense of frustration. For example, Sunny, a mom of four and a grandmother of one, all in one motel room, said:

I told him [her spouse], I'm looking on the Internet [for rentals], I mean, as of Friday I have \$1200, but I want to be able to move right into a place and not sit here [and] get hollered at and wait, then I have this much money, but another 2 weeks here shortens my money to get a place. I told him, I got \$1200, I can get

a place, but then there's the deposit issue...it makes it really tough.

Sunny's situation depicts the endless cycle that these families find themselves in. While her spouse was employed, she worked at home caring for her kids and grandchild and procuring services, assistance programs, and potential housing options. Even though at the time of the interview she had \$1200, that money would not last beyond two weeks after she would pay her rate at the motel and necessities, and they would be left without savings to cover rental and utility deposits for a rental.

Further complicating matters were the lengthy wait times for assistance programs, which took up precious time and often without any rewards. As Pedro, a father of four kids (including an infant and a preschooler), explained:

One of the things is that when we call for help, I wish they didn't run. You know, I wish they'd tell us, "Here, we're giving this to you." If they can't give it to us, don't tell us, "Listen, make an appointment here, and then go there," please, you know? Our time and the time of the people behind the desk is valuable. Sometimes we don't have the chance to get there, we don't have transportation to get to the offices, why? Because we don't even have 2 cents to get on the bus, you understand?

Pedro is referring to calls he had made to different social services for rent assistance and/or transportation assistance where he was told to fill out an application but did not receive any assistance. He, along with others, was under the impression that an application meant there were funds available, that they had a chance. But, the timing of the need versus the timing of the dissemination of assistance

most times did not align and thus, created a crisis for the families. For example, multiple families reported applying for food stamps but not receiving approval for food stamps until two to three months later. This hurt the family's restricted budgets and did not help their immediate need for food until months later, further contributing to the financial and mental stress of the household.

### Emotional Stress

Besides being stressed about finances, the families worried about their physical and mental well-being and that of their children. The lack of space and privacy took a toll on everyone at some point. Aida, a mother of two, explained how the lack of physical space affected her marriage and the mental state of everyone in the family. She said:

But, I don't know, I know he's [spouse] depressed, too. We're tired of living here. And then we, we got in a, I got him arrested because he tried to choke me or whatever, but after we fixed it, we got back together because of the kids and plus I love him but living like this, anyone would be like...crawling up the walls, it's horrible, it's depressing, um, just you don't have privacy, you don't have time for yourselves, the kids don't have room to play, they don't have a backyard to run around in, and it's just, it's very stressful because everybody is crammed up in here, we're always, not always arguing because we get along pretty well, but like we get into arguments, we argue with the kids, they get tired, they got attitudes...

Natalia, a new mom, also discussed how living in the motels gave her extreme emotional stress due to her constantly feeling unsafe. This led her and her boyfriend, along with their newborn, to move

motels frequently, trying to find a better environment where they felt safer. She said,

I used to cry 'cause I was scared and it was 'cause I get real emotional, I was really emotional when I was pregnant. But, yeah, I wanted to move, and I was like, I was also stressed out, so like it wasn't good, it was, it got to the point that I was about to take therapy, but I cooled down, so when we left the [hotel 1], we went to the [hotel 2], and that's where the drug addicts come and stuff like that, so like, yeah, it wasn't good.

Aida and Natalia are not alone—the connection between emotional stress and safety was a recurrent theme for many participants. Motel hopping was common among participants. Nearly all of the families had lived in multiple motels by the time I interviewed them. Sometimes they moved because they were not able to pay the week, but, most often, they reported moving from motel to motel looking for a better environment where they felt safer with their kids. They were aware that motels are home to families like themselves but also to people with criminal records unable to obtain housing and that worried them (although some of the parents in this study were convicted felons themselves). One resident, in particular, Laura, felt like she had finally found a motel with an owner who cared about the residents and had some screening questions before renting out a room. This made her feel a little bit more comfortable. During conversations with motel managers, I only found one motel manager who did a “background check” before renting, and that consisted of checking the name on the ID against the state's registered sex offender website.

For the families that moved often, the additional moves added financial and emotional instability. The emotional stress seemed to take a bigger toll

on the mothers in the sample since they tended to spend the most time in the motel room either alone or caring for their children. Sunny, a mother of four plus a grandson in the room, talked at length about how living in a motel increased tensions within her household, mainly due to a lack of space and privacy. When asked about what it was like to live in the motel, she explained how difficult it was to live with seven people in one room:

The most difficult...being all crammed in a room. Putting up with the attitudes [laughter] [unclear] I deal with her, my daughter, she's got the same disorder as her dad, so to yell at her and say something at her, she fights back, and then I'm a total mess, and I'll pull all my brains out. She's outside throwing herself around somewhere, and this one, now she's 12, she's getting into that teen stage, and you just want to hang her by her toes and say swing at it...

The lack of perceived safety by the families meant they kept their children in the room most of the time, which heightened stress and emotions among all members of the family. The mothers in particular, like Aida mentioned, were concerned about their inability to provide a “traditional” childhood for their kids where they could play outside or at least have a dedicated play area and their rooms with a door and/or cook and bake with their children. Another mother, Ellen, lamented the fact that her daughter could not have sleepovers while her friends often could.

According to Somerville (2013), women may view homelessness as a disruption of their daily lives and routines, whereas men view it as a loss of property. Furthermore, homemaking is typically regarded as a motherly role (McCarthy 2020) and one that the mothers in this sample reported struggling to ful-

fill in the ways that they could. The mothers in this sample tried to maintain routines, family traditions, and celebrations as they would or had when they had a permanent home, sometimes successfully and often not, and this was a source of emotional distress for them.

Most of the emotional stress was bared by the mothers since the majority of the fathers (all but three in this sample) worked outside the home and tried to work as much as they could to provide for the family. This allowed the men some distance from the motel environment and the daily disruptions to home life. It also allowed them to focus on things they felt they could control—like work to earn money to hopefully have the ability to move to permanent housing, which was also a way for them to cope with the stress.

### **Coping Mechanisms**

The first two themes: perpetual hope and motivated by children were expressed by all of the participants in different ways. The last theme discussed in this section, building community with others in the motel, was something experienced by a sub-group of the motel residents, all from one location.

#### *Perpetual Hope*

All of the families, regardless of the length of stay at a motel, remained hopeful that something would come through for them (e.g., a new job, promotion, a tax refund, or a new housing program) that would change their housing situation. Most times, participants did not have concrete evidence that any of these things would manifest yet they still allowed the participants to remain optimistic and hopeful that the motel room was, indeed, a temporary place.

As Joe said, “it’s gonna get better, I know it is. It just takes time.”

For Mara, who worked as a housekeeper, the hope was the new job she would start the week following our interview. This new full-time job would pay her an hourly rate of \$9 plus benefits instead of production. During the interview, she was doing the math in her head and figuring out how she would be able to cover her rent and expenses. Even though she realized her new income would not cover all of her housing plus transportation and childcare expenses, she believed she would be able to make up the difference by selling handmade crafts on the side.

Donna, a working mother with two teens in the room, had applied for a housing program with the county and was placed on a waitlist. She said, “I’m on the list to be helped in July when the funding comes through,” and she told me that she had been looking for rental homes and had found 12 affordable ones in the neighborhood where she wants to live. Having these potential breakthroughs served as motivation for the residents, and it helped them remain hopeful that their situation would only be temporary.

These hopes and opportunities that the participants shared with me not only served as coping mechanisms for their financial stress but also helped their self-image. Laura commented multiple times of her uneasy feelings anytime she had to interact with someone and disclose her living situation and the reactions or judgments that she encountered. About seeking assistance, she said,

But, it’s just some places that I have gone to, they treat you like that, like, you know, they see you in a situation and assume that you’ve been in that situation

all your life and, you know. Like I told them, you pay taxes in case you're ever in that situation, you know you're able to go and apply and receive it again. And it's like bothersome to some people.

Laura was a cosmetology student, and she said, "After all of this, I'm still going to school." Laura was very proud of maintaining her studies despite living in a motel and living an hour away from her school. She also referred to the certifications she had from her previous job working with the Head Start program in a different state.

Several residents pointed out how they were different from others because they were actively working to get out and not "getting comfortable" in the motel. Donna was adamant about that for herself. She explained:

Like I said, I came in here with one black duffle bag as if I came from wherever and moved in. People that come here have those rollaway carts with their lives on them, their lives, like I said, [name of another motel resident], big freezer, oven, 3 of these refrigerators all over the place, his own flat-screen TV, his own... it's up to the yin and yang. Not me. I'm not making it my home. I'm not, I refuse to. And I feel like when you bring things here, and then you bring more things [13-year-old son yells out: "You feel too much at home," she nods in agreement], and this isn't home, this is just a place to lay your head until you can lay it in a permanent spot.

Donna felt that if she moved in a lot of stuff into their room, then she would get comfortable and complacent with her living situation. She wanted to stay uncomfortable so that she would stay motivated to move out. She compared herself to other residents whom she felt had become too comfortable

in the motel and thus, had lived there for multiple years. Her comfort with the discomfort stemmed from her perpetual hope that she would soon be able to move into her place. On the other hand, Jackson, a single dad of three, had all his belongings packed in boxes in the room like a storage unit (this was unique for this sample). When asked how it was to live in the motel, he said, "Small. Crowded. Crazy. It's all right, I'm going to make it all right until I can do better." Jackson was an unusual case in that he consistently referred to the room as "the house," and the hallway as "the porch" where the kids played, and he did not seem as bothered by the small space as others in this sample. Jackson spent nearly 90% of his monthly fixed income from social security disability on the monthly room rate. Despite there being little chance he would be moving out of the motel soon, he was optimistic that everything would be all right and he and his kids would be ok.

### *Motivated by Children*

Parents worried about how the motel environment would affect the children in the long run. However, children forced the parents to have, or at least present, a positive outlook. Many of the parents, especially those who were able to be interviewed away from their children, talked about how depressing and difficult their situation was and how they hated that their children had to endure that because of their (parents') failure to provide. At the same time, the kids motivated the parents to persevere every day. Aida said,

I don't even want to get up half the time...I get up because I have to because I have to get my son to school, because I have to feed my daughter. If not, I would probably die there.

For Aida, who reported suffering from clinical depression, her children forced her to get up and greet the world each day. She was motivated to find resources to provide better for her children despite her personal challenges with her mental health.

As mentioned earlier, several families discussed how the motel environment was not ideal for children and they felt unsafe. Inocencia and her daughters experienced some distress over the incidents at the motel, but she tried to keep a positive outlook to help her kids get through the tough times and help them and her cope with her situation. She said,

My youngest, sometimes her nerves would be uncontrollable when the police were in the area, she was so uncomfortable, it was tough. But, Mami (referring to herself) always managed to explain and, you know, “Let’s go for a walk”...and we would have some quality time with whatever activity we could do...Those are the little moments, I value...But, it is tough! It’s just that I’m the type of person that always tries to look for the positive side...

Orphee and Joe said it hurt them when their daughters asked for stuff that they could not buy for them. But, they also said those moments become teachable moments for them, too. Joe said, “but it’s kinda good in a way for them ‘cause as my older daughter, they’ll see now what it takes to survive in the world, you know. It’s kinda teaching them as well.” Dee, who thought similarly about her six-year-old daughter, said, “for 6 years, whatever she pointed at, she got. So, maybe God wants us to learn to live a little more humble.”

These parents coped by reframing their situation as a character-building experience for their children. Our society expects parents to have the ability to

provide necessities and a healthy environment for children to develop and grow. Sometimes the parents felt like they were failing to do so, and that generated guilt and stress. However, during the interviews, parents discussed how they were doing everything they could to provide a loving and safe environment for their children. Each one had high hopes for their children’s futures, and that hope helped them cope with their current situation.

### *Building Community*

Though the majority of the participants felt a general mistrust of other motel residents, six motel families found great comfort in meeting other families in the motel that they could relate to and build relationships they considered stronger than their ties to family members. Though the larger clique in this sample was a result of the snowball sample, two other participants in different motels reported very similar bonding experiences to other families in their motels. In Brownrigg’s (2006) study, there was no discussion of anything beyond emotional support for these cliques, but in this sample, the families reported receiving instrumental and emotional support from these neighboring families.

In reference to the community feel of one motel, one participant said, “you know, everybody kinda knows everybody. It’s like, I call it ‘the happy hotel’ from The Muppets.” The families reported each other as their support system. When asked whom they would go to for help, these families would say they would talk to their neighbors rather than their relatives. Despite her comments about how other motel residents felt “too comfortable” living in the motel, Donna said:

The other thing about the hotels is that everybody understands one another, doesn’t judge anybody

about having no money, having no food, or what kind of situation we're in. Everybody understands 'cause they're living it, so everybody bends over backward to help each other.

While some of these families may hesitate to ask family for money for rent or food, they rely on each other to avoid judgment and perhaps repercussions, such as being reported to child protection services for not having enough food for their kids.

A resident at another motel, Inocencia, had a network of four families who also lived at her motel. She said they became very close, like a family, and she could count on them for emotional support, as well as during any crisis. Inocencia explains:

On occasion, the other girls have lent me money, I would pay [rent], and then when I got paid, I would pay them back. Also, when I had money and another person was short, I would give them money, and we would keep each other in this exchange to survive.

Ward and Turner (2007) suggest that social networks can prevent welfare. In these cases, the social networks were not complete substitutes for their TANF benefits, but they did provide assistance that would not be available to them through TANF or available on time. For the majority of residents who found themselves in a motel with other supportive families, these relationships filled the gap that their families would have filled and eased their stress during a crisis. Some completely replaced them by calling them their family. At an outreach event where I met two of the participants, Ellen and Jeanette, they introduced themselves as "neighbor sisters." After talking to them a bit, I learned that they had met only a couple of months before at the motel when they became next-door neighbors. Jeanette told me,

"she's like my sister, man, I don't know what I would do without her." Ellen and Jeanette, as well as their husbands, became so close in that short period that they were planning to move into a house together. These fictive kin relationships were the residents' safety nets when the traditional bonds were broken or non-existent. For these motel residents, knowing they were surrounded by people in the same situation, who understood their struggles and did not think of them as any less because of it, was a beneficial factor in helping them feel optimistic about their future.

In contrast, some residents either were not in a motel with other families (or at least ones they could relate to) or had been through some bad experiences that made them hesitant to interact with others. These residents reported that they felt it was best to keep to themselves and interact with others as little as possible to avoid being caught up with "bad" people or having others gossip about them and know "their business." While they felt that isolating themselves was best for their family, these residents were more likely to report feeling down, depressed, and overall unhappy with their current situation than those who talked about their close relationships with neighbors. Sunny describes why she prefers to keep to herself:

I've met other people, but I try to keep myself distant not to get too involved with other people. Like we have a few people that we talk to, but other than that, we don't get involved with other people. We try and keep our distance. I find it's easier that way, no one knows your business, they don't have to know your business, my kids don't have to deal with other people saying your kids are doing this and that..I'm right here, I can tell what my kids are doing, we don't need these people coming in here, run in here, yapping making it worse than what it is.

For residents like Sunny, keeping to themselves was a way to not add stress or “drama” to their already stressful living situations. This also meant they did not forge positive social relationships for emotional or instrumental support if needed. They only depended on their partners, if they had one, to talk to and vent their feelings. The lack of a social network made them more susceptible to negative feelings and general unhappiness.

However, I found through their narratives that they reported knowledge of other families in the motel. They did not “know” them, but they knew of them and either had observed the families in the common areas or had some interaction that gave them the ability to tell their story. In other words, even though the families said they did not know anyone, they still speculated about the lives of others during their interviews with me. Sometimes these details or experiences were reasons for them to not interact with others in the motel. The families were speaking of other residents and comparing other residents’ decisions to their own and using those judgments as justification for their choices. Even some of the residents, who said they avoided others, tried to learn about and find a connection to the others around their motel room. This pseudo connection served as a coping strategy for them by reinforcing their beliefs, values, and providing some affirmation that they are different (better) than other motel residents.

## Discussion

Families in extended-stay motels experience a great deal of stress from multiple factors that affect their subjective mental health, physical well-being, and their daily routines. Financial pressures are the main stressor for these families, but the financial instability affects their housing alternatives, relation-

ships with partners and children, perceptions of safety, as well as their physical and mental health. Notably, stressors vary by gender. While most of the fathers in this sample worried about providing for their families, the mothers had additional stressors stemming from their inability to perform motherhood the way they would want to and also because of their social isolation since most of the mothers in dual-partner households did not work outside the home and had no respite from the motel room. The lack of transportation, money, childcare and even mental healthcare placed greater weight on the mothers.

The findings showed how small networks within motels or “cliques” serve as an informal safety net for the families when assistance from extended family or social service providers is not available. Moreover, it was evident in this data that those who were able to forge social relationships in and out of the motel had a more positive outlook on their situation. Though, consistent with Brownrigg’s (2006) findings, some motel residents keep to themselves to protect their privacy while others socialize and form cliques with other residents. Given the potential benefits of these small social networks within a motel, social service providers could attempt to hold more outreach events at the extended-stay motel locations to encourage interaction between neighbors and facilitate these social connections that can improve instrumental and emotional support for the families.

In this data, there is some indication that the type and location of the motel encourage or discourage social interactions with neighbors. For example, there were single-story and two-story traditional motel locations where the doors faced the parking lots. In these locations, the residents were more like-

ly to report noise disruptions, police presence, and overall feelings of uneasiness about their surroundings. Other locations were more mid-range hotel style with multiple stories, and the rooms were only accessible from the inside of the building through the main lobby entrance. Two of the three “cliques” discussed in the findings section were based in locations with the mid-range hotel layout, and the other was in a two-story motel layout. The style and layout of the locations should be a variable to consider in future research as it relates to not just community building among residents but also for adequate trauma-informed care of extended-stay motel residents and their children.

As with any qualitative study, there are limitations in the present study. The sample consisted of families with children living in extended-stay motels. The stressors and coping mechanisms may differ by different demographics and life circumstances. The motels may be the only housing option for individuals with felonies, drug charges, registered sex offenders, or individuals on fixed incomes. Future research should explore the experiences of the various sub-groups that live in extended-stay motels. It is important to understand how each sub-group constructs a “home” in their situation, how they attempt to manage the stress and stigma associated with their living situation, and how they cope with the stress of it all.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, the lack of permanent housing is the most pressing stressor for these families. The participants believe that once they acquire permanent housing, all other stressors will decrease or be eliminated. The bad news is that affordable housing units are dwindling across the nation. According to the National

Low Income Housing Coalition (2019), there is not a single state where a minimum wage employee can afford a two-bedroom apartment. This housing crisis will inevitably maintain some of these families in the extended-stay motels and lead to more people seeking shelter in extended-stay motels.

This study reveals the consistent and persistent stress levels that the parents living in extended-stay motels experience daily. Future research in this area should pay particular attention to the temporal challenges families who live in extended-stay motels face. As explained here, the quick turnaround time for rent payments in a motel yielded high concern of being on the streets on a weekly basis. While common rhetoric may portray people living in poverty as complacent and unmotivated, this is simply not the case for these families. The families spend considerable amounts of time hustling, working at their jobs, procuring goods and services from non-profit organizations and food pantries, looking for assistance programs to help them obtain basic needs including housing options. This is all the more challenging for families with young children, limited childcare, and/or without transportation. One of the families in this sample walked two hours each way (with an infant and a toddler) in full Florida sun to an agency offering emergency assistance because they did not have any other transportation or childcare. Thus, there is a level of stress and frustration that occurs when everything they can and need to do to improve their situation takes an unrealistic amount of time, and it feels like their efforts do not yield any or enough benefits (Fraenkel 2020).

While extended-stay motels residents may be perceived as “housed” individuals and not homeless, they experience similar stressors as those living in emergency shelters and/or liminal housing. It is dif-

difficult to establish routines and plan when there is so much instability in their lives. Furthermore, the gendered stressors are also heightened in this housing setting as families are isolated from residential areas and amenities (e.g., green spaces, playgrounds) that can provide some respite from the “four walls” of a motel room but are difficult to reach without transportation. As the housing crisis persists in America, low-income individuals have fewer and fewer housing options, and as the recent New York Times (Frazier 2021) article title suggests, “When no landlord will rent to you, where do you go?” Extended stay motels are the band-aid to the housing crisis, and it is peeling. Social service agencies and city governments in this area are discussing turning to motels as affordable housing units. But, from the experiences of the families here, as they exist,

extended-stay motel rooms are not healthy for families with children. These motel units could work as affordable housing if: 1) motels were converted into traditional rental units with leases that afforded tenant rights, 2) rooms were retrofitted to create delineated living spaces where families can cook, eat at a table, kids can study, and have private sleeping quarters, 3) they were rented at affordable rates based on income, 4) based on the narratives shared about the significance of informal social networks, it would be wise to build opportunities for residents to commune together and facilitate these connections. Ultimately, extended-stay motel residents want to be “seen,” as they are largely overlooked by housing/rent assistance programs and they need assistance to break their “payday loan of housing” (Frazier 2021).

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