

Misty Blue ([00:01](#)):

Welcome to Ending Student Homelessness, a podcast that brings together folks who are committed to understanding and finding housing solutions. I am Misty Blue, a researcher at the University of Minnesota's Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare, and I've had the honor of interviewing a series of guests committed to this work. I hope you enjoy today's episode with Dr. Mary Beth Shinn, a Cornelius Vanderbilt professor at Vanderbilt University. Dr. Shinn studies how to prevent and end homelessness. She was co-principal investigator of the 12 Site Family Options Experiment, examining approaches to ending family homelessness. She was also the evaluator for the initial study of the Pathways Housing First Program in New York City, and the developer of a model used by that city to target its Homelessness Prevention Services. Her 2020 book with Jill Khadduri, *In the Midst of Plenty Homelessness And What to Do About It*, surveys research to show that we know how to end homelessness if we devote the necessary resources to doing so. Beth has received research or publication awards from the Society for Community Research and Action, the Society for Research on Adolescents and the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management. She serves on the Her Local Homeless Planning Council and on the research council for the National Alliance to End Homelessness. Welcome. Thank you so much for joining me in this conversation today.

Mary Beth Shinn ([01:35](#)):

Thanks so much for having me.

Misty Blue ([01:36](#)):

Can you please introduce yourself to our listeners?

Mary Beth Shinn ([01:39](#)):

Um, so it was Misty said, I'm Beth Shinn, I'm a professor at Vanderbilt University. Uh, before I came down here, I was at New York University and for the last 30 years or so, I've been researching how to prevent and end homelessness. Um, and, uh, I think we know the answers to that now. So the, I've recently co-authored a book with Jill Khadduri called *In The Midst of Plenty Homelessness and What to Do About It*. We argue that we know how to prevent homelessness, we know how to end it, and it's a matter of political will. And there we survey the research about homelessness, about its causes, about what to do about it. So we look at intervention programs that work like housing choice vouchers, uh, for different populations. So housing choice vouchers work well for families. Folks with serious mental illnesses need something more, uh, supported housing on a housing first model, for example. And we look at what prevents homelessness, uh, and how we target prevention programs to the people who will benefit most from those programs.

Misty Blue ([02:47](#)):

Could you please describe the work that you do currently for us?

Mary Beth Shinn ([02:51](#)):

So I'm involved in a variety of studies to try to, uh, prevent and end homelessness. Uh, the largest is the Family Option Study, a 12 site study where we randomize nearly 2300 families to different housing and surface interventions, uh, to understand what works best for homelessness. And we're about to launch an 11 year follow up, uh, to that study, which will be very exciting.

Misty Blue ([03:18](#)):

Excellent. Thank you. And what led you to do this work?

Mary Beth Shinn ([03:23](#)):

I was in New York at the time when homelessness began to kind of spill out of skid rows and into all of our consciousness. Um, and I was a young mother and I had, uh, you know, kids who would sort of tug at my sweater and say, mommy, why? Why is this person here? It's hard today for young people to imagine a time when there wasn't homelessness, when you didn't have to pick your way around your fellow citizens on the streets. And it's hard for people my age to recapture the kind of shocked disbelief that we had that this could be happening here in a wealthy country, but we don't need to have homelessness. It's a product of inequality of unaffordable housing and it's something that we can end.

Misty Blue ([04:08](#)):

Wow, that's really great. It's really meaningful to me to hear that it really stemmed from your family. So you and your, your children, your motivation because you do such great work on ending family homelessness. You had mentioned inequalities, what types of inequities present themselves in your work or to the people that you serve?

Mary Beth Shinn ([04:30](#)):

Well, it's economic and racial inequality, and those of course are intertwined. Uh, so homelessness arose when people at the bottom stopped being able to afford rents. Back in the seventies, there was a surplus of units that people at the bottom of the income distribution could afford. Uh, and that surplus turned into a deficit that's gotten only larger over the years. Um, but, uh, homelessness is differentially visited on different racial groups. So African Americans and Native Americans are at special risk. Uh, and that has to do with long histories of inequalities in the housing market that have stopped African Americans from building up wealth. Uh, they have to do with present day inequalities, discrimination in housing discrimination in employment, uh, incarceration. Uh, so all of those contribute to African Americans becoming much more at risk of homelessness. The mechanisms for Native Americans are a little different, but they're very similar.

Misty Blue ([05:32](#)):

And what is one action that you think should be taken on this? I'm sure there are many that you can think of, but, um, if you would share one with us that would be, that'd be great.

Mary Beth Shinn ([05:40](#)):

The closest thing we have to a silver bullet would be a large scale expansion of the Housing Choice Voucher Program. Uh, that's expanded very little as population has expanded over the last 20 years. Um, and a bipartisan policy commission a few years back figured that, uh, for about 30 billion dollars we could provide housing choice vouchers to everyone who needs them. What Housing Choice Voucher does is it holds your rental costs to 30% of your income. Uh, and we've shown that for families that ends homelessness, other studies have shown that it prevents homelessness among families.

Misty Blue ([06:21](#)):

So we are currently recording this podcast over Zoom due to Covid, and I'm curious about the ways that you've seen Covid impacting your work or your studies currently.

Mary Beth Shinn (06:32):

Well, COVID certainly exacerbates the racial inequalities that we've seen all along in homelessness. Uh, people, African Americans and Latinx people are at special risk and Native Americans as well, uh, in part because of the jobs that they do where they can't protect themselves as easily as those of us who are sitting home on Zoom. Uh, and because of overcrowding in their housing. Uh, so Covid has exacerbated the racial inequities. It also maybe, uh, provides, uh, one route to a solution so that the CARES Act included some funds for what are called Emergency Solutions grants that can be used to get people off of the streets and into housing. Uh, they don't last long enough for everybody. Some people with six months of help can get back on their feet, but this is in the middle of a pandemic. There's an unemployment crisis and a recession as well. Uh, so not everybody's gonna be able to do it with a short term kind of subsidy. So what we need then is for public housing authorities to use their housing choice vouchers to make a seamless transition so people can stay in the same units and they can get the help as long as they need it.

Misty Blue (07:50):

So where does your focus and your research intersect with student homelessness specifically?

Mary Beth Shinn (07:57):

So student homelessness is usually defined more broadly by the Department of Education than homelessness is defined by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. So HUD focuses on people who are on the streets and in shelters, places not meant for human habitation. The Department of Education looks more broadly at people who are doubled up, um, and housing vouchers fix both of those. So housing vouchers really end homelessness for families. In the Family Option Study, a large 12 site study, they improved kids' behavior problems as rated by their mothers. They improved school attendance, they reduced moves from school to school. And so they, uh, student homelessness is absolutely something that we can work on as well. We can try to prevent and end.

Misty Blue (08:55):

So if you could re-envision or re-imagine a system, and I know you've given us many clues into that already, but what would be the key to ending student homelessness?

Mary Beth Shinn (09:04):

Um, well, again, I think that it's the Housing Choice Vouchers, uh, or other ways that make housing affordable for people. So housing affordability depends on the cost of housing, and it depends on incomes and the difference between those. So anything that you can do to reduce housing costs and anything you can do to raise incomes for people at the bottom part of the income distribution, is gonna make a big difference for homelessness.

Misty Blue (09:32):

So you've talked a lot about, sort of mitigating exposure in a way, right? So people, homelessness is, you know, causes such a disruption to people's lives, and it really puts people, um, more exposed to different risks. And I'm hearing that, the housing vouchers offer just other layers of protection. Whether it be for not losing their housing in the first place, or for layering more protection on in this moment of covid, in this moment of, of pandemic and recession as well.

Mary Beth Shinn ([10:07](#)):

Absolutely. Uh, the other thing, the other place, uh, that you haven't asked about that's probably important, um, is to think about, uh, children who are too young for school. So, the age at which you're most likely to be found in a homeless shelter in the United States is infancy. That's shocking. Let me repeat it. Infancy is the age at which you are at highest risk of, of homelessness and rates of literal homelessness. HUD defined homelessness stay high in the preschool years. They drop when kids get to public school, when they get to school age. Uh, because school is a form of subsidized childcare, families, childcare expenses drop. And so we need to think not only about children who are already at school age, we need to think about readiness for school for those very young children whose health and whose educational development, whose access to toys that they can learn from is impeded when they have unstable housing.

Misty Blue ([11:16](#)):

Early childhood is such a critical moment, right. In a child's life. So thank you for, for bringing that up. Where do you see any avenues that we could either continue or increase the ways that we're connecting with families who have children in early childhood?

Mary Beth Shinn ([11:33](#)):

Well, at the University of Minnesota, you do great work on how to work with families, work with children, bolster them to make them more resilient to the challenges that they face. And I would refer people to you. What I do is more at the backend trying to prevent them from getting to that place altogether.

Misty Blue ([12:01](#)):

Thank you. It's been great hearing from you and hearing about your work today. Thank you for joining me. Where can our listeners find out more about you and your work that you're doing?

Mary Beth Shinn ([12:09](#)):

Well, one place is at the conference on Ending Student Homelessness November 13th at the University of Minnesota. And so I'm really looking forward to participating in that and, and learning from that. Um, and then folks could go to my book on Amazon In The Midst of Plenty, How to Prevent and End Homelessness, Shinn and Khadduri, and, or our website at Vanderbilt University.

Misty Blue ([12:35](#)):

Great. Thank you.

Mary Beth Shinn ([12:37](#)):

Okay. Thank you.

Misty Blue ([12:40](#)):

Thank you for listening to the Ending Student Homelessness podcast. This podcast was recorded on Anishinabe and Dakota ancestral homelands. Indigenous people have historically and paradoxically faced homelessness at disproportionate rates in the state of Minnesota. Please visit our podcast page to learn about ways you can support local organizations committed to addressing this issue. This special podcast series has been created by The Homework Starts With Home Research Partnership. We are a

collaborative state university school community project designed to integrate multi-system administrative data and analyze it in order to produce and disseminate high quality evidence pertinent to addressing the state and national challenge of student homelessness.