EARLY CHILDHOOD HIGHLIGHTS

Child TRENDS

When the Bough Breaks: The Effects of Homelessness on Young Children

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Living without permanent, long-term housing creates a number of stressors for children and families, but being homeless can be particularly detrimental to the healthy development of young children. The National Center on Family Homelessness reports that more than 1.6 million children - or one in 45 children - were homeless annually in America between 2006 and 2010. It is estimated that 40 percent of homeless children, or roughly 640,000 over that timeframe, were under the age of six.[1] This brief highlights the effects of homelessness on children, with a particular emphasis on young children, and notes several policies and practices that could help mitigate negative outcomes.

Homelessness Trends

Homelessness among families has increased considerably in recent years and is most often due to unexpected financial set-backs (e.g., a death in the family, unemployment) that create a situation where the family can no longer pay for their housing. According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the number of homeless families increased by 20 percent from 2007 to 2010, and families currently represent a much larger percentage of the shelter population than ever before.[3] Similar to other families living in poverty, the typical homeless family is headed by a young, single woman in her 20s, with limited education (often less than a high school degree), with two children (one or both under the age of 6 years old).[4]

Most stays in homeless shelters are for very short periods of time, and many who stay in shelters do not return. A report by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) found that 60 percent of emergency shelter stays lasted less than a month, with many (one-third) lasting less than a week.[5] Some families will return, indicative of their inability to secure adequate and affordable housing. Several factors predict which families will return to emergency shelters, including whether they exited without having obtained a housing subsidy, and low educational attainment and/or poor work history for the head of the household.[6]

Some homeless families are not using shelter programs. The HUD report found that approximately 21 percent were living in places not intended for housing (e.g., in public spaces, cars, etc.).[7]

THE McKINNEY-VENTO HOMELESS ASSISTANCE ACT[14]

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is a federal law that addresses the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness in U.S. public schools. In part, it provides federal funding to states to address the problems that this population encounters when enrolling in and attending public schools, including early childhood education programs for pre-school-aged homeless children (e.g. , public preschool, Head Start, Even Start). Under this act, homeless children include those residing in unstable "doubled-up" accommodations, migrant children, and children awaiting foster care.

The bill was reauthorized in 2002 as part of the No Child Left Behind legislation, and required that preschool-aged homeless children have equal access to the same public preschool programs as non-homeless children. Additional funding to help states and local educational agencies (LEAs) address the educational and related needs of homeless children and youth, given the recent economic crisis in the United States was provided under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009.
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The Negative Effects of Homelessness on Child Development

Frequent moves are typical for families experiencing homelessness, as they attempt to secure affordable housing and/or employment. Having two or more changes in residence, parent's employment or schools in the previous twelve months indicates the presence of turbulence.[8] Research indicates that children who experience a high degree of turbulence are more likely to have high levels of emotional and behavioral problems.[9] In some cases, family homelessness may result in children's separation from their parents—either because children are formally placed in foster care, or because parents leave children in the care of relatives and friends.[10] Lack of regular, stable housing, and the resulting transitions, can negatively affect children's development, including their physical, social-emotional, and cognitive development.

Children who are homeless may suffer from hunger, poor physical and emotional health, and missed educational opportunities.[11] According to the National Center on Family Homelessness, children who are homeless are twice as likely to go hungry as are children who are not homeless. Homeless children are more likely than other children to have moderate to severe acute and chronic health problems, and less access to medical and dental care.[12] Symptoms of asthma, hyperactivity/inattention, and behavior problem are more prevalent among this group.[13,14] Homeless children have three times the rate of emotional and behavioral problems, such as anxiety, depression, sleep problems, withdrawal and aggression.[16] Children without stable homes are more than twice as likely as others to repeat a school grade, be expelled or suspended, or drop out of high school. A quarter or more of homeless children have witnessed violence.[17]

Research suggests that early experiences and environmental influences can negatively impact children's health.[18] When children experience early adversity and toxic stress, for example, when their family is homeless, research finds corresponding subsequent impairments in learning, behavior, and both physical and mental well-being.

According to reports by the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, more than 80 percent of mothers with children experiencing homelessness have previously experienced domestic violence, and their children are more likely to have emotional and behavioral problems.[19] In a study of homeless families with young children (headed predominantly by single mothers), researchers found that 54 percent of preschoolers had a major developmental delay (e.g. language, gross motor, fine motor, social) compared to only 16 percent of their housed peers. In addition, compared

Federal Support for Homeless Children

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), in conjunction with many other federal agencies, funds programs specifically to help the homeless.

One requirement of this funding is that programs ensure children are enrolled in school and connected to the appropriate community resources, including early childhood programs such as Head Start, Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and McKinney-Vento education services.

State-funded preschool programs can complement these federal efforts to prioritize the needs of young homeless children. The 2007 reauthorization of Head Start ensured that homeless children are categorically eligible for Head Start services and are prioritized for services.

Specifically, homeless children are deemed immediately eligible for Head Start and other early education programs, even if documentation (e.g., immunization records) cannot be readily provided.

Early Education Programs (Title I) Title I funds can be used to provide early education programs in community-based settings including child care and Head Start. Homeless children are automatically eligible for Title I-funded early education programs. Funds may supplement or expand existing early education programs, including state-funded pre-kindergarten and Head Start, and may be used in conjunction with community-based child care programs. Title I may be used for district-wide programs, or at the school level for school-wide programs or targeted assistance programs.[23]

with their peers, a higher proportion of homeless preschoolers had a number of developmental delays.[20]

Homeless children may be at greater risk for social-emotional and behavior problems in schools, as well, especially when they lack certain abilities (e.g., focusing attention, self-control) associated with academic achievement. In a recent study, kindergarten and first-grade children (ages 5-7) living in homeless shelters had significantly poorer academic outcomes (e.g., lower IQ scores, below-grade-level performance), and high rates of both internalizing behaviors (e.g., depression, anxiety) and externalizing behaviors (e.g., conduct disorder, hostility). Yet, homeless children with high rates of positive "effortful control" behaviors demonstrated greater academic and social competence and fewer behavior problems in the classroom setting, regardless of initial IQ scores.[21] Promoting such positive behaviors may be especially important for homeless children's early learning, which may also positively affect academic achievement.

Homelessness seems to have long-term effects on a child's school performance as well, though little is known about the educational impact for children not yet in school. In a large study of urban elementary school students (grades 2-5), students who were homeless (as broadly defined to include those living in cars, in doubled-up accommodations, etc.) scored lower on reading and math achievement tests compared to low-income students with housing. Although academic achievement was generally lower among poor children (regardless of homeless status), it was found to be even lower among homeless and highly mobile students. These findings suggest that homelessness is an additional risk factor beyond poverty, and may compound other risk factors (for example, living in a single-parent family, not speaking English as a first language, or minority status) that can also affect academic achievement.[22]

The poorer academic performance of children who are homeless may be associated with their higher rates of school mobility and grade retention, compared with their housed peers. One longitudinal study of ethnically diverse poor children showed that formerly homeless children (ages 11-17 at follow-up) had attended 4.2 schools since kindergarten, compared with 3.1 schools attended by their peers who had never been homeless. While both groups of children demonstrated poor academic achievement, half of the formerly homeless children had repeated at least one grade, and 21.7 percent had repeated two grades during that time period, in contrast with only 8 percent of those who had never been homeless.[23]

Importance of Early Childhood Care and Education Opportunities for Young Children Who are Homeless

Research suggests that high-quality child care and early education (e.g., preschool, Head Start) can provide enriching experiences that promote children's positive and healthy development.[25] These early experiences can be especially beneficial for homeless children, because they provide stability and daily routines that may otherwise be scarce in these children's lives.

Low Number of Young Homeless Children Enrolled in Preschool Programs

The 2001 reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento law requires that homeless children who are of preschool age have equal access to the same public preschool programs as non-homeless children,[26] yet the number of homeless children enrolled in preschool has historically been low.[27] Despite some federal programs that specifically support education for homeless children under the age of 5 (see text box on page 3), reports indicate that many eligible homeless children are not enrolled in early education programs.

According to the most recent (2011) U.S. Department of Education report, preschool enrollment for homeless children (ages 3-5 years) went from 27,784 in 2007-2008 to 33,433 during the 2008-2009 school year—a 20 percent increase. However, in the 2009-2010 year, enrollment of this group declined by seven percent, to 30,995.[28] This decrease is particularly troubling, given that enrollment of homeless children, for grades K-12 overall, increased in each of those years. [13]

Unlike public school programs for children in grades K-12, which are universally provided, the availability of preschool and child care programs varies greatly by locale. Indeed, 10 states have no established state preschool programs.[29] Enrollment criteria can also vary between and even within states. In most states, public preschool programs are currently not funded at a level sufficient to educate the number of children eligible for such services. State-funded preschool programs currently serve just 24 percent of four-year-olds and 4 percent of three-year-olds.[30] In six states, less than 15 percent of 4-year-old children are enrolled in any public preschool program, including Head Start.[11]

Barriers to Using Early Learning Programs Faced by Homeless Families

Beyond the limited availability of public preschool programs, there are additional barriers to enrollment in preschool programs, such as Head Start, for homeless families and their children. Some of these barriers are related to familial constraints. For example, parents may not have time or resources to locate and enroll their children in early childhood programs. Some may fear that their children will be removed from their care, if their homeless status becomes known.

Other barriers are related to how programs and policies are structured and their interaction with the constraints of being homeless. For example, varying definitions of what it means to be homeless can affect a family's eligibility for services. Children in homeless families may be denied enrollment for lacking immunizations, birth certificates, or other documentation (e.g., proof of residence) typically required. Given the high rates of mobility among homeless families, children on waiting lists often move prior to obtaining services. In addition, homeless families often need transportation, which may be unavailable or unreliable, in order for their young children to attend preschool programs.

In the past few years, the U.S. Department of Education reports "little to moderate progress" in enrolling preschool-aged homeless children in preschool programs.[15] Data from the most recent (2006) Head Start Program Information Report indicate that of the 1,072,014 children enrolled in Head Start programs during 2004, only 23,926 were identified as homeless. (Note this predates the most recent recession.) However, there is no system-wide effort that specifically tracks homeless Head Start children, so this figure may underreport the actual number of homeless preschool-aged children currently being served by Head Start.[15]

Implications for Policy and Practice

Moving homeless families back into permanent housing as quickly as possible remains a top goal for policy and practice. However, based on increasing awareness about the effects of homelessness on young children, there are several policy approaches that may support better outcomes for young homeless children until permanent housing can be secured.

Child care and preschool programs should consider prioritizing homeless children during enrollment, similar to the way Head Start does. The number of homeless children enrolled in Head Start

has increased since 2007,[31] possibly because Head Start gives priority to homeless children.

Reduce barriers to enrolling young homeless children in early learning programs. Policies, procedures, and regulations should be reviewed to identify barriers young homeless children have in accessing (and remaining enrolled in) early care and learning programs. In some cases, definitions may prevent service, in other cases, the need for a complete set of paperwork may prevent enrollment. For example, the Department of Education has taken steps to improve access to federally-funded programs for homeless children by expanding Head Start's definition of "homeless" to incorporate broader definitions (e.g., unstable doubled-up accommodations). However, despite revised federal regulations, the state and local agencies that implement many of these programs (e.g., child care) may delay children's entry until immunization and other records have been submitted.

Improve coordination of programs serving young homeless children. With improved coordination across different programs serving young homeless children, more children could gain access to existing services. For example, many child care programs serving young homeless children (birth-5 years) are offered by non-profit agencies and the private sector, while others are offered through the public school system or Head Start. Private and public programs have differing requirements which may impede entry to or transfer from one type of program to another.

Additionally, multiple federal agencies administer programs designed to address the needs of children and youths experiencing homelessness, but programs use different definitions of homelessness to determine eligibility. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) recently reported that the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (Interagency Council) and federal agencies have taken steps to develop a common vocabulary for discussing homelessness and related terms. In November 2011, HUD issued a final rule on the definition of homelessness, adding new categories of homelessness––unaccompanied youth, and families with children and youth who are defined as homeless under other federal statutes. Individual federal agencies have taken positive steps to create this common data standard and improve coordination across agencies. For example, the Departments of

Health & Human Services, and Veterans Affairs have been working with HUD to plan the potential transition of some of their programs to HUD's Homelessness Management Information System.[32]

Transitional housing programs, including shelters, should provide services that support the physical and social-emotional needs of young homeless children. To address the complex needs of young homeless children, transitional and temporary housing should also incorporate services that address multiple domains of healthy development. One way housing programs can do this is to ensure that adequate mental health supports exist for children as well as their parents. For example, a large study found that in one network of transitional housing for children and their families, few had licensed mental health professionals on site and, when this was the case, these practitioners often had fewer than three years of experience working with children.[33]

Shelters should consider incorporating play-based strategies to support the healthy development of their youngest clients. Some innovative programs have been developed that help address the needs of young homeless children. For example, since 1990, Horizons for Homeless Children has established play centers in family shelters throughout Massachusetts in order to provide children with a dedicated area for playing. The program serves about 2,200 children each week.[34] In Washington, D.C., a similar program, Homeless Children's Playtime Project, offers playrooms for homeless children. Trained, screened volunteers provide weekly activities, healthy snacks, and opportunities to play and learn for hundreds of children in five emergency shelter and transitional housing programs. Homeless Children's Playtime Project served 714 children in 2010, with more than 400 of them under the age of 5.[35]

Support homeless children's participation in early childhood programs by providing transportation to programs, or by providing services in easily accessible locations. According to a report by the Department of Education, transportation was the most frequently reported barrier to participation in public preschool programs.[36] Programs that can provide reliable transportation for young children and their families could increase participation. In addition, providing services in the communities in which these families reside, whenever possible, would help improve access for homeless families with young children.

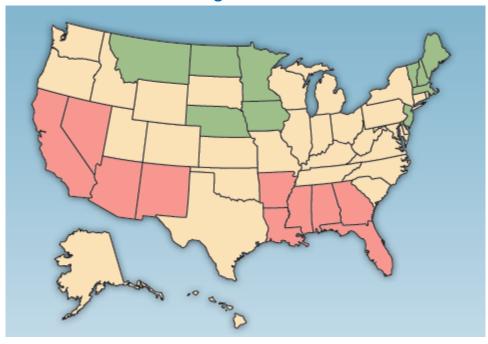## About the Authors and Acknowledgments

State by State Performance in Serving Homeless Children

	Top Ten States (Best composite score)		Bottom Ten States (Worst composite score)
1.	Vermont	41.	Georgia
2.	Minnesota	42.	Florida
3.	Nebraska	43.	Nevada
4.	North Dakota	44.	Louisiana
5.	Maine	45.	New Mexico
6.	New Hampshire	46.	California
7.	New Jersey	47.	Arizona
8.	Massachusetts	48.	Arkansas
9.	Montana	49.	Mississippi
10.	Iowa	50.	Alabama

Composite score constructed according to performance on four domains: 1) Extent of Child Homelessness; 2) Child Wellbeing; 3) Risk for Child Homelessness; and 4) State Policy and Planning Efforts.

Source: Campaign to End Child Homelessness, 2011

Endnotes

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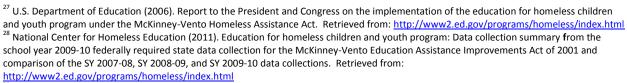[23] Rafferty, Y., Shinn, M., & Weitzman, B. C. (2004). Academic achievement among formerly homeless adolescents and their continuously housed peers. *Journal of School Psychology, 42(3),* 179-199.
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