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How Homelessness Affects Children and Their
Education

Ashley DeMarcus

Senior Honors Research Project

May, 2005

How Homelessness Affects Children and Their Education

I chose to explore and research the effects of homelessness on children. I chose this topic because I work with the homeless population at Knox Area Rescue Ministries (and I want to eventually work with America's youth) and I know that homelessness is a problem for children just as it is for adults because I have seen many homeless children come through our doors. I believe that I definitely will find there to be many effects on children of living in a homeless situation. I will discover the many effects homelessness has on children's education, mental well-being, and physical health. I also hope to find out if there are agencies, as well as policies, out there to help the homeless children, which ones they are, and what they hope to do for these children and/or society as a whole. I also address the problem of how we go about finding homeless children and what makes children homeless.

In reading an article called "Resources: Homeless Facts Children and Homelessness - Some Facts" done by the Committee on Temporary Shelter (COTS), I realized that homelessness does, in fact, as I assumed, affect children. However, I did not realize it affected children as much, and in as many ways, as it does. Being homeless affects children's education, causes health problems, causes them to experience abuse and neglect, wounds them, and tears their families apart.

A homeless child faces rather discouraging barriers to his or her academic success, provided that he or she is able to continue attending school. These homeless children have four times the rate of delayed development, are

suspended twice as often as non-homeless children, are in special education programs at a rate three times higher than other children, and attend an average of two different schools in a single year. These children are at a greater risk for detrimental effects on their IQ and poor academic achievement (APA Online).

Homeless children have four times as many respiratory infections and five times as many stomach and diarrheal infections. They experience twice as many emergency hospitalizations, and four times the rate of asthma as non-homeless children. These children also have six times as many speech and stammering problems.

There is evidence that poverty is associated with child maltreatment. Also, violence (which these children encounter or witness often) injures children and destroys their sense of self and family. Combining homelessness with violence is even more detrimental. Homeless children are confronted with stressful, often traumatic, events every day. The stress has effects on both the cognitive and emotional development of these children. Also, one in three homeless children are separated from their parents.

Homelessness affects children in terms of their education and their psychological well-being. I don't think that these effects can ever be completely reversed. I also don't think there are many agencies out there that help, or focus on, homeless children.

As for a partial solution to this problem, I think that there will probably always be some children that will run away, and will become homeless because of this. However, a way to solve the majority of child homelessness is to get the

children's parents off the streets and into permanent housing first. If society can get families off the streets, children can, and will, be raised in a more stable environment, thus producing less adverse effects on many children.

For this research project, I interviewed Del, who at the time of the interview, was a Team Leader at Knox Area Rescue Ministries, Tamara Saunders, the homeless coordinator for Knox County Schools, and Dr. Nooe, a professor at the University of Tennessee.

My first question posed, "Does homelessness affect children?" was answered by all my sources as a "Yes." I even found a chart online that showed that there are rising numbers of homeless children (almost 100 in 1995 in VT compared to about 450 in 2000 in VT), while the amount of days that these children on average spend in a shelter are on the rise as well. The amount of days spent are up from 20 in 1995 to 60 in 2000 (www.cotsonline.org). Millions of children experience homelessness every year. On any given night, 1.2 million children are homeless (National Mental Health Association).

When it comes to the second question of, "How does homelessness affect children?" Del said that it affects their self-esteem because they are very aware of the haves and the have-nots in society. There is pressure on how they dress, the kind of car they get out of, and who their friends are. These children realize that they come from a type of home that is different from that of traditional families. Many of them have single parents and no home to go back to. He said they feel a sense of abandonment and insecurity. They often times are clingy and needy. After a length of time of living a lifestyle of this sort, it can cause the

children to become hard and distant. They also are very quiet children usually.

Ellen Hart-Shegos who did a report for the Family Housing Fund said that homelessness influences every facet of a child's life. The experience of homelessness affects the physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and behavioral development of children. The impact of homelessness begins before a child is even born. Most homeless parents are single women. These women face many obstacles to healthy pregnancies (such as chemical abuse, chronic and acute health problems, and lack of prenatal care). Children of homeless women are more likely to have low birth rates and a higher risk of death. This living situation also exposes infants to environmental factors that may endanger their health. Many infants lack essential immunizations because their families lack access, or have limited access, to health care. These children begin to demonstrate significant developmental delays after eighteen months of age, which probably influence later behavioral and emotional problems. Homeless children are often separated from their parents and this can cause long-term negative effects. By the time these children reach school age, homelessness affects their social, physical, and academic lives. These children are not simply at risk, but most suffer physical, psychological, and emotional damage. The homeless children are at high risk for infectious disease, asthma, lead poisoning, stunted growth, and anemia. These children also go hungry at a rate twice that of children who are not homeless (National Resource Center...).

According to www.nationalhomeless.org, homelessness impacts children and youth by affecting their ability to enroll, attend, and succeed in school.

Often, they do not have adequate food or nutrition, reliable transportation to school, the necessary immunizations or immunization records, appropriate clothing, or school supplies.

At least one fifth of homeless children do not attend school (National Resource Center). More than one fourth have attended three or more schools in a year. 41% go to two different schools within a single year and 28% go to three or more schools in a year (America's Homeless Children). These children are diagnosed with learning disabilities such as dyslexia or speech and language impediments twice as often as children who are not homeless. The children are also twice as likely to repeat a grade (National Resource Center...). School and medical records can be misplaced or lost because these children move around a lot, in addition the daily work of finding food and shelter pushes school aside (America's Homeless Children). Homeless children encounter lower teacher expectations, poor school readiness skills, and harsh and inconsistent parenting (Hart-Shegos).

Nearly one in three children who are homeless have at least one major mental disorder. Almost half of children who are homeless have anxiety, depression, or withdrawal. More than one in three homeless children manifest delinquent and aggressive behavior. Children who grow up on the streets are likely to repeat the lifestyle with their own children (National Mental Health Association).

Karen Heusel, who wrote a book entitled, Homeless Children, found most homeless children to be living in dangerous, violent situations. She says, "The

theme that emerged from the experience of being in dangerous environments in the past was relief being in the present living situation”(60). By the term “present living situation” she meant the homeless shelters. One girl Heusel interviewed told her story of when her father was alive and they lived in a great house with lots of toys, a playroom, and a big bedroom. In this house, only her, her parents, and her siblings resided in. Her father was killed at work and then the family since that has had to live with relatives and move more than six times in the past year (61). This story is all too familiar because many of the homeless families are headed by single mothers. Many times, when a father leaves the picture, for whatever reason, the mother does not make enough money to keep her and her family afloat.

Henrietta Attles wrote a book called, The Effects of Homelessness on the Academic Achievement of Children. Her study found that, when compared with normal, housed school-age children, homeless children scored lower on achievement tests. In grade five of school, the deviation ranges from a seven-month deviation in “Mathematics Computation” to a two-year deviation in “Vocabulary”. The academic performance in the category of “Word Analysis” was very severe. Most scored from one year to four years behind (31-39).

In response to my third question of, “Can anything be done to reverse these affects?” Del said yes. He said he thinks the effects can be reversed if these children are shown and taught that they have value. Also, it may be helpful for them to see someone not put as much importance on economics, but rather to place it on whom they are instead. He said it is important to point things out

that they do well and to focus on their accomplishments such as, homework, and attending school. People have to let these children know that they matter and are valued, and it's also great for them to know that someone knows their name. Interaction with these children is another key element. They need to know that there are people out there who care about them.

“There is hope that with early and consistent intervention strategies, children can learn to overcome many of the detrimental effects of their poverty and homeless experiences” (Ellen Hart-Shegos). One set of strategies is to ensure priority access for homeless families for services such as supportive housing, drug and alcohol treatment, parenting support, after-school programs, and nutritional support. A second set of strategies can be used by emergency and supportive housing providers to assist their residents by obtaining health screenings and prenatal care for women, assisting families in getting health and nutrition information, assessing and monitoring children's development, and assisting children and parents in participating in school activities (Hart-Shegos). “Interventions give young children who have experienced the traumatic effects of homelessness the chance to build the resiliency and competence they need to break the detrimental cycle of homelessness” (Hart-Shegos).

In trying to find the answer to my fourth, and final, question, “Are there any agencies out there to help homeless children?” Del found this one a bit harder to answer. He said that the Case Managers would know more about that, since they are the ones that deal with that sort of matter more. However, he did say that there are several agencies out there to help these children. He mentioned

the Family Crisis Center, maybe the Salvation Army since they are starting a new program (or restructuring the current one), A Leg Up, as well as KARM. He said that at KARM, the Case Managers work with the children and there are programs set up so that the child feels some sort of normalcy similar to a traditional home (for example, they try to allow things like sleep-overs and birthday parties).

Just by looking on the internet I found that there are many agencies that deal with, and advocate for, homeless children, such as: The National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE), the National Coalition for the Homeless, the Committee on Temporary Shelter (COTS), and the Family Housing Fund (FHF). I also found information about The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY) which, "Serves as the voice and the social conscience for the education of children and youth in homeless situations. NAEHCY connects educators, parents, advocates, researchers, and service providers to ensure school enrollment and attendance, and overall success for children and youth whose lives have been disrupted by the lack of safe, permanent, and adequate housing."

I did not realize that there are as many agencies out there to help advocate for the homeless children in America as there actually are. I did not think there would be very many agencies for these children, since society usually thinks of adults when they think of the homeless population. I also did not realize there were as many pieces of legislation, etc. in our society to help the homeless children as there are.

For example, The McKinney-Vento Act, is a list of the educational rights of

children and youth experiencing homelessness. It was reauthorized as Title X, Part C, of the No Child Left Behind Act in January 2002. The rights listed include, the right to go to school; the right to continue in the school they last attended; the right to receive transportation to the school they last attended; the right to attend a school and participate in school programs with other children who are not homeless; the right to enroll in school without giving a permanent address; the right to enroll and attend classes while the school arranges for the transfer of school and immunization records or any other documents required for enrollment; the right to receive the same special programs and services, if needed, as provided to all other children served in these programs; and the right to transportation to school and to school programs comparable to that provided to children who are not homeless. This is a primary piece of legislation dealing with the education of homeless children and youth in U.S. public schools. To qualify for the rights listed in this Act, children must be considered homeless according to the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness (NCHE). The Act funds emergency aid for food and shelter, healthcare, and public schools. Some of its programs have been reduced or eliminated over the years. Even with full funding, the Act cannot end homelessness (America's Homeless Children).

Another program to help children is the Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) Program. The program demands that homeless children and youth have equal access to the same free and appropriate public education as their permanently housed peers, including preschool. It requires agencies to review and revise any laws, regulations, practices, and policies that may be a

barrier to the enrollment, attendance, or academic success of homeless students. It states that homeless children and youth be provided with the opportunity to meet state and local academic achievement standards and be included in state- and district-wide assessments and accountability systems. The EHCY program addresses the need for policies and procedures to identify children and youth who are homeless. Each state education agency is required to have a State Coordinator of Education of Homeless Children and Youth to identify all such persons in their state, assess their needs, and facilitate cooperation between state and local agencies. Each school district must also have a liaison to make sure the district's homeless children are identified and enrolled in school. They must ensure the children receive services and referrals to services such as health, mental health, dental, etc. The program also demands that parents of homeless children be informed of their rights under the McKinney-Vento Act. Posters also must be displayed in areas where such people might congregate (Levinson).

My interview with Tamara Saunders gave me the following insights including, elementary age children are the highest growing group of homeless children. There are many more services and resources, such as school supplies, health care, transportation, clothing, etc., available to children if they live in a shelter. There are many gaps in education because they go through so many schools in a year, so they get behind. Many parents don't know about the services that are available. Many children find it hard to find a quiet place to do their schoolwork. These children also lack many of the records that are needed

for school, such as a social security card, birth certificate, etc., but the McKinney-Vento Act eliminates many of these barriers.

Barriers for enrollment in schools for homeless children are guardianship and immunization requirements, transportation problems, and school fees.

Barriers for success in school are family mobility, poor health, and lack of food, clothing, and school supplies. Homeless children need school because it's one of the few stable, and secure, things in their lives. It's a place where they can acquire the skills they need to help them escape poverty (www.nationalhomeless.org).

Nearly 25% of homeless children have witnessed violent acts in their families, usually against their mother. They experience physical and sexual abuse at a rate two to three times higher than that of other children (National Resource Center...). 22% of these children live apart from their immediate family at some point. As they get older, they are more likely to be separated from their families. Without parents, these children have a harder time finding shelter because many shelters don't allow young people without adult supervision. Without the relative safety of shelters or schools, they are left to live a dangerous life on unfriendly streets (America's Homeless Children).

I wondered how we find out who/where the homeless children are.

Tamara Saunders said they are identified when they come to register for school and don't have an address, necessary documents, etc. Teachers and counselors are also able to pick up on it sometimes. Tamara also receives referrals from CAC, Homeward Bound, the day shelter (Volunteer Ministries),

social workers, who may contact her because of truancy problems, the runaway shelter, and the Columbus Home. These children can be hard to find. Some stay in shelters, cars, campgrounds, abandoned buildings, or the streets (America's Homeless Children).

My next issue then, was how do we try to help these children? Tamara said she refers them to GED programs, which is good for girls who are pregnant. Also, they give parents a parent pack, which tells about the resources that are available to them, such as housing information and a list of rights. The National Resource Center says we can help them by maximizing families' economic resources and building their assets; developing an adequate supply of decent affordable housing; supporting education, training, work, and childcare for parents; eliminating hunger and food insecurity; protecting children's health; improving mental health services for children and parents; ensuring access to school and opportunities for success in school; preventing unnecessary separation of families; and expanding violence prevention, treatment, and follow-up services.

Hart-Shegos says homeless parents and children should receive priority for long-term supportive housing; drug and alcohol treatment and sobriety support programs for mothers, particularly pregnant mothers; parenting education and support programming specifically designed for parents who did not experience a supportive childhood; after-school tutoring and academic support programs; and nutritional support programs, including WIC (Women, Infants, and Children – a food supplement program), free-lunch programs at school,

supplemental snacks in after-school programs, and other food support programs for families and children (10).

There are many reasons for children's homelessness. Some of them are runaway kids or throwaway kids. The increase in the number of families living in poverty and the shortage of affordable housing also contribute to children's homelessness (National Resource Center...). More reasons include problems with parents or stepparents, or parental abuse; family money problems caused by high rents, low wages, lack of health insurance, or loss of welfare benefits; and foster care, which can lead to homelessness (America's Homeless Children). One of the leading analysts of homelessness in the nation found that the key variables leading to homelessness are the unemployment rate and the employment market; population change; percentage of one-person households, indicating possible social isolation; absence of General Association benefits; cost of living; and failure of benefits to keep pace with the cost of living (Hombs).

I found that homelessness does in fact affect children, but to a much more severe degree than I assumed. Their homeless problem affects each and every aspect of life that one could think of. It not only affects their lives on a daily basis, but in many ways as well. There are physical and psychological health issues, emotional problems, educational barriers, etc. Our government is at least trying to help this population, along with many agencies, but I hope to see more done for these children in the future.

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