

## Unstable Living Situations and Early Childhood Mental Health

### *What we know about young children experiencing homelessness and poverty*

Families with children are one of the fastest growing segments of the homeless population. An estimated 1.35 million American children become homeless each year, and more than 42% of these children are under the age of six.<sup>1</sup> Compared to those in stable homes, children who live in unstable situations have four times the rate of developmental delays, three times the rate of emotional or behavioral problems, and twice the rate of learning disabilities.<sup>2</sup> Homeless infants often have low birth weights, lack necessary immunizations, and are more likely to be exposed to environmental risks than housed infants. Research shows 54% of these children experience some form of developmental delay,<sup>3</sup> which can lead to behavioral and emotional problems and diminish educational success.<sup>4</sup> Common causes of child homelessness include domestic violence, parental behavioral health problems, and loss of a caregiver.<sup>5</sup>

Homelessness and poverty often go hand in hand. Like unstable housing, poverty can have detrimental and lifelong impacts on a child's health and development. In the US, almost 29 million children live in low income households (2006). Poverty inhibits a parent's ability to provide as safe, clean, nurturing environment for a child. Exposure to both short-term and chronic poverty has detrimental effects on children, particularly younger children in the crucial early stages of development. Children at the greatest risk of suffering developmental impairment are those who live in poverty at a young age and those who experience severe, chronic privation. Single-parent families, immigrant families, and parents with minimal education are all at high risk of being poor due to limited earning power. About 40% of Americans will experience poverty during their lifetimes.<sup>6</sup>

When families struggle with poverty or housing concerns, parental stress and mental health problems caused by hardship leads to poor social and emotional development in their children.<sup>7</sup> Parents that are distracted from their child while attempting to cope with life's issues may not be able to provide the nurturing, attentive relationship a young child requires. Children need stable relationships with

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<sup>1</sup> National Coalition for the Homeless, Education of Homeless Children and Youth NCH Factsheet #10, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Cuidando los Niños, Caring for Children of Homeless Families, 2009. Retrieved from: <http://clnkids.org/learn/importance-of-early-intervention/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ammons, S., et al. Helping Young Children (Birth to Five) Who Are Homeless, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Goode, S. Homelessness and Young Children: Early Childhood Care and Education, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Philadelphia Office of Supportive Housing, Supporting Young Homeless Children with Developmental Delays: A Successful Cross-System Model, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> National Center for Children in Poverty, retrieved from <http://www.nccp.org/fa2.html>.

<sup>7</sup> National Center for Children in Poverty, <http://www.nccp.org/fa2.html>

mindful, loving adults and predictable, supportive routines to form healthy attachments. Children who experience multiple caregivers may have trouble forming strong relationships with any adult.<sup>8</sup>

Research shows school support improves the lives of young students. Child outcomes improve when teachers respond to children's needs and create a safe school environment. Good schools, supportive family and friends, and economic and social stability are all protective factors that enhance child resilience.<sup>9</sup> Children living in unstable and resource-limited situations benefit from the stabilizing and supportive environment of schools and early childhood care and education programs. Often, however, pre-school aged children living in unstable situations do not receive these much-needed supportive services.

### ***Homelessness and other unstable living situations***

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act sets the legal definition of homeless children and youth, and enumerates their rights to school services including pre-kindergarten. This Act defines children who are homeless as those who “lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.” It includes children who are “doubled-up” with relatives or friends due to the loss of housing or economic need. Children residing in shelters, hotels, camp grounds, places not intended for regular human accommodation, public or abandoned spaces, who were abandoned at a hospital, and children awaiting foster care placements are also considered homeless (Sec.725).

However, a child does not have to meet the definition of “homeless” to experience the trauma or high levels of stress associated with the lack of fixed residence. Young children who experience adversity in the form of frequent transitions, ongoing instability, or lack of a consistent caregiver are also at risk for developing social-emotional problems and behavior disorders.<sup>10</sup>

### ***The links between unstable living situations, trauma and early childhood mental health***

Many homeless parents are young, single mothers who also experienced homelessness as children. These mothers are likely to have limited education, have little to no work experience, often struggle with mental health and/or substance abuse problems, and are frequently victims of domestic

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<sup>8</sup> American Bar Association, National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, & Zero to Three, Healthy Beginnings, Healthy Futures: A Judge's Guide, 2009. Claire Chiamulera, editor.

<sup>9</sup> Rand Conger, Penn State University, [http://www.extension.org/pages/Teens'\\_Risky\\_Behaviors\\_Are\\_Affected\\_by\\_Family\\_Economic\\_Pressure](http://www.extension.org/pages/Teens'_Risky_Behaviors_Are_Affected_by_Family_Economic_Pressure)

<sup>10</sup> Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, In Brief: the impact of early adversity on children's development. Retrieved from <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/initiatives/council/>, 2009.

violence.<sup>11</sup> All of these circumstances equate to multiple risks a child faces prior to birth and throughout the experience of homelessness, the effects of which may persist into youth and adulthood.

Children who are born into or experience homelessness early in life not only face many risks, most experience physical, psychological, and emotional harm. Research has shown trauma and extreme stress in childhood can lead to detrimental changes in brain structure and function.<sup>12</sup> Children who are highly mobile or insecurely housed experience stress, trauma, and recurring change in their daily lives.<sup>13</sup> They are also more likely than other children to witness severe conflict and violence between their caregivers and to experience physical and sexual abuse and domestic violence.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, these children are often separated from their parents or other caregivers, potentially leading to poor attachment, social-emotional problems, and inability to form healthy relationships. The effects of traumatic stress and violence on children can be extensive and lifelong, and may cause children to develop depression or anxiety, fearful or inhibited behavior, aggressive or antisocial behavior, or use violence in conflict resolution. Traumatic experiences interfere with the ability to learn and succeed in school.<sup>15</sup> A child's likelihood of having developmental, emotional and behavioral problems increases with the number of adverse experiences he faces in childhood.<sup>16</sup>

The Office of Child Development (OCD) recently reviewed a sample of 47 children under age five who were referred to an early childhood mental health (ECMH) consultation project. Referrals are made to the early childhood mental health project by a child care provider who notices a child is struggling with behavioral or social-emotional challenges. The data show that only 51% of these young children have a stable living environment. The other half of the children have experienced erratic changes in living environment in one or more forms, such as: instability in housing, frequent moves, inconsistent caregivers or loss of a primary caregiver, living in very dangerous neighborhoods, severe family stressors, and/or abandonment.

Child mental health services were the most common referral made to the children living in these unstable situations. More broadly, of all the children in the ECMH project, about 30% of these children have a history or parental behavioral health problems, 25% have experienced abuse or neglect, and 19% have experienced domestic violence. All of these are risk factors for both homelessness and social-emotional or behavioral problems. Furthermore, children in the ECMH project faced an average of 2.8 risk factors (e.g. unstable living situation, parental mental health issues, or abuse). Nearly 43% of the children faced three or more risk factors. The presence of multiple risk factors in the lives of a majority

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<sup>11</sup> Hart-Shegos, Ellen. Homelessness and its Effects on Children, a report for the Family Housing Fund, 1999.

<sup>12</sup> The National Center on Family Homelessness, American's Youngest Outcasts, 2009. Retrieved from:

[http://www.homelesschildrenamerica.org/report\\_child-wellbeing\\_health.php#stress](http://www.homelesschildrenamerica.org/report_child-wellbeing_health.php#stress).

<sup>13</sup> Hart-Shegos, Ellen. Homelessness and its Effects on Children, a report for the Family Housing Fund, 1999.

<sup>14</sup> Ammons, S. et al. Helping Young Children (Birth to Five) Who are Homeless, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> The National Center on Family Homelessness, American's Youngest Outcasts, 2009. Retrieved from:

[http://www.homelesschildrenamerica.org/report\\_child-wellbeing\\_health.php#stress](http://www.homelesschildrenamerica.org/report_child-wellbeing_health.php#stress).

<sup>16</sup> Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, In Brief: the impact of early adversity on children's development. Retrieved from

<http://developingchild.harvard.edu/initiatives/council/>, 2009.

of the children exhibiting social-emotional and behavioral problems is consistent with the evidence for a link between the number of risk factors in a child's life and the likelihood of him having developmental problems.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Barriers to early childhood education***

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, reauthorized in 2002 as part of No Child Left Behind, entitles children who are experiencing homelessness to a “free, appropriate public education, including a pre-school education.”<sup>18</sup> Nationally, over 40% of children living in homeless shelters are under age five, and therefore at an age where early childhood education can significantly impact their healthy development and lifelong success. However, children who experience homelessness face multiple barriers to matriculating and participating in preschool.<sup>19</sup> It is estimated that less than 16% of eligible pre-school aged children who are homeless are enrolled in preschool programs.<sup>20</sup> Pennsylvania has the sixth highest number of homeless children and youth in the US.<sup>21</sup>

We know the number of young children experiencing homelessness and other types of housing instability is increasing due to the recent economic downturn, yet it is difficult to collect accurate data on the extent of the problem. One barrier to data collection is the difficulty of recognizing young homeless children. Due to stigma, families often do not identify themselves as homeless when seeking services. Furthermore, some families who are “doubled up” with relatives or friends may not realize they qualify for services based on their housing situation. Often, data on homeless children come from schools or shelters. Pre-school aged children are not counted by many school districts and shelters often prioritize assisting older children and youth to access school, overlooking those below school age. Additionally, it is very challenging to maintain contact with families who are highly mobile due to tenuous housing or employment changes. Families may migrate among relatives' or friends' homes, shelters, motels, or other forms of temporary shelter, causing breaks in schooling, early intervention, or other services.

In the last year, schools have reported an increase in the number of homeless students, a trend that can likely be applied to pre-school aged children as well. We also know that the number of homeless families in Allegheny County has risen significantly in the past three years.<sup>22</sup> In an informal survey of providers in Allegheny County conducted by the Office of Child Development found little

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<sup>17</sup> Stevens, G.D. Gradients in the Health Status and Developmental Risks of Young Children: The Combined Influences of Multiple Social Risk Factors, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, Pre-School Children and the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, retrieved from [www.naehcy.org](http://www.naehcy.org)

<sup>19</sup> National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2007. Retrieved from: <http://www.naehcy.org/early.html>.

<sup>20</sup> US Department of Education, 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Homeless Children's Education Fund

<sup>22</sup> Miller, P.M. and J. B. Schreiber, Educating Homeless Children in Allegheny County: An Evaluation of Families, Agencies, and Services, 2009.

evidence of increasing numbers of young, homeless children accessing services. However, providers' anecdotal evidence suggests they exist but are not being identified. Thus, there is a vulnerable and growing population of young children experiencing homelessness that stand to benefit greatly from the services to which they are legally entitled, yet they are a group that is often overlooked.