



SOCIAL WORK DEPARTMENT Student Research Brief

Homeless Youth: A Multidisciplinary Approach

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Introduction

Unless you reside in a large metropolitan city, the issue of homelessness has not been of great concern to the general public. Once thought to only affect adult men, the homeless population now comprises a large number of single mothers and consequently this has affected young children and adolescents. Suddenly, with the increase in home foreclosures, less money for government programs, and the shift to a service economy and lower paying jobs more and more families are finding themselves out on the street. Another issue they face in obtaining government assistance may be how homelessness is defined. For the purpose of this article and its focus on homeless youth, homelessness will be defined by the amended McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 2004:

Children and youth who are:

- sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason;
- living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to lack of alternative adequate accommodations
- living in emergency or transitional shelters;
- abandoned in hospitals or awaiting foster care placement;
- Children and youth who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings;
- Children and youth who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings;
- Migratory children who qualify as homeless because they are living in circumstances described above.

From a multidisciplinary approach, the literature focuses not only on the educational barriers that homeless children and youth face but the long-term physical, psychological, and socioeconomic hardships that this population endures.

Summary of Primary Findings

The literature reviewed suggested the reasons that youth are homeless range from physical and sexual abuse in the home; drug use or abuse by family members; truancy/expulsion from school; personal substance use; and emotional issues (Baker, McKay, Lynn, Schlange, & Auville, 2003; Van Leeuwen *et al.*, 2006). Once on the street, the homeless youth may engage in risky behaviors that affect their physical and emotional well-being. These behaviors include unprotected sex in exchange for money or

food; substance abuse; exposure to violence both as a witness and a victim; and loss of access to education and medical assistance. Especially at risk are females which one study reported are "...are among the most vulnerable and medically underserved subgroups within the homeless population" (Ensign & Panke, 2002, p. 166) and lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) homeless youth who have a substantially greater chance

than non- LGB for suicide attempts (Van Leeuwen *et al.*, 2006). Factor in educating the homeless youth population and their economic future looks bleak. School districts that are now held to strict accountability standards by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) may have supplemental services in place to address the homeless child's needs but they are generally limited and not offered in all schools. And they mostly focus on nationally based reform and do not include unique local context (Mawhinney-Rhoads & Stahler, 2006). Homelessness does decrease success in school as evidenced by a study (Shinn *et al.*, 2008) in which "Homeless children's scores dropped about a third of a standard deviation, relative to their housed peers, when they became homeless. Both the change over time and the difference between groups were significant."

Implications for Social Work Practice

Homeless youth are at great risk for falling through the cracks of social services due to the nature of their reasons for leaving home in the first place. Services

DATA AT A GLANCE

2000 Report to Congress indicated that 87 percent of homeless K-12 children and youth were enrolled in school. However, only 77 percent attended school regularly.

U.S. Department of Education's Report to Congress for Fiscal

that focus on this population may have an extremely hard time meeting their unique needs simply because they do not seek out services out of fear of being sent back to the unlivable situations that they escaped from. Social work practice in this area requires outreach programs that are not nationally based but grounded in the local context. This could be as simple as taking the program to the people because they usually will not come to agencies for help.

TABLE 1—Characteristics of Runaway Adolescents in a Shelter (N = 166)

Youth and Family Characteristic	M	SD	%
Age	15.24	1.42	
Female			60.8
Minority ethnicity			79.0
Living with stepparent/parent			89.8
Family change			18.9
Youth problems			
Emotional problems			15.7
Physical abuse			29.3
Drug use			12.2
School problems			14.3
Family change			18.9
Parent problems			
Substance use	0.22	.51	
Family conflict	0.84	.78	
Strictness	0.82	.97	
Shelter use			
Length of stay (days)	13.87	16.76	
Recidivism			26.5
Repeat runaway			52.4

Table 1. From *Recidivism at a shelter for adolescents: First-time versus repeat runaways*, by Amy Baker, Mary McKay, Cynthia Lynn, Hans Schlange, & Alicia Auville, 2003.

Recommendations for Practice

Interventions that provide social connections with other homeless youth may aid them in overcoming feelings of despair and loneliness which often leads to suicidal ideation. Educating service providers on the unique needs of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual population may improve service delivery to this population. Local Education Associations should focus on the needs of their local area and create programs that fit those needs rather than force a national policy on the homeless students that they are under serving. Input from the homeless youth is one of the most vital steps in removing barriers that keep this population from reaching their full potential (Rew, Taylor-Sheffer, Thomas, & Yockey, 2001). To do this, social service providers must stop labeling homeless youth as deviant and *listen* to their concerns

without judgment. Homeless youth want from service agencies what we all seek: respect and equal treatment options that meet their unique situation.

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