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How Homelessness Affects Young Children

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Abstract

This paper will explore the detrimental effects of homelessness on young children ranging from infancy to 6 years of age. First, an overall analysis of the numbers of children enduring homelessness in the U.S. will be presented. These numbers relating to the effects of homelessness ss children's health and wellness will be explored, followed by effects on children's education and communication skills. The paper will then address how parental status and actions can affect their child during homelessness. Finally, the trauma and lifelong mental effects of experiencing homelessness will be addressed, followed by a call to action to increase the number of studies on homelessness and the services available to those in need.

According to the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), over “1.2 million children under 6 years old experience homelessness in the United States” (Head Start, 2022, para. 4). Furthermore, in 2022, the Department of Education estimates that one in sixteen children will experience homelessness before the age of 6. These staggering numbers may seem large, but in 2012, the number of homeless children in the U.S was reported to be about “2.5

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million – or about 1 in 30 of all American children” (SAMHSA, 2022, para. 1). Although it seems like the numbers have dropped, the detrimental effects of homelessness on young children’s lives have not. Every homeless child is exposed to the risk that their lives will be irreparably damaged by their experience. The effects of homelessness on overall health, education, parental relations, and mental state can be dangerous, lifelong, and extreme.

Health and Wellness

It is estimated by the Department of Health and Human Services that “children experiencing homelessness are sick at twice the rate of children who have homes” (Head Start, 2022, para. 5). A study conducted by Clark et al (2019), from 2008-2015, shares some enlightening but saddening facts of how homelessness can affect children’s medical care. It was found that in a homeless infant’s first year, they were twice as likely to visit the hospital than their homed counterparts due to the lack of pre-natal care their mother received during pregnancy. In addition, homeless infants are more likely to suffer from serious and life-threatening conditions such as upper respiratory infections, fever, allergic reactions, asthma, developmental issues, and nutritional disorders. These trends continue into early childhood, with side effects from the previously mentioned illnesses greatly influencing a child’s toddler years.

Increased visits to doctors also result in more medical expenses for families. Even with assistance from Medicaid, homeless families with children ages 0-6 on average paid more than \$500 in medical costs each year than homed families, with the first 3 years of a homeless child’s life seeing about a \$1,000 difference. These expenses further deprive homeless families of needed nutritional food and supplies, increasing the probability of continued poor health in following years.

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Education and Communication

Just as homelessness can cause concerns for a child's health, their education is also in danger of being jeopardized. Despite programs such as Head Start preparing disadvantaged children for preschool being successful, it was still found in a study by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) based in Washington D.C that children who had entered a homeless shelter with their family, within 20 months, scored lower on pre-math and pre-reading skills than homed children. Homeless children are also less likely to be enrolled in preschool or center-based care than stably homed children. The Department of Education has also found that "homelessness in early childhood is correlated with poor classroom engagement and social skills" (School House Connection, 2020, pg. 2). Not only is academic performance affected, but homeless children are also at a disadvantage when it comes to forming social bonds that are essential to a successful school experience.

Lack of social and engagement skills can also be attributed to the poor communication and language skills that homeless children face in general, as alluded to in a study conducted by the Ohio State University published in the *Maternal and Child Health Journal* concerning toddler language skills in low-income families. It was found that low-income 2-year-old children scored on average 25% lower on receptive language and expressive language tests when compared to normative counterparts. With such a disadvantage at 2 years of age, social and language skills of homeless children at ages 3-4 will most likely not reach the level expected of them for many years, if at all. This gap in skill was attributed to "dysregulated parent-child interactions" (Justice, 2019, para. 19), implicating that parental stress and experiences caused by low-income have the possibility to impact the child's communication skills. The parents of a homeless child have more responsibilities than just financial ones. They also have the duty to

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raise, nurture, educate, and prepare their child for the life ahead of them, a duty which they sometimes cannot fulfill.

Parents and Family Status

School House Connection, a non-profit working to overcome homelessness, found that about 1.1 million homeless children have parents between the ages of 18-25 who are likely to be uneducated and have low financial opportunities. In addition, Green Doors (2022) reported that “84% of homeless families are female headed, with 71% of them being single parents” (Para. 2). The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) also estimates that 2 out of 3 homeless mothers have experienced domestic abuse, and 1 out of 3 mothers are now homeless due to fleeing their abusers. All these conditions combined make it so that almost 50% of homeless children’s mothers have experienced domestic abuse, and 25% of all homeless children have the experience due to fleeing domestic abuse. The situations of parents and their own histories contribute to how they manage stress and raise their child as is stated by the Department of Health and Human Services, SAMHSA, School House Connection, and supported by a study conducted by the Center of Early Childhood Innovation, published in the *Journal of Developmental Psychobiology*.

Bates (2021) found that toddlers whose mothers were experiencing extreme stress caused by poverty also had extremely high levels of stress. The reasoning behind this finding was attributed to the fact that parent and child are experiencing the same stressors, as well as a lack of access to de-stressing materials due to financial poverty. Furthermore, this study found that black mothers and their children had higher levels of stress than their white counterparts, which was attributed to neighborhood disadvantages and speculated, but not proven, to be related to racism. Signs of different experiences with homelessness depending on race was also alluded to in a

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study conducted by American Academy of Political and Social Science which was published in the journal *Criminal Justice and American Civic Life*. It was found that while parental incarceration increased the chances of any child experiencing homelessness by 95%, a disproportionate number of children who did end up in homeless shelters were black children. Green Doors, a non-profit tackling homelessness, also reports that 43% of all homeless individuals in the United States are black. These studies show that homeless children are more likely to be black than any other ethnicity, alluding to the probability that race can impact the experience of child homelessness.

Mental Health, Trauma, and Behavior

Just as homeless children are twice as likely to get sick, the Department of Health and Human Services also reports that homeless children have “three times the rate of emotional and behavioral problems of children who have homes” (Head Start, 2022, para. 5). OPRE also states that children exposed to a homeless shelter within 20 months were more likely to exhibit behavioral issues, stating a correlation between negative behaviors and homelessness. A study conducted by Bollens and Fox (2019) found that children experiencing homelessness and poverty were likely to have these behavior issues due to experiences with trauma. Child homelessness itself is classified as an adverse childhood experience, which refers to potentially traumatic events that occur during childhood. In their study, Bollens and Fox (2019) found that “81.4% of child caregivers reported at least one potentially traumatic event; the average number of PTEs was 2.5” (para. 10). These traumatic events were thought to result in numerous behavioral issues such as hyperarousal, extreme tantrums, trouble staying calm, insomnia, and even self-harm. Views of surrounding people, environments, and the world itself were also

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altered by poverty and homelessness, with many toddlers asking questions about private parts, stating that “the world is a bad place,” or having difficulties separating from parents.

The Department of Health and Human Services has found that traumatic events and the resulting behavioral issues can have “long-term adverse effects on a child’s neurobiological make-up, cognitive ability, and mental health, as well as on their ability to manage stressors as an adult” (Head Start, 2022, para. 7). Not having a place to call home is undoubtedly a terrible experience for a child, as society teaches children to treasure their home. JAMA Pediatrics also states that living on the streets can contribute to “mental health morbidity, PTSD, anxiety, feelings of hopelessness, and depression” (Embleton, 2016, para. 1). As mental state can determine whether a person succeeds in life, and with the disadvantage of homelessness, it becomes harder for these children to rise above their origins and try to have a normalized life if they experience prolonged homelessness.

Conclusion

Child homelessness in the United States is not an unknown problem, but it is one that many ignore. America is sometimes referred to as a land of opportunity, but children experiencing homelessness have very little. Their bodies, education, upbringing, and mental state/capacity may be damaged beyond repair by homelessness. To mitigate this problem, children and their families must be taken off the streets, but this is not plausible for the foreseeable future without a serious effort from multiple humanitarian, financial, and political groups. Focusing efforts on studying child homelessness and identifying the best points for intervention is key to starting to solve the homeless crisis.

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