



## **HOMELESS CHILDREN: AMERICA'S NEW OUTCASTS**

This fact sheet provides a condensed overview of selected information from *Homeless Children: America's New Outcasts*.

### **Part I**

#### **1. Family Homelessness: A New Social Problem**

Except during the Great Depression, women and children have never been on our nation's streets in significant numbers. During the 1980's, cutbacks in benefits coupled with rapidly increasing rents and a dearth of low-income housing jeopardized the stability of all people with reduced or fixed incomes. At the same time, the number of female-headed households dramatically increased. As a result, the nation's population of homeless families swelled from almost negligible numbers to nearly 40% of the overall homeless population today. The United States is unique among industrialized nations in that women and children comprise such a large percentage of our country's homeless.

#### **2. More Than One Million Homeless Children**

Although counting the exact number of homeless children is difficult, a consensus is emerging among researchers. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, 1.2 million children are homeless on any given night. Supporting this figure are estimates from the U.S. Department of Education that report almost 400,000 homeless children were served by the nation's public schools last year. Since more than half of all homeless children are under the age of 6 and not yet in school, a minimum of 800,000 children can be presumed to be homeless. On the basis of these data, the National Center on Family Homelessness concludes that more than one million American children are homeless today.

#### **3. Family Homelessness Will Increase**

Looking beyond current numbers, The National Center on Family Homelessness (NCFH) predicts that tight housing markets accompanied by decreasing availability of cash benefits as a result of welfare reform will lead to an increase in family homelessness. To determine which states will have the biggest problem, NCFH created an index of seven risk factors for family homelessness. These factors were identified from epidemiological research conducted over the past ten years. The ranking of states is presented in the report.

## **Part II**

### **1. Homelessness Makes Children Sick**

Researchers from NCFH have isolated homelessness as a direct predictor of specific childhood illnesses. Homeless children:

- Are in fair or poor health twice as often as other children and four times as often as children whose families earn more than \$35,000 a year.
- Have higher rates of low birth weight and need special care right after birth four times as often as other children.
- Have very high rates of acute illness, with half suffering from two or more symptoms during a single month.
- Have twice as many ear infections, five times more diarrhea and stomach problems, and six times as many speech and stammering problems.
- Are four times more likely to be asthmatic.
- Go hungry at more than twice the rate of other children.

### **2. Homelessness Wounds Young Children**

Every day, homeless children are confronted with stressful, often traumatic events.

- 74% of homeless children worry they will have no place to live.
- 58% worry they will have no place to sleep.
- 87% worry that something bad will happen to their family.

Within a single year:

- 97% of homeless children move, many up to three times.
- More than 30% are evicted from their housing.
- 22% are separated from their family to be put in foster care or sent to live with a relative.
- Almost 25% have witnessed acts of violence within their family.

The constant barrage of stressful and traumatic experiences has profound effects on the cognitive and emotional development of homeless children.

- Homeless babies show significantly slower development than other children do.
- More than one-fifth of homeless children between 3 and 6 years of age have emotional problems serious enough to require professional care.
- Homeless children between 6 and 17 years struggle with very high rates of mental health problems.
- Less than one-third of homeless children are receiving mental health treatment.

### **3. Homelessness Devastates Families**

Families are the fastest growing segment of the homeless population, now accounting for almost 40% of the nation's homeless. More than 85% of homeless families are headed by single mothers, with the average homeless family comprised of a young mother and her two young children, most of whom are below the age of 6 years.

Homeless mothers have an average annual income of under \$8000, living at 63% of the federal poverty level for a family of three.

- Only 21% of homeless mothers receive money from family, partners, or friends.
- 39% have been hospitalized for medical treatment.
- 22% have asthma, compared to 5% of other women under 45 years.
- 20% have anemia, compared to 2% of other women under 45 years.
- 40% report alcohol or drug dependency at some time in their lives.

Although 70% of fathers of homeless children are in touch with their children, most do not live with the family. The downward spiral into homelessness for a child is often accelerated if a father loses his job, becomes injured or ill, has a bout with alcohol or drugs, or is involved with the criminal justice system.

- 50% of fathers are unemployed.
- 43% have problems with drugs or alcohol.
- 31% have physical or mental health problems.
- 32% are in jail or on probation.

Homeless children are at particularly high risk for being placed in foster care; 12% of homeless children are placed in foster care compared to just over 1% of other children. The National Center on Family Homelessness has identified placement in foster care as one of only two childhood risk factors that predicts family homelessness during adulthood.

- 44% of homeless mothers lived outside of their homes at some point during their childhood; 20% of these women were placed in foster care.
- 70% of homeless mothers placed in foster care as children have had at least one of their own children in foster care.

The frequency of violence in the lives of homeless mothers is staggering.

- 63% have been violently abused by an intimate male partner.
- 27% have required medical treatment because of violence by an intimate male partner.
- 25% have been physically or sexually assaulted during adulthood by someone other than an intimate partner.
- 66% were violently abused by a childhood caretaker or other adult in the household before reaching 18.
- 43% were sexually molested as children.

When the violence from their childhood is combined with their experiences as adults, 92% of homeless mothers have been severely physically or sexually assaulted; 88% have been violently abused by a family member or intimate partner. These repeated acts of brutality result in unusually high rates of serious emotional problems among homeless mothers.

- 36% have experienced Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder; three times the rate of other women.
- 45% have had a major depressive disorder, twice the rate of other women.
- 31% have attempted suicide at least once, primarily during adolescence.
- 12% have been hospitalized for treatment of mental illness.

Among homeless children:

- 8% have been physically abused, twice the rate of other children.
- 8% have been sexually abused; three times the rate of other children.
- 35% have been the subject of a child protection investigation.
- 24% have witnessed acts of violence within their family.
- 15% have seen their father hit their mother.
- 11% have seen their mother abused by a male partner.

#### **4. Homeless Children Struggle in School**

Despite state and federal efforts to provide homeless children with improved access to public school, at least one-fifth of homeless children do not attend school.

Homelessness takes children far away from their own schools and classmates. For many homeless children:

- There is no transportation from shelters to school.
- Improvised living arrangements are too short to make enrolling in a new school worthwhile.
- Lack of academic and medical records creates obstacles to registration.
- Daily demands of finding food and shelter push children's educational needs aside.

Homeless children who manage to attend school face discouraging barriers to their academic success.

- Homeless children have four times the average rate of delayed development.
- Have more academic problems than other children.
- Are under served by special education.
- Are suspended twice as often as other children.

Among homeless children, there is twice the number of students with learning disabilities and three times the number of students with emotional and behavioral problems.

Homeless children are twice as likely to repeat a grade.

- 21% of homeless children repeat a grade because of frequent absence from school, compared to 5% of other children.
- 14% repeat a grade because they have moved to a new school, compared to 5% of other children.

Within a single year:

- 40% of homeless children attend two different schools.
- 28% attend three or more different schools.

## **Part III**

Immediate action must be taken to end the current epidemic of family homelessness.

### **Immediate Action**

The seven-point platform presented in detail in the report will significantly improve the well being of homeless children. The platform presents concrete action steps to:

1. Protect the health of homeless children.
2. Eliminate hunger and food insecurity.
3. Improve mental health services.
4. Support education, training, and work.
5. Prevent unnecessary separation of families.
6. Expand violence prevention, treatment, and follow-up services.
7. Ensure access to school and opportunities for success in school.

### **Long-Term Solutions**

Larger scale activities must be implemented over the longer term to address the systemic economic and social causes of family homelessness. Details are presented in the report.

1. Develop an adequate supply of decent affordable housing.
2. Maximize poor families' economic resources and build their assets.

### **The National Center on Family Homelessness**

The National Center on Family Homelessness is a 501(c) 3 nonprofit organization working to end family homelessness in America. We design, pilot and evaluate innovative programs and services that provide long term solutions for family homelessness. We share our knowledge by educating service providers, policy makers, and the public.

Please consult the full report for details and documentation. For additional information and/or to order *Homeless Children: America's New Outcasts* please contact:

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