

# HOMELESS CHILDREN



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7 Zima, B. T., Wells, K. B., & Freeman, H. E. (1994). Emotional and behavioral problems and severe academic delays among sheltered homeless children in Los Angeles County. *American Journal of Public Health*, 84(2), 260-264.

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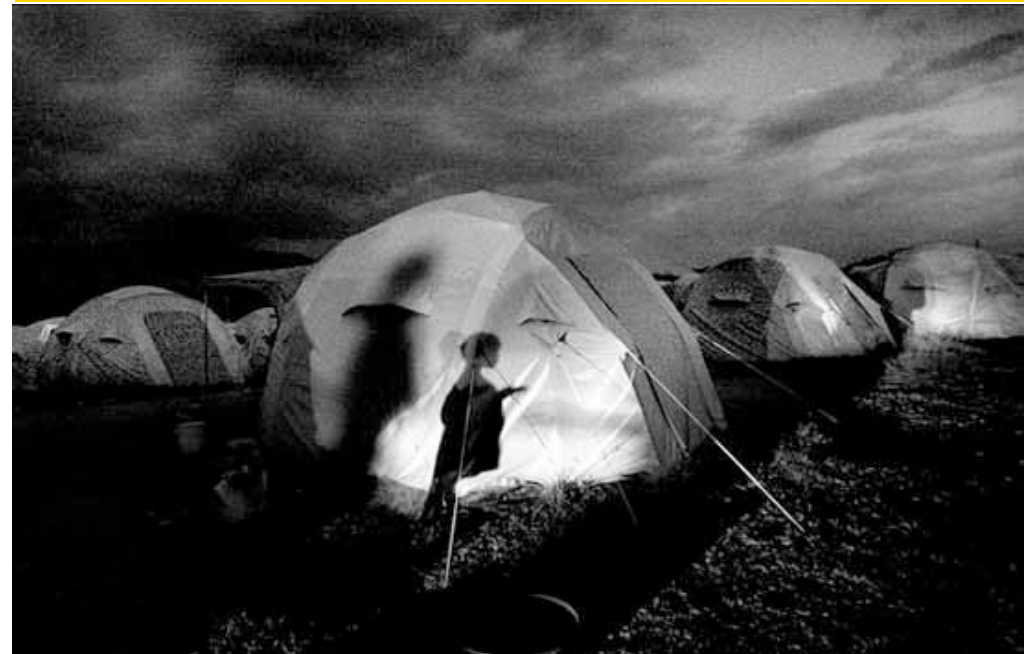
# Resources

- 1 Buckner, J. C. (2008). Understanding the impact of homelessness on children: Challenges and future research directions. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 51(6), 721-736.
- 2 Heusel, R. J. (1990). *The experience of homelessness viewed through the eyes of homeless school-age children* (Doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University). University Microfilms International.
- 3 Huntington, N., Buckner, J. C., & Bassuk, E.L. (2008). Adaptation in homeless children: An empirical examination using cluster analysis. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 51(6), 737-755.
- 4 Morse, G. A. (1992). Causes of homelessness. In M. Robertson, & M. Greenblatt (Eds.), *Homelessness: A national perspective* (pp.3-17). New York: Plenum Press.
- 5 Obradovic, J. (2010). Effortful control and adaptive functioning of homeless children: Variable-focused and person-focused analyses. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 31, 109-117.
- 6 Rubin, D. H., Erickson, C. J., Agustin, M. S., Cleary, S. D., Allen, J. K., & Cohen, P. (1996). Cognitive and academic functioning of homeless children compared with housed children. *Pediatrics*, 97(3), 289-294.

**Homelessness** means having no regular house or dwelling, residing in shelters, abandoned buildings, cars, or other places that are not permanent living spaces (Zima, Wells, & Freeman, 1994).<sup>7</sup>

*Home is the sanctuary where the healing is... Nothing brings as quickly to mind the horror of natural upheaval, civil strife or war as the picture of the "homeless." The deprivation of the security of home is the worst of the mass tragedies.*

— Walter Cronkite



# Causes of homelessness

Homelessness is a complex and multidimensional social problem. No single factor or simple combination of factors can accurately explain it. Although we cannot claim a clear cause-effect relationship between homelessness and various factors, we can identify associated factors such as the following (Morse, 1992):<sup>4</sup>



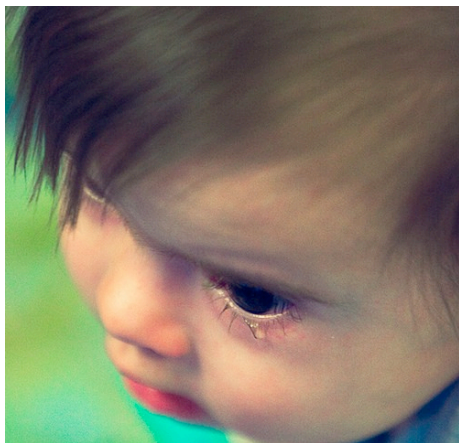
- Minority discrimination
- Unemployment
- Shortage of low-income housing
- Cuts in financial assistance programs
- Failure to provide community support services
- Urban redevelopment policies
- Personal physical and mental health problems
- Substance abuse
- Family problems

# Glossary

- **Homelessness:** Having no regular house or dwelling, residing in shelters, abandoned buildings, cars, or other places that are not permanent living spaces.
- **Homogeneity:** It views homeless children as a group with relatively similar needs and characteristics.
- **Heterogeneity:** It holds that homeless children are made up of meaningful subgroups functioning at contrasting levels and having different needs and characteristics.
- **Allocate:** To distribute different services according to needs and characteristics of particular children.
- **Effortful control:** The ability to intentionally manipulate one's attention and behavior and the ability to inhibit a dominant response in order to execute a subdominant response.
- **Resilient:** The positive ability of a child to adapt himself or herself to adversity caused by homelessness and recover readily from adversity.

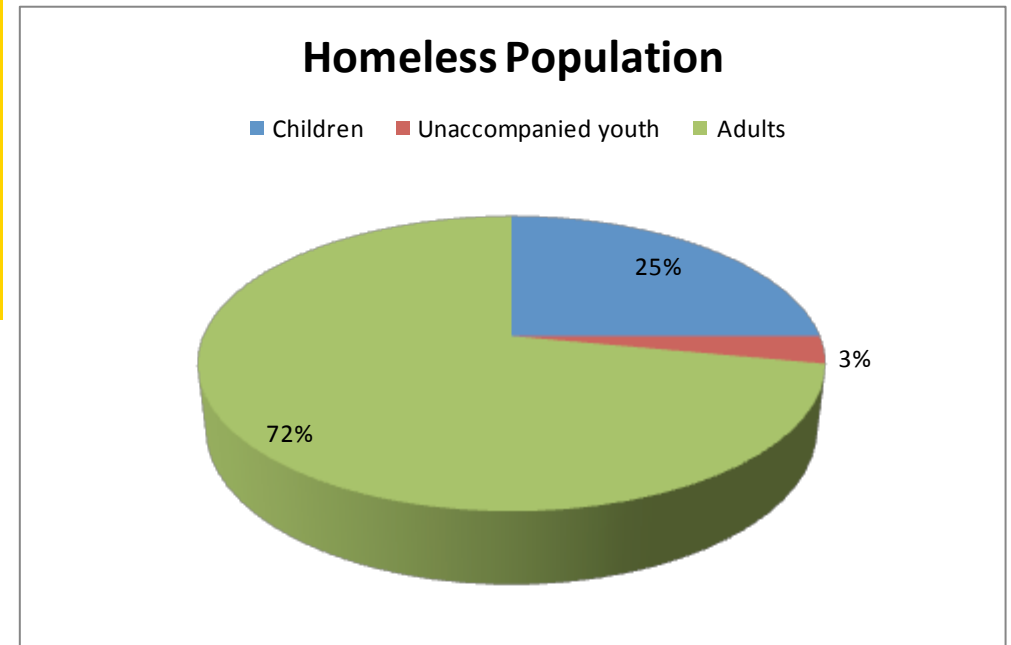


If such timely programs are missing, the emotional and behavioral problems in homeless children will go untreated and deteriorate enough to threaten the development of these children at a critical period in their lives. In addition, their academic delays will exacerbate the learning difficulties, which in the end will prevent them from having fundamental opportunities to gain the emotional tools and academic skills necessary for fully productive and independent lives.



# Prevalence

More and more evidence points out an inconvenient truth in the United States: a substantial number of people are without homes.



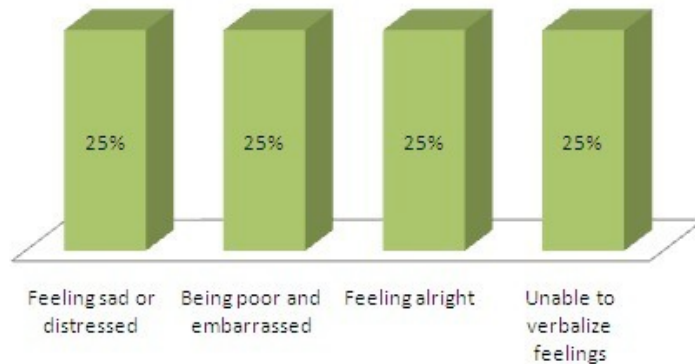
Research shows that the numbers of homeless people increased in every corner of the United States during the 1980's and that the total numbers of homeless people today range from 2.5 to 3 million. Families without homes (single mothers and their children) constitute up to 40% of homeless people, and are the fastest growing population; children constitute almost 25% and unaccompanied youth at least 3% (Rubin et al., 1996; Zima, Wells, & Freeman, 1994; Morse, 1992).<sup>4, 6, 7</sup>

# A child's view of being homeless

The most common stressful experiences for homeless children include moving frequently, leaving friends, changing schools, having no permanent place to call home and being ridiculed for being homeless (Rubin et al., 1996; Zima, Wells, & Freeman, 1994).<sup>6,7</sup>



Children's responses to homelessness



Thirty-three homeless school-aged children living in public shelters were asked about their experiences of being homeless. Four kinds of responses were reported, as shown in the chart above (Heusel, 1990).<sup>2</sup>

Research found that **effortful control**, defined as the ability to intentionally manipulate one's attention and behavior, is crucial in achieving early academic success and important to homeless children's resilient adaptation (Obradovic, 2010).<sup>5</sup>

Effortful control is a unique predictor of resilient status across four developmental domains among homeless children: academic competence, peer competence, internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems.

Training programs and specialized classroom curricula were designed to improve effortful control skills that can make significant differences in homeless children's resilience.



# How you can help?

A successful prevention and intervention program for homeless children requires mental health and educational services. They also require collaboration of the schools, shelters and routine health care practitioners, as well as inclusion of parental education (Zima, Wells, & Freeman, 1994).<sup>7</sup>



It is important to differentiate subgroups of homeless children according to their heterogeneous characteristics and needs so that programs and resources can be targeted for homeless children in the most sensible manner possible (Huntington, Buckner, & Basuk, 2008).<sup>3</sup>

# The impact of homelessness on children

1. Living in homeless conditions, children experience extreme poverty, substandard living environments, abrupt residential changes and early discontinuities in education (Rubin et al., 1996; Zima, Wells, & Freeman, 1994).<sup>6, 7</sup>



2. Studies show that homeless children have higher rates of school absenteeism and grade repetition compared with their non-homeless classmates (Rubin et al., 1996).<sup>6</sup>

3. Other studies also point out that a large majority of homeless children show severe delays in academic achievement (Rubin et al., 1996; Zima, Wells, & Freeman, 1994).<sup>6, 7</sup>



One study was conducted to examine the effect of homelessness on the cognitive development and academic functioning of children between the ages of 6 and 11 years compared with housed children (Rubin et al., 1996).<sup>6</sup> The study found:

- Cognitive functioning was not significantly different between homeless and housed children.
- However, homeless children had a significantly lower level of academic performance than their housed counterparts in the tests of reading, spelling, and mathematics.

These differences in academic functioning were related to the number of school changes and grade repetition.

## Characteristics of homeless children:

### Homogeneity vs. Heterogeneity

Homelessness can have a detrimental impact on children, but not in all cases.

A study was conducted to examine whether homeless children are a homogeneous group with similar characteristics and needs, or meaningful subgroups with different characteristics and needs (Huntington, Buckner, & Bassuk, 2008).<sup>3</sup>

Based on the assessments of behavioral problems, adaptive functioning and academic achievement, two main subgroups are identified:

- a group of higher functioning children who were doing well in all three areas despite their adverse circumstances and
- another group of lower functioning children who were doing poorly.

While we pay attention to characteristics that all homeless children have in common, we also need to examine heterogeneity in children's characteristics in order to help allocate prevention and intervention resources for homeless children according to their specific characteristics and needs.



Homelessness can influence every aspect of a child's life and cause different types of problems (Buckner, 2008).<sup>1</sup>

- Mental health problems
- Behavioral problems
- Developmental-related problems
- Health-related problems
- Education-related problems



4. Homeless children have been found to suffer a significantly higher percentage of clinical social problems, which require psychiatric evaluation for depression or anxiety.

However, few homeless children have ever received treatment and services. The lack of parental awareness of a child's problem becomes an obstacle for children to receive health care or special education (Zima, Wells, & Freeman, 1994).<sup>7</sup>

