



The Rising Number of Homeless Students, their Social Condition and its Impact on their Education

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According to the American Psychological Association (2011) home foreclosures and job layoffs are severely impacting low-income families (American Psychological Association [APA], 2011). Recent research indicates that families with children are the fastest growing segment of the homeless population in the country (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2011; National Center on Homeless Families [NCFH], 2009; U.S. Conference of Mayors; 2009). The state of homelessness profoundly and directly impacts the education and well being of homeless children (APA, 2011; Levin, Belfield, Muennig & Rouse, 2007; United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2009; Institute for Children and Poverty, 2003). Reductions in federal and state social services funding are compromising homeless children who are unable to seek work, secure food or find shelter. Consequently homeless children are left with few options other than to sell their bodies (Gaetz, O'Grady, & Vaillancourt, 1999). The state of homelessness exposes children to social conditions that compromise their access and future prospects (Poleski, 2010, UNICEF, 2009). These social conditions are acutely impacting low income and the poor families living in the Capital of our nation, Washington, DC where the numbers of homeless families with young children are among the highest in the nation (Ferrell, 2010). Federal law mandates that states provide all children with free, appropriate public education (No Child Left Behind [NCLB] Public Law 107 - 110, 2001; The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act [PL100-77], 1987). While Race to the Top (2010) require schools to meet the needs of all students and mandates school districts to provide intensive support, effective



interventions and a wide range of services specifically designed to address homeless children's conditions and ensure their educational success (Department of Education, 2010). These well meaning initiatives have yet to deliver well-articulated and concrete programs to address the rising number of homeless students' and their unique educational, social and economic conditions.

The State of Child Homelessness in the US:

The United States and Somalia (a country without a legally constituted government) are the only two United Nations members that have failed to ratify the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations Children's Rights [UNCR], 2009). Despite our country's massive wealth, the existence of internationally recognized human rights, millions of young American children suffer from poverty, homelessness, abuse, neglect, preventable diseases, unequal access to education, and legislative and justice systems that neglects to recognize their special needs (UNICEF, 2008).

Federal law defines children and youth who are homeless as individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence (NCH, 1999; The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, 1987). People who are homeless are the poorest of the poor ([NCH, 2009). Children's homelessness results from extreme poverty lack of affordable housing and inadequate social services and supports (National Child Traumatic Stress Center [NCTSCN] 2005; US Conference of Mayors, 2009). American families with young children account for 40% of the nation's homeless population and in the course of the year, more than 1.5 million children are homeless due to the nation's economic crisis (NCFH, 2009). The Campaign to End Child Homelessness (2009) estimates that one in every 50 children are homeless in the US trapped in deep poverty, economic recession, and escalating housing foreclosures (Campaign to End Child Homelessness, 2009). With foreclosures and layoffs increasing daily, the number of children and families without homes in the United States will likely increase (US Conference of City Mayors, 2009). In addition the continued rise of food and fuel prices, and the high cost of housing are distressing



middle class and poor families and contribute to the increase in the number of the homeless in the US (Raburn, 2010).

These dire social and economic conditions have created unprecedented increase in the number of homeless families in the US (Hunger and Homelessness in US Cities', 2009). These social conditions are acutely articulated among urban city poor and low -income families (NCH, 2009; US Conference of Mayors, 2007; 2008; 2009). The APA (2008) found that African American and Hispanic children are twice as likely to live in poverty as non-Hispanic White and Asian children (APA, 2008). McGreal (2009) also suggests that those suffering the most in the US are the very poor and low- income -who are largely African-Americans, Latinos and members of the immigrant communities (McGreal, 2009).

Washington, DC's Poor Homeless Children:

Washington, DC has the third highest poverty and homelessness rates in the nation (Poverty and Homelessness, 2007). The dire economic conditions are exasperating Washington, DC's low -income families and their children. According to Every Kids Count (2010) in 2009 one third of Washington, DC's children live in deep poverty and include 1,535 homeless children, meanwhile the city's total homeless population is 6,228 homeless people (Every Kids Count, 2010). These figures imply that in 2009, more than 24.6% -- about 1 in 5- -of the total homeless population in DC was comprised of children under the age of 18. And according to Seif (2009) in 2009, DC Public Schools identified 950 students as homeless (Seif, 2010).

Meanwhile in January, 2010 the federally mandated homeless enumeration count established an 11% increase in the number of homeless children in Washington, DC, that were identified sleeping in shelters or on the streets (Ferrell, 2010). Farrell (2010) suggests the number of homeless children in Washington, DC account for 26% of the total city homeless population (Ferrell, 2010).

In fall of 2010, the United Nations Human Rights Commissioner [UNCHR] Raquel Rolnik visited Washington, DC on a fact-finding tour to investigate the rising number of homeless and low-income communities in the city (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2009). UNCHR (2010) identified and detailed gross human rights



and child human rights abuses related to poverty, absence of governmental support services and income disparities in Washington, DC (UNCHR, 2010). According to the UNCHR (2010) report the economic and social conditions of Washington, DC's poor are the result of the high cost of housing; where low income families are unable to meet their monthly rent and mortgage payment face foreclosure; eviction; and are often forced to live in overcrowded and substandard conditions (UNCHR, 2010; National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2009). According to Ferrell (2010) Washington, DC's homeless children are living in transitional shelters, emergency shelters, runaway youth shelters, streets, parks, alleys, abandoned buildings and stairways (Ferrell, 2010).

Child Homelessness and Social Risk Factors:

According to the Government Accountability Office (2010) young homeless children left without shelter and guidance are vulnerable to exploitation and involvement in illicit activities, including prostitution (Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2010). Estes & Weiner (2005) suggest that poverty contributes to high incidents of juvenile prostitution (Estes & Weiner, 2005). While according to the UNICEF (2008) children living in poverty are highly vulnerable and willingly or unwillingly engage in sexual activities to fulfill key need such as food, shelter, and to earn money to "simply survive" (Keim, 2008).

Experts estimate the average number of children sexually exploited in the US at two hundred thousand (Estes et al., 2005; America's Prostituted Kids, 2006). Meanwhile Keim (2009) and the National Center of Missing Children (2008) suggest the number of prostituted children and adolescents in the US is as high as 300,000 (Keim, 2009; Shared Hope, 2008).

Interestingly UNICEF (2009) published a provoking report titled "Child Sexual Exploitation in the USA: Not Just a Problem for Developing Nations" (Kiem, 2009). Keim (2009; 2008) laments that in the past child sexual exploitation was a phenomenon linked to poverty among the children of the developing countries are manifested in one of the wealthiest nation in the world (Keim, 2009; 2008).

DC Homeless Children Engage in Sustenance Sex:



The Declaration of the World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (1996) considers child sexual exploitation a form of slavery (The Declaration of World Congress, 1996). According to the UNICEF (2002) children living in poverty are highly vulnerable and submit willingly or unwillingly to engage in sexual activities to fulfill key need such as food, shelter and to earn money to " simply survive" (UNICEF, 2002). Munir, & Yassin (1997) document the extent of daily abuse, violence and exploitation young vulnerable children are exposed to as they engage in "sustenance sex" (Munir, & Yassin, 1997). According to Brooke (2004) child prostitution is particularly evident among poor children living in urban cities; those residing in public housing, and the growing numbers of youth forced off by national welfare reform (Brooke, 2004). While the APA suggests that many homeless children "engage in sexually risky behaviors sometimes for their own survival" (APA, 2009).

Poverty is the most frequent explanation cited for the involvement of large numbers of children in sex crimes (Azaola, 2001; Boye, 1996; Lederer, 1996, Longford, 1995; Save the Children, 1996; Shamim, 1993; Smeeding, 1997). With the continued economic downturn and the increasing number of DC's homeless children who are daily confronted with factors outside and beyond their control, these children are unable to seek work; secure food; or find shelter; and consequently are left with few options other than to sell their bodies (Gaetz et al., 1999; UNICEF, 2009).

Unfortunately DC's child prostitution is among the highest in the country (Ali, 2009). A simple search of the Washington, DC Examiner website with the words "child prostitutes" generated several pages of stories of children between the ages of 12-17 engaged in prostitution to make ends meet (Washington, DC Examiner, 2010). According to Ali (2009) and Klopott (2010) Washington, DC youth trade sex for shelter or food (Ali, 2009; Klopott, 2010).

During the past four years the rate of child prostitutes in Washington, DC has seen a huge spike and the city was cited by child advocacy groups as a hub for sexual exploitation of children (Ali, 2009; Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI] 2009). This prompted the DC Council (2009) to pass "The Prohibition Against Human Trafficking Bill", which included language about the prohibition of adults engaging or



facilitating consensual sex with a minor in exchange for goods or services (DC Council Bill 18-70, 2009).

The escalating dire economic conditions are adversely impacting low-income families living in large urban centers. For several years the US Conference of Mayors (2007; 2008; 2009) established the magnitude of hunger and homelessness in large urban cities, which is attributed to the dramatic rise in unemployment and housing costs (US Conference of Mayors 2007; 2008; 2009). Despite this alarming rise of homeless children legislatures have yet to concretely address the needs of homeless children and adolescents. In the past these deep poverty driven problems took place in far away poor countries, but today our country and capitol are on par with poor and developing countries where children's safety, well being and future prospects are compromised by their dire economic and social conditions.

Child Homelessness and Education:

Homeless children's education is adversely impacted by the economic and social hardships they experience (Institute for Children and Poverty, 2003; Rubin, 1996; Zima., Kenneth, & Freeman. 1994). Homeless children endure a loss of safety, proper health care, uninterrupted schooling, sustaining relationships, and a sense of community and continuity, which negatively impact their education (NCH, 2009). Levi, Belfield, Muennig & Rouse (2007) found a strong correlation between children's homelessness and their educational success (Levi, Belfield, Muennig, & Rouse, 2007). Children's homelessness and education are directly related to dramatic and alarming increases in students' retention rates, high rates of suspensions, school turnover, expulsions, and are often inappropriately assigned in special education placement (Institute for Children and Poverty, 2003; 2010; NCH; 2009; Spark, 2010).

In addition homeless children experience constant change and instability that impacts their education and future success. Living in shelters, streets, abandoned buildings, constant change and highly mobility; conditions that exposes them to educational difficulties whether finding the space to do homework, maintain an address, enroll in school, comply with school requirements such as immunization or birth records (Endres, 2010; Duffild & Lovell, 2008).



Experts suggest that homeless children when compared to non homeless children are nine times more likely to repeat a grade; four times more likely to drop out of school; and are three times more likely than non homeless children to be placed in special education (NCTSN, 2010, Sparks, 2010). While according to the NHC (2009) homeless children have twice the likelihood of being expelled; suspended; and subsequently fewer homeless students attain proficiency in reading and math; and their estimated graduation rate are low at less than 25% (NCH, 2009).

According to a University of Pennsylvania study (2001) poverty erodes economic, social rights, right to health, adequate housing, food, safe water, and the right to education (Estes et al., 2001). Duffield & Lovell (2008) found homelessness; food insecurity and hunger particularly harm children's cognitive and emotional state (Duffield & Lovell, 2008). According to Hart-Shegos (2009) homeless children's academic performance is hampered by their social and economic circumstances (Hart-Shegos, 2009). Poverty and homelessness impacts children mentally, socially and emotionally and exposes them to a greater social risks and several negative outcomes including poor academic achievement, school dropout, abuse and neglect, behavioral and socio- emotional problems, physical health problems, and developmental delays (APA, 2000, Rubin, Erickson, San Agustin, Cleary, Allen, & Cohen, 1996). Hart-Shegos, (2009) maintains that homeless youth social conditions often induces developmental delays; emotional and behavior problems; learning disabilities; and speech delays (Hart-Shegos, 2009).

In addition access and length of stay limits that are placed on homeless shelter residents and the constant occupation of searching for safe shelters; forces homeless children to relocate and change schools frequently (Duffield et al, 2008). Consequently homeless children change schools habitually as they seek shelter accommodations that are by design temporary and as a result they are forced to enroll and transfer to multiple schools in one year. (Institute for children Poverty, 2008). The high frequencies of school changes these children encounter adversely impact their education and future prospects (National Coalition for the Homeless,



2009).

Saprks (2010) cites recent studies conducted in Chicago City and New York City that found homeless students changed school enrollment several times a year primarily due to city school closures and consolidations (Sparks, 2010). This implies that similar recent school closures, restructuring, and consolidations that are taking place in Washington, DC may be gravely contributing to homeless students' educational attainment. With the loss of adequate opportunity to receive their education, homeless children are much less likely to acquire the skills they need to escape poverty as adults.

Federal Initiatives Fall Short:

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (1987) requires schools to remove barriers to education for homeless children so that they may attend and succeed in school (The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, 1987). This federal initiative primarily focuses on transportation and access of homeless children to public schooling, while important it fails to address the myriad of complex issues they face or offer personalized support in the form of comprehensive school programs to meet homeless children's academic and social needs (NCH, 2009). While Race to the Top (2010) recognizes the complexity of issues homeless children face and requires schools that receive public funding to meet the needs of all students and mandates schools to provide intensive support to meet the needs of homeless children (Department of Education, 2010). Race to the Top requires Title I schools serving high-need students that constitute high rates of homeless students to raise achievement or face closure (Department of Education, 2010).

Race to the Top ignores to address the conclusive evidence that suggest closing schools in low-income communities adversely impact homeless student population and their academic achievement (Sparks, 2010). Frequent changes in school enrolment harms students' academic achievement (Duffield, et al., 2008) and negatively impacts high school students' graduation rates (Rumberger & Larson, 1998). While a GAO (1994) report suggests that third-graders who experience frequent school changes are more likely to repeat a grade than their non-homeless



peers (1994). High school turnover compromises homeless children's psychological, social and academic well-being and adversely impacts their academic achievement and future success (Rumberger, Larson, Ream, & Polardy, 1999).

Conclusion:

Child homelessness adversely impacts academic achievement. Studies have found that housing instability and homelessness lower academic performance, increase the chances of repeating a grade, reduce high school completion rates and exposes children to greater risk of serious physical, emotional and health problems. Homeless children are dependent on their parents and care givers and as such are bound by their family's social and economic conditions and suffer from factors outside their control.

The nations dire economic conditions are adversely impacting low-income families living in large urban centers. The US Conference of Mayors (2009) documents the magnitude of hunger and homelessness in large urban cities, which are attributed to the recent dramatic rise in unemployment, high housing costs and low wages in urban cities (Hunger and Homelessness in US Cities', 2009). During 2007-2008 large US cities saw an 8 per cent increase in the number of homeless families with children (Hunger and Homelessness in US Cities', 2009). In 2010 the Children's Defense Fund (2010) suggest that families with young children are the highest segment of the homeless population and today account for 40% of the nation's homeless population (Children's Defense Fund (2010).

According to the APA (2009) poverty is the strongest predictor of homelessness for families and suggests that 11% of American children living in poverty are homeless (APA, 2009). In addition researchers suggests that the state of homelessness erodes children's sense of security, sense of belonging, health, and safety. These factors that young homeless children face adversely impact their education and future prospects ((APA, 2011, 2000; Levin, et al., 2007; UNICEF, 2009; Duffield, 2008; Institute for Children and Poverty, 2003; Rumberger, et al., 1999; GAO, 1994). Poverty and homelessness damages children mentally, socially and emotionally and exposes them to serious negative outcomes such as high rates



of school dropouts, behavioral and emotional problems, physical, educational problems, and developmental delays (APA, 2000; 2011; Rumberger, et al., 1999).

Child homelessness significantly impacts the educational prospects, well-being, and safety of young children. Without the proper school intervention and appropriate programs to moderate the impact of homelessness on student learning the future prospect of these young children is dim. To continue to shortchange the education of homeless children guarantees that many of today's homeless children are not offered their right to the educational opportunities or the prospect of alleviating the social factors that victimize them.

In addition due to their homeless status youth engage in sustenance sex to secure food, housing, transportation, and other survival necessities (GAO, 2010; America's Prostituted Children, 2009; UNICEF, 2009). Research suggests that poverty is the most frequent explanation cited for the involvement of large numbers of children in sex crimes (Azaola, 2001; Boye, 1996; Longford, 1995; Mayombo, 1998; Save the Children, 1996; Shamim, 1993).

Federal law mandates that school districts provide homeless children with a free, appropriate public education (No Child Left Behind, 2001) and Race to The Top (2010) requires school to provide homeless children a wide range of services including intensive support, effective interventions and the removal of educational barriers and obstacles to ensure their equitable access to education (U.S. Department of Education 2010). But despite the growth in the number of homeless children in Washington, DC and the many well documented complex educational issues they face, Washington DC has failed to provide viable programs and structural support to augment the dire social conditions they face or fully address the unique needs of the city's most vulnerable victims.

When considering the grim prediction of the continued rise of homeless children, it is important for legislators to establish concrete social and educational structures to support the needs of homeless students. It is critical for federal and local legislators and school districts to begin implementing and integrating preventive educational measures and comprehensive programs aimed at addressing the unique



academic and social challenges homeless children face.

In the past these deep poverty driven problems took place in far away poor countries, but today our country is on par with poor and developing countries where children have been compromised due to their economic and social conditions. Federal initiatives have failed to address the root causes of child homelessness, including the poverty of the families and its impact on these children who face exploitation, and lack viable educational opportunities (Poleski, 2010). These well meaning efforts fail to address the nature and extent of social exclusion experienced by young people who are profoundly affected by their precarious state of poverty, problematic familial, interpersonal and educational barriers. These well meaning initiatives fail to articulate well- funded support structures to counter inadequate and negligent state policies.

If the educational structures for the homeless children are not formally established within urban school districts, school administrators and teachers will be left unequipped to address the needs of their homeless student populations. Constructive federal policies must move beyond the ethical expression of combating child homelessness to incorporate and articulate measures that are concrete, formally integrated, and funded to address the particular social and economic needs of this vulnerable student population.

Federal and local legislators fail to address the nature and extent of the social exclusion homeless children face. They fail to consider the complex issues that arise due to homelessness and how profoundly affected this susceptible student population is impacted by the inadequate services they receive; the lack of sufficient educational, emotional and social support structures available to address their unique needs; and the deficient formal programs available to augment their unique social, emotional and physical deficits that are directly related to their state of homelessness.



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