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Introduction

Homelessness, Children, and Youth: Research in the United States and Canada

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This issue of *American Behavioral Scientist* makes available some of the most recent research on the growing social, economic, and human development impacts of homelessness on families—specifically, on the lives of children and youth. The seven studies from the United States and Canada compiled here provide important evidence-based insights to inform efforts aimed at combating homelessness among children and youth. They represent a variety of methodologies, including rigorous, person-centered approaches that reveal the complexity of the homeless experience for young people and the heterogeneity of the young homeless population. As a body, the studies highlight the importance of understanding the diverse contexts in which homeless children and youth live and tailoring supportive services accordingly. Thousands of homeless young people remain unrecognized and underserved. The work in this issue illustrates the urgency of bringing researchers, policy makers, and practitioners together to work toward adequate and affordable shelter for all.

Keywords: *homelessness; children and youth; United States; Canada*

Today, more than half of the world's 6 billion people live in cities (UN-HABITAT, 2006). At least one third of all urban residents live in slums, often in overcrowded and ramshackle dwellings, lacking secure tenure, access to safe water, adequate sanitation, and other basic services. An additional 100 million people are homeless (UN-HABITAT, 2000).

The numbers of adults, youth, and children living at the margins of society without adequate housing have sharply increased since the 1980s, when the twin trends of privatization and state decentralization led to increased reliance on nongovernmental agencies and informal safety networks to provide social and economic supports for individuals and families. In the United States, the 1980s marked the end of surplus housing units for those in need: Owing to the Reagan administration's cuts in the federal budget for housing assistance, the number of low-cost housing units

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decreased from 6.5 million to 5.6 million between 1970 and 1985, whereas the number of low-income renter households grew from 6.2 million to 8.9 million, creating a disparity of 3.3 million units (Dreier, 2004). The Canadian government also stopped providing housing assistance for the poor during the same period, cutting the federally funded supply of social housing from 25,000 units per year in 1983 to zero in 1993 (Hulchanski, 2002). Homelessness and rental housing insecurity now affect tens of thousands of urban Canadians—especially single-parent families, Aboriginal people, and other minorities (Hulchanski, 2002). About 30,000 people use homeless shelters every year in the city of Toronto alone, including more than 6,000 children (Porter, 2003).

In his groundbreaking book *Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America*, Jonathan Kozol (1988) illustrated the severe consequences of the Reagan-era budget cuts, skyrocketing rental rates, and decreased social supports on low-income families. In stark contrast to President Reagan's assertions that many poor people routinely cheated the welfare system and were "homeless by choice," Kozol presented evidence of a system that senselessly trapped homeless families in a cycle of dependence and shelter occupancy, stifling their attempts to become self-sufficient and find decent, affordable housing. By the late 1980s, the estimated number of homeless people in the United States had reached 600,000 on any given day, and about 1.2 million over the course of a year (Dreier, 2004). The actual number of people who experienced homelessness between 1985 and 1990 was evidently much higher than typical point-in-time estimates reveal. Researchers studying the lifetime and 5-year prevalence of homelessness among a nationally representative sample estimated that about 13.5 million adult residents of the United States had been literally homeless at some time in their lives, and 5.7 million had been literally homeless within the past 5 years (Link et al., 1994). When they factored in those who had doubled up—the "hidden homeless"—the researchers estimated that at least 26 million people had experienced homelessness across their lifetimes, and 8.5 million had been homeless in the past 5 years (Link et al., 1994).

Today, the situation is worse: The Urban Institute estimates that more than 800,000 people are homeless on any given day, including about 200,000 children in homeless families (Burt, Aron, Lee, & Valente, 2001). The National Alliance to End Homelessness (NAEH; 2006b) reports that "about 600,000 families and 1.35 million children experience homelessness in the United States each year" (p. 4). At least 52,000 youth are homeless on their own—and service providers count more than 1 million youth who have run away from home or been "thrown away" by parents, guardians, or institutions (Fernandes, 2007).

This issue of *American Behavioral Scientist* makes available some of the most recent research on the growing social, economic, and human development impacts of homelessness on families—specifically, on the lives of children and youth. Homeless young people are a subpopulation of the more than 12.3 million children

living in poverty in the United States (Eckholm, 2007). Recent evidence points to the long-term social and personal costs of childhood poverty, indicating that children who grow up poor tend to earn less over a lifetime, be less productive, commit more crimes, and have higher health care costs than those who did not grow up poor (Eckholm, 2007; Rainwater & Smeeding, 2003). Those who become homeless represent a fraction of the population living in poverty, but episodic or chronic housing insecurity severely constrains young people's life chances and limits their access to resources required for healthy development and successful functioning.

The Articles in This Issue

The persistence and pervasiveness of homelessness among children and youth has spurred extensive research on causes, consequences, and cures. This issue starts out with John Buckner's review of many of these studies (conducted between 1987 and 2005). Their findings are inconsistent because of differences in methodology, historical and political contexts, and other factors. "While methodological differences may have had a limited role in accounting for some of these inconsistencies," Buckner writes, "it is more likely that historical and contextual differences have played an even larger role in explaining why some studies have detected apparent effects that can be attributed to homelessness and others have not." To understand better the impacts of homelessness on children, he recommends researchers focus more deliberately on the variations in children's and families' experiences across contexts, finding ways to account reliably for the variety of stressors different children face during homeless episodes in different locations.

Recent research has used rigorous, person-centered methods to better understand this heterogeneity of the homeless child and youth populations, paying careful attention to contextual factors and individual variations in experience. The articles in this issue represent some of the best work in this regard, providing useful insights to guide ameliorative approaches. For example, in the second article, John Buckner, Nick Huntington, and Ellen Bassuk use cluster analysis, a person-centered alternative to the more common variable-centered methods, to analyze data from the Worcester Family Research Project. Their analysis reveals two distinct clusters of children who had been homeless: "higher functioning" children who do well despite the stresses they face during homelessness and "lower functioning" children who experience significant challenges in terms of behavior problems, adaptive functioning, and achievement. The researchers underscore the importance of targeting services and policies to homeless children based on their actual needs and abilities rather than assuming all homeless children enter and exit the experience the same way.

The two articles that follow use ethnographic methods to understand how youth who live on the street cope with and exit from homelessness, further illustrating the

complexity of the homeless experience and the heterogeneity of homeless youth. Hilary Smith captures the voices of young people in her article on the creation of street families among homeless youth. She emphasizes the often overlooked needs of youth living on the street for identification and close personal relationships that offer protection and support. Acknowledging the strategies that homeless youth use and the struggles they experience firsthand is key to developing programs and interventions that work—a point made also by Jeff Karabanow in his article on how homeless youth exit the street. The youth Karabanow interviewed speak clearly to the need for greater investment in prevention and support services, housing, and employment opportunities that meet them where they are.

The articles in the first half of this issue highlight the resilience and positive potential of many homeless children and youth. The remaining three articles focus on behavioral and mental health problems associated with homelessness—a more common emphasis. In their article on the long-term consequences of homelessness for children, Marybeth Shinn and colleagues examine the possibility of cumulative risk or an inoculating effect of stressors in children and teenagers who had experienced homelessness with their families. They find different results for different age groups. Homelessness—living in a shelter—appears to have more deleterious effects on very young children than older ones, but the ways in which services are provided to families may also have an important effect on how well children cope with the stresses of insecure housing.

Abigail Gewirtz, Ellen Hart-Shegos, and Amanuel Medhanie study cumulative risk in terms of formerly homeless children's psychosocial functioning and needs, reporting on data from a participatory action research project with 17 family-supportive-housing communities. Research on supportive-housing programs for formerly homeless families is relatively new; this study reveals gaps in service provision and suggests that “to be successful, supportive housing-based interventions must be developmentally appropriate, tailored to the child's type and level of need, and multi-component/domain.”

In the final article presented here, Suzanne Zerger, Aaron Strehlow, and Adi Gundlapalli review the literature on behavioral health issues for homeless young adults. They conclude that the typical research focus on individual-level risk and protective factors, as well as service use patterns and preferences among homeless youth, is inadequate for understanding the experiences and needs of those who are not accessing formal services and for recognizing the structural issues that have shaped their experiences. They point to the need for greater recognition of the “hidden” population of homeless youth and “research that informs interventions that work—interventions built by hearing both youth and the adults they trust—and that focuses on the broader structural causes that put them on the street in the first place.”

Research, Rhetoric, and Reality

Understanding the structural causes of child and youth homelessness and targeting appropriate interventions are two objectives of the movement to end homelessness in the next decade in the United States. The studies published in this issue provide important evidence-based insights to inform efforts aimed at combating homelessness among children and youth. However, a wide gap remains between what we now know about child and youth homelessness, its causes and outcomes, and the development of political will and practical strategies to ensure that all young people in North America have access to adequate and affordable housing.

The U.S. Housing Act of 1949 called for “a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family.” For more than 50 years, governments have failed to attain this goal. In 1996, at the World City Summit, the United States and Canada reaffirmed their commitment to the “progressive realization of the goal of the human right to housing,” but unmet needs increased during the decade that followed. Since 2003, 220 communities around the United States have begun the process of creating plans to end homelessness; in 2006, the NAEH (2006a) reported that 90 communities had completed their plans. Still, fewer than half of the completed plans include specific strategies for ending family or youth homelessness, and “although plans are outlining the right strategies, they are not always setting clear numeric indicators, establishing timelines, implementing bodies, and identifying funding sources to implement each key strategy” (NAEH, 2006a, p. 4).

This issue publishes some of the cumulative research currently available to guide policies and programs. The knowledge exists. Now, politicians and practitioners must put this knowledge to practical use.

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