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Education of Homeless Children and Youth

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This fact sheet examines the barriers to public education faced by homeless children and youth, the progress states have made in removing those barriers, and current policy issues. A list of resources for further study is also provided.

BACKGROUND

Families with children are by most accounts among the fastest growing segments of the homeless population. In the United States today, an estimated 1.35 million children are likely to experience homelessness over the course of a year (The Institute for Children and Poverty, 2004). This number represents two percent of all children in the United States, and ten percent of all poor children in the United States.

Homelessness has a devastating impact on homeless children and youth's educational opportunities. Residency requirements, guardianship requirements, delays in transfer of school records, lack of transportation, and lack of immunization records often prevent homeless children from enrolling in school. Homeless children and youth who are able to enroll in school still face barriers to regular attendance: while 87% of homeless youth are enrolled in school, only 77% attend school regularly (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

In addition to enrollment problems, the high mobility associated with homelessness has severe educational consequences. Homeless families move frequently due to limits on length of shelter stays, search for safe and affordable housing or employment, or to escape abusive partners. All too often, homeless children have to change schools because shelters or other temporary accommodations are not located in their school district. In recent years, 42% of homeless children transferred schools at least once, and 51% of these students transferred twice or more (Institute for Children and Poverty, 2003).

Every time a child has to change schools, his or her education is disrupted. According to some estimates, 3-6 months of education are lost with every move. In a recent study of homeless children in New York City, 23% of homeless children repeated a grade, and 13% were placed in special education classes, many times inappropriately (Institute for Children and Poverty, 2003). Homeless children are thus at high risk for falling behind in school due to their mobility. Without an opportunity to receive an education, homeless children are much less likely to acquire the skills they need to escape poverty as adults.

REMOVING BARRIERS TO HOMELESS CHILDREN'S EDUCATION

Congress established the McKinney Act's Education of Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program in 1987 in response to reports that only 57% of homeless children were enrolled in school. The EHCY Program provides formula grants to state educational agencies to ensure that all homeless children and youth have equal access to the same free, appropriate education, including preschool education, provided to other children and youth. State and local educational agencies receive McKinney Act funds to review and revise laws, regulations, practices, or policies that may act as a barrier to the enrollment, attendance, and success in school of homeless children and youth. Local educational agency (LEA) sub grants support a variety of activities, including identification and outreach; assistance with school enrollment and placement; transportation assistance; school supplies; coordination among local service providers; before and after school and summer educational programs; and referrals to support services. State educational agency (SEA) funding helps support services such as toll-free hotlines; awareness raising activities for educators and service providers; preparation of educational materials for statewide distribution; technical assistance to schools, service providers, parents, and students; and enrollment assistance.

Evaluations of the EHCY program reveal that while much progress has been made in ensuring homeless children's access to education, many barriers remain. A U.S. Department of Education Report to Congress reported that 87% of homeless children and youth are enrolled in school, a significant increase in school access (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). A 1995 national evaluation found that almost all states have revised laws and policies to improve access to education for homeless students, but that the remaining barriers to enrollment in school include guardianship and immunization requirements, transportation problems and school fees (Anderson et al., 1995). Barriers to success in school were found to include family mobility, poor health, and lack of food, clothing, and school supplies. Many of these issues were addressed in the 2001 reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Act, but due to a lack in funding, have not been fully addressed. A majority of the service providers and shelter operators surveyed felt that homeless children faced difficulties in being evaluated for special education programs and services, participating in after-school events and extra-curricular activities, obtaining counseling and psychological services, and accessing before- and after-school care programs (National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, 1995).

POLICY ISSUES

Homeless children's access to education has significantly improved as a result of the McKinney EHCY program. However, many obstacles to the enrollment, attendance, and success of homeless children in school persist. One of the largest obstacles is the extremely limited resources available to implement the McKinney Act. Appropriations for the EHCY program have not kept up with inflation or demand for services. In 1990, Congress authorized \$50 million for the EHCY program. The program's FY2001 funding level was \$35 million. In 2003 \$55 million was appropriated, which is \$15 million less than the authorized \$70 million. As a result of lack of funds for the EHCY program, many states are serving only a small portion of their estimated population of homeless children.

In a recent survey, experts discovered that requests for emergency shelter increased by an average of 9 percent within a period of one year. They also found that requests for shelter by homeless families increased by 5 percent. Where as an average of 23 percent of all the requests for emergency shelter were filed by homeless people, 29 percent of those same requests by homeless persons went unmet during the last year (Home Aid, 2007). Of this population that uses the emergency shelters, 24 percent

are children. However, contrary to popular belief, people remain homeless an average of eight months in the survey cities. Recent statistics indicate that 51 percent of those suffering from homelessness are single men, 30 percent come from families with children, 17 percent are single women and 2 percent are unsupervised children. Furthermore, 42 percent of the homeless population are African-American, 39 percent are white, 13 percent are Hispanic, 4 percent are Native American, and 2 percent are Asian. An average of 16 percent of homeless people are considered “mentally ill;” 26 percent are substance abusers. Thirteen percent are employed. Requests for assisted housing by low-income families and individuals increased in 87 percent of the cities during the last year (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2006).

Two subpopulations of children who face increased policy barriers to education are unaccompanied homeless youth and homeless pre-schoolers. Homeless youth are often prevented from enrolling in and attending school by curfew laws, liability concerns, and legal guardianship requirements (Anderson et al., 1995). Homeless pre-schoolers also face difficulty accessing public preschool education. Less than 16% of eligible pre-school aged homeless children are enrolled in preschool programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). According to a survey conducted by the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, 70% of all respondents (state coordinators and service providers) reported that funding was inadequate to meet the preschool needs of homeless children, and 80% of all respondents indicated that public preschool programs have waiting lists from less than 30 days to more than 12 months (National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, 1997). Findings from a three-year Head Start Demonstration Project reveal numerous challenges in serving homeless children and their families, including recruiting and enrolling homeless families; retaining homeless families and children in project services; involving homeless parents; and meeting the unique needs of homeless children and parents (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999).

Congress reauthorized the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act in 2002. It changed some of the responsibilities of school districts and states, including the requirement for each school district to have a designated homeless education liaison to build awareness in the school and community. Congress appropriated \$55 million for the EHCY program in FY2003; however, this is \$15 million less than the authorized amount of \$70 million (Bringing America Home Campaign, 2003). The program still lacks proper funding, and therefore cannot be adequately implemented on the state and local level.

CONCLUSION

What homeless children need most of all is a home. While they are experiencing homelessness, however, children desperately need to remain in school. School is one of the few stable, secure places in the lives of homeless children and youth -- a place where they can acquire the skills needed to help them escape poverty.

RESOURCES

Every state has a state coordinator for the education of homeless children and youth. To locate the coordinator in your state, visit the NAEHCY web site at www.serve.org/nche/states/state_resources.php or contact Barbara Duffield at National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, phone: 202/364-7392, email: bduffield@naehcy.org.

In addition, the National Center for Homeless Education serves as a clearinghouse for information and resources on the educational rights of homeless children and youth. The web site contains the full text of the McKinney Act, as well as numerous educational resources. NCHE, 1100 West Market Street, Suite 300, Greensboro, NC 27403, 1-800-308-2145; email: homeless@serve.org; <http://www.serve.org/nche>.

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