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Education of Homeless Children and Youth

Published by the National Coalition for the Homeless, September 2009

BACKGROUND

Families with children are by most accounts among the fastest growing segments of the homeless population. In the United States an estimated 1.35 million from 600 thousand families will experience homelessness today, while 3.8 million more will live in “precarious housing situations.”¹ Put another way, of every 200 children in America, 3 will be homeless today and more than double that number will be at risk for homelessness.²

Homelessness has a devastating impact on children and youths’ 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.³ According to recent federal data, during the 2007-2008 school year 794,617 homeless children and youth were enrolled in public schools. This number, however, is an underestimate, as not all school districts report data to the U.S. Department of Education, and because the data collected represents only those children identified and enrolled in school. Furthermore, the number does not include all preschool-age children, or any infants and toddlers.

Living arrangements for homeless children can be highly improvisational. These situations are often precarious, unstable, and, at times, dangerous. Of children who schools identified as homeless during the 2007-2008 school year, 22% lived in shelters, 65% lived with other family members or

¹ Institute for Children and Poverty. (2008). “National Data on Family Homelessness.” Retrieved September 21, 2009 from <http://www.icpny.org/index.asp?CID=7>.

² Data compiled using Data from the Institute for Children and Poverty. (2008). “National Data on Family Homelessness.” Retrieved September 21, 2009 from <http://www.icpny.org/index.asp?CID=7>. and from the U.S. Census Bureau (2009). Retrieved September 21, 2009 from http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/ADPTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=01000US&-qr_name=ACS_2007_3YR_G00_DP3YR2&-ds_name=ACS_2007_3YR_G00_&-lang=en&-sse=on

³ U.S. Department of Education. “Education OF Homeless Youth Program: Learning to Succeed.” Retrieved September 21, 2009 from http://www.ed.gov/offices/OUS/PES/esed/learnsucceed/exec_sum.html

friends, 7% lived in motels, and 6% lived without shelter.⁴

In addition to enrollment problems, the high mobility associated with homelessness has severe educational consequences. Homeless families move frequently due to limits to length of shelter stays, search for safe and affordable housing or employment, or to escape abusive family members. Too often, homeless children have to change schools because shelters or other temporary accommodations are not located within their school district. Homeless children and youth frequently transfer schools multiple times in a single year because of these conditions.

Every time a child has to change schools, his or her education is disrupted. According to the Institute for Children and Poverty, homeless children are nine times more likely to repeat a grade, four times more likely to drop out of school, and three times more likely to be placed in special education programs than their housed peers.⁵

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 and 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, and/or policies that may act as barriers to the enrollment, attendance, and educational success 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.⁶

Evaluations of the EHCY program reveal that while much progress has been made in ensuring homeless children's access to education, many barriers remain. Enrollment of homeless students increased by 17% between the 2006-2007 and the 2007-2008 school years. Yet, while almost all states have revised laws and policies to improve access to education for homeless students, significant barriers to enrollment and attendance remain, including guardianship and immunization requirements, transportation problems and school fees. Barriers to success in school were found to include family

⁴ The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY). "Facts About the Education of Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness." Retrieved September 21, 2009 from <http://naehcy.org/facts.html#why>.

⁵ Institute for Children and Poverty. (2008). "National Data on Family Homelessness." Retrieved September 21, 2009 from <http://www.icpny.org/PDF/reports/AccessToSuccess.pdf?Submit1=Free+Download>.

⁶ Department of Housing and Urban Development, *McKinney-Vento Act*. Retrieved September 21, 2009 from <http://www.hud.gov/offices/cpd/homeless/lawsandregs/laws/index.cfm?title=t4>.

mobility, poor health, and lack of food, clothing, and school supplies.⁷ 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.

POLICY ISSUES

Homeless children's access to and success in education have significantly improved as a result of the McKinney EHCY program. These victories have been noted by states and LEAs, alike, and have resulted in the expansion of local support networks. However, many obstacles to the enrollment, attendance, and success of homeless children in school persist. One of the greatest obstacles is the scarcity of resources available to implement the McKinney Act. Appropriations for the EHCY program have not kept up with inflation or demand for services. During the 2006-2007 school year, there was a 17% increase in homeless children and youth identified in public schools. With numbers of homeless students nearing 800,000, states failed to provide subgrants to 41% of students identified as homeless. These figures promise only to increase in the upcoming year, due principally to the economy's drastic downturn in late 2008. Where appropriations have risen, observers have noted a nearly proportional increase in the number of homeless students served. Yet, the EHCY program was funded at only \$65 million in FY2009, less than one third of the \$210 million minimum NAEHCY estimates will be required to appropriately serve the rising number of homeless students in America.⁸

In a recent survey, 43% percent of responding cities reported an increase in the overall number of homeless persons accessing emergency shelter and transitional housing programs during the last year. Meanwhile, 71% of responding cities reported increases in households with children accessing emergency shelter. 65% of these cities are predicting increases in overall requests for emergency shelter and 100% predict increases in requests for emergency shelter by households with children. Meanwhile, 52% of responding cities already report having to turn people away some or all of the time.⁹

More than 42% of those accessing emergency shelter are families, and, on average these families remain in emergency shelters for 70 days, longer than either single women or single men. The primary reason for family homelessness is the lack of affordable housing, though poverty, unemployment, low-paying jobs, family disputes, substance abuse, and other factors all play significant roles in family homelessness. Recent statistics indicate that 26% of those suffering from homelessness are considered "severely mentally ill;" 19% are employed; 15% are victims of domestic violence; 13% are physically disabled; 13 are veterans; and 2% are HIV positive.¹⁰

⁷ Anderson, Leslie et al. An Evaluation of State Local Efforts to Serve the Educational Needs of Homeless Children and Youth, 1995. Available, free, from the U.S. Department of Education, 600 Independence Ave., SW, Room 4168, Washington, DC 20202-8240; 202/401-0590. and The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY). "Facts About the Education of Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness." Retrieved September 21, 2009 from <http://naehcy.org/facts.html#why>.

⁸ The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY). "Funding for the Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program (FY2010 appropriations)." Retrieved September 22, 2009 from <http://www.naehcy.org/update.html>.

⁹ HomeAid. "Facts & Statistics." Retrieved September 22, 2009 from http://www.homeaid.org/index.cfm?tdc=dsp&page=homeless_facts

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.¹¹ Two subpopulations of children who face increased policy barriers to education are unaccompanied homeless youth and homeless preschoolers. Homeless youth are often prevented from enrolling in and attending school by curfew laws, liability concerns, and legal guardianship requirements.¹² Homeless preschoolers also face difficulty accessing public preschool education. Less than 16% of eligible preschool aged homeless children are enrolled in preschool programs.¹³

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. Despite some increase in funding to the initiative in the last few years, 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, it is essential that children 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.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND INFORMATION

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. NCHCE, 1100 West Market Street, Suite 300, Greensboro, NC 27403, 1-800-308-2145; email: homeless@serve.org; <http://www.serve.org/nche>.

¹⁰ U.S. Conference of Mayors. *HUNGER AND Homelessness Report, 2008*. Retrieved September 22, 2009 from http://usmayors.org/pressreleases/documents/hungerhomelessnessreport_121208.pdf.

¹¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Head Start Bureau. Serving Homeless Families: Descriptions, Effective Practices, and Lessons Learned, 1999. Available, free, from the Head Start Publications Management Center, by email at HSPMC9@idt.net or by fax at 703.683.5769.

¹² Anderson, Leslie et al. An Evaluation of State Local Efforts to Serve the Educational Needs of Homeless Children and Youth, 1995. Available, free, from the U.S. Department of Education, 600 Independence Ave., SW, Room 4168, Washington, DC 20202-8240; 202/401-0590.

¹³ U. S. Department of Education. Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program, 2004. Available at www.ed.gov.

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