



## **Development in Children Experiencing Homelessness**

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The number of children experiencing homelessness is on the rise, with 1.6 million American children, about 40% of which are under the age of 7, living in poverty each year (National Center on Family Homelessness 2011). As a result of their homelessness, many of these children face challenges that have the potential to stunt their mental wellbeing, as well as their emotional development and social adjustment. For example, children who have experienced homelessness are more likely to be exposed to abuse, suffer separation from their primary guardian, experience parental substance abuse, and witness partner abuse between their parents (Haskett 119). Homeless children are exposed to three potential categories of risks: risks which are related to being homeless, risks related to children from low income families, and risks that are experienced generally by all children (Buckner 723).

Experiencing homelessness exposes children to a number of risks that increase the likelihood of them experiencing worsened mental health, which in turn stunts their development. For example, nearly a quarter of the children experiencing homelessness develop anxiety, depression, and/or behavioral problems as a direct

result of their homelessness (National Center on Family Homelessness 2011). One of the leading predictors in the development of mental and behavioral issues in children is the level of emotional distress experienced by their mother, and many children who experience homelessness have also witnessed the abuse of their mother. Additionally, more than 45% of mothers experiencing homelessness suffer from depression themselves, hindering their ability to care for their child's mental wellbeing, as well as their own (National Center on Family Homelessness 2011). Furthermore, not only are homeless children more likely to experience emotional and behavioral problems, they are also less likely to have access to professional counseling to treat their disorders.

Our earliest childhood experiences, specifically from birth to age 8, have immense influence on our subsequent physical, emotional, and cognitive development. Therefore, children who experience homelessness, especially those at an early age, are at risk for suffering from a number of developmental delays. When children experience trauma or maltreatment during critical developmental periods, it can often lead to delays in neurological functioning. For example, children who experience abuse or maltreatment as infants are more likely to experience neurological delays and are more likely to struggle in school (Pearlman and Fantuzzo 875). Children who experience homelessness at an early age are also at a higher risk for developing learning disabilities and are more likely to have poorer attendance in school than their peers of a higher socioeconomic status. Children who struggle in school early on are more likely to struggle later in their academic career and are more susceptible to dropping out. Additionally, these children are less likely to pursue higher education. On average, the earlier a child experienced homelessness, the more likely they were to struggle in school and experience a learning disability (Pearlman and Fantuzzo 880). Therefore, the age at which a child experiences homelessness is extremely important, as early experience of trauma can have adverse effects on the child's mental and behavioral development.

## Works Cited

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