

Pregnancy and Homelessness

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Expecting a baby can be a stressful time, even if you do everything “right.” You have the support of your partner and your family to lean on, and a warm, loving home to bring the baby to after they’re born. But what about the women who have no home, or no permanent, home to take their new baby to? Unfortunately, pregnancy and homelessness is something that happens in our world, and it has significant impact on the mental health of the mothers who are experiencing it.

A study in 2006 estimated that between 6-22% of all homeless women were pregnant. This study only sampled women who were between the ages of 16 and 19, so it is likely much higher than the percentage given. Homeless women have higher chances of pregnancy than other young women their age who have permanent homes.

Another study conducted in Minneapolis in 2004 followed young homeless women aged 15-22. The study found that half of the women they had surveyed had been pregnant at least once and 30% of the women had been pregnant 2 or more times. In 1992 half of the homeless women in New York City had been pregnant 4 or more times. These statistics are not very surprising when you look at the contraception use, and not to mention the sexual abuse statistics among these populations.

Many women end up losing care of their children, either by voluntary giving up custody or having their children removed by child protective services. Younger women who have less resources to draw from are more likely to have child protective services involvement, it’s estimated that about 37% of children whose mothers are experiencing homelessness have child protective services involved. A study out of New York surveyed nearly 200 foster children, and it showed that 50% of their parents had experienced homelessness at some point, if not currently.

It's probably not surprising that pregnant, homeless women are at a higher risk for mental illness. Pregnancy is already stressful enough without the added stress of not having a permanent home. Homeless women are also at higher risk of postpartum depression, anxiety, and psychosis. Homeless women are also at higher risk of having babies who have low birthweight or need to stay in the NICU due to lack of prenatal care. In many towns and cities there are special clinics for homeless women who are pregnant. They give them free prenatal care, parenting classes, and can help them find employment and affordable housing.

Nurse Martha Ryan, from San Francisco started a nonprofit organization in 1989 that provides prenatal care to thousands of women in San Francisco. Today, her organization helps more than 3,600 families a year with services to help them find their way out of poverty. With the assistance of Ryan's organization children can also remain with their families, and not in foster care. Since the organizations founding in 1989, it has helped more than 80,000 families.

Sources

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3383651/>

<https://www-m.cnn.com/2013/05/09/health/cnnheroes-ryan-homeless-pregnant/index.html?r=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F>