

Facts on Trauma and Homeless Children

How does trauma enter the lives of homeless children?

Homelessness results from the combined effects of extreme poverty, lack of affordable housing, decreasing government supports, the challenge of raising children alone, domestic violence, and fractured social supports. The experience of homelessness results in a loss of community, routines, possessions, privacy, and security. Children and families who live in shelters need to make significant adjustments to shelter living and are confronted by other problems, such as the need to reestablish a home, interpersonal difficulties, mental and physical problems, and child-related difficulties such as illness. Homelessness also makes families more vulnerable to other forms of trauma such as physical and sexual assault, witnessing violence, or abrupt separation. The stress related to these risks comes in addition to the stress resulting from homelessness itself and can impede recovery due to ongoing traumatic reminders and challenges.

Children bear the brunt of homelessness:

- Homeless children are sick at twice the rate of other children. They suffer twice as many ear infections, have four times the rate of asthma, and have five times more diarrhea and stomach problems.
- Homeless children go hungry at twice the rate of non-homeless children, reflecting the ongoing struggle to access consistent and nutritious meals.
- More than one-fifth of homeless preschoolers have emotional problems serious enough to require professional care, but less than one-third receive any treatment.
- Homeless children are twice as likely to repeat a grade compared to non-homeless children.
- Homeless children have twice the rate of learning disabilities and three times the rate of emotional and behavioral problems of non-homeless children.
- Half of school-age homeless children experience anxiety, depression, or withdrawal compared to 18 percent of non-homeless children.
- By the time homeless children are eight years old, one in three has a major mental disorder.

These challenges not only stand on their own but may also act as "secondary adversities," placing children at greater risk for trauma reactions and complicating the recovery process.

Understanding the intricate relationship between homelessness and trauma in children's lives is crucial for developing effective interventions and support systems to address the complex needs of these vulnerable individuals.