

HOMELESS CHILDREN

Hanna Ashagre

ABSTRACT: The purpose of this study was to examine the adverse psychological effects of homelessness on children; also, to analyze how homelessness influences homeless children's behavior, school performance, social-emotional and developmental functioning. The study findings show that homelessness has a negative impact on children's psychological development. Homeless children faced many challenges when they moved to an unfamiliar environment. The frequent movement increases a feeling of insecurity and creates severe psychological distress, which might lead them to experience anxiety, depression, social stress, and hostility. Also, researchers found that homelessness interferes with the ability to learn. Lack of social support systems may result in social emotional, low self-esteem and psychological distress in children. Moreover, homelessness may create depression in both children and their families. When mother is stressed the child is negatively affected by her stress. This study suggests that it is essential to address the cause of poverty and homelessness in the life of children. In addition, it is crucial to assess new intervention that might stimulate empowerment for child personality and mother-child relationship.

Introduction

The number of homeless children is rising in America. Every year in the U.S there are above 1.6 million homeless children; from those children 40% of them are living in shelters (Haskett, Armstrong & Tisdale, 2016). Homelessness is described by, low socio-economic status and the lack of stable housing. An individual is considered homeless if that person lives on the street without permanent housing (Schteingart & Molnar, 1995). Homelessness is mostly influenced by the lack of financial stability in families, which stimulate children's basic learning abilities.

Homeless children who are residing in shelters face an increased risk for mental health issues, behavior problems, academic delays, chronic illness, and are more likely to experience depression and trauma. Moreover, many homeless children and their families experience different challenges.

They move continuously from one place to another place. In addition, they are criticized for their poor school performance. They are also unnoticeable in school and labeled as "shelter rats" by their teachers and schoolmates (Kim, 2013). Practical problems involved in homelessness, such as frequent changes in housing and schools, create cumulative stress in the homeless community. Furthermore, homelessness can create harmful psychological effects such as social stress, depression, and behavioral problems in children (Haskett et al., 2016). My research question is how does homelessness distort a child's psychological well-being? I hypothesized that homelessness has a negative consequence on children psychological wellbeing.

Background

Homelessness can have negative psychological effects on individuals,

especially on children in school. The research shows that the experience of homelessness in children includes mental developmental delay, emotional risk, chronic disease and social problems due to lack of permanent housing, which negatively impacts their quality of life (Haskett et al., 2016). According to Pamela and Toro (1998), homeless children, when they moved to an unfamiliar environment from their home and faced uncertainty concerning shelter, may be more likely to experience anxiety, paranoia, psychoticism, and hostility. For example, a constant movement may make them unable to form supportive peer relationships at school. The cumulative stress of homelessness creates harmful psychological effects such as social stress, and behavioral problems in children. Rescorla et al. (1991) conducted a study which reported that more than half of children had developmental lags, anxiety, depression or learning difficulties and that half appeared to require psychiatric evaluation. The constant movement from place to place and psychological problems can negatively affect children's psychological wellbeing.

According to Kim (2013), psychological distress may result when children lose social support systems due to homelessness. Children are more likely to experience emotional and behavioral issues such as low self-esteem, bullying, and difficulty building friendships. While psychological energy is spent on survival, less energy is placed on socialization and forming relationships which can result in a feeling of isolation. In addition, a homeless child's lack of familiar routine and loss of daily contact with friends, relatives, and neighbors leads to vulnerability, anxiety, and fear. According to Sulkowski and Joyce-Beaulieu (2014), a

clinical study from 176 homeless children, 86% met diagnostic for a psychiatric disorder; the majority 53% of homeless children show disruptive behavior disorders which are categorized as conduct disorders, and about 21% have a mood disorder, which is depression and bipolar disorder. This study shows that lack of social support system creates psychological distress in homeless children, which may also lead to depression in students as well as their families.

Homelessness may create depression in both children and their families; maternal depression is a risk factor for homeless children. The mother's frustration and helplessness may make her depressed. This depression affects children's behavior and gives them anxiety and depression. Maternal depression may encompass both intra- and interpersonal processes for children; a poor parent-child relationship may result in negative effects for both mother and child (Schteingart & Molnar, 1995). When children do not get enough attention from their families, it leads them to become more stressed and may place children at risk of depressive disorder and anxiety. According to Rafferty and Shinn (1991), while the mother is stressed, frustrated, and depressed about housing or work opportunities, the child is negatively affected by her stress, and the studies also provided evidence that 66% of parents had noticed behavior change on their children after becoming homeless. The homelessness situation may make children feel more insecure, which leads to many forms of acting out behavior. According to Kilmer et al. (2012), 50% of mothers were found to have experienced depression after they became homeless; maternal depression is associated with intensiveness, negative caregiving, and emotionally detached

parenting. This study shows that homeless children may change their behavior because of the combination of homelessness, poor parent-child relationship, and maternal depression which results in psychological effects. Besides the psychological problems and acting out behavior, homelessness can negatively affect school performance.

Homelessness may also interfere with homeless children's ability to learn. According to Cutuli et al. (2013), a 2007 study by Fantuzzo and Perlaman found that through the group of 11,835 homeless students in second grade living in an urban school district show that homelessness may influence the learning of children such as the ability to read, write, and science. These homeless children did not acquire a strong educational foundation at home, and they may not have enough resources available to school supplements, such as books, or quiet places to study. Research by Sulkowski and Joyce-Beaulieu (2014) found that homelessness has been associated with low achievement in math and reading among students in a study that was conducted in a large school district from third through eighth grades. This study shows that the impact of frequent movement affects homeless children's school performance, which makes them fall behind. The stress interferes with the ability to learn because there is a lot on their mind, and they cannot focus and concentrate. Also, this problem might build up as they continue to be homeless and might prevent them from high school graduation. Besides practical and academic problems, homelessness may produce symptoms of psychological distress in children.

Researchers have also found that homelessness may increase feelings of

insecurity in children, which leads them to different forms of acting out. It is also possible that their acting-out behavior is a signal of generalized anger about their difficult life circumstances. Some homeless children may change their behavior because of social pressure and bullying at school, which leads them to become socially withdrawn. (Rafferty and Shinn, 1991). These risk factors would be even more harmful to homeless children's psychological wellbeing.

Methods

Study design

This research process will use a repeated cross-sectional design. The research design will include a large sample population.

Participants and Sample Design

The intended population is homeless children who attend at Shoreline School District. These homeless groups will consist of individuals of diverse races who are currently experiencing homelessness with diagnosed anxiety and depression. The participants will be children under the age of 18. The sample size will be 500 participants. The sampling process will be non-probability sampling method, convenience design.

Ethical Considerations

The research study will have Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the Shoreline School District. Participants in this study will be voluntary and anonymous. An assent form will be provided to the participant 16-18 years old, and informed consent form for participants' guardians and parents to inform them about the purpose of the study.

Measurement/Variables

The independent variable for this study is homelessness, and the dependent variable is psychological well-being. Sub-categories of the dependent variable are maternal depression, emotional distress, and self-esteem. The questionnaires measured by short interview answer demographic and psychological questionnaires. These interview questions use qualitative design and have open-ended questions. The interview questions are developed by the researcher in order to understand the relevant experience of homelessness and psychological effects.

Procedures

Information and data will be collected through detailed interviews of participant and survey. The study will obtain baseline information by going onsite to the school locations and interviewing the counselor. The interview will be done by talking face to face. The study to follow participants will be two days during a school week, Monday and Friday. The first step will be to contact principals of four middle schools and four high schools by email to gain access to homeless students under eighteen. This will comprise my student population. Second, the students will sign up for the study by email or text. The data will be collected using a survey online.

Analysis

This study utilizes a combination of both qualitative and quantitative analysis. The qualitative study is an interview, and the quantitative is a survey. This study plan is to use multivariate analysis and the three variables mentioned above.

Discussion

Significance

Homeless children have been invisible. Nobody wants to talk about homelessness among children because it is a sensitive topic. One of the reasons might be homeless students are not comfortable talking with others in school about the fact that they are homeless. Moreover, no one is aware of their vulnerable circumstances and challenges they face. For example, in school teachers have limited information about homeless children. They are not aware of the challenge and experience homeless children bring to school. According to Kim (2013), teachers believe that homeless children were disorganized and dysfunctional. This kind of stereotypical belief and assumption may drive from lack of experience with marginalized children. Furthermore, their situation deserves more attention because children are vulnerable, and they cannot stand for themselves. Bringing awareness to homeless children should be part of professional development in school as well as in society; such as engaging with homeless children to understand their experience and raising awareness of the situation of homeless children's lives. Therefore, teachers who are aware and trained can act differently and support homeless children to be successful in school.

Limitations

The cross-sectional design of this research has problems establishing temporal order. The sample for homeless children may not have been representative of a larger population. Also, the observed outcomes may not apply to all families of homeless children across the board. In addition, this study requires the participant to give

detailed information about their personal situation which might be uncomfortable for some of the participants.

Future Research

It would be important for future research to establish the study process of psychological well-being of homeless children in large school districts in South Seattle. In addition, an important strategy for future research will be to use case-study methodology. A case-study methodology will explore more in-depth the circumstance of the real-life situation for homeless children. Also, it helps to understand and analyze treatment and give solutions for homeless children. Furthermore, it is necessary to study all families of homeless children and children living in the streets, so it can be helpful to address the multiple risk factor that impacts the psychological well-being of children. Also, it is essential to continue to address the issue of poverty and homelessness especially in the life of children. In addition, it is important to assess new intervention that might promote empowerment for child personality and mother-child relationship as well as social support.

References

- Cutuli, J. J., Desjardins, C. D., Herbers, J. E., Long, J. D., Heistad, D., Chan, C., & ... Masten, A. S. (2013). Academic achievement trajectories of homeless and highly mobile students: Resilience in the context of chronic and acute risk. *Child Development, 84*(3), 841-857.
- Grant, R., Gracy, D., Goldsmith, G., Shapiro, A., & Redlener, I. E. (2013). Twenty-five years of child and family homelessness: Where are we now?. *American Journal of Public Health, 103*(S2), e1-e10.
- Haskett, M. m., Armstrong, J., & Tisdale, J. (2016). Developmental status and social-emotional functioning of young children experiencing homelessness. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 44*(2), 119-125.
- Kilmer, R. P., Cook, J. R., Crusto, C., Strater, K. P., & Haber, M. G. (2012). Understanding the ecology and development of children and families experiencing homelessness: Implications for practice, supportive services, and policy. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 82*(3), 389-401.
- Kim, J. (2013). Confronting invisibility: Early childhood pre-service teachers' beliefs toward homeless children. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 41*(2), 161-169.
- McCaskill, P. A., & Toro, P. A. (1998). Homeless and matched housed adolescents: A comparative study of psychopathology. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology, 27*(3), 306.
- Rafferty, Y., & Shinn, M. (1991). The impact of homelessness on children. (Cover story). *American Psychologist, 46*(11), 1170.
- Rescorla, L., Parker, R., & Stolley, P. (1991). Ability, achievement, and adjustment in homeless children. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 61*(2), 210-220.
- Schteingart, J. S., & Molnar, J. (1995). Homelessness and child functioning in the context of risk and protective. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology, 24*(3), 320.
- Sulkowski, M. L., & Joyce-Beaulieu, D. K. (2014). School-based service delivery for homeless students: Relevant laws and overcoming access barriers. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 84*(6), 711-719.