

## The Challenges of Homelessness

School supports and resources for students can be the difference between overcoming the effects of homelessness and perpetuating the cycle of poverty for another generation.

Tory Cox

**O**viously, his parents don't care about his education," the school secretary said confidently to her colleagues. "This is the third day this week he has been absent."

It was true that the ninth grader's absences were frequent and his grades suffered as a result. Ray was bright and engaging when he was on campus. He soaked up the knowledge with an eagerness to learn that many teachers thought had long since left their classrooms. The problem was that life kept interfering.

Ray's older brother, John, had similar attendance problems, but he had never been that good in school. When their frequent moves landed him in different schools every three or four months, he eventually gave up the fight. His family's struggles had become too much for him to handle. In Ray, however, the light still managed to shine. Teachers, administrators, and staff members saw that light fading and felt helpless to stop it.

### Characteristics of Homeless Children

Homelessness among school-age children crosses urban and rural boundaries, includes all races and ethnicities, and is found throughout the 50 states and territories of the United States

(Harris, 2012). The National Center on Family Homelessness (2012) estimates 1.6 million children, or 1 in 45 children, are homeless: "In any given day, researchers estimate that more than 200,000 children have no place to live" (p. 1). The National Coalition for the Homeless (2009) stated that "families with children are by most accounts among the fastest growing segments of the homeless population." For students identified as homeless during the 2007–08 school year, "22% lived in shelters, 65% lived with other family members or friends, 7% lived in motels, and 6% lived without shelter."

The academic challenges for homeless children are daunting: they 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" (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009).

Students experiencing homelessness are also at greater risk of contracting human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection and other sexually transmitted and infectious diseases, abusing drugs and alcohol, attempting suicide, suffering from depression, exhibiting psychotic behavior, engaging in prostitution, and experiencing trauma (Ringwalt, Greene, Robertson, & McPeeters, 1998). Ennet and Ennett, Bailey, and Federman (as cited in Harris, 2012) suggested that homeless children are at greater risk than their peers for using illicit drugs and engaging in risky sexual behavior. The National Center on Family Homelessness (2012) found that homeless children experience alarming levels of violence, including violence within their families (experienced by nearly a quarter of all homeless children).

The physical and mental health of children is also affected by homelessness. Homeless children are at risk of increased rates of sickness (four times greater than their peers), including

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such chronic illnesses as asthma and such occasional illnesses as respiratory infections. Children experiencing homelessness also go hungry twice as often as other children. Children experiencing homelessness also confront significant mental health issues at rates much higher than their peers, including three times the rate of emotional and behavioral problems; two-and-a-half times the rate of anxiety, depression, and withdrawal (18% to 47%); and two times the rate of delinquent or aggressive behavior (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2012).

### **Barriers to Educational Attainment**

*Ray had the ability to bring people together. Because of his winning smile, easy nature, and genuine desire to learn he was viewed as a leader at every school he attended. At his middle school, which was located next to one of the family homeless shelters and housed most of the K–8 students who lived in the nearby shelters, he regularly gathered the smaller children around, telling them stories during nutrition break and leading holiday events in December.*

In the mid-1980s, reports on the educational status of children experiencing homelessness found that only 57% of them were enrolled in school (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009). Those children experienced

continual school removal and replacement, also known as transitory mobility, which resulted in lost relationships, emotional withdrawal, and new living environments (Harris, 2012).

In those new environments, they were also excluded from educational attainment by school systems' policies and procedures. Although the protocols served other purposes, they effectively kept homeless children from school because of requirements for proof of residency, previous school records, immunization cards, evidence of kinship or guardianship, and private transportation to enroll students (Foscarinis & McCarthy, as cited in Reed-Victor & Stronge, 2002).

As a result of these findings, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act of 1987 was created to establish national standards for addressing the needs of children experiencing homelessness. But McKinney-Vento funding could only target 3% of the nation's public school systems, and because of that lack of funding, schools inconsistently enforce the act (Powers-Costello, as cited in Harris, 2012).

"Significant barriers to enrollment and attendance [of homeless children] remain, including guardianship and immunization requirements, transportation problems and school fees" (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009, p. 1). Other challenges include



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"inappropriate placements, poor awareness of family circumstances, inadequate staff time and poor transition across programs" (Reed-Victor & Stronge, 2002, p. 168). Among families, barriers include "family mobility, poor health, and lack of food, clothing, and school supplies" (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009, p. 1).

### How to Help

*Ray's mother had burned most of the bridges with her immediate and extended family members, so much so that her blindness from diabetes did not constitute a drastic enough reason in her family's eyes for them to help her and her sons find a home. She tolerated no disrespect from her sons or anyone else. Her pride and defensive posture contrasted sharply with the family's destitution, creating a situation in which people felt comfortable dismissing her problems by saying, "She sure doesn't act like she wants any help."*

School may be the only stable environment for students who are homeless. Teachers; administrators; and specialized instructional support personnel, such as school social workers, have important roles to play in advocating for targeted interventions, expanded services, increased interactions with family members, and collaboration with supportive district and community-based programs (Harris, 2012). One way for teachers to influence positive academic outcomes is to become more invested in students' lives outside of the classroom (Harris, 2012).

Ensuring the emotional safety of students is a priority, especially those students who have experienced constant emotional and physical disrup-

tion. Reed-Victor and Stronge (2002) suggested a focus on solutions instead of student problems. They recommended focusing on the environmental protective factors of support, structure, and opportunity:

Support—Warm and caring relationships with significant adults; positive peer interactions; encouragement and recognition

Structure—Clear, consistent, and high expectations (in line with developmental level); shared values; instruction ability/mentoring in goal setting, problem solving, decision making and task completion

Opportunity—Multiple avenues for talent and interest development; advocacy for expanded learning experiences; access to services. (p. 162)

Students experiencing homelessness may have the same emotional needs as other students, but the immediacy of those needs is heightened. A supportive structure can help schools meet homeless students' needs for "self-esteem, love and attention, age-appropriate expectations and experiences, positive expectations for the future, academic engagement and self-management" (Reed-Victor & Stronge, 2002, p. 167). Those needs could also be addressed by having "enrichment activities, appropriate male role models, individual adult attention..., counseling services..., emotional support (from school personnel), and opportunities for self-expression" (Reed-Victor & Stronge, 2002, p. 168).

## How Your School Social Worker Can Help Students and Families Experiencing Homelessness

- Counsel identified students individually and in groups on such issues as transition, grief and loss, mental health, and family violence.
- Ensure access to free meal programs, transportation, school supplies, basic needs, and other needed resources.
- Create a referral list of agencies and community-based supports that work directly with students and families experiencing homelessness.
- Represent the students' best interests regarding enrollment, discipline, intervention, and multidisciplinary team meetings.
- Develop and implement "welcome programs" that help students gain trust and stability as quickly as possible in their new environment.
- Advocate for parent involvement in multidisciplinary team meetings, parent-teacher conferences, school activities, and student recognition ceremonies.
- Ensure that parents and students understand their educational rights.
- Educate teachers, staff members, and administrators through inservices and presentations.
- Arrange for district homeless liaisons to speak to school personnel about the needs of students who are experiencing homelessness.
- Consult with teachers on effective strategies to meet the students' social and emotional needs during classroom and instructional time.
- Establish partnerships with faith-based groups and community agencies to create a network of support.
- Develop mentoring connections with community members, school faculty and staff members, and district personnel to provide one-on-one support.
- Work with administrators to review, revise, and monitor policies of enrollment and suspension that consider the unique needs of students experiencing homelessness.
- Help create a welcoming and nonjudgmental campus climate for parents.
- Identify and apply for grant funding opportunities to provide resources for students experiencing homelessness.
- Organize volunteer opportunities for school personnel at local shelters serving the homeless.
- Bring in resources from [www.HomelessChildrenAmerica.org](http://www.HomelessChildrenAmerica.org) and [www.FamilyHomelessness.org](http://www.FamilyHomelessness.org)

**Sources:** McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987, 42 U.S.C. § 11301 et seq.; National Center on Family Homelessness. (2012a). *How you can help children and families experiencing homelessness*. Retrieved from [www.homelesschildrenamerica.org/media/252.pdf](http://www.homelesschildrenamerica.org/media/252.pdf)

Professional development activities for teachers and administrators that focus on the needs of students experiencing homelessness should address the following identified areas:

- "Academic supports (specific skill development, appropriate placement and individualized instruction)..., individualized supports (counseling, tutoring), instructional strategies (engagement, group skills), improved enrollment procedures, staff awareness and coordination (within schools and with community agencies)" (Reed-Victor & Stronge, 2002, p. 168).

### Conclusion

*Through a benefactor of his middle school, Ray and his family obtained a small apartment within walking distance of the school bus stop. Because she knew Ray's story, the landlord overlooked the late rent payments.*

*Having a stable living arrangement allowed Ray to attend school regularly as a ninth grader. As his attendance slowly improved, his grades did as well. Teachers commented that he seemed more open, more willing to engage classmates and teachers, and more involved in school culture than other students from his previous school. He joined the*

*football team, and although he did not play regularly, he was building connections again.*

*Then one day he did not show up for class. Two days went by before the school received word that Ray's mother had died. The school social worker went to the family's apartment. Ray and John sat in the apartment, playing a video game and dealing with their mother's death by retreating from contact with the outside world.*

*The school social worker helped Ray and John connect to a network of supports to assist them in this latest transition, such as grief and loss sup-*



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port groups and student success team meetings. Support for Ray also came through the relationships he had built in the past year, and soon he began living with another family. After two years, the family adopted him. His brother John was there to witness the ceremony but left the celebration early to get back to the shelter where he lived before it closed for the night. Ray and John visited each other every once in a while, but their lives took very different paths, in large part because of the support the school system and the community had provided for Ray. **PL**

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**Tory Cox** is a clinical assistant professor of field education in the School of Social Work at the University of Southern California.