



FOCUS on Early Childhood Mental Health

Caring for Young Children Who Are Experiencing Homelessness

Two reports on child experiencing homelessness—one national and one state—focus attention on how to care for them. The National Center on Family Homelessness recently released *America's Youngest Outcasts: State Report Card on Child Homelessness* which includes a separate report card for each state. Based on 2010 data, Pennsylvania ranks 14th in the nation in how well we deal with the issue of homeless children. In March 2014, the Pennsylvania Department of Education released the report of a task force on children and youth experiencing homelessness.

A few facts about homelessness and young children:

- More than half of children living in federally funded homeless shelters are five years old or younger.
- In 2010, more than 18,000 Pennsylvania children under age six were homeless (this number may have decreased since then, given the numbers in the PA task force report).
- More than one-fifth of children ages 3-6 experiencing homelessness also experience emotional problems serious enough to require professional help.
- Babies who experience homelessness develop more slowly than other children.
- Barriers to enrolling and participating in early care and learning programs include: lack of appropriate documentation (birth certificates, health records), moving around among many temporary living facilities, transportation, lack of awareness on the part of early childhood programs of homeless children in their communities.

Some recommendations for those who provide care for young children who are experiencing homelessness:

- Participate in strategies to identify and locate young children who would benefit from supportive services and welcome them into your program
- Collaborate with statewide cross-system efforts to implement developmental screening processes for young children so they will have increased access to services, including early intervention when indicated
- Provide information to parents about early childhood development and assist them in obtaining supplemental food resources, such as the Women, Infants and Children program
- Be aware of state and federal policies regarding services for children who are experiencing homelessness.

Resources

- “Meeting the Educational Needs of Pennsylvania’s Homeless Children and Youth,” Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Task Force on Homeless Children’s Education, 2014; <http://ow.ly/v8423>
- “America’s Youngest Outcasts: State Report Card on Homelessness,” The National Center on Family Homelessness, 2010: www.homelesschildrenamerica.org/reportcard.php
- “An Overview of Federal Policy on Homeless Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers,” National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth; www.naehcy.org/educational-resources/early-childhood
- “Homelessness and Its Effect on Children,” Family Housing Fund; www.fhfund.org/dnld/reports/SupportiveChildren.pdf

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