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Policy Brief

Seattle Homeless Youth Policy Brief

Homeless youth have suffered throughout the world, though especially so in Seattle, Washington. For some time, the proposed solution has been to create programs aimed at getting homeless youth off the streets. However, these programs simply do not do enough to solve the issue. No matter how many programs are founded, the problem is just not going away. Currently, “an estimated 620 youth under… (the age of)…18 and another 1,380 young adults 18-21 are homeless in Seattle and King County” (City of Seattle, 2012). If Seattle is going to succeed in eradicating homelessness in youth, it needs to do so in a way that both effectively helps get those individuals off the street as well as strongly encourages them to help themselves. The following discussion will take a look at the growing, diverse population of homeless youth; who homeless youth are, the cause of their homelessness; and will evaluate their current needs as well as the suggested methods and policies to help improve (or eliminate) the situation.

The typical image of a homeless person is a male in his mid 30’s to late 60”s living in abject poverty. You see images of him hanging out at soup kitchens, homeless shelters, and on street corners. He is constantly shuffling between makeshift living spaces on the street while sleeping on steam grates, in doorways, under roadway overpasses, or temporary housing shelters when available, which they rarely are. We may see these men at busy street intersections with creative signs often depicting some religious message, the most common ones being ‘God loves You,’ ‘God Bless You,’ ‘Disabled Veteran,’ or the all-time favorite: ‘Family attacked by ninjas. Seeking revenge. Need money for karate lessons.’ We often walk, or drive quickly by them without establishing eye contact, and thereby avoid the guilt of not having the ability to, or simply not wanting to offer assistance. Unfortunately, as this is the face of the homeless we are often presented with we fall into the trap of assuming they represent the majority of homeless people in any major city in America and around the world, and that their circumstances are due to their own misjudgment, laziness, or for other reasons which they could fix if they just worked harder. (HubPage, 2009).

However, this picture of the homeless population is not an accurate one. It does not reflect the true reality of all those that are homeless. The unfortunate reality is that single men represent only a small fraction of the homeless population in America, and most major cities across the globe. The reality of the situation is that most homeless people are not in traffic-heavy areas begging for spare change, but rather behind the scenes attempting to improve their situation through homeless outreach programs. The faces you don’t see are the families who now make up more than 37 percent of the homeless population in America (National Alliance to End Homelessness). Among this percentage, 40% are more than 1.5 million homeless children, many below age 5. These numbers are alarming and growing each day. According to the numbers calculated by The National Center on Family Homelessness, 39 percent of the homeless population consists of children less than 18 years of age, 40% of these homeless children are less than five years old, and 85% percent of homeless families are headed by single mothers. It is estimated by the NCFH that these children’s are homeless at least ten to eleven months at a time, and their homelessness continues through adulthood (HubPage, 2009).

As bad as these statistics sound bad, in America it is nothing new. What is new are the numbers which has grown significantly in the past ten years, spiking within the past two years—partly due to the current mortgage crisis resulting in an astronomical rate of home foreclosures. There are various reasons for the increase in homeless families which include the inability of the parents to find decent paying jobs allowing them the opportunity for alternative, affordable housing. Other factors may include the inability of the parents to find any form of employment at all. Draw your own conclusions and it will not change the fact that the poverty rate among child homelessness in America has risen to more than 19 percent which is much higher than any other age group. Other factors of child homelessness, according to The NCFH include parent substance abuse, mental illness, domestic violence, and jail or prison release, to include changes or cuts in public assistance programs designed to help families stay above the poverty line. In the early 1990’s the welfare reform legislation was drastically changed resulting in a significant decrease in the number of families receiving benefits. During this time frame the numbers on the welfare rolls dropped drastically but not because of employment or families suddenly receiving financial stability. They were simply dropped from the system because of lack of government funding of social programs. Many families who were receiving welfare benefits struggled to get needed medical care, food, and housing. In addition, many lost health insurance, despite their eligibility for continued Medicaid (HubPage, 2009).

While these sudden changes in the system affected millions of low to moderate income families it hit the children the hardest. While most went from a stable home to no home at all, others were born homeless. Statistical data from the NCFH suggests that homeless children often face surmountable problems from the time of birth, continuing throughout their formative years. The NCFH’s data also concludes that this population are four times more likely to have a low birth weight and more likely to need special care immediately after birth, particularly in the area of nutrition. Homeless children experience hunger and starvation at rates twice as high as other children contributing to learning disabilities due to malnutrition and poor self-esteem. This reality, accompanied with poor living conditions weakens a child's resistance to disease resulting in long term illness. Homeless children suffer from various medical complications, often receiving little or no treatment because of their parent’s inability to pay. These complications may include high rates of acute illness including three times as many ear infections, five times more diarrhea and stomach problems. Of this homeless child population 10% reported sexual abused which is three times the rate of other children. An estimated 20% of this population does not attend school, of any kind. They suffer from insomnia and they fear the darkness, crying at night because of the uncertainty of tomorrow. For these unfortunate children a new day is not a new beginning – it’s the continuation of a bad ending (HubPage, 2009).So what do homeless youth need most? According to Slesnick et al.:

“Securing housing is an important goal for homeless youth and service providers. Much research identifies homelessness as a risk factor for a variety of problems including mortality, substance use, victimization, and physical and mental health problems. However, adolescent minors who sever connections with family or the foster care system have difficulty obtaining the guardian consent necessary to obtain permanent housing. Even with guardian consent or adult status, many of these adolescents and young adults face challenges obtaining housing due to the lack of stable employment and often, substance use or mental health problems. Without housing, successfully addressing substance use, mental health, employment and education is especially challenging.” (Slesnick et al., 2007).

There are many ways to get homes for the youth living on the streets. One of these solutions in better funding. Seattle constantly complains about spending too much money on the homeless population. But the fact is, Seattle has an uncomfortably large homeless community. Instead of removing the homeless individuals from the city altogether, the city should accept that it is in a dire situation and needs to face it head on—in a way that benefits *both* parties.

Another possible solution is to provide better housing options. There are many groups that provide housing for youth and many others that provide temporary places to sleep. But, there are specific groups of youth on the streets that are not being offered help so easily. As we discussed in class, for example, there are less than 20 beds in the entirety of the United States that reserves a spot for young victims of human trafficking. Even though having temporary beds available for any group is important, however, the bigger importance rests with finding the homeless youth permanent housing. More organizations and policies should be created to accomplish this task—and they should be focused on every unique situation, not just the generic, stereotypical homeless youth.

The final, and most coveted solution, is to reunite the homeless youth with their families or guardians. Many policies are starting develop across the nation to tackle this challenging solution, and I back it 100%. It is a challenging ideal, however, because many homeless youth are homeless by choice. So the first step is to teach the youth about the importance of positive, healthy relationships. Then, implement ways to help homeless youth develop positive relationships with family, guardians, or, if necessary, new adult figures. Seattle Fox News said it the best:

“Programs and funding alone will not solve the problem,” said Fox. “Those resources only help us manage the problem. We must spend even more dollars for programs and services as long as anyone remains on the street, but we must seek and implement new legislation to respond to the structural roots of the problem. Accomplishing that tracks right back to the continuing accelerated loss of existing low-income housing to redevelopment and gentrification” (Seattle Post Globe, 2011).

Currently, there are five policies in place to help homeless youth. These policies are the Runaway and Homeless Youth Protection Act, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, the 34 CFR Part 200: Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged, the Housing Subsidy (section 8 and Public Housing) Programs, and the Chafee Foster Care Independence Act. These are great policies, but I believe that in order to help the homeless youth of Seattle, policies need to be made and plans of action need to be implemented to reconnect the youth with their families. Only then can we see improvements in keeping youth off the streets and safe in a home where their basic needs can be provided for them. By doing that, the youth can grow up healthily and reap the benefits of having positive relationships with adult figures in their lives.

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