

on the Record

Experts Answer Questions about the Effects of Homelessness on Children

Though the iconic and persistent image of homelessness is of a single, male adult sleeping on a park bench, poverty and homelessness affect vast numbers of families. According to the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, of the roughly 3.5 million people who will likely experience homelessness during the course of a year, 1.35 million are children. *UNCENSORED* has asked two professionals with vast experience in the areas of children and poverty to respond to questions about the effects of homelessness on the young. John C. Buckner, PhD, an assistant professor of psychology at Children’s Hospital–Boston, a teaching hospital of Harvard Medical School, has published numerous papers on the subject of children in poverty. Jamila Larson, LICSW, is the executive director and co-founder of the Homeless Children’s Playtime Project, in Washington, D.C., which provides children in temporary housing with activities aimed at nurturing their development. While Ms. Larson and Dr. Buckner approach the subject of child homelessness from different perspectives, both gave illuminating and thought-provoking responses.

UNCENSORED: In the course of your research, how have you come to view the experience of homelessness for children?

BUCKNER: I believe that homelessness needs to be understood within the broader context of poverty. As such, homelessness (i.e., a stay in a family shelter) is but one of many negative life events that children living in poverty can experience. I think some misperceptions exist about homeless children because of people’s tendency to see homelessness as a permanent status rather than a temporary one and thereby assume or contend that children who are homeless are quite distinct from other children who are housed but also living in poverty. Of course, homelessness creates unique challenges for those who experience it, but once homeless children are re-housed they go back to living in a similar set of adverse circumstances (summed up as “poverty”) with a much more sizeable group of children. On a more general note, I don’t believe it is possible to effectively prevent family homelessness without simultaneously tackling the much broader problem of family poverty. Homelessness is the tip of the poverty iceberg.

UNCENSORED: You have written that research on the impact of homelessness for children has produced inconsistent results—can you say more?

BUCKNER: I’ve reviewed a 20-year span of investigations, some of which I was involved in, that examined the effects of homelessness on children. Except for the earliest studies in the 1980s, it has been difficult for researchers to isolate ill effects of homelessness on children above and beyond the nega-

tive impact of poverty. On average, homeless and similarly poor non-homeless children looked more alike than different in terms of levels of mental health and behavioral problems. However, differences were much more obvious between poor children (both homeless and housed) and children from middle-class backgrounds. In short, it has been much easier to demonstrate the negative impact of poverty on children than of homelessness, per se.

UNCENSORED: Did such findings surprise you or did you expect to observe this?

BUCKNER: It greatly surprised me as it did others. In research I helped to conduct, I expected we would document clear evidence of the negative effects of homelessness—and while we did find this to some extent, it was certainly not to the degree I had anticipated. Grappling with these findings is what led me to better appreciate how homelessness is not an outlier negative experience for a child growing up in poverty. To use an analogy, detecting the “signal” represented by an episode of homelessness is challenging when there is so much background “noise” as well. This “noise” is the combined impact of many other non-homelessness-related experiences (discrete negative events and chronic strains) that children growing up in poverty must endure. As a result of my research, I suppose I came to be even more alarmed by the “noise” we were documenting than I was by the “signal” we were trying to detect. I would extend this to some of the situations I’ve observed housed poor children living in; conditions that can sometimes be much more distressing than those found in a typical family shelter.

UNCENSORED: How does homelessness compare, as a stressful event, with other negative events that children can experience?

BUCKNER: Homelessness is not the same experience for every child. The length of an episode can vary, shelter conditions are different, some children are displaced from their former schools and neighborhoods while others are not, etc. So, while it is difficult to make sweeping statements about the impact of homelessness on children, on average I would say that homelessness is a “moderate” stressor for children living in poverty. It can have an appreciable negative impact for some children although, on average, those effects often dissipate once a child is re-housed. Witnessing or being the victim of violence, which any child living in poverty can experience, can have far more damaging and long-lasting effects.

UNCENSORED: In your research, you have also examined self-regulation as an important protective factor for children (both homeless and non-homeless). Tell us more about why self-regulation seems to promote resilience in children.

BUCKNER: In addition to factors such as homelessness that can harm children, I’ve also been interested in understanding things that can promote good outcomes in children experiencing the common adversity of poverty. In other words, what characteristics do resilient children seem to share that set them apart from other children not doing as well despite similar life circumstances and experiences? About ten years ago, my colleagues and I were the first to identify self-regulation as a key variable that jumped out in this regard. Self-regulation is an interrelated set

on the Homefront

of skills that all people possess in varying degrees. This set of skills includes inhibitory control, attention, working memory, emotion regulation, and the ability to be flexible in one's thinking. We all use self-regulation in everyday life to accomplish goals and solve problems. Among the low-income children I've studied, good self-regulation seems to contribute to doing well in school, getting along with others, having good mental health and behavior, and dealing more adaptively with stress. I believe good self-regulation helps a child solve solvable problems and react more constructively to losses or events they cannot control. Unfortunately, poverty presents a lot of opportunity for children to have to deal with losses and events outside their control.

UNCENSORED: What is the most pronounced aspect of the psychological impact of homelessness on children?

LARSON: "Cling to what you have right now because you never know when you're going to lose it." That's the lesson that homelessness can teach children. We see many children demonstrate this by making quick attachments to adults they just met, hungry for love and reassurance wherever they find it. Then there are the children who do not want to be separated from their parents during this time of uncertainty, because they don't know when they will see them again.

Young children need consistency, routine, and predictability, all of which are lacking when you are living in transition. Part of being a child is to find comfort in the familiar, which may include certain objects like toys. When those playthings are gone, you want to hold on tight to anything you can get. This might mean that sharing toys is extra difficult, that you want an extra snack because you don't know when you might eat again, or that you want to take back extra food to share with your family. The concept of what belongs to you—whether it's your doll, your room, your home, your street, your food—is important and must be factored in when working with this population.

There is a continuum of awareness depending on a child's age and experience with homelessness. On one end of the spectrum, there are the youngest ones, who might be toddling about the shelter hallways, happy to be alive. This doesn't mean they don't have unmet needs, it just means they don't know they are homeless. At the opposite end are the teens, who are acutely aware. You will see them in the shadows of the shelter, not wanting their friends to know where they live, feeling the shame of not having the clothes, school supplies, or teenage gadgets that help them feel a sense of normalcy.

We also see the effects of chronic trauma on many children who come into the shelter system. Their instinct to fight, flee, or freeze is more easily triggered, and it can take a child time to feel safe in a new environment. This can cause behavioral

difficulties or make it difficult to get along with peers. All of these factors can add up to a challenging learning landscape for children who experience homelessness.

UNCENSORED: How does that psychological impact tend to play out over the children's lives? What tendencies mark homeless children when they become adults?

LARSON: Impacts will vary widely. Many of the factors that lead to family homelessness, like domestic violence, parental incarceration, physical and mental health problems, eviction, job loss, and insufficient income add to the experience that becomes part of the fabric of one's childhood. Some children grow up feeling let down by family members who they feel didn't help them enough during their time of need; others feel that the world is full of caring people ready to help. Some can grow up to become more sensitive to others, by not judging those they encounter who went through something they know about all too well. Others develop a tough-love philosophy, expecting the poor to make it with little help, feeling that they themselves have had to survive on their own.

Children who experience homelessness can learn to take on adult worries and responsibilities early, even when their parents are doing everything they can to support the family. Some children, later in life, feel extra motivated to work overtime to prevent homelessness from striking them, while many others find themselves confined to the only coping skills they know, which may keep them stuck in the cycle of poverty.

UNCENSORED: What would you say is the most sad, surprising, or counterintuitive fact about child homelessness?

LARSON: The numbers of the hidden homeless are larger than any count could possibly capture, since most families whom we would consider homeless live doubled-up with family and friends. Many children do not see themselves as homeless, and many parents work hard to shield their children from that label.

Child homelessness for some may look like an entire childhood spent in transition, with dozens of unstable living situations along the way. Many children grow up knowing only housing instability. A shelter might be the most stable and predictable place a child has lived for a while.

People also forget that domestic violence is a significant reason many families become homeless. In some of these cases, as family income suddenly plummets, children not only lose a parent and home, but also move away from school, friends, and extracurricular activities that may have become unaffordable. Losing everything all at once can be a different experience from chronic poverty, with both having a significant impact on childhood memories and their sense of safety and stability.

UNCENSORED: What kinds of therapeutic activities—for example, art, music, or yoga—have you found to be helpful for homeless children, and why?

LARSON: Studies have found that chronic stress caused by growing up in poverty can physiologically impact children's brains dramatically. It impairs children's working memory, diminishing their ability to develop language, reading, and problem-solving skills, and impairing their ability to learn in school. However, we also know that the antidote to elevated cortisol levels caused by chronic stress is serotonin, which is produced through physical exercise, learning new skills and positive experiences. Opportunities to engage in activities that promote feelings of mastery, safety, relaxation, and joy are what our program model is all about.

We find that the children in our program respond well to opportunities to create art—for example, designing their ideal home out of a milk carton, or learning from a visiting artist how to make fine jewelry that they can give to their moms. Children love trying something new, like yoga, that they otherwise would not be exposed to, and tasting new healthy snacks they might not have access to otherwise. Going outside is a popular activity, as all children seem to be pulled to the natural world; so is moving their bodies through dance, ball games, playground climbs, jump rope, or imaginative play. Parents don't always have the time, energy, or resources to safely supervise outdoor play, and children in shelters often miss out. All children need to express themselves, and providing children who are homeless with a variety of vehicles to do so is healing in and of itself.

UNCENSORED: What public or private programs aimed at helping homeless children would you like to see expanded or emulated?

LARSON: Public and private programs designed to prevent homelessness in the first place are among the most cost-effective ways of preventing families from entering the homeless system and keeping children from facing unnecessary trauma. Literally, a couple of thousand dollars can prevent the tens of thousands of dollars it costs to shelter a family for a year. The average Emergency Rental Assistance payment in D.C. is just \$2,023, yet city budgets keep cutting it, and the number of homeless families continues to grow.

Similarly, the Housing First model needs more investments, as does the Housing Production Trust Fund and the federal Housing Choice Voucher system. There are a lot of proven models all across the continuum that are just underfunded as the need grows all across this country. At the same time, we must continue to invest in shelter programs for families who need a place to stay right now. Fortifying those shelters with support services is an absolute necessity. ■