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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### INTERVENING WITH SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN FACING HOMELESSNESS AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE

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#### ABSTRACT

Researchers analyzed previous and current practices with regard to homelessness, school-aged children, substance abuse, and interventions. The data revealed much of the current practices to be lacking in specific needs of the currently homeless or the individuals in danger of becoming homeless. Researching a cross section of the four categories of homelessness, substance abuse, school-aged children and interventions showed enough data to support the researchers' hypothesis: social work interventions improve the performance of school-aged children facing homelessness and substance abuse. Research has established that having good, trustworthy relationships within the school system, engagement in structured crisis based shelters and positive family support, encouragement, and empowerment are proven to be effective interventions for school-aged youth faced with homelessness.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Intervening with School-Age Children Facing Homelessness and Substance Abuse

According to Thomas E. Gould and Arthur R. Williams (2010), "More than 14 percent of the population of the United States is estimated to have experienced homelessness during their lives, either by way of a stay in a homeless shelter, living on the street, or living in over-crowded and doubled up conditions" (p. 171). The definition of who should be counted as homeless has evolved over time and can be considerably problematic among different populations (Gould, 2010, p. 171). The current meaning of *homelessness* has been constructed around the concept of a person ultimately without shelter; this would include persons living on the streets, in abandoned buildings, cars, shelters, and other places not meant for human habitation (Gould, 2010, p. 173). Individuals and families tend to experience homelessness in three different ways: people who are chronically homeless that will spend a substantial portion of their lives in unstable shelter arrangements, people who experience homelessness episodically who may in time find a safe haven or join the chronically homeless population, and

lastly, people who experience homelessness briefly prior to transitioning to a more stable living arrangement (Gould, 2010, p. 174). Homelessness is an extreme condition of poverty that has been a long-standing concern of the social work profession and all though single men make up the majority of the population; growing numbers of single mothers, families, children, and youth are experiencing homelessness (Jozefowicz-Simheni, 2006, p. 37).

"Culhane's New York City data, (as cited in Gould, 2010) found that the largest age cohort annually experiencing homelessness is children younger than 9 years of age" (p. 171). School-aged children and their families become homeless for a number of reasons such as: poverty, lack of affordable housing, eviction, personal or relationship factors, substance abuse, mental health difficulties, abuse and neglect, and family conflict and violence also contribute to why children and youth may find themselves without a place to stay (Jozefowicz-Simheni, 2006, p. 38). Jozefowicz-Simheni (2006) also explained how the struggles that homeless children and youth may face can be categorized into five different areas: (a) physical conditions and health problems that result from environmental factors such as poor nutrition, (b) unacceptable behaviors resulting from coping and survival strategies, (c) inadequate social skills and insecurities stemming from frequent moves and self-consciousness about being homeless

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and lacking resources, (c) psychological trauma resulting from multiple stressors that contributes to negative mental health, and (d) developmental delays due to a lack of stimulating environmental conditions (p. 38).

As a response to the diverse needs of this population, numerous social services and educational policies have been implemented and developed resources to assist with poor academic achievement, child development, as well as poverty (Jozefowicz-Simheni, 2006, p. 39). One piece of legislation, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistant Act has been acclaimed as the landmark law that explicitly addresses the needs and concerns of homeless school-aged children and their families (Jozefowicz-Simheni, 2006, p. 39). According to the McKinney-Vento Act, homeless children and youth are defined by the following:

(A) means individuals who lack a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence.; and (B) includes. (i) children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due the lack of alternative accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement; (ii) children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings; (iii) children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus train stations, or similar settings; and (iv) migratory children who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii). (Aviles de Bradley, 2011).

Household members who willingly leave their homes to escape domestic violence are viewed as homeless and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) allows funds allocated under the McKinney/Vento Act to be utilized for shelter services (Gould, 2010, p. 174). These services are typically provided for individuals that are considered “at-risk” youth that finds themselves facing homelessness. One national survey found that 7.6 percent of adolescents 12 to 17 years of age have spent at least one night in an emergency shelter, public place, with a stranger, or abandoned building (Thompson, 2010, p. 194). Data shows that there are 500,000 to 2 million runaway/homeless youth in the United States (Thompson, 2010, p. 194).

Sanna J. Thompson, et al. break youth homelessness into three categories: runaways, throwaways, and doubly homeless (2010, p. 194). Youth that leave their home without parental consent and reside on the streets for prolonged periods of time are termed *runaway homeless* and may perceive themselves as active agents choosing to leave undesirable or abusive living situations and seek a more adventuresome social situation (Thompson, 2010, p. 194). For some youth, running away is not an option and they are forced out of their homes or abandoned by their parents, and these youth are considered *throwaway youth* and are more likely to experience suicide attempts, drug use, and familial drug use (Thompson, 2010, p.

194). The final category is *doubly homeless* and this term identifies the homeless youth that have been removed from their homes by state authorities and then run away from their placements (Thompson, 2010, p. 194). Most accounts of this population report running away from abusive situations or placements where the youth did not feel a sense of belonging or comfort (Thompson, 2010, p. 194).

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Researchers conducted an online search based on keywords and reviewed results produced. Through completion of literature reviews, information was placed into a matrix. Researchers additionally grouped articles into the following categories: Homeless School-Aged Children, Intervening with Homelessness, and Substance Abusing Homeless. It is important to note that when research was sampled, not all of the participants were youths. Some of the participants across the studies were adults. This difference was noted but overall, not a factor that would make samples unreliable.

### Literature Review

#### Homeless School-Aged Children

Young people who experience homelessness tend to come from disadvantaged class backgrounds, although this is not true of all homeless youth, the experience of homelessness usually follows a breakdown in family relations which may involve physical, emotional or sexual abuse (Farrugia, p. 762). The No Child Left Behind Act (as cited in Aviles de Bradley, 2011) defines unaccompanied homeless youth as “a youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian” (p. 156). This study further goes to reference the various categories of homeless youth as any, but not limited to, the following: “runaways (youth who have left home voluntarily), throwaways or pushouts (youth told to leave home), street youth (youth living on the street), and systems youth (wards of the state)” (Aviles de Bradley, p. 156).

Homeless youth are particularly vulnerable and often deal with difficult family situations before leaving home and then must cope with the stress of living on the streets (Thompson, 2010, p. 195). Distinguishing between cause and consequences of youth homelessness is often difficult because they tend to intersect (Thompson, 2010, p. 195). Substance abuse is a common factor, whether as a cause of consequence of youth homelessness (Keys, 2006, p. 65). For some youth, prior to leaving their home they used substances to cope with family stressors, substance use results in increased conflict within the family and ultimate separation, and for others use may occur as a response to living on the streets (Thompson, 2010, p. 198-199). Parental or familial substance abuse also contributes to youth homelessness (Thompson, 2010, p. 198-199). Homeless youth are reported to experience twice as much drug use than housed adolescents and the more times a youth runs away from home, the more likely they are to experience higher levels of substance use (Thompson, 2010, p. 197). Thompson states that, “93 percent of homeless youth have tried at least one illegal drug” (2010, p. 197).

**Figure 1. Research Question, Purpose, and Problem**

Research Question: How effective are social work interventions in preventing homelessness and substance abuse in children?
Purpose: Find effective social work interventions that can prevent homelessness and substance abuse in children
Problem: Homelessness and substance abuse in school-aged children.

**Figure 2. Cochrane Systematic Review****Cochrane Collaboration Method**

- (1) Defining the review questions and developing criteria for including studies
- (2) Searching for studies
- (3) Selecting articles and collecting data
- (4) Critiquing articles for relevance to the issue
- (5) Sorting the data in a matrix
- (6) Analyzing data
- (7) Presenting results and "summary of findings" tables
- (8) Interpreting results and drawing conclusions

**Figure 3. Synthesis of Keywords**

Years	Keywords	Number of Articles
1966-2013	Homelessness	N= 2,528
1966-2013	Homelessness + Children	N= 522
1966-2013	Homelessness + Substance Abuse	N= 340
1966-2013	Homelessness + Children + Interventions	N= 91
1966-2013	Homelessness + Substance Abuse + Interventions	N= 91
1966-2013	Homelessness + Substance Abuse + Children	N= 72
1966-2013	Homelessness + Substance Abuse + Children + Interventions	N= 27

**Figure 4. Synthesis of journal articles for keywords homelessness + substance abuse + interventions (N=91)**

Total articles for keywords Homelessness + Substance Abuse + Interventions	N=91
Omit Magazines	N=78
Omit Articles before 2000	N= 64
Omit Articles that do not match keywords	N= 40
Total of number of articles used for searching database with keywords	N= 40

**Figure 5. Research Question**

Research Question
How effective are social work interventions in preventing homelessness and substance abuse in children?
Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni, D. M., & Israel, N. (2006). Services to Homeless Students and Families: The McKinney-Vento Act and Its Implications for School Social Work Practice. <i>Children &amp; Schools</i> , 28(1), 37-44.
Thompson, S. J., Bender, K., Windsor, L., Cook, M. S., & Williams, T. (2010). Homeless youth: Characteristics, contributing factors, and service options. <i>Journal Of Human Behavior In The Social Environment</i> , 20(2), 193-217.

**Figure 6. Synthesis of key articles**

Author/Date	Type of Study	Purpose	General Comments	Strengths and Limitations (can talk about your sample size)
Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni, D. M., & Israel, N. (2006)	Literature Review	To discuss the McKinney-Vento Act	Summarizes key aspects of the McKinney-Vento Act, outlines how school social workers can become more involved in the implementation, and offers suggestions for expansion of services and further evaluation of service provision effectiveness.	Information used in articles used studies with small sample sizes.
Aviles de Bradley, A.M. (2011)	Qualitative	To discuss school interventions and the alternatives to the McKinney-Vento Act	The purpose of this article is two-fold: (a) to obtain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of what it means to be "homeless" for youth, and (b) to better understand the manner in which schools respond to the needs of unaccompanied homeless youth.	Small sample size
Xiang, X. (2013)	Literature Review	To use substance abuse data	Xiang talks about many great topics that are utilized in the paper.	The longitudinal study showed many aspects of homeless youth abusing substances that were not visited with other researchers.
Thompson, S.J., Bender, K., Windsor, L, Cook, M.S., & Williams, T. (2010)	Literature Review	Background for youth homelessness and service options.	Overall information regarding youth homelessness and the struggles they face and provided evidence of service options.	This qualitative study provided insight to the characteristics, contributing factors, including substance abuse and the service options that are available to this population.

Homeless children and youth are likely undercounted and under-identified due to inaccessible shelters and programs, being turned away from shelters, or they avoid shelters and other services due to the stigma attached to them (Jozefowicz-Simbeni, 2006, p. 38). However, this study will report on the findings of beneficial interventions, service options, barriers and issues that homeless youth face. The researchers have examined and discovered that social work interventions improve the performance, physically and psychologically, of school-aged children facing homelessness and substance abuse. Research found in this study primarily focuses on articles that pertain to homeless school-aged children and youth, intervening with homelessness, and substance abusing homeless.

### **Intervening with Homelessness**

Social workers can play a major role with intervening with homeless children and their families. Through various interventions, programs, and policies, social workers can use these tools to help these people live improved and successful lives. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act became a part of the No Left Behind Act of 2001. This act as a whole secures "the rights of homeless students . . . to ensure that they receive the same quality and appropriate public school education that non-homeless students receive by addressing some of the barriers homeless children and adolescents face when enrolling and succeeding in school" (Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni, D. M., & Israel, N., 2006, p. 39). This act also requires state coordinators to promote educational access for homeless students. Homeless students are defined as school-aged children who do not have "a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence" (Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni, 2006, p. 39). Many of these children find themselves in any of the following situations: (a) waiting for a foster care placement, (b) being abandoned in a hospital □ staying in a shelter, abandoned building, or motel; (c) staying at a campground or inadequate trailer park, (d) □ living out of a car or in a bus or train station, (e) staying with friends or relatives as a result of no housing, (f) staying in any public or private space not designed for or used as a regular sleeping place for human beings (Hernandez, 2006, p. 39). The McKinney-Vento Act also increased the scope of policies and potential services to assist homeless students in gaining access to and succeeding in their education. Its "One Child, One School, One Year" policy describes the requirements regarding school enrollment and transportation, and allows immediate enrollment in school without proof of residence, school records, or immunization records. It also gives the family a choice of what school their child attends whether its school attended before loss of housing, the last school enrolled, or school affiliated with present living arrangement (Hernandez, 2006, p. 39). In addition, the Act indicates that services should be provided in a way that allows homeless children to remain in the mainstream setting with their peers to avoid being ostracized, segregated, and harassed in their schools. As a result of this act, many school social workers are required to take on the role as a homeless liaison for each school district to ensure a smooth transition for all homeless students into school programs. They are also responsible for educating school facility and parents regarding their rights under the McKinney-Vento Act. As

advocates for the homeless children and their families, the social workers attain resources that connect them with community organizations and agencies.

Research has established that having good, trustworthy relationships within the school system, engagement in structured crisis based shelters and positive family support, encouragement, and empowerment are proven to be effective interventions for school-aged youth faced with homelessness. "While McKinney-Vento policy addresses structural barriers to educational success, such as access to school and housing, legislation cannot fill the emotional chasm youth experience when they lack adult guidance and support" (Aviles de Bradley, p159). A discussion of the interviews conducted in "Unaccompanied Homeless Youth: Intersections of Homelessness, School Experiences and Educational Policy," bring to surface the importance of supportive relationships from adult figures and more so from those in the school setting, "wishing to repair their fractured familial relationships" (p169). Flores-Gonzalez's research, (as cited in Aviles de Bradley, 2011), "Recognizes that school plays a key role in providing or not providing opportunities for kids to engage in socially appropriate roles by giving them social support, prestige and rewards, fostering engagement in school through numerous and meaningful relationships," and once such support is provided, "these students can take on a school kid identity" (p. 169). "Respondents who were involved in school activities or had a teacher they felt cared were more likely to regularly attend school, and put more effort into their schoolwork. On the contrary students who lacked these interactions/relationships with adults in the school building resulted in chronic absenteeism, or a complete departure from school. These dynamics illustrate the critical role schools can play in supporting students" (p. 170).

In communities across the nation, homeless shelters have been established to serve the critical need of homeless populations. For youth in particular, "community-based youth emergency shelters were developed as a primary method of intervention. These facilities are designed to provide a variety of short-term crisis and custodial services with a focus on family reunification" (Nebbit, House, Thompson & Pollio, p. 546). Through a study conducted of sheltered youth in the Kansas and Missouri areas, youth were exposed to structured tasks, received freedoms they considered to not have at home, established good relationships with shelter support staff and were later reunified with their families as their problematic behaviors decreased. Its results were clear in that family relationships and dynamics must be included in the treatment and follow-up process. Results suggested that family re-engagement with youth prior to discharge and inclusion of their families in the youths treatment were critical to overall success (p. 554).

According to Timothy L. Davey (2004), homelessness among families with children continues to be the fastest growing segment of the homeless population and continues to increase nationally (p. 326). As a response to this need, Davey conducted an experience using Multiple-family groups (MFGs) that has been proven as a responsive intervention modality for low-income, ethnic minority children and families (2004, p.

326). MFGs are problem focused and the family systems perspective is the basic unit of analysis (Davey, 2004, p. 326). The approach enables families to practice and develop parenting skills, respectful communication, improving decision-making responsibilities, and managing their stress (p. 326). Through having parents and their children meet together and share information addressing common concerns and develop support networks can be effective in provide family mental health services (p. 326-327). For this particular study, initially it was designed to conduct weekly family group meetings for selected homeless families (p. 327). However, attrition was significant and occurred, so in order to address this issue, the design was adjusted to better meet the needs of participants and changed to a weekend retreat, lasting Friday evening to all day Saturday (p. 327). The weekend retreat was structured around four main components: (1) building trust, (2) effective communication, (3) managing stress, and (4) decision-making responsibilities (p. 327). Some activities consisted of questionnaires, providing hypothetical situations and participants provided resolution, and at different times activities would involve the family as a group or broken up between parents and children. At the end of the retreat, participants were asked to complete a brief evaluation and overall, both parents and children expressed satisfaction with the retreat (p. 328). Participants reported effective in families feeling more positive about themselves, ability to recognize and cope with stress, and the children seemed to especially enjoy being involved in group activities and wanted to repeat the experience (p. 328). Through this study, the MFG appears to provide necessary conditions for which social support can be built and reduces feelings of isolation, anxiety, and helplessness (p. 328).

### Substance Abusing Homeless

After an extensive review of much of the available research, it is obvious that homelessness and risky behavior can go hand in hand. A commonality found in homeless people's behavior was their use and abuse of alcohol and drugs. The choice to abuse substances starts them on a downward spiral that will spin out of their control unless they receive assistance. Studying different research and perspectives, the researchers have found some interesting facts and some specific changes that should be made to social work practices to improve the situation affecting the lives of homeless people. Much of the research targeted homeless youth. "Homeless youth are disproportionately more likely than their housed peers to use alcohol and other drugs, and experience the negative health and social consequences of these risky behaviors. Increasing effectiveness of substance use prevention programs for this population is important to health workers, researchers and policy makers. However, homeless youth are often disconnected from typical locations of substance use prevention programs: school and family" (Green, 2013, p. 108).

Research reflected clearly outlines that homelessness was not the only problem facing the participants of a majority of the targeted research. Gender identity, alcohol and drug abuse, lack of family supports, lack of moral reasoning, traveling to different areas, and violence are all factors that affect the mental health of the participants of the various studies. "Early

childhood maltreatment can create substantial developmental delays that may interfere with moral reasoning" (p. 41). "Some researchers have assumed that particular populations, such as substance abusing women, lack spirituality because of their apparent inability to make healthy decisions and their tendency to have engaged in deviant behavior" (p.43). The researchers were unable to correlate the spirituality to substance abuse in homelessness but "most researchers conclude that 25 to 30 percent of the adult homeless population suffers from some substance use problem" (Dietz, 2010, p. 2). "In the US, an estimated 125,000 homeless teenagers identify themselves as gay or lesbian, and half of them say they were thrown out of their homes" (van Wormer, 2003, 414).

There are factors that research has stated to increase the likelihood of homeless people becoming involved with alcohol and drugs. Use may occur as a response to living on the streets and peers play an important role in homeless adolescents' drug use (Thompson, 2010, p. 199). Other homeless youth become the source of information and support, however they do not encourage positive social behaviors and are similarly troubled and substance abusing (p. 199). Research indicates that street friends provide a learning environment for initiating drug use and often reinforce drug-related choices, attitudes, and behaviors (p. 199). Furthermore, "travelers are a migratory subgroup of homeless youth who may be especially prone to engaging in risky behavior. Travelers also had more recent sex partners and were more likely to report having casual or need-based sexual partners and combining sex with substance use" (Martino, 2011, p. 1634). "In a longitudinal study of comorbidities of substance use among homeless youth in eight cities, Johnson, Whitbeck, and Hoyt found that 93% of the youth in their sample who met substance abuse criteria also reported one other mental disorder, and half of their sample reported two or more mental disorders" (Xiang, 2012, p. 34). "These findings indicate a need for prevention programs targeting household youth who are at high risk of becoming homeless" (p. 41).

### Conclusion

Research has established that having good, trustworthy relationships within the school system, engagement in structured crisis based shelters and positive family support, encouragement, and empowerment are proven to be effective interventions for school-aged youth faced with homelessness. Adding a more narrow focus to already established relationships to troubled, homeless youths would be the best recipe for success. "To effectively address the high prevalence of substance use among homeless youth, an evidence-based approach is required to identify interventions that result in demonstrable health benefits for substance abusing homeless youth" (Xiang, 2012, p. 34). "The harm reduction approach is relevant for gay and lesbian youth, who are the same as all young people when it comes to many of the risks related to early and secretive sexual activity, accompanied, as it so often is, by alcohol and other drug use" (van Wormer, 2003, p. 409). Researchers found that a crisis-based solution was not as effective as prevention-based education with regard to assisting with the global problem of homelessness.

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