DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 325 589 UD 027 735

AUTHOR Rafferty, Yvonne; Rollins, Norma
TITLE Homeless Children: Educational Challenges for the 1990s.
INSTITUTION Advocates for Children of New York, Inc., Long Island City.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (98th, Boston, MA, August 11, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Access to Education; *Children; Compliance (Legal); *Disadvantaged Youth; Elementary Secondary Education; Federal Aid; *Federal Regulation; Federal State Relationship; Government Role; *High Risk Students; *Homeless People; Housing Needs
IDENTIFIERS Stewart B McKinney Homeless Assistance Act 1987

ABSTRACT

This paper identifies the educational problems confronting homeless children, describes the Federal response to these problems, and discusses challenges for the 1990s. Although homeless children want to go to school more often than their permanently housed peers, they typically confront significant obstacles to access because of local enrollment requirements, including problems involving residency, guardianship, special education, school records, and transportation. Beyond access, the most serious educational problems for homeless children are poor school attendance and poor academic performance. The principle Federal response has been the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, 1987, which aimed to facilitate integrating homeless children into existing public school systems and programs. Title VII, Subtitle B of the McKinney Act guarantees homeless children access to public education and provides Federal funding to states to implement this policy. Challenges that remain unmet relative to McKinney Act homeless education measures include the following: (1) noncompliance at both state and Federal levels, arising from the Act's failure to provide a statutory guarantee for a free and appropriate education for homeless children; (2) failure to ensure that homeless children receive adequate educational services once they are enrolled in school; and (3) inadequate funding levels for educational services. A list of 21 references is appended. (AF)

ADVOCATES FOR CHILDREN
of New York, Inc.
24-16 Bridge Plaza South
Long Island City, N.Y. 11101
(718) 729-8866

Norma Rollins
Executive Director



# HOMELESS CHILDREN: EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES FOR THE 1990'S

Yvonne Rafferty, Ph.D.
Director of Research
Advocates for Children of New York
24-16 Bridge Plaza South
Long Island City, New York 11101

Norma Rollins
Executive Director
Advocates for Children of New York
24-16 Bridge Plaza South
Long Island City, New York 11101

Paper presented at the 98th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Boston, Mass, August 11, 1990.

## INTRODUCTION

The 1949 Housing Act established a national goal of affordable, decent, safe, and sanitary housing for every American family. This goal remained unmet through the 1980's. Instead, that decade brought an unprecedented rise in the number of homeless families with children - "a decade of national shame" according to the National Coalition for the Homeless (1989). Families with children make up the fastest growing segment of the homeless population and by some estimates, account for over 30% of homeless persons in the United States (National Coalition for the Homeless, 1989; U.S. Conference of Mayors, 1989). The National Coalition for the Homeless (1987) estimates that there are as many as 750,000 homeless children nationwide.

The rise in family homelessness is generally attributed to macro social and economic factors (McChesney, in press). Some have lost their permanent housing as a result of fires or vacate orders placed because of dangerous housing conditions. Some are families who have lost their jobs, had their public assistance benefits erroneously terminated, or found their shelter allowance inadequate to pay skyrocketing rents. Others have lost their permanent housing because, without the assistance of counsel, they were improperly evicted. Some had been living in overcrowded and unhealthy conditions, or doubled-up with relatives or friends. Many of the women and their children are victims of domestic violence.

Research on the impact of homelessness on children indicates

that homeless children confront serious threats to their ability to succeed and their future well-being. Of particular concern are health problems; hunger and poor nutrition; developmental delays; increased frequency of anxiety, depression, and behavioral problems; and educational underachievement (Rafferty & Rollins, 1989). In this paper, we will identify the educational problems confronting homeless children, describe the Federal response to address these problems, and discuss some challenges for the 1990's.

## EDUCATIONAL PROBLEMS CONFRONTING HOMELESS CHILDREN

School is especially important for homeless children because of the very tumultuous nature of their existence, and the potential of the educational system to offer the stability, skills, and supports they so desperately need. School, in fact, may be the only source of stability in the life of a homeless child (National Coalition for the Homeless, 1987).

Although homeless children want to go to school more often than their permanently housed peers (Horowitz, Springer, & Kose, 1988), they typically confront greater obstacles in their attempts to gain access to the nation's public schools because of local enrollment requirements (National Coalition for the Homeless, 1987). Particularly detrimental are residency requirements; guardianship requirements; special education requirements; inability to obtain school records; and transportation problems (National Coalition for the Homeless, 1987; Rafferty & Rollins, 1989). However, the educational problems confronting homeless children do not end even when access is ultimately obtained. Of

particular concern are poorer school attendance and academic performance.

School Attendance. U. S. government estimates of the number of homeless school age children who do not attend school regularly range from 15% (General Accounting Office, 1989) to 30% (U. S. Department of Education, 1989). In contrast, the National Coalition for the Homeless (1987), estimate that 57% of homeless school age children do not attend school regularly.

Two recent studies have evaluated the school attendance of homeless children. Wood, Hayashi, Schlossman, and Valdez's (1989) sample of 78 homeless school age children in Los Angeles missed more days in the prior three months than a comparison group of 90 poor housed children (8-9 vs. 5-6). Homeless students were also more likely to have missed more than one week of school (42% vs. 22%). For housed children, the primary reason for absence was illness; for homeless children, it was family transience. Rafferty and Rollins (1989) compared the school attendance of 6,142 homeless students in New York City with overall citywide attendance rates. Homeless high school students had the poorest rate of attendance (51% vs. 84% citywide), followed by junior high school students (64% vs. 86%) and children in elementary schools (74% vs. 89%).

Academic Performance. Homeless children score poorly on standardized reading and mathematics tests, and are often required to repeat a grade. Of the 3,805 homeless children in New York City in grades 3 through 9 in May of 1988, 42%, compared with 68% citywide, scored at or above grade level in reading ability. Of

the 4,203 students who took the Metropolitan Achievement test in mathematics, 28%, compared with 57% citywide, scored at or above grade level (Rafferty & Rollins, 1989).

Homeless children, when compared with their permanently housed peers, are also more likely to be behind grade level. Maza and Hall (1988) surveyed 163 families seeking assistance from Travelers Aid, and found that 30% of the children who were attending school were behind grade level. Similarly, 30% of 78 homeless school age children in Los Angeles, compared with 18% of 90 poor housed children, had repeated a grade (Wood, et al., 1989). Rafferty & Rollins (1989) found that 15% of 390 homeless children in New York City were currently repeating a grade, compared with 7% of New York City students overall.

**THE FEDERAL RESPONSE TO THE EDUCATION OF HOMELESS CHILDREN**

In July of 1987, Congress enacted the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act (Public Law 100-71), providing the nation's first legislative response to the educational needs of homeless children. Title VII, Subtitle B, Education for Homeless Children and Youth, requires states to remove the previously identified barriers to education, and to develop programs to assure that homeless children and youth have equal access to a free appropriate public education as would be available to permanently housed children in the community.

The McKinney Act did not seek to create a separate education system for homeless children. Instead, it aimed to facilitate integrating homeless children into existing public education

systems and programs. Title VII, Subtitle B implemented this goal in two ways. First, it guarantees homeless children access to public schools by establishing as federal policy that states must ensure that homeless children have the same access to "a free, appropriate public education" as children who are not homeless. Second, it provides federal funding to states to implement this policy.

Each state education department receiving federal funding is required to gather data on the number of homeless children and youth in their state, identify the problems they experience accessing educational services, and devise a state plan that guarantees every homeless child access to appropriate public education. The United States Department of Education must oversee the implementation of Subtitle VII B.

**UNMET CHALLENGES**

One major limitation of the McKinney Act is its failure to provide a statutory guarantee for a free and appropriate education for homeless children. This, in turn, has translated into non-compliance at both state and federal levels. A second major problem is its failure to ensure that homeless children receive adequate and appropriate educational services once they are enrolled in school. A third limitation is the inadequate level of funding for educational services.

Non-compliance at the State and Federal Level. Several studies have examined how adequately states have implemented the educational provisions of the McKinney Act (Bowen, Purrington, &

O'Brien, 1990; Center for Law and Education, 1990; National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 1990). Each found that states have failed to implement the McKinney Act adequately and that state plans routinely omit provisions expressly mandated by the act. For example, a 20 state survey of service providers conducted by the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty (1990) reveals that homeless children are still being denied access to education. Of the states surveyed: 60% report that residency requirements are still being imposed in a manner that excludes homeless children; 70% report difficulties in records transfer for homeless children; 40% report that guardianship requirements are being imposed in a manner that excludes homeless children; and 55% report that homeless children are being denied access to "comparable services" including school meals and special education programs.

These studies also indicate that state plans routinely omit provisions expressly mandated by the McKinney Act. For example, the McKinney Act stipulates that local education agencies shall continue the child's education in the school district of origin for the remainder of the school year, or enroll the child in the school district where the child is actually living. Such placement decisions are to be made "in the best interest of the child," and mechanisms must be implemented to resolve disputes if and when they arise. Most states have authorized education officials, rather than the child's parent, to make decisions regarding the educational placement of homeless children. Only four states specified that the parent has the primary right and responsibility

to determine their child's school placement. In addition, a number of state plans failed to include a dispute resolution process, or if they did, it failed to specify the child's placement pending the resolution of the dispute or to include specific time limits and due process protections for these processes. Finally, while most state plans recognize the right of homeless children to receive a comparable education and acknowledge the need for speedy transfer of records, few specify a plan to accomplish these goals.

In addition to non-compliance at the State level, the U. S. Department of Education (DOE) has been accused of failing to comply with its statutory duty to implement Subtitle VII B (Center for Law and Education, 1990; National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 1990). Of particular concern are unwarranted delays in implementing the educational provisions; inadequate guidance to states; insufficient monitoring of state plans and programs; and failure to provide timely and accurate reports to congress.

Failure to Ensure Adequate Services. A second major limitation of Subtitle VII B is that it addresses only those barriers that keep homeless children from accessing educational services and ignores the need to ensure that they receive adequate services once they are enrolled in school. According to the National Association of State Coordinators for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (1990):

> "Getting homeless children through schoolhouse doors is not enough.... Enrolling homeless children in school without addressing these needs may, for many homeless children and youth, represent a futile gesture. In opening the schoolhouse doors without addressing these needs, we may find that we are opening a revolving door

through which homeless children enroll, experience failure, and permanently exit" (p.8).

Given the disruptions associated with homelessness and the excessive number of school transfers, homeless children may also need remedial educational services to address academic deficits; pre school enrichment services to prevent academic failure; psychological support services to respond to emotional problems; and greater sensitivity from school personnel (cf. Eddowes & Hr-nitz, 1989; Gewirtzman & Fodor, 1987; Horowitz, Springer, & Kose, 1988; National Association of State Coordinators for Homeless Children and Youth, 1990). But rather than receive such increased services to meet their needs, homeless children are far more likely receive fewer services with the onset of homelessness. Of 97 children who were receiving remedial assistance, bilingual services, or gifted and talented programs in New York prior to becoming homeless, only 52 (54%) received them while homeless (Rafferty & Rollins, 1989).

Inadequate Funding Levels. A final limitation pertains to the level of funding appropriated for the education of homeless children and youth. Of the $355 and $358 million appropriated by Congress for implementing the McKinney act for fiscal years 1987 and 1988, only $4.6 and $4.8 million respectively (1.3%) was appropriated to implement the Subtitle VII-B Program. This amounts to less than ten dollars per year for every homeless child in America (National Association of State Coordinators for the

Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 1990).[1]

## DISCUSSION

While McKinney funds have facilitated whatever limited progress has been made in providing emergency aid to homeless families, much remains to be done (National Coalition for the Homeless, 1989a; Partnership for the Homeless, 1989; U.S. Conference of Mayors, 1988). Of particular concern is the need for permanent affordable housing. The housing needs of homeless families include options for rehousing those who are currently homeless, and strategies to prevent new homelessness (cf. National Alliance to end Homelessness, 1988). New initiatives are needed as well as greater efforts through existing programs.

While affordable permanent housing is the fundamental issue of homelessness, it is not the sole need of homeless families with children. One immediate need is for emergency transitional shelter facilities. Yet, few states provide homeless families with a legal right to emergency shelter, and where they do, it has come only as a result of advocates bringing the issue before the courts. The urgent need for increased Federal involvement in this area is easily illustrated: 78% of 27 cities recently surveyed indicate that they turn away homeless families because of a lack of

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[1] The McKinney Act authorized additional funding for fiscal years 1987-1988 and 1988-1989 for exceptional programs that effectively address the needs of homeless students -- "relating to exemplary grants and dissemination of information activities." However, it was not until federal fiscal year 1990 that Congress appropriated funds ($2.3 million) for this part of the Act.

resources; 62% of cities report being unable to keep homeless families intact while receiving emergency shelter, requiring families to break themselves up or give their children up to foster care in order to be accommodated; and families are often only able to avail of shelter during night time hours -- 50% of the cities surveyed ask families to leave shelters during the day (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 1989).

Homeless families and children need adequate services, including food, health care, mental health care, early intervention programs to prevent the onset of developmental delays, and adequate educational services. An entire generation of homeless children face truly unacceptable risks that jeopardize the future potential of each child. In the long run, the social costs of producing a lost generation of children -- which will include increased costs for criminal and juvenile justice, medical care, and special education programs -- are likely to substantially exceed the costs of providing sufficient amounts of permanent housing to end the crisis of homelessness. However, while the societal costs of supporting underemployed, indigent young adults who were once homeless will be counted in the billions, the human costs will be much more tragic. Our cities and our nation must develop an appropriate and effective response.

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