

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 387 540

UD 029 573

TITLE Homelessness: The Foster Care Connection.  
 INSTITUTION Institute for Children and Poverty, New York, NY.  
 REPORT NO ICP-R-4  
 PUB DATE Aug 93  
 NOTE 9p.; ICP report No. 1 is unnumbered; no. 2 is designated "Vol 1, iss. 2"; no. 3 is "vol. 1, iss. 3"; no. 4 is "vol. 2., iss. 1"; no. 5 is "ICP Report 5." ICP is a project of Homes for the Homeless. Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)  
 PUB TYPE  
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
 DESCRIPTORS At Risk Persons; Child Abuse; Child Neglect; \*Children; Elementary Secondary Education; Family Problems; \*Foster Care; \*Homeless People; \*Housing Needs; Low Income Groups; Models; \*Parent Background; Poverty; Prevention; Substance Abuse  
 IDENTIFIERS \*Crisis Child Care; \*Family Preservation Services; New York (New York)

ABSTRACT

Roughly 600,000 families are homeless today in America, while over 2.7 million children are in foster care or out-of-home placements. Few policymakers have examined these issues together, or understood that they are interrelated and must be addressed jointly to break the cycle of family disintegration, violence, and poverty. A recent survey by the Institute for Children and Poverty suggests that of the entire homeless population about 2,000 families in New York City may have children at risk of abuse or neglect, and over 1,200 are likely already to have children in foster care. It is families where the heads of households grew up in foster care who are at greatest risk of dissolution. The Prospect Family Crisis Nursery is an example of a family preservation program designed to meet the needs of these at-risk families. Parents may leave their children for up to 72 hours per visit up to 30 days per year without legal separation from them. The child is cared for safely at the crisis nursery while the parent can address immediate problems. The Together in Emotional Strength (TIES) program is another family preservation initiative of family services targeting substance abuse in particular. Prevention models like these offer possible solutions by regarding homelessness as more than simply a housing issue. One figure, one table, and one graph present information on homeless families. (Contains 2 references.) (SLD)

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ED 387 540

# HOMELESSNESS: THE FOSTER CARE CONNECTION

Vol. 2, Issue 1

August 1993

## What Does Homelessness Have To Do With Foster Care?

Today roughly 600,000 families are homeless in America while over 2.7 million children are in foster care or other out-of-home placements to safeguard them from abuse or neglect. However, few policymakers have examined these issues together or understood that they are interrelated. Homelessness and foster care placement must be jointly addressed if we are to break a cycle of family disintegration, violence and poverty.

An ongoing study by Homes for the Homeless' Institute for Children and Poverty (ICP) has noted that foster care and the elements of abuse and neglect play prominent roles in understanding certain aspects of homelessness. Specifically, a recent survey of nearly 400 homeless parents in New York City revealed that:

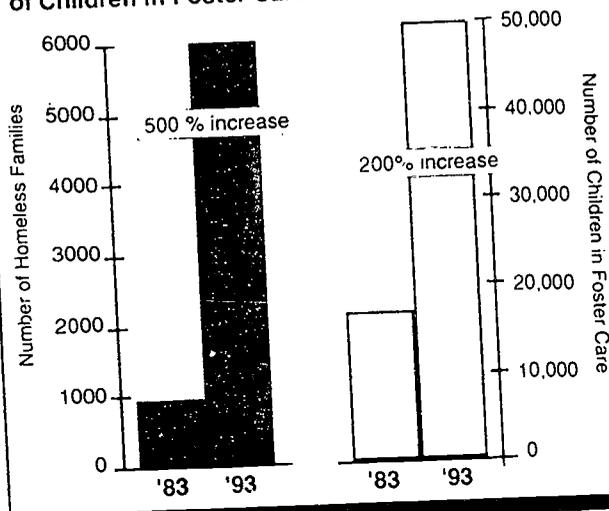
- 20% lived in foster care as children;
- 30% experienced sexual or physical abuse as children;
- 20% have one or more children in foster care;
- 35% have an open case for child abuse or neglect with the Child Welfare Administration.

Even more alarming, this snapshot suggests that of the entire homeless family population in New York City, roughly 2,000 families may have children who are at risk of abuse or neglect and over 1,200 are likely to already have children in the foster care system.

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*The average age of a homeless child is six; if his or her parent was in foster care as a child, chances are one in four that he or she will enter the foster care system before age eighteen.*

The Increase in Homeless Families and the Number of Children in Foster Care in NYC - 1983 vs. 1993



Ten years ago approximately 940 families lived in New York City's emergency shelter system; today there are 6,000--over five times as many. Correspondingly, a decade ago 17,000 children were in foster care; today there are 50,000--nearly three times as many.

## Growing Up In Foster Care: A Glimpse at Today's Homeless Parents

While the characteristics of homeless families are those of severe poverty, it is the families whose heads of household grew up in foster care who are at the greatest risk of dissolution. Such families are headed by *single mothers who became parents, homeless, and dependent on public assistance at a younger age than the typical homeless head of household*. Half of these parents *have been through the shelter system at least twice and have less work experience than the average homeless head*

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of household. Furthermore, when compared to the overall homeless population, these parents are *30 percent more likely to have a history of substance abuse, 50 percent more likely to have a history of domestic violence, and more than twice as likely to have a history of mental illness.*

Parents with childhood foster care histories also *have more children and nearly twice as many of these parents already have at least one of their children in foster care* when compared to the overall homeless population. Moreover, almost *75 percent of these parents have an open case with the Child Welfare Administration in New York City.* The probability is much higher that their families will continue in this cycle of foster care and homelessness (See Table 1).

Profiles of these families suggest the need for early intervention. Programs which prevent abuse, neglect and foster care placement while helping families stay together and live independently must be a priority if we are to prevent these predictable outcomes.

**Table 1: Profile of Homeless Parents with a History of Foster Care vs. Parents without a History**

Characteristics (N=398)	History of Foster Care* (N=81)	No History (N=317)
<b>Average Age of Parent</b>	22	25
Age Had First Child	18	20
<b>Children</b>		
Average Number of Children	3	2
Pregnant/Recently Gave Birth	60%	47%
Have Children in Foster Care	27%	15%
Have Active Case with CWA**	73%	29%
<b>Social Welfare Indicators</b>		
Substance Abuse History	79%	60%
Domestic Violence History	60%	41%
Mental Illness History	18%	8%
<b>Housing History</b>		
Previously Homeless	49%	19%
<b>Employment/Welfare History</b>		
Have 6 Mos. Work Experience	18%	45%
Age Began Receiving AFDC	18	21
No. of Yrs. Receiving AFDC	4	2.5

\* Homeless parent lived in a foster home as a child

\*\* NYC Child Welfare Administration

## Family Preservation Programs: Answering The Urgent Call

The foster care system cannot begin to provide the necessary nurturing stability of a healthy, functioning family. In an attempt to keep victimized families intact, particularly during periods of stress, Homes for the Homeless (HFH) has piloted two family preservation and foster care prevention programs. The Prospect Family Crisis Nursery provides a safe environment for children at risk of abuse or neglect and support services for their families. The Together in Emotional Strength (TIES) program helps substance-abusing parents eliminate their abusive behavior and learn to live independently. These two programs work in tandem to prevent the abuse and neglect of children while offering supportive and educational services to their parents; the result is a strengthening of the family and a reduced need for foster care placement.

### *The Prospect Family Crisis Nursery: Safe-Guarding Childhood and Strengthening Parenthood*

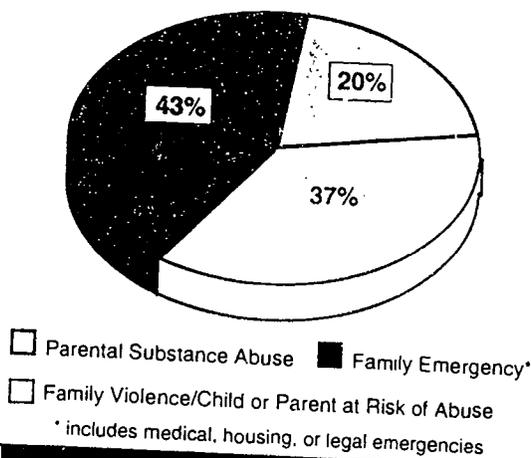
The Crisis Nursery model has evolved over the last decade in communities across the United States. Its overarching goal is to prevent child abuse and neglect by giving parents a respite from their children during times of extreme stress and upheaval. Having experienced firsthand the prevalence of child abuse, Homes for the Homeless adapted this model for its work with homeless families. The result was the establishment of a Crisis Nursery in May 1992 at the Prospect Family Inn in the South Bronx. Designed as a therapeutic child development center for children under the age of five, the Nursery provides respite, security, and care. Operating 24 hours a day, seven days a week, parents may leave their young children in the Nursery for up to 72 hours per visit, up to 30 days per year, with no legal separation. Although its primary purpose is to serve homeless families, the Prospect Family Nursery is open to the entire community.

In its first year the Nursery served 250 children from 100 families. (Current utilization rates project that almost 500 children will be served in 1993--a 100 percent increase over the pilot year, clearly showing the critical need for this service.)

The primary reasons for family use of the Crisis Nursery are noted in Figure 1. A majority of parents report that the underlying reason or triggering event for using the Nursery is violence in the home or their own substance abuse problem (57%). Consequently, professional staff identify such conditions and offer counseling or referrals to address the underlying problems that may put children at risk.

By avoiding legal separation from their family, the child is allowed time to rest and play in a safe and attentive environment while the parents address their crisis. They partake in activities which are both educational and specifically

Figure 1: Events Triggering Crisis Nursery Use



children. Additionally, follow-up services in the form of phone calls and home visits are provided to families to insure the service plan is

appropriate for their situation. A 24-hour hot-line reassures parents that someone from the Nursery is always available to help and support them should further problems arise.

Over the last year, parents have learned to trust the Crisis Nursery as a resource center where they can have delicate questions answered, get referrals

for specialized help, or leave their child for a few days to deal with the underlying causes which place their children at risk of abuse or neglect. The temporary, targeted and interactive nature of the Crisis Nursery stresses non-legal action and keeps families intact by alleviating the pressure of intervention by child welfare officials during moments of crisis. The continuous spectrum of services and child care that the Crisis Nursery offers strengthens the family unit and often prevents unnecessary foster care placement.

*Tanya suffered from a history of substance abuse since she was in high school. When she was evicted from her apartment, she ended up at the Prospect Family Inn. Staff referred her to an off-site detox program. Her two year-old son was safely cared for at the Crisis Nursery. Later, having successfully kicked her habit, she and her son moved to a permanent apartment. Her son was spared an unnecessary journey through the foster care system while also protected during a moment of crisis.*

geared toward enhancing children's self-esteem, trust and sense of control. The children are also assessed by qualified personnel for any medical or special developmental needs they may have.

Once the stressful incident passes, the Crisis Nursery staff is ready to tailor a service plan for the family which includes linkages to available resources in their communities such as counseling, daycare, and medical care. Staff also provide workshops, at the Crisis Nursery and in the community, focusing on stress management, substance abuse, domestic violence, reproductive health, parenting skills and the needs of

## *Together In Emotional Strength: Challenging the Stranglehold of Substance Abuse Over Families*

The Together in Emotional Strength (TIES) Program was developed by Homes for the Homeless as a family preservation initiative focusing on the overwhelmingly interconnected nature of substance abuse and family violence. *Between 1986 and 1988 the number of child abuse and neglect cases, resulting from parents with substance abuse problems, increased by 224% in New York City.* Because substance abuse is a factor in the majority of foster care placements, the TIES Program addresses a parent's substance abuse problem while keeping the family together. Keeping parents' role as parents in the forefront at all times, the TIES Program addresses the risk of child abuse and foster care placement by simultaneously ensuring ongoing substance abuse treatment, adult and children's support services, education, and follow-up services. The program's staff works together, tailoring their services to the specific needs of each family. It is this segment of the homeless population that is most vulnerable to the imminent disintegration of their families.

As with the Crisis Nursery, the TIES Program is located at the Prospect Family Inn. It is a voluntary, comprehensive program which integrates an array of services to suit each family's needs. As soon as a family enters the program, children and parents meet with a counselor who work with the entire family on all relevant issues. The adults participate daily in an off-site substance abuse program which allows them to evaluate the ways in which drugs affect their family as they work to eliminate their chemical dependency. Through additional group therapy sessions and workshops parents work on managing stress, modifying negative behaviors, and improving parenting skills.

TIES families also participate in HFIH's popular

### **The typical homeless parent in the TIES program:**

- is a twenty-nine year old woman;
- has 4 children, 3 of whom are currently in foster care;
- is an active substance abuser;
- is the victim of domestic violence;
- is most likely the victim of sexual or physical abuse as a child;
- probably has lived in her own apartment;
- and has been homeless more than once.

**She represents the most vulnerable segment of the homeless family population.**

Practical Living/Useful Skills (PLUS) workshops which focus both on pragmatic aspects of daily life, such as home management, job skills, budgeting, and parenting, and on larger issues, such as domestic violence and child abuse.

Each family's progress is closely monitored in this staff-intensive program (the current counselor-to-client ratio is one to ten) and their readiness for independent living is assessed at regular intervals.

After families are placed in their new homes, TIES in-home Parent Aides visit on a regular basis to offer counseling, client advocacy, and linkages to community resources. Post-placement assistance has proven essential in keeping relapse rates low and allowing families to make a successful transition to independent living.

Because of the emphasis on family preservation, children are an important component of the TIES Program. The children engage in group play and role-play counseling to begin healing the emotional wounds incurred through parental neglect, substance abuse, and homelessness. Children also participate in education and prevention programs which simultaneously en-

*At age 29, Anna A. has overcome more hardship than many twice her age. Abandoned by her mother at age five, then raised by her alcoholic father for a short time, Anna entered the foster care system at the age of nine and remained until she was eighteen. By the time she reached her mid-twenties she had become addicted to crack and dated a violent, abusive man with whom she had her son and daughter. Both children were born with positive-toxicity.*

*Anna ended up at the Prospect Family Inn suffering from drug addiction and physical and emotional abuse where she joined the TIES program. The road to recovery was not easy and on several occasions she left her children in the care of professional staff at the Prospect Family Crisis Nursery. Her son, age four, could not speak due to a mental block attributed to emotional abuse and his mother's drug use while pregnant. At the Crisis Nursery, nurturing staff offered praise and affection for both of her children; their positive response encouraged Anna to learn appropriate parenting skills.*

*Once a bitter and troubled parent, Anna A. has successfully fought her drug addiction and become a caring mother through the intensive casework of her TIES counselor. Her children were spared from the foster care system while also being protected from neglect or abuse. Anna looks forward to an independent and drug-free life with her children in a permanent apartment.*

hance self-esteem and decision making skills. In responding to the needs of the children of substance abusers, the TIES program ensures that the entire family, not only the parents, is given the resources with which to overcome their problems together. In 1992 the TIES program served approximately 100 families with over 400 children.

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## **Necessary, Feasible, But Affordable? The Cost of Prevention Programs**

Without question foster care placement is the least desirable form of resolving a family's

problems and the most expensive alternative. The cost of placing a child in foster care can run from \$13,000 per year in a foster home to over \$40,000 per year in a group home.<sup>1</sup> With the average length of stay in foster care currently at 39 months, each child who enters this system can cost the public anywhere from \$42,000 to \$160,000 per stay. While steep, these figures do not begin to reflect the costs incurred by the judiciary system to remove a child from their family--much less reunite them.

Prevention models, such as the Crisis Nursery and TIES Programs are much less costly in financial as well as emotional terms. The annual cost of preventing a child from entering foster care through the intervention of the Crisis Nursery is approximately \$1,250, a small price to pay when one considers the longterm fiscal and social costs of an average foster care stay.

With an expected 500 children per year to be served by the Nursery, the potential net savings to the public through this single program could range from \$6.5 to \$20 million a year, depending on the type of foster care placement prevented. By replicating the Crisis Nursery model to serve the roughly 2,000 homeless children estimated to be at risk of abuse or neglect, programs such as these could save anywhere from \$26 to \$80 million a year by preventing foster care placement. In addition these children and their families are spared from the emotional scars of separation.

More intensive efforts such as the TIES program which take a whole family approach to substance abuse recovery and foster care prevention are more costly but have an equally profound impact on family preservation. At an annual cost of roughly \$5,000 per child per family, savings from \$8,000 to \$35,000 per child can be achieved. Serving 100 families each year through this effort could generate a minimum savings of \$1 million annually which could be redirected to support additional prevention programs.

*Preventative alternative approaches to traditional foster care programs offer significant savings and can be effective.*

Cost per Child:	Preventative Placement		Foster Care Placement	
	Crisis Nursery	TIES	Private Home	Group Home
1 Child	\$1,250	\$5,000	\$13,000	\$40,000
100 Children	\$125,000	\$500,000	\$1,300,000	\$4,000,000
1,000 Children	\$1,250,000	\$5,000,000	\$13,000,000	\$40,000,000

Taken together in their first year of operation, the Crisis Nursery and TIES Programs may have prevented over 350 children from entering the foster care system, resulting in a minimum financial savings of \$6 million and a social and emotional savings that cannot be measured. While substantial, these savings do not begin to account for the savings generated by keeping families clear of all the legal and social services necessary when families are fractured by foster care.

### Alternatives for the Future

Further and more extensive analysis of this issue is needed but the direction is clear. Homelessness is not simply a housing issue; it is a multifaceted problem as earlier Homes for the Homeless studies have shown.<sup>2</sup> What is so disturbing is that 75 percent of the homeless family population are children, who represent the most vulnerable members of our society. This analysis is simply a first step to recognizing that a large segment of homeless parents with troubled pasts were themselves in foster care not so long ago. And the probability that this segment of the population will perpetuate the same fate for their children is not only troubling but very real.

Nonetheless there are alternatives. Comprehensive programming to end homelessness by addressing all of the key issues that are at its core have the potential to make a difference, as has

been shown here with the case of foster care. Homes for the Homeless and the Institute for Children and Poverty continue to call upon policymakers to abandon the concept of simple temporary shelter and adopt the Residential Educational Training (RET) Center model. The RET Center model is based on the premise that comprehensive education and a continuum of supportive services are key to breaking the cycle of homelessness and poverty. RET Centers offer programs which address homeless families' myriad needs including: adult education, prenatal and basic healthcare, job training, substance abuse and domestic violence counseling, child development centers, accelerated afterschool programming, recreational and cultural activities, and preventative foster care programs. When one realizes that homelessness is a children's and a family issue, there is no question as to what must be done.

#### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Cost of foster care, home and group placements were obtained from the New York State Department of Social Services and the Human Resources Administration of New York City, 1991.
- <sup>2</sup> "Who are Homeless Families?" (April 1992); "The New Poverty: A Generation of Homeless Families" (June 1992); "Access to Success: Meeting the Educational Needs of Homeless Children and Their Families" (January 1993).

### THE RET CENTER MODEL

- **Needs Assessment:** A service plan is developed for each family upon entry to the RET Centers, taking into account the unique needs of the family.
- **Health Services:** Families receive complete medical evaluations and preventive services including pre-natal care for pregnant women and immunizations for children.
- **Educational Enhancement:** On-site Alternative High Schools enable adults to complete their GEDs; early childhood development centers provide preschoolers with a jump-start on their education using the 'High Scope' model; after-school accelerated learning programs supplement the education of students and allow them to catch up with their peers; recreation programs including sports teams, theater and dance enhance the children's creativity and socialization skills.
- **Foster Care Prevention:** An innovative crisis nursery provides a safe haven for children at risk of abuse; intensive family counseling and crisis intervention are made available to parents and children which prevent at-risk families from having their children placed into foster care.
- **Substance Abuse Treatment:** On-site substance abuse treatment and counseling encourages family preservation by including children in therapy, unlike many programs which remove children from the family.
- **Independent Living Skills:** PLUS (Practical Living/Useful Skills) workshops address issues such as parenting, domestic violence, child development, self-esteem, housing maintenance, and budgeting to assist families in developing the independent living skills necessary to retain housing.
- **Employment Training:** An apprenticeship and employment training program gives adults the motivation, knowledge, and experience to move from welfare to workfare.
- **Post-Placement Services:** In the PLUS In New Communities (PLUS INC) program, caseworkers visit families for up to one year and offer counseling, client advocacy and linkages to available community resources.

*The Institute for Children and Poverty, a project of Homes for the Homeless, seeks to provide innovative strategies to combat the impact of homelessness and urban poverty on the lives of children and their families through the development of effective public policy initiatives and the dissemination of quantitative research findings.*

*Research is conducted in a broad array of areas including early childhood development, accelerated learning models, alternative adult educational methods, family literacy programs, non-traditional job training, foster care prevention, family preservation and reunification, substance abuse, domestic violence and child abuse, and independent living skill.*

*Homes for the Homeless is the largest provider of transitional housing and services for homeless families in New York City. Since our inception in 1986, we have served over 6,900 families including over 16,100 children. Our goal is to break the cycle of poverty and ensure a future for our children.*

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