

ED425046 1999-01-00 Homeless Children: Addressing the Challenge in Rural Schools. ERIC Digest.

ERIC Development Team

www.eric.ed.gov

Table of Contents

If you're viewing this document online, you can click any of the topics below to link directly to that section.

Homeless Children: Addressing the Challenge in Rural Schools. ERIC Digest.....	1
THE CHALLENGE OF HOMELESSNESS IN RURAL AREAS.....	2
WHAT HOMELESSNESS MEANS FOR RURAL CHILDREN AND YOUTH.....	2
EDUCATIONAL PROBLEMS OF HOMELESS CHILDREN AND YOUTH.....	3
CAUSES OF RURAL HOMELESSNESS.....	4
REMEDIES AND RESOURCES.....	5
REFERENCES.....	5



ERIC Identifier: ED425046

Publication Date: 1999-01-00

Author: Vissing, Yvonne M.

Source: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools Charleston WV.

Homeless Children: Addressing the Challenge in Rural Schools. ERIC Digest.

THIS DIGEST WAS CREATED BY ERIC, THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

INFORMATION CENTER. FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT ERIC, CONTACT ACCESS ERIC 1-800-LET-ERIC

Rural homelessness is as prevalent as urban homelessness (National Coalition for the Homeless, 1997). It differs markedly from its urban counterpart. This Digest considers (1) the challenge of homelessness in rural areas, (2) the meaning of homelessness for rural children, (3) the educational problems of homelessness, (4) causes of rural homelessness, and (5) remedies and resources for rural educators and human service providers.

THE CHALLENGE OF HOMELESSNESS IN RURAL AREAS

According to the National Coalition for the Homeless (1997, p. 1), "Studies comparing urban and rural homeless populations have shown that homeless people in rural areas are more likely to be white, female, married, currently working, homeless for the first time, and homeless for a shorter period of time." Vissing (1996) estimates that half of rural homeless households are families with children, both two-parent and single-parent families. She also suggests that female-headed households are about twice as numerous among rural, as compared to urban, homeless (32% vs. 16%).

Exact national figures are not available because 1990 census data on the homeless are doubtful, especially for rural areas. The census enumeration relied on the assumption that the homeless would be found in shelters. However, few shelters exist in rural areas. Even where shelters exist, rural homeless people favor other options because of shame and pride (Garrett, 1996). Vissing (1996) reports that instead of relying on social agencies, rural homeless people move in temporarily with family or friends until they get back on their feet: 41% in rural areas versus 11% in urban areas.

Homelessness, then, arguably presents a more pressing challenge for rural than for urban educators because of the higher rate of homelessness involving families and children. But it receives far less attention, either from national media or from rural education and social authorities. Most available resources have been developed for the urban context.

WHAT HOMELESSNESS MEANS FOR RURAL CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Vissing (1996) uses the terms "housing displacement" and "housing distress" to describe rural homelessness. She defines rural homelessness as "lack of a consistent, safe physical structure and 'the emotional deprivation that occurs as a result'" [italics added] (p. 8). In rural areas, extended families are sometimes able to take in homeless young families. Abandoned houses can sometimes be occupied for free, but the availability of electricity, heating, and water supplies may be doubtful.

Housing shelters humans from the elements, but homes provide more. The social construct of "the home" describes the physical and emotional space needed for sustaining a private life. In educationally relevant terms, homelessness deprives children of the security they need to be themselves. Rural homelessness, which undermines the conditions of learning, is just one of many serious threats that poverty inflicts on children's ability to learn (Children's Defense Fund, 1998).

EDUCATIONAL PROBLEMS OF HOMELESS CHILDREN AND YOUTH

A diversity of people with possible rights to elementary and secondary educational services comprise the homeless: young children, single teenagers on their own (e.g., pregnant teens, teen parents, runaways), and young adults (Kryder-Coe, Salamon, & Molnar, 1991). Failure to provide "appropriate" educational services for these people magnifies their misfortune and frustrates the growth of their intellectual capacities. Just enrolling homeless children in school and ensuring their attendance can be difficult. Residency requirements bar homeless children from attending school in 60% of the states (Vissing, 1996). Other obstacles to admission include missing health and education records. Seventy percent of the states report difficulties getting records of homeless children who transfer to their schools. Often, homeless children need to be reimmunized. These obstacles are falling in many places, but the rural situation is unclear.

Although many homeless rural children continue to do well in school, transience, uncertainty, and emotional turmoil strongly undermine success. Many, perhaps most, homeless students will develop physical, behavioral, and emotional problems including post-traumatic stress disorders, depression, and anxiety.

Existing health problems may go untreated, and the stressors of homelessness inevitably produce new health problems. Transience may disrupt the task of preparing and serving regular meals. Quantity and quality of food commonly suffer as well.

According to the National Coalition for the Homeless (1997), rural as compared to urban homelessness involves more prevalent domestic violence but less substance abuse. These trends probably reflect the elevated rates of family homelessness in rural areas.

Profound emotional troubles accompany homelessness. Some children feel guilty, as if they were the cause of their families' poverty. They may also resent their parents for not being better providers. And they may actively resent other students, teachers, and administrators for not understanding homelessness. Self-destructive behaviors and psychic numbing are common. Homeless children may act out to get needed attention, but withdrawal is more common. Suicidal tendencies increase with homelessness, as do incidences of unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (Vissing,

1996).

Children usually hide their homelessness. Among all others who interact with children, teachers are in the best position to identify problems unobtrusively. They observe their students carefully from day to day.

CAUSES OF RURAL HOMELESSNESS

Some observers (Gans, 1995; Katz, 1990) note the persistent belief that the poor exhibit bad genes, poor planning, weakness, and overall lack of discipline and worthiness. According to this view, the moral fiber of the nation is decaying, and the character of the family is one victim; the poor reveal themselves as the worst citizens and the worst people, though it is important to distinguish between the deserving and the undeserving poor even in this explanation (Katz, 1990). Rural educators should understand that this concept may characterize conventional wisdom in many traditional communities (Garrett, 1996).

Among many educators, an economic argument offers a more acceptable explanation. Homelessness is increasing, according to this argument, in part, because the income gap between rich and poor in the United States has widened substantially in recent decades. Measured in constant dollars, the "poorest" one-fifth of all families had incomes 9% lower in 1996 as compared to 1973. But incomes for the "wealthiest" one-fifth of all families rose 35% (Children's Defense Fund, 1998). The gap between rural and urban incomes is also widening, with the rural percentage of the average urban income falling from 78.5% in 1980 to 72.8% in 1990 (Rural Policy Research Institute, 1998).

Child poverty is also increasing. The Children's Defense Fund (1998) reports that while the median income (in constant 1996 dollars) of U.S. families with children stayed level at \$41,000 from 1976 to 1996, income for childless families rose 18% over the same period, and income for young families (parents under 30) sank 33% from \$30,000 to less than \$20,000. The child poverty rate in young families doubled between 1973 and 1996, from 20% to 41% (Children's Defense Fund, 1998). And, in rural areas, child poverty rates are reportedly higher than in urban areas (Rural Policy Research Institute, 1998).

As the rural poor get poorer, the proportion of income claimed by housing goes up. By the standards of the 1950s, 20% of income constituted a normal housing expense. In the 1970s, the official standard was raised to 25%. Today, the standard is 30% (Vissing, 1996). But the poor spend a larger proportion of their income on housing often twice as large. Fitchen (1981) suggests suburbanization has driven up the price of housing for the rural poor. As new residents move in, rural land and housing prices increase along with taxes. The supply of inexpensive housing shrinks, and new residents seek to increase housing standards. This process makes it difficult for the rural poor to live either in make shift housing or mobile homes.

REMEDIES AND RESOURCES

Practical strategies and a review of successful programs to help the homeless are available from organizations listed in the Resources section, or through publications like those of James Stronge (1992), which overview successful programs to help homeless students. Again, adaptations from the urban context should be considered critically. Schools and districts must consider the appropriateness of policies with respect to homeless children. Most absentee policies and attendance penalties fail to acknowledge homelessness as a possible condition of students' lives. In a logical and practical sense, having a home is a prior condition of schooling. Homeless students need plenty of lead time for projects, and they should get in-school support for projects with which parents usually help (e.g., entries for science and social studies fairs). Professional development workshops could help teachers more easily identify impoverished rural students and address the challenge of serving them well in the classroom.

Knowing where to turn for help is important. Administrators in rural areas where housing distress and displacement are common should make sure that teachers, counselors, nurses, and other administrators can find local resources. A handbook or an easily accessible computerized database that describes agencies and services is essential for those who want to help homeless students.

Immediacy is the key for serving homeless students because their living circumstances can be truly dire. School personnel should have access to information that describes options for emergency shelter, long-term housing support, food and clothing assistance, social services, employment, legal counsel, medical and dental care, mental health services, emergency financial assistance, and transportation. All the details of life are usually disrupted when families become homeless. Single teenagers are likely to exhibit the most needs.

Although formal support is thin in rural areas, some services exist everywhere. Rural educators may want to commit energy to establishing informal support mechanisms. They will be pioneers.

REFERENCES

- Children's Defense Fund. (1998). *The state of America's children: A report from the Children's Defense Fund*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Fitchen, J. (1981). *Poverty in rural America: A case study*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Gans, H. J. (1995). *The war against the poor: The underclass and antipoverty policy*. New York: BasicBooks.

Garrett, P. (1996). Poor kids in a rich nation: Eating the seed corn. In Pathways from poverty educational network. University Park, PA: Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development. (ED 406 080)

Katz, M. B. (1990). The undeserving poor: From the war on poverty to the war on welfare. New York: Pantheon Books.

Kryder-Coe, J. H., Salamon, L. M., & Molnar, J. M. (Eds.). (1991). Homeless children and youth: A new American dilemma. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

National Coalition for the Homeless. (1997). Rural homelessness (NCH Fact Sheet No. 13). Also available: <http://nch.ari.net/rural.html> (1998, November 10).

Rural Policy Research Institute. (1998). Diversity in rural America: Income characteristics of non-metropolitan America. In Rural Policy Context. Columbia, MO: Author. Also available: <http://www.rupri.org/ruralcontext/diversity/income.html> (1998, November 10).

Stronge, J. H. (Ed.). (1992). Educating homeless children and adolescents: Evaluating policy and practice. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Vissing, Y. M. (1996). Out of sight, out of mind: Homeless children and families in small-town America. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.

RESOURCES

Several organizations specialize in programs for the homeless:



Health Care for the Homeless Information Resource Center



Policy Research Associates, Inc.



262 Delaware Avenue



Delmar, NY 12054



888-439-3300, ext. 246



Web site: <http://www.prainc.com/hch/>





Interagency Council on the Homeless



451 Seventh Street, SW, Room 7274



Washington, DC 20410



202-708-1480



Web site: <http://aspe.os.dhhs.gov/progsys/homeless/ich.htm>





National Alliance to End Homelessness



1518 K Street, NW, Suite 206



Washington, DC 20005



202-638-1526



Web site: <http://www.naeh.org/>





National Association of State Coordinators



for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth



c/o Louisiana Department of Education



654 Main Street



Baton Rouge, LA 70801



504-342-3431





National Coalition for the Homeless



1012 Fourteenth Street, NW, #600



Washington, DC 20005



202-737-6444



Web site: <http://nch.ari.net/>





National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty



918 F Street, NW, Suite 412



Washington, DC 20004



202-638-2535



Web site: <http://www.nlchp.org/>

The ERIC system has developed a number of Digests that address urban homelessness. The digests may provide some examples or contacts of possible utility in

rural schools. Search for them using "homeless" at the following URL:
<http://ericae.net/search.htm#Dig>. Or you can call ERIC/CRESS at 800-624-9120 to request a free search.

Yvonne Vissing is a professor of Sociology at Salem State College in Massachusetts, author of a book on homeless children, and researcher on rural homelessness.

This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RR93002012. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI, the Department, or AEL.

Title: Homeless Children: Addressing the Challenge in Rural Schools. ERIC Digest.

Document Type: Information Analyses---ERIC Information Analysis Products (IAPs) (071); Information Analyses---ERIC Digests (Selected) in Full Text (073);

Available From: ERIC/CRESS, P.O. Box 1348, Charleston, WV 25325-1348; phone: 800-624-9120 (free).

Descriptors: Children, Economically Disadvantaged, Elementary Secondary Education, High Risk Students, Homeless People, Housing Deficiencies, Poverty, Rural Areas, Rural Family, Rural Schools, Rural Urban Differences, School Policy, School Role

Identifiers: ERIC Digests, Student Support Services

###



[\[Return to ERIC Digest Search Page\]](#)