

## Social-Rejection and Isolation among Homeless Children

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Literature Review

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### Introduction

“In a relatively affluent nation like the U.S., homelessness can be defined as a social condition in which people do not have regular housing and are forced to sleep in public places, public shelters, or other facilities designed for homeless individuals and families” (Kornblum 2007: 343). In the social science discipline little is known to paint a complete picture of homelessness. According to Anooshian (2005), Forty percent of homeless people consist of families with children. This represents the fastest growing subgroup of the homeless population. It is suggested that homelessness in children can result in feelings of isolation, self-rejection and developmental difficulties. Research has indicated that social rejection is one of the leading causes of isolation among homeless children promoting negative outcomes including meager academic functioning (Anooshian 2003), loss of identity, and problems with identity formation (Slesnick 2008), throughout the child’s life cycle. Similarly Nunez’s (2000) findings from pervious studies indicate that academic success requires cognitive development during the early ages of life for children. Statistics show that 41% of the homeless are children under five years old (Anooshian 2005). Due to poor cognitive development, most of these children are suggested to experience developmental delays both in their academics and social skills leaving them with feelings of self-rejection. Since there has been a lot of focus on homeless children and violence, it may be of interest to consider how homelessness influences children with identity formation and feelings of isolation.

Due to the reported rise of homeless children becoming the largest subgroup of homelessness, the investigation of the factors contributing to social rejection and isolation is justified. A number of well designed prospective studies have found that children who are

either witnesses of violence and aggression or experience it first hand, show both internalized and externalized behavior problems (Anooshian 2005). Similarly, Nunez (2000) observed that children who witness domestic violence are at risk of abuse themselves. As many as 75% of homeless battered women report their children have also been abused. Children who witness or experience violent and aggressive behaviors, are more likely to skip school than those who do not (Nunez 2000). Homelessness leaves children with fewer mechanisms to cope with the trauma of violence, and can destroy the child's sense of self and chance of educational success. Liebow (1993) reports that Natalie and Biff's son Rick, spent most of his time running away from the beatings his father was trying to give him. Children will have trouble with identity formation from experiencing violence first hand, and will not be able to relate their lives with other children. Other research has suggested that if children have trouble forming and maintaining friendships amongst peers, there is a higher chance of isolation from other children (Anooshian 2005). Isolation is a coping mechanism that many children choose to obtain instead of speaking about their problems to others (Nunez 2000).

While there has been some research done on homelessness and abuse among children, most literature on homelessness fails to touch on social-rejection and isolation. It is suggested that many of the negative impacts of poverty and homelessness among children can be explained by parental neglect. Anooshian (2003) concludes that a child's problem with social adjustment reflected the well-being of their parents and their ability of parenting adequately. Similarly Nunez (2000) reports that homeless children have a moving rate 16 times greater than an average American family and typically lives in three different locations in one year. Children are not able to make social bonds with friends in their community and this causes them to feel like they do not belong and are rejected from society. Liebow (1993) explains that

when a whole family is homeless, there is a greater chance they will have to split up if certain shelters are designed by gender. For instance a child may only have the influence of one parent, leaving them to feel neglected by the other parent if he or she is not always in the child's life.

Research suggests that a child's level of chronic illness is substantially higher than a child who is not homeless due to their poor living conditions (Anonymous 1999). Forty percent of homeless children undergo the effects of two or more major illnesses in one year, which takes them out of their daily routines of socializing at school (Anonymous 1999). This idea is also consistent with Nunez (2000), stating that poor health in general, will dampen homeless children's chances at good education and social bond making. Along with a child's physical and mental health, homelessness also affects a child's emotional health greatly. According to Nunez (2000) 26% of children under the age of 5 become depressed while homeless and they tend to be more alert to disguise their homelessness from other students. Taunting by others makes homeless children twice as likely to experience depression, aggression, and symptoms of isolation. Similarly research by Panter-Brick (2004), suggests that adequate parental involvement for homeless children could potentially prevent emotional distress and signs of social-isolation in children. The street living youth are at a higher risk of social isolation from abusive sexual relationships and sexually transmitted diseases when trying to survive on their own on the streets, than children who have support from their families (Panter-Brick 2004).

The aim of this literature review is to expand and contribute to previous literature regarding social rejection, by acquiring statistical support for the presence of isolation among homeless children who exhibit signs of violence and trouble in academics. Violence and harm

done to others is an indication of isolation and children will form difficulties with their identity formation and their transformation throughout their years in homelessness if adequate parental support is not a factor in their lives. Homelessness prevents children from socializing properly to form an understanding of their identity throughout life. Research suggests that isolation and social rejection are major effects for homeless children.

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