

## Our Invisible Families: Library Services with Families Experiencing Homelessness

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### Abstract:

*This paper explores family homelessness in the United States and looks at correlated literacy and school performance outcomes for children who experience homelessness. Recommendations and examples of best practices for providing library services for families who are homeless are included, as well as a case study of programs and practices offered by the Queens Library in New York City, New York. The paper also addresses gaps in the conversation around family homelessness, systems, and service interventions which may contribute to misunderstandings about the nature of homelessness.*

**Keywords:** homelessness, family homelessness, public libraries

According to the American Institutes for Research (2014), 2,483,539 children experienced homelessness in the U.S. in 2013. Strengthened and expanded as part of the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) which will go into effect in the fall of 2016, the McKinney-Vento Act (the federal law that protects the educational rights of homeless students) defines homelessness for students as lacking ‘fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence’ and includes

(i) children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate 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 (within the meaning of section 103(a)(2)(C));

(iii) children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and

(iv) migratory children (as such term is defined in section 1309 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965) who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii). (NYS-TEACHS 2016)

The inclusion of students who are ‘doubled-up’ (living with friends or relatives not by choice) adds significantly to the number of young people counted as homeless, since up to 75 percent of homeless children are living in doubled-up conditions (Child Trends DataBank 2015). Thus the demographic data based on school counts is much higher (though likely still an undercount) when compared to statistics from other agencies that only include individuals in shelters or identified through Point-in-Time counts as being homeless.

There is significant research (Rubin et al. 1996; Noll and Watkins 2003; Sinatra 2007; Walker-Dalhouse and Risko 2008; Cutuli et al. 2013) correlating children’s experiences of homelessness with poor school performance, including below-grade-level reading. Research has demonstrated that children who experience homelessness face greater challenges than more stably housed peers, even those in poverty. Children who have experienced homelessness are more likely to repeat a grade, to receive special education services, and are less likely to graduate on-time than their housed peers (Child Trends DataBank 2015). Because of the challenges they face, children who experience homelessness also tend to underperform on standardized assessments; only 21.5% of homeless elementary students are proficient in math and only 24.4% in reading and only 11.4% of homeless high school students are proficient in math and only 14.6% in reading (National Center on Family Homelessness 2011). Additional research has shown that the experience of homelessness can have lasting impact on children’s school performance. For example, students in New York City who had experienced homelessness within three years still scored significantly lower on State English Language Arts (ELA) and Math assessments than their peers who were never homeless (20% vs 36% proficient in Math and 16% vs. 30% proficient in ELA in third through eighth grades) (Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness 2016). Demographic data also reveal that mothers’ incomplete education is correlated with an increased likelihood of experiencing homelessness (Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness 2011). Yet, MacGillivray, Ardell and Curwen (2010), in their qualitative study of the literacy practices of mothers and children in a Los Angeles homeless shelter, found that families had both positive feelings about literacy and strong use of libraries, churches, and schools as sites of literacy practice.

In the United States, more than half of the children whose families experience homelessness are under the age of five, with high concentrations of school-age homelessness in the early elementary grades (Family Housing Fund 2014, Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness 2016). The long-term effects of the trauma and stress of homelessness can be seen in lingering lower test scores, greater likelihood of repeating a grade, and both the over-representation of homeless children in special education settings and the under-referral of homeless students to services. The recent GradNation report (2016) explores high school graduation rates among students who have experienced homelessness. While the report acknowledges the rates of homelessness across K-12 education, they focus on the impacts of homelessness in the middle and high school years as being especially significant. Yet the impact of homelessness on the youngest children, shown to cause (as opposed to be

correlated with) developmental delays (Healing Hands 2009), almost certainly influences school success and persistence in later childhood.

In New York City, there is a league right to shelter, won through the 1979 lawsuit *Callahan v. Carey* (Coalition for the Homeless 2016). In addition, the New York State constitution mandates care of the indigent

Section 1: The aid, care and support of the needy are public concerns and shall be provided by the state and by such of its subdivisions, and in such manner and by such means, as the legislature may from time to time determine. (New York State Constitution Article XVII, Social Welfare).

Thus, it is not surprising that the numbers of people experiencing homelessness have been increasing, even years after the Great Recession of 2008. The New York City's Department of Homeless Services maintains a daily census count of the people they serve through shelters. On June 16, 2016, a total of 57,962 were residing in the New York City shelter system, including 22,683 children (DHS 2016). Compared to Fiscal Year 2009, the number of families in the shelter system so far in Fiscal Year 2016 has increased by more than 50% (DHS 2016).

It is important to understand that there are an array of factors that contribute to homelessness and housing instability. Lack of affordable housing and low wages that have not kept pace with housing costs are two of the most basic reasons for homelessness but others such as domestic violence, substance abuse, disasters or emergencies, also contribute. Within American culture, there tends to be a sense that homelessness is the result of personal deficits or failures and many of the efforts to 'end' homelessness are focused in these areas by helping people get rapidly-rehoused, earn education credentials, and become better-employed. There is relatively little discussion about the systems that have created high housing costs and low wages; subsequently, there is little said about how those systems (rather than the individuals experiencing them) can be changed. It is also essential as we look at how public libraries can support families experiencing homelessness and housing instability, to recognize that many of the economic factors that impacted homelessness rates in the United States (and around the world) since 2008, have also had significant impacts on library budgets and services. Thus, while many libraries may be interested in being more involved in their communities or in serving their most vulnerable populations, they are also hampered by their own financial constraints.

It is well-established that public libraries can be a sanctuary for people experiencing homelessness, as well as a place in which to engage in activities around literacy and learning (Hodgetts et al. 2008; Juchniewicz 2012; Toolis and Hammack 2015). For children and families experiencing homelessness, library services can support school success, connect families to a sense of community and belonging, and provide resources and services they may not receive elsewhere. The conversation about library services for families experiencing homelessness must begin with a discussion around access, particularly library cards. While policies around library cards vary from one library to another, similar issues arise when looking at offering cards to individuals without permanent addresses. Libraries should consider alternatives for patrons who cannot easily demonstrate proof of address, including documentation from service providers, offering cards that do not require proof of address but may limit the number of items borrowed, or providing free guest cards that allow computer and other limited privileges. In looking at policies, there may also need to be consideration

of identification requirements as these may also be barriers for people who are not stably housed or who are transgender, for example. Even if people who are experiencing homelessness have the needed documentation to obtain a library card, previous fees or fines may prevent them from re-establishing an account. It is not uncommon for parents who are experiencing homelessness and trying to obtain library cards for themselves and their children, to still owe fees on materials from when they were children. Thus, libraries should consider policies to support individuals who are in this situation; amnesty days, ‘reading down’ fees, or waiving outdated fees are all ways libraries have approached this issue, and should be part of the toolbox library staff has when interacting with patrons.

There are a number of other policy considerations libraries may need to address if they are to best-serve people experiencing homelessness. These include policies around hygiene, personal belongings, bathroom use, use of space, and sleeping, which tend to be enforced most often with people perceived to be experiencing homelessness. For example, a hygiene policy may be used to ask a homeless person with offensive body odor to leave the library but is unlikely to be used with someone who smells heavily of perfume or cologne (despite the fact that those smells may trigger allergies or asthma in others). Similarly, many libraries will not let people bring in carts or large bags, but do not prohibit baby carriages or strollers that take up the same amount of space (in fact, just suggesting it sounds ludicrous). The recommendation here is not necessarily that libraries remove these policies, but that they re-examine them objectively and be clear with library staff about how they should be enforced so that they are not being used selectively as ‘anti-homeless’ policies.

Public libraries are engaged in many programs, partnerships and outreach activities with families experiencing homelessness. Here in Ohio, for example, the Columbus Metropolitan Library’s Ready to Reads Corps regularly visits family shelters with their Bookmobile and provides programming and resources. At the Akron-Summit County Public Library in Akron, OH has staff visit several of their local family shelters regularly to offer programming for children. Libraries frequently bring programming for children and families into shelters and other provider locations to combat barriers families may face, including lack of transportation, distrust of government or quasi-government agencies, or language and literacy barriers. Being able to program onsite can also be a way around some of the library card policy challenges, since by doing library cards at a shelter you are actually witnessing proof of address. For parents who do not have any (or at least a positive) personal or cultural history with libraries, having library programming available to them in their own space can ease some of their concerns and help them be more willing to visit the library themselves. Traditional story time programming for parents and young children can be especially beneficial, since these programs support early literacy in fun, low-risk ways. More and more libraries are using this type of programming to model effective literacy development skills to parents regardless of the venue (Every Child Ready to Read 2011); knowing how important support for literacy is with children experiencing homelessness, these types of programs are crucial.

The Queens Library has been working closely with family shelters for many years. The library serves the borough (or county) of Queens, one of New York City’s five boroughs, with a population of 2.3 million people in what is considered the most diverse county in the world. There are more than fifteen family shelters in Queens; the New York City homeless shelter population has been growing and new shelters have been opening to accommodate the need. The coordinated library outreach to the family shelters began in 2008 in partnership with the New York City Department of Education’s Queens Office for Students in

Temporary Housing (although there had been some unstructured outreach to shelters before this). Many of the family shelters in Queens are converted motels located near the City's two major airports; while these are somewhat residential neighborhoods, they require long walks or bus trips to the nearest libraries. The shelter outreach has included library card registration drives, typically at the start of the school year and beginning of summer, summer reading programming for children, and depending on the individual shelters' needs, interests, and availability, more in-depth library programming.

Since 2014, Queens Library has provided summer book collections and related programming at a total of six shelters as part of its state-supported Summer Reading program. These collections were added to any existing library materials at the shelters, and the programming has included story and craft and other traditional summer reading programming onsite at the shelters. Since many school-aged children in New York City shelters have the opportunity to attend free sleep away summer camp for part or all of the summer, summers are often fairly quiet times for recreation programs within the shelters. In addition to the Summer Reading program, Queens Library is also participating in a citywide initiative to support libraries and literacy in family shelters in partnership with the Department of Homeless Services, Department of Education, and other city agencies. This pilot also brings books and library programming into the shelters, as well as volunteers to work with both the shelter and library staff on maintaining the collections, helping children and parents select books, and assisting with programs.

As supporting families experiencing homelessness has become an increasing priority for the City, additional opportunities are developing for libraries to reach families, bring services to them, and ideally link them to the more abundant programs and services in library locations.

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