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Homeless Street Youth: The Foster Care Connection

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There are an estimated .5 to 1.5 million homeless youth over the course of any one year in the USA (HHS). The etiology of homeless is multifaceted and includes both factors intrinsic to the youth and his/her family (e.g., relationship problems, mental illness) and societal/institutional factors (foster care and prison discharge policy). In 2001, 543,000 children were in foster care (HHS); 13% of whom are not discharged to family/guardian (NCSL). Two to four years after leaving foster care 25% are homeless for at least 1 night (ACYF). Once homeless they are introduced to the street economy and culture. Ironically, these activities of survival such as, drug/alcohol use, drug selling, gang involvement and survival sex are the very behaviors that pose the greatest risk to their physical and mental health. This study was designed to investigate the role that contact with foster care has in the etiology of adolescent homelessness. Pilot data derived from a 2002 retroactive medical chart review of NYC homeless youth served by a mobile medical unit revealed that 53% had life-time contact with the foster care system. Utilizing a questionnaire, prospective data comparing homeless and demographically similar domiciled youth (13-21 years) will be gathered to investigate both lifetime contact with the foster care system and foster care as the last place of residence before homelessness. Our preliminary findings suggest that any lifetime contact with foster care may in itself be a risk factor for homelessness and that governmental policy could better protect youth from this outcome.

Learning Objectives:

At the end of this presentation, participants will:

- better understand the potential link between foster care placement and homeless youth;
- better understand the risks faced by homeless youth; and
- better understand the kinds of policy changes that can lead to government doing more to protect children and youth in their care

Keywords: Adolescent Health, Homeless

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