

## Mental Health Needs and Services to Children and families in Shelters

Roy Grant (1) , Lourdes Lynch PhD, Karen Redlener (2)

(1) The Children's Health Fund, New York, NY

(2) Community Pediatrics, The Children's Hospital at Montefiore, New York, NY

### **Background:**

- ◆ Comparative studies have shown that children in homeless have higher rates of acute and chronic health conditions, and mental health, developmental, and school problems than is typical for low-income housed children.
- ◆ We are not aware of any studies that relate medical conditions to behavioral health conditions in a homeless population.
- ◆ The New York Children's Health Project (NYCHP), a service program of the Children's Hospital at Montefiore, has provided comprehensive health care to homeless children and families for 15 years.
  - ◆ Over time, the Project began to serve more families in domestic violence shelters as well as homeless shelters.
  - ◆ Over time, the patient population shifted from pediatric only to a mix of pediatric (~67%) and adult (~33%) patients.

### **Goals and Methods:**

- ◆ Through retrospective chart review, we recorded the behavioral health diagnoses and key medical conditions for 538 consecutively assessed pediatric patients who received a completed mental health/child development evaluation by the NYCHP child psychologist during a five year period, 1998 – 2001. We focused on
  - ◆ Diagnosed behavioral health conditions;
  - ◆ Possible relationships between health conditions (asthma, otitis media) and diagnosed behavioral health conditions;
  - ◆ Possible differences in the prevalence of these medical conditions in the behavioral health referred population compared with a randomly selected comparison group of NYCHP patients (N=200); and
  - ◆ Possible differences in prevalence of these medical and behavioral health conditions between a homogeneously homeless sheltered patient group and a population comprised of homeless plus domestic violence sheltered children.

### **Results:**

- ◆ 267 children from homeless shelters were assessed during 1998 and 1999 based on primary care provider referral to the clinical psychologist
  - ◆ Race ethnicity: 60% African-American; 40% Hispanic
  - ◆ Gender: 64% male; 36% female
  - ◆ Age: mean, 59 months; range 2 months to 19 years
  - ◆ The following were the most frequent behavioral health diagnoses:
    - ◆ Attention deficit disorder: 18%
    - ◆ Depression: 15%
    - ◆ Posttraumatic stress disorder: 5%

- ◆ The prevalence of asthma in the behavioral health referred population significantly exceeded that in the NYCHP general population: (42% vs. 27%,  $p < 0.05$ )
- ◆ The prevalence of recurrent or chronic otitis media in the behavioral health referred population significantly exceeded that in the NYCHP general pediatric population (54% to 29% for patients  $\leq 60$  months of age;  $p < 0.05$ )
- ◆ Among the referred patient population, 29% had recently been exposed to domestic violence, compared with 29% in the NYCHP general patient population (not significant).
  
- ◆ We next compared these results with those of children assessed from 2000-2002 (N=271), an increasing percentage of whom were domiciled in domestic violence shelters.
  - ◆ Demographically (race-ethnicity, gender, age), both groups are very similar.
  - ◆ The prevalence of diagnosed depression is higher in the homeless plus DV sheltered population, 17% to 15%, not significant.
  - ◆ The prevalence of posttraumatic stress disorder is higher in the homeless plus DV sheltered population, 7% to 5%, not significant.
  - ◆ The prevalence of attention deficit disorder is lower in the homeless plus DV sheltered population, 18% to 14%, not significant.
  - ◆ The prevalence of asthma is significantly lower in the homeless plus DV sheltered population, 29% to 42%,  $p < 0.05$
  - ◆ The prevalence of recurrent or chronic otitis media is significantly lower in the homeless plus DV sheltered population (30% to 54%,  $p < 0.05$  for patients  $\leq 60$  months old).

### **Conclusions:**

- ◆ There is a significant relationship between chronic or recurrent otitis media and a developmental or behavioral problem among young homeless children.
- ◆ Homeless children diagnosed with asthma are significantly more likely to have a developmental or behavioral problem than other homeless children.
- ◆ The developmental and behavioral problems of homeless children are similar whether or not they have been recently exposed to violence.
  - ◆ There is a trend towards higher prevalence of posttraumatic stress disorder among children recently exposed to domestic violence.
- ◆ The contributory role of medical problems appears to be less significant among children recently exposed to domestic violence.

### **Implications for Practice:**

- ◆ Homeless children with asthma, and those with frequent otitis media, should be carefully screened for possible developmental or behavioral problems.
- ◆ Children exposed to domestic violence should be carefully screened for possible developmental or behavioral problems.
- ◆ Referrals by primary care providers to a behavioral health specialist are an important part of comprehensive health care for homeless children.