

THE HEALTH OF COLORADO HOMELESS CHILDREN

The state of Colorado is experiencing a rapid rise in homelessness and the number of homeless children has skyrocketed. There are about 23,000 homeless children in Colorado who attend schools, in addition to homeless preschoolers and babies (02 September 2014). The number has tripled in a decade.

The definition of homelessness, “individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.”

Homelessness affects people of all geographic areas of the state, ages, occupations, and ethnicities. In many instances the parent(s) are working full time jobs. However, the typical homeless family is headed by a single mother in her late twenties. She has with her two or three children, typically preschoolers. With single mothers being the head of the household that has the lowest median annual income of all family types, this can be considered poverty level.

Shelter for homeless children may be the following: campgrounds, designated shelters, cheap hotels/motels, bus/train stations, cars, parks, public places, and abandoned and/or substandard buildings. Migrant children also qualify as homeless because of inadequate residences.

Living without permanent, long-term housing can be particularly detrimental to the healthy development of young children. Children who are homeless may suffer from 1) hunger and poor physical condition, 2) emotional and behavioral issues, and 3) missed educational opportunities.

1) HUNGER AND PHYSICAL HEALTH - A study based on a national sample of homelessness individuals found that about 60% reported inadequate food consumption as well as frequency of meals. This report, and others, suggest that children, living in homeless families, and unaccompanied youth, likely experience more serious food insecurity given their lessened capability to secure food. Another study found that fruit and dairy products are often below recommended nutritional levels along with intakes of necessary nutrition, such as iron, magnesium, zinc, or vitamins.

Some homeless children look healthy, even seeming overweight, however, it is due to inappropriate food consumption (“empty calories”), or mal nutrition.

Homeless children experience various health problems such as the following:

- being ill four times more than other children
- four times as many respiratory and/or bacterial infections

- twice as many ear infections
- five times more gastrointestinal problems than other children
- four times more likely to have asthma
- going hungry at twice the rate of other children
- lacking immunizations, dental care, eye doctor exams, and regular check ups

2) EMOTIONAL HEALTH - Homeless children have three times the rate of emotional and behavioral problems, such as anxiety, depression, sleep problems, withdrawal and aggression. Homelessness also affects children's brain functions. The brain develops rapidly during childhood and adolescence and, factors that shift this process can lead to long-lasting negative effects. Research from Harvard University suggests that everyday stressors become "toxic" and change how the brain develops.

Homeless children and youth are more likely to witness or experience violence prior to homeless episodes. They are also exposed to violence due to the public nature of their lives and vulnerable living conditions associated with poverty, such as being on the streets, in shelters, or crowded housing. However, of great concern is the safety of unaccompanied youth that have been displaced from their homes and families making them more vulnerable to physical or sexual victimization. Due to the emotional and mental stress of homelessness, nearly one in five homeless youth attempted suicide. More than half had thoughts of suicide.

3) EDUCATION – Approximately 87% of school-age homeless children and youth are enrolled in school, although only about 77% attend school regularly. Homeless children who are able to attend school still have problems learning in school:

- four times as likely to have developmental delays in language, gross motor, fine motor, and social skills
- twice as likely to have learning disabilities.
- twice as likely to repeat a grade, most often due to frequent absences and moves to new schools. 28% of homeless children go to 3 or more schools in a single year.
- homelessness impacts academic achievement in reading, spelling, and arithmetic

Across Colorado there are many agencies helping the homeless. If you are homeless or know of a family in need please contact one or more of the agencies below.

References and Resources

- Denver's Road Home – Direct assistance listing multiple agencies (www.denversroadhome.org/homeless.php)
- Colorado Department of Local Affairs (www.colorado.gov/cs/Satellite/DOLA-Main/CBON/1251595945321)
- Directories of Local Homeless Service Organizations (www.nationalhomeless.org/directories/directory-local-pdf)
- Community Resources – Partners In Housing (www.partnersinhousing.org/Resources.aspx)