

Violence, Stressful Life Events, and Behavior

Homeless youth are often exposed to violence, fear violent victimization, and may become the perpetrators of violence. The longer a person has been homeless, the more likely it is that he or she has been a witness to, a victim of, or a perpetrator of violence.³⁷ Homeless youth endure especially high rates of emotional, sexual and physical abuse in childhood. In one study of shelter-dwelling urban youth, more than half of respondents had experienced all three types of childhood maltreatment.³⁸ The same study found that 73% of homeless youth had been victimized by an intimate partner, and that 32% had themselves perpetrated intimate partner violence.³⁸ Homeless children experience more stressful life events than children who are continuously housed,³⁹ and children's expression of distress has been shown to be related to the cumulative count of negative life events as well as their mother's reported level of distress.⁴⁰

The longer a person is homeless, the more likely he or she is to be affected by violence. One study explored homeless youths' histories of exposure to violence, perpetration of violence, and fear of violent victimization, and the relationship of these ideas across demographic variables such as gender and age. Cumulative length of time homeless was positively associated with all violent exposure variables. Subjects who had been homeless three years or more were more likely to have witnessed violence; to have been victimized; or to have perpetrated violence than youth who had been homeless less than three months.³⁷ In one study, more than half of shelter-dwelling urban youth had experienced all three types of childhood maltreatment considered in the study: physical, sexual and emotional abuse. All three types of childhood maltreatment were more common among families that reported exposure to community violence.³⁸

Stressful life events can have cumulative and negative effects on homeless children. One study looked at the characteristics of homeless and low-income housed preschool-aged children to identify family and environmental determinants of their behavior. Findings showed that homeless children had more stressful life events in the past year; had more care and protection investigations; had poorer health, based on maternal report; had more hospitalizations; and scored higher on the externalizing behaviors scale (indicating frequency of "acting out" behaviors). Lifetime history of physical abuse and death of a childhood friend were also predictive of children's behavior.³⁹

A homeless mother's level of distress can deeply affect child behavior. Findings in one study showed that homeless mothers' reported levels of distress were strongly associated with more behavior problems among children, especially internalizing problems like anxiety, depression, and withdrawn behavior. Again in this study, the cumulative count of negative life events like death of a friend, witnessing violence, and frequent arguments between parents was positively associated with internalizing and externalizing problems in children. A child's history of physical or sexual abuse predicted externalizing problems but not internalizing problems, and housing status was associated with internalizing problems but not externalizing.⁴⁰ In a separate study that examined the prevalence, co-occurrence, and inter-correlations of self-reported psychosocial risk factors, housing instability had the highest proportion of pregnant

women scoring at high risk. Housing instability was significantly correlated with 11 other risk domains, including food insecurity, depression, and alcohol use.⁴¹

Multiple risks can also negatively impact educational status of homeless youth. One study used a developmental-epidemiological approach to examine the impact of type and amount of multiple early risks on educational outcomes across an entire second grade cohort of urban, public school students. Risks included biological birth risk, low maternal education, poverty, homeless experience, and child maltreatment. Findings showed that regardless of the type of risk, each additional risk contributed to poorer behavioral outcomes (e.g., learning behaviors and social skills).¹