Who Are the Homeless Families?  
Characteristics of Sheltered Mothers and Children

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INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1980s, alarming numbers of families have lost their homes and have turned to emergency shelters for refuge. Because of the overflow, many families have also been housed in dilapidated welfare hotels and motels. Based on a 29 city survey, the U.S. Conference of Mayors (1987) reported in 1987 that families comprise 34% of the overall homeless population, are the fastest growing subgroup, and are predominantly headed by women.

We may well be witnessing the “feminization of homelessness” (Bassuk, 1987a). Reflecting the remarkable increase of female-headed families in the general population—now estimated at one out of seven American families (Wilson, 1987)—70% to 90% of homeless families are headed by women (Bassuk, 1988b). The figures vary regionally, with the lower percentage in the mid-west and west and the higher in the east. The remaining families are headed by couples who generally become homeless after the man has lost his blue-collar job (Bassuk, 1988b).

The numbers of homeless families do not at first glance reflect the enormity of the tragedy since the figures do not account for individual

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family members as well as the life-long impact of homelessness. Homeless mothers are defined as those women who are pregnant or are on the streets with their children. Usually they have 2 to 3 children, the majority of whom are 5 years or less. The preschoolers are growing up in shelters or on the streets during their formative years without the emotional, social, or economic resources they need for basic development. Based on data from a descriptive study that we completed of 80 families and 156 children residing in 14 Massachusetts family shelters (Bassuk, 1986; Bassuk, 1987b) as well as relevant literature, this paper reviews what is known about homeless mothers and children.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MOTHERS

Demographics

The average age of most homeless mothers, regardless of the locale, is approximately 27 years (Bassuk, 1986; Dumpson, 1987; McChesney, 1986). Despite a widespread belief that homeless persons are overwhelmingly from minority groups, the distribution of families mirrors the percentage of poor persons in a given location; no group is spared the degradation of becoming homeless. In the overall Massachusetts sample, for example, most mothers are white. However, when the distribution of minorities was looked at regionally, the majority of those in Boston are black, while most suburban families are white (Bassuk, 1986). Information about rural homeless families is lacking.

Marital status also varies according to location, but this too most likely reflects the general ethnic composition of the region. The marital status of homeless mothers reflects the tendency for black women to never marry and for whites to marry, but to have high divorce rates (Bassuk, 1986; Garfinkel, 1986; Wilson, 1987).

Contrary to the common assumption that homeless persons are poorly educated, the Massachusetts data show that almost two-thirds of the mothers have at least a GED or high school education with more than one-fifth completing several years of technical school or college (Bassuk, 1986). Unfortunately, for these women, educational achievement did not translate into occupational skills, suggesting that other factors such as economic or emotional problems may be interfering with their capacity to work. Most homeless women had not worked for more than a month at a time or had never worked.

Given this profile, it has been assumed that homelessness is primarily a problem of teen mothers and that many are unable to work