Intervening with Homeless Youths: Direct Practice Without Blaming the Victim

Laura R. Bronstein, M.S.W.

ABSTRACT: Homeless adolescents present with an array of difficulties, being perhaps the neediest group of youths in the U.S. While policy and programmatic needs of this population are often discussed, their clinical needs can be overlooked for fear of “implied victim blaming”. This paper examines characteristics of homeless youths, diverse practice methods that have been applied to this population, and related theories. Three models of practice are described, with examples, as potentially applicable to individual and family intervention with this population.

Introduction

Homeless adolescents experience a staggering range of difficulties. They are perhaps the most vulnerable group of youths in the United States. Their needs demand attention at the macro level of policy and program development as well as at the micro level of day to day practice. Morse (1992) notes that while the policy and programmatic needs of this population are often addressed, their individual and family needs on a direct practice level are frequently overlooked for fear that they and their families will appear blamed for their troubles (p. 5). In conjunction with program development and policy initiatives, creative ways are called for to meet the daily challenges facing homeless youths. These teens are in desperate need of early intervention to prevent the downward spiral that characterizes acclimation to homelessness.

This paper looks at the unique characteristics of homeless youths...
and practice approaches that have been applied to work with this population. Noting that the field lacks approaches specifically designed for practice with homeless youths, this paper suggests an overarching paradigm, and identifies three models of practice applicable to homeless youths.

Characteristics of Homeless Youths: Who Are They?

Homeless youths are adolescents with “nowhere to turn,” as distinct from “runaways” who have a home to go back to (Kurtz, Jarvis & Kurtz, 1991; Shane, 1989). Within the category of homeless youths are two sub-groups that include youths on their own and teenage mothers. The first group, homeless youths on their own, often find homelessness and the violence of the streets a better alternative than their home situations. Typically they come from families of severe dysfunction, including histories of substance abuse, criminal involvement, unemployment, health and mental health problems, multiple domestic partners, domestic violence, overcrowded living quarters, and emotional/physical/sexual abuse. Once on the streets, it is not unlikely for homeless youths to abuse drugs and alcohol, and turn to prostitution and crime (Baum & Burnes, 1993). The second group, homeless teen parents, are a unique population because “they are both adult and child” (Baum & Burnes, p. 15). In delineating different patterns of poverty among homeless families, McChesney (1992) identifies mothers who are or who have been homeless teenagers as the neediest group among homeless families. They are generally “unable to participate in the legal market economy” (p. 251) due to their lack of work experience, few job-related skills and minimal education. They leave or are forced from homes characterized by the same difficulties as “youths on their own.”

Jencks (1994) observed that the increase in homeless youths parallels changing demographics of families in the U.S. Those born in the fifties and before, typically lived in two-parent families with two or more siblings and a good number of aunts, uncles and relatives. Many of the youths we see now come from families with one parent and one sibling. When these youths cannot look to their mothers or siblings for support, they have nowhere else to go. Extended families, a major resource for “runaways” or “throwaways” of the past, are not available for today’s homeless youths.

Within the two groups—youths alone and teen parents—numerous