

# An Inside Look At The Mental Health Epidemic Plaguing Homeless Youth

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Life in a shelter, exposure to violence, poverty, and inadequate health care all take a toll on homeless children — putting them in greater need of mental health services compared to their counterparts who live in more stable environments, a [new study](#) has confirmed.

Researchers at North Carolina State University compiled data on more than 300 homeless children between the ages of 2 months to 6 years who lived in 11 Wake County, NC-based shelters. Their long-term study found that 25 percent of the youngsters needed mental health services. These findings came on the heels of other reports that showed linkages between homelessness and well below academic and language skills for 5 and 6 year-olds.

“As a result of their exposure to those difficult life circumstances — combined with living in a shelter — homeless children are at a much greater risk of developmental delays, social and emotional problems, and problems at school,” Jenna Armstrong, co-author of the study and Ph.D. candidate at the university, [told MedicineNet.com](#). “[T]he scale of the problem is huge.” Nearly [2.5 million children](#) end up homeless in the United States, according to data collected by the National Center on Family Homelessness. In 2013, the homeless child population reached historic highs with youngsters in urban centers and rural areas of the United States finding “shelter” in the streets, in cars, campgrounds, or with family members in tight quarters for a short amount of time.

The above-average increase — [more than 8 percentage points](#) — in the homeless child population stems from government policies that have overlooked families, even while taking steps in connecting chronically homeless individuals and veterans with shelter. A significant number of homeless families are [headed by single women](#) who are victims of violence, [one-third](#) of whom have developed post-traumatic stress disorder. [More than half](#) of the women in these situations have depressive episodes while caring for their young children.

For children living in these situations, lack of stable housing, lack of sleep, hunger, and fear can [increase the production of cortisol](#), a stress hormone that alters young brains, during the developmental period of their lives. Homeless youth between the ages of 6 and 17 [struggle](#) with anxiety, depression, and withdrawal at a rate nearly 30 percentage points higher than other children in that age group. In school, homeless youth are [four times as likely](#) to have developmental delays in their speech, cognition, and social and motor skills. They also stand a greater chance of developing learning disabilities and repeating a grade because of extended absences, frequent school transfers, and lack of transportation. One in four homeless children also reported [eating less](#).

“We like to believe that education the great equalizer in our society. As long as you try hard you’ll have a chance to improve your situation but if you’re spending your night in a tent or in a car how are you going to succeed in school?” Rachael Myers, executive director of the Washington Low Income Housing Alliance, told a Washington state NBC affiliate. Myers is supporting a state bill that would provide affordable housing and other services to families dealing with homelessness and mental health issues that make it difficult for children to consistently attend school. With stalled education funding, however, the bill may not pass. More than likely, school is the last thing on the minds of a growing number of young people who are facing homelessness alone. For example, children transitioning into adulthood after stints in foster care report being homeless at least once, according to data compiled by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. Research has shown that history of physical abuse and delinquent behavior that developed as a result of trauma counts among the key causes of homelessness among foster children, struggling to find their way without a concrete plan for housing and financial assets.

In recent years, more LGBT children — a group that accounts for more than 30 percent of the homeless youth population — have found themselves on the streets after coming out to their family. Homeless LGBT youth have a greater risk of social stigma and discrimination because of their sexual orientation. They’re turned away from homeless shelters at a rate greater than that of their peers. Transgender youth, in particular, have a greater chance of experiencing physical harm, abuse, and exploitation on the streets and in shelters, factors that make them more likely to become depressed.

“Prevention and early intervention is the way to go,” David Murphey, a senior research fellow at the Child Trends research center, told The Youth Project, a media outlet that address public policy issues affecting youth, in 2013. “Taking a pro-active approach could prevent things for getting worse later, he said, encouraging listeners to learn the tell-tale signs of common disorders, speak out if they notice any, and extend help to young people who look as if they need a hand. Treatment that combines talk therapy with medication has been shown to be most effective, he said.

No matter the circumstance, the unaddressed physical and mental abuse that may have taken place during the period of homelessness can devastate children later in life. Homeless youth stand a greater chance of abusing substances, attempting suicide, participating in criminal activity, and most importantly becoming homeless later in adulthood.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says that parent and school administrators — people who are in contact with children for up to one-third of the day — play a unique role in recognizing the telltale signs of mental illness and connecting children with mental health care. In 2010, the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness adopted the Framework to End Youth Homelessness, an approach that proponents said will provide stable housing, education, and social-welfare programs for homeless youth.

“In contrast to common perceptions, homelessness is not just an adult phenomenon; youth are resorting to abandoned buildings, park benches, makeshift shelters, and staying with friends and sometimes strangers,” the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness wrote in the introduction of its 2013 report about the trauma of youth homelessness.

“Many of these youth have experienced significant trauma before and after becoming homeless. Often they face struggles across multiple aspects of daily life that contribute to their vulnerability,” the report continues. “At the same time, all youth have strengths, but youth experiencing homelessness often lack positive opportunities and supports to apply them. An effective strategy must account for the specific needs of adolescents and youth transitioning to adulthood and the role families can play in both the reasons for becoming homeless and the potential solutions.”