A Home for the Holidays: Spotlighting National Homeless Youth Awareness Month

Population Health Sciences

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November is best known for holiday cheer and giving thanks, but many are not aware that November is also National Homeless Youth Awareness Month. When we picture people experiencing homelessness we rarely picture young faces staring back. However, an estimated 2.5 million children and youth experienced homelessness in the United States in 2013, 38,000 of whom live in Pennsylvania. So while many children will spend Thanksgiving at home, millions may not.

In Philadelphia, as in many cities, identifying and engaging homeless youth populations can be difficult, especially considering that the majority of students experiencing homelessness live doubled-up with friends or family, as opposed to in a shelter or on the street. The People's Emergency Center (PEC), a family homeless housing agency in West Philadelphia, found that the number of high schoolers in Philadelphia who reported sleeping away from home with their families doubled from 2009 to 2011, while the number of unaccompanied youth sleeping away from home more than tripled in the same timespan.

Children who experience homelessness as infants and toddlers are especially at risk for adverse developmental and educational outcomes, likely because of exposure to emotional and environmental challenges during critical years of development. While the majority of children who experience homelessness with their families are age 6 or younger, most runaway youth are older teens ages 15 to 17. Adolescents experiencing homelessness face a multitude of disadvantages when it comes to their education and well-being. Homeless youth are more likely to be exposed to violence, engage in high-risk behavior, and to face multiple obstacles in accessing essential health resources. Federal laws, particularly the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, exist to provide pathways to equitable education, but a recent study found that less than half of homeless youth in grades 3 through 12 score proficient or above on state achievement tests. PEC also found that youth who reported having experienced homelessness in Philadelphia were at an increased likelihood of physical harm, poor mental health, and high risk sexual behavior.

Fortunately, a bill recently passed in Pennsylvania gives us a reason to give thanks this season. The bill expands access to Early Intervention Services for 6,000 homeless Pennsylvania infants and toddlers ages 3 and younger. Under this bill, infants and toddlers without permanent homes, a group that is at high risk for developmental delays, will now be eligible for developmental testing and tracking.

National Homeless Youth Awareness Month is an opportunity for us to take a look at the challenges faced by homeless youth to create policies and programs for those without homes, living in shelters, on the streets, and doubled up with family and friends. It is also a time to shine a light on the needs of this population through much needed research to examine its root causes.

To learn more about homeless children and youth and to find ways for health providers, policy makers, researchers, and advocates to get involved visit the National Trauma Child Traumatic Stress Network and The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia's Homeless Health Initiative.

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