

Web of Failure: The Relationship Between Foster Care and Homelessness

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The purpose of this project is to examine the connection between foster care and homelessness and to determine whether or not there is an over-representation of people with a foster care history in the homeless population. In order to examine this issue, the project used four sources of information: (1) existing research on the connection between foster care and homelessness; (2) data collected from organizations which serve homeless people and which gather information on their clients' foster care history; (3) data obtained directly from a sample of homeless people; and (4) case studies of people who are or were homeless and who have a foster care history. The principle findings of this study are as follows.

- There is an over-representation of people with a foster care history in the homeless population.
- Homeless people with a foster care history are more likely than other people to have their own children in foster care.
- Very frequently, people who are homeless had multiple placements as children: some were in foster care, but others were "unofficial" placements in the homes of family or friends.
- In addition, there were certain demographic factors which were revealed by the research.
- Those people with a foster care history tend to become homeless at an earlier age than those who do not have a foster care history.
- Homeless people who are white are somewhat more likely to have a foster care history than people who are Hispanic or African American.

- Childhood placement in foster care can correlate with a substantial increase in the length of a person's homeless experience.

The research did not find (nor did it examine) that foster care directly caused homelessness. To the contrary, most children who experience foster care do not become homeless as adults. Rather, the indication was that foster care has an impact on personal risk factors that may eventually result in homelessness. Among the findings were the following.

- The foster care system often fails to help children deal with the problems that result from circumstances which caused them to be removed from their homes (these circumstances include physical or sexual abuse; parents with alcohol or substance abuse illness; family dissolution; etc.). Foster care can also fail to help children deal with problems that arise from foster care placements in abusive homes or facilities.
- Alcohol and other substance abuse illnesses and mental illness play a significant role in the relationship between foster care and homelessness.
- Youngsters emancipated from foster care often lack the independent living skills that would allow them to establish a household.
- People who have experienced extensive foster care, particularly multiple placements, extended group home placements, or foster care in combination with multiple unofficial placements, may become better acculturated to institutionalized living than to living on their own.
- Young people who are emancipated from foster care and become homeless tend to lack the support networks that other people can rely upon in times of crisis.
- Children who are moved from home to home over an extended period of time (foster care and/or unofficial placements) learn to deal with problems by leaving them behind.

It is clear from this study that what happens to children has a lifelong impact on them. When you see a homeless adult, it is quite possible that they are homeless because of people and systems that failed them as children. In order to eliminate any contribution foster care may make to homelessness, the National Alliance to End Homelessness makes the following recommendations.

- A better job must be done of supporting and strengthening families (particularly those in crisis) in order to keep children out of the foster care system.
- Once children are in the foster care system, extraordinary measures should be taken to move them quickly into a permanent living situation (family reunification or adoption), taking all necessary steps to avoid multiple placements.
- If children have experienced multiple placements, a much more directed effort should be made to help them gain the skills and other resources necessary to move to successful independence.
- The service and housing needs of homeless parents with a foster care history should be met so that their stability is promoted and their own children are not placed in foster care.
- Extraordinary steps should be taken to avoid placing children in foster care solely because of their parents' homelessness. Other measures (such as housing, employment and/or training, and services) should be taken, first.

For full study, go to: <http://www.endhomelessness.org/content/general/detail/1285>