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Vikki C. Terrile
Queens Library

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Library Services to Children, Teens and Families Experiencing Homelessness

Vikki C. Terrile

Vikki C. Terrile is the Coordinator of Young Adult Services at Queens Library in New York. She received her Master's of Science in Library Science from the Palmer School of Library and Information Science at Long Island University.

Abstract

Families with children are one of the fastest growing homeless populations in the United States, but are often left out of public library discussions of services to the homeless. This article will explore the demographics and educational issues surrounding children and teens who are experiencing homelessness in order to make the case that library services specifically for them are necessary. It will also look at the role library programs and services for their parents can play in improving literacy skills within the family unit. In addition, the article will examine model library services to children, teens and families experiencing homeless gathered from librarians engaged in this work throughout the US.

Keywords: homelessness, libraries, children, teenagers, literacy

Introduction

Libraries, particularly public libraries, are no stranger to people who are homeless; in fact, it has become something of a pop culture joke, with references on the animated sitcom "Family Guy" and a movie based on an op-ed piece about homeless people in the library currently being made by Emilio Estevez. Even in library science journals and magazines, the vast majority of articles relating to libraries and homelessness have to do with problem patrons and policy issues. It may come as something of a surprise then, to discover that the average person experiencing homeless in America is nine years old and that families with children represent one of the fastest-growing segments of the homeless population.

Clearly, families, children and teenagers have information needs that may differ from those of chronically homeless adults, the people about whom so

much is written. While many libraries are currently offering services to help meet those needs, little has been written about them, or even about what exactly those needs are. This article seeks to synthesize research from library science, education and social policy to gain a better understanding of what the library's role might be to serve the unique needs of this growing population.

Literature Review: Overview

As A. Henning (2008) points out in her master's thesis for the library science program at Kent State University, most of the library science research on homelessness focuses on "problem patrons" and policy issues such as borrowing privileges and violations of conduct or behavior policies (such as using restrooms for shaving or bathing, or being asked to leave because of body odor). She adds that while many libraries are reluctant to take on what they feel is a "social services" issue, there is a continuum of programming and policies that ranges from antagonistic to welcoming and supportive.

In looking for research that relates specifically to library services to homeless young people and their families, it becomes immediately clear that there is a dearth of available information. The few articles available in library science journals are overviews of specific programs and outreach efforts, and are scattered across the last twenty five years of publications. Those articles were examined for this article, but in order to understand why library service to young people who are homeless is worth examining at all, one must first understand who these children and their families are.

Literature Review: Trends and Demographics

Although less visible than street homeless adults, families with children are the fastest growing segment of the homeless population. In 2007, families with children accounted for nearly a quarter of the total population of the homeless, resulting in approximately 1,200,000 children without permanent housing. Nearly three-quarters of US cities reported an increase in the rate of requests for emergency assistance by families with children between 2006 and 2007 and all of the cities surveyed by the US Conference of Mayors in 2007 expected that trend to continue into 2008 (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2008). According to the non-profit advocacy group Coalition for the Homeless (2007), 2007 saw the highest rates of family homelessness since the Great Depression, with the number of families in New York City shelters, for example, more than doubling since 1998. In a year, the number of children living in shelters in New York City increased by eleven percent. Advocacy

Terrile/ Library Services to Children, Teens and Families Experiencing Homelessness

groups expect at least two million children will be affected by the home foreclosure crisis, and many more will become homeless as landlords default on mortgages for apartment and other rental buildings (Gewertz, 2008). In addition, many young people are not counted as homeless because they are “doubling up” with other families and therefore do not receive the social services and non-profit support their peers in the shelter system may receive (Vissing, 2004). Most often correlated to poverty rather than directly to race or ethnicity, homelessness affects blacks and Latinos in disproportionately high numbers. For example, in New York City, roughly ninety percent of the people experiencing homelessness are black or Latino although they represent only fifty-three percent of the city’s total population (Coalition for the Homeless, 2007).

In addition to children and teens living within family units who are homeless, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in the US Department of Justice estimates in its most recent report (2002) that there are also 1,682,900 homeless and runaway youth in the US. Most of these youth are over age fifteen, and the number is equally divided between males and females (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2008). In New York State, for example, fifty-one percent of these unaccompanied youth were from the New York City metropolitan area, eighty-one percent were over age 16 and nearly sixty percent were female. Forty-three percent of the teens were black, compared to seventeen percent of New York State’s total population (New York State Office of Children and Family Services [OCFS], 2006).

A wide array of factors can result in teens running away or becoming homeless. Conflicts with parents (including youth being told to leave the home), sexual and physical abuse, teen pregnancy and issues related to a teen’s identification as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (GLBT) are all common reasons for youth to leave their living situation (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2008). The most frequently stated reasons runaway and unaccompanied homeless youth in New York State, for example, give for having left their previous living arrangement are a lack of independent living and other life skills, homelessness, or conflicts with parents or caregivers (OCFS, 2006). As evidenced by this study from New York State, teens throughout the country whose families are in financial crisis or homeless themselves may choose or be forced to separate from the family depending on the systems and policies in place and how they define “family.” Young people aging out of the foster care system are more likely to become homeless than other teens, become so at a younger age and for longer periods of time. Studies have shown that up to forty-five percent of teens seeking a spot in a shelter have either just been released from foster care or were released within the previous year (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2008).

For young people, experiencing homelessness can have long-term, often devastating consequences. Children who experience homelessness are in fair or poor health twice as often as their peers, and are more likely to suffer from asthma and have ear infections and stomach problems. They are also more likely to have speech problems. Children with unstable living situations are also far more likely than their housed peers to experience mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and withdrawal. They are twice as likely to be hungry, and four times as likely to experience developmental delays, both of which can have devastating long-term consequences. Homeless teens are more likely to suffer from severe depression and anxiety, as well as post-traumatic stress disorder, low self-esteem, and poor physical health. In addition, since these teens have few legal means to earn enough money to support themselves (particularly in urban environments with high costs of living) many turn to selling themselves for food, money or drugs. Thus, homeless and runaway teens are at greater risk for contracting AIDS or HIV-related illnesses (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2008).

Literature Review: Education and Literacy

In addition to the mental and physical health issues children and teens who are homeless face, their access to--and the quality of--education is strongly impacted. The 2008-2009 school year is already showing the devastating effects of the subprime mortgage crisis and the overall economic recession. Many school districts throughout the country are seeing a sharp increase in the number of students experiencing homelessness, building on increases that began at the end of the previous school year. The school districts in Clark County, Nevada (which includes the city of Las Vegas) and Albuquerque, New Mexico, for example, have seen the number of students who are homeless double already in the early months of this school year. By the second month of school, the Wichita, Kansas school district already had two-thirds the number of homeless students it had in all of the 2007-2008 school year (Gewertz, 2008).

Schools already struggling with state and local budget cuts are now finding themselves with increased transportation costs; the federal McKinney-Vento Act mandates that homeless children should stay in the school they were attending previously if at all possible, and that the school district then provide transportation for them, even if they are not currently living within the district's boundaries (Gewertz, 2008). Schools local to shelters also feel burdened by an increase in enrollment; although they are required to accept students from shelters within their boundaries, they can turn these students away claiming they have no open seats and may also be discriminatory towards the "shelter kids" if they do accept them. Even when the registration

Terrile/ Library Services to Children, Teens and Families Experiencing Homelessness

and transportation difficulties of students experiencing homelessness are resolved, they often face other obstacles. They may not have computer or internet access or reference books such as dictionaries to assist with homework questions. Not having school supplies or suitable clothes may also put children who are homeless at greater risk for ridicule and bullying by their peers (Vissing, 2004). Projects such as The Yellow School Bus Project in New Hampshire and New York City's Operation Backpack do a great deal to give students living in temporary housing the supplies they need to start the school year. Staying in school or trying to re-enroll, becomes prohibitively difficult for teens who are unaccompanied since they lack legal guardianship, and often proof of residency, means of transportation and access to their records (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2008).

Statistics consistently indicate that roughly half of the children who are experiencing homelessness are under age 5, putting them at greater risk for behavioral problems, literacy deficits and developmental delays (Noll & Watkins, 2003). Researchers have found in many different studies that "out-of-home placement experiences" (students living in a homeless shelter, institutional care, foster care, placement with relatives, or group home care) can hamper children's early literacy and is correlated with an increase in behavioral problems in school (Walker-Dalhouse & Risko, 2008). Among school-age children who are homeless, up to forty-three percent do not attend school and many others only attend sporadically, which translates to performance that lags behind their peers. In fact, students who are homeless are twice as likely to be held back a grade as their peers in stable living situations (Noll & Watkins, 2003). Within a year of becoming homeless, forty-one percent of children will attend two different schools, while twenty-eight percent will attend three or more schools; this constant upheaval leaves homeless children an average of four to six months behind their peers (Coalition for the Homeless, 2007). A recent report by the Center for New York City Affairs at The New School details the causes and effects of chronic absenteeism in New York City public schools. The report points out that high levels of school absences are most common in low-income neighborhoods and that two of the major causes of chronic absenteeism are "dislocations caused by eviction" and "traveling between homeless shelters" (Nauer, White & Yerneni, 2008, p. 1).

Studies have also found that up to seventy-five percent of children experiencing homelessness are performing below grade level in reading and that if individual teachers and schools are not equipped to effectively teach these students, additional deficits in their literacy skills and overall school achievement are likely (Walker-Dalhouse & Risko, 2008). Conversely, other research from the education field points out that good teachers working with students living in shelters or other temporary housing do not lower their

expectations for these students, but rather, are compassionate and flexible with the curriculum and classroom management, providing space in which these students can succeed (Landsman, 2006).

Although many homeless students struggle with gaps in their measurable literacy skills, Noll and Watkins (2003) point out that they often are highly skilled in other types of literacy. They argue that since they are living in an environment that often calls upon them to solve problems just to survive, students who are experiencing homelessness are often very skilled at making inferences and comparisons. Opportunities to integrate art (whether visual or performance) with literacy gives students who struggle with print literacy ways not only to express themselves, but to make connections between what they are learning and their own lives. Landsman (2006) agrees, explaining that through the use of creative and multidisciplinary approaches, teachers can provide students with a nurturing and supportive, though still demanding, environment that also provides them with some of the stability and consistency missing in their lives outside of school. By using a rich and complex curriculum that allows students' voices to be at the center of the classroom experience, and offering a safe place to discuss relevant real-life issues, schools can help students bridge the gap created by poverty and instability. Since students whose living situations are unstable often feel less in control of their lives than their peers, a pedagogy that gives students a voice in their schoolwork, as well as choices and different ways to become engaged leads to greater school success.

Many parents who are experiencing homelessness with their children are also struggling with literacy skills. New York State's guide to education for homeless adults includes a volume on family literacy, arguing that since adults and children in poverty are all at risk for less educational and job-related success in the future, teaching literacy skills to families in a way that "draws on the strengths of caring and concern within a family to foster each member's literacy skills" would be most effective (The University of the State of New York/New York State Education Department [SUNY/NYSED], 1995). Adult literacy programs, even without a specific family literacy focus, impact children's literacy by giving parents improved skills to be their children's first teacher (Celano & Neuman, 2001). The research that children's reading achievement correlates to their parents' (particularly mothers') income level, marital status and education recognizes that poor access to opportunities and resources is an important factor, since parents across socioeconomic levels have similar goals in mind for their children (Celano & Neuman, 2001). The optimal family literacy program addresses the separate educational needs of parents and children, provides strong early literacy education, offers opportunities for parents and children to learn and engage together, and provides parenting support and education. It is especially important because

Terrile/ Library Services to Children, Teens and Families Experiencing Homelessness

of the diverse experiences and backgrounds of family literacy program participants for educators to include the students in the creation of the curriculum and to focus instruction on the “real issues” of each class or group (SUNY/ NYSED, 1995).

D. Colon (personal communication, November 21, 2008), a Recreation Specialist with a New York City family shelter run by the Salvation Army, explains that the day-to-day experience of her clients closely echoes what is revealed in the literature. Most of the children who live in the shelter are not on grade level and about half have been able to stay in their previous school. Parents, particularly because of the work requirements necessary for placement by New York City into permanent housing, are most likely to need literacy, GED and job training programs; bilingual GED preparation programs are of particular need. Programs that offer night classes are essential since the residents are required to work during the day in order to qualify for some of the city’s assistance programs. Parents are also interested in attending parenting skills and health classes run by the social work staff. A meditation group is popular, as well.

The Role of Libraries

Supporting literacy for all people has been an important role for public libraries for much of their history. Libraries have often been seen as a place that people, particularly those who “need special assistance in developing literacy skills” can go to for access to a wide array of print and media resources, as well as professionals who are there to help them navigate those resources (Celano & Neuman, 2001). In addition, equality of access to information, services and materials has been a vital part of libraries’ mission and ethics, as evidenced by the American Library Association’s Policy 61: Library Services for the Poor. This document, adopted in 1990, details several objectives that relate directly to youth and families experiencing homelessness. In particular, policy 61.1.1 which supports “promoting the removal of all barriers to library and information services, particularly fees and overdue charges,” and policy 61.1.3 which supports “promoting full, stable, and ongoing funding for existing legislative programs in support of low-income services and for pro-active library programs that reach beyond traditional service-sites to poor children, adults, and families.” ALA’s Hunger, Homelessness and Poverty Task Force, part of the Social Responsibilities Round Table, expanded on Policy 61 by creating a list of ten practical things library staff can do to improve services to low-income library users. On the list are “8. Take another look at your library card registration policy to see that it does not exclude people living in temporary housing” and “9. Bring library programs to a temporary housing facility. Story times, book

discussions, and poetry readings are always popular outreach activities” (Hunger, Homelessness & Poverty Task Force, 2007).

Celano and Neuman (2001) cite research that shows library outreach to preschools significantly improved children’s vocabulary, as well as emergent literacy behaviors and skills, that early literacy experiences such as library story times “contribute significantly to children’s reading achievement” and that children who lack that exposure have a difficult time making up for the deficit. They argue that public libraries are particularly well-suited to provide children with the language-rich opportunities that help ready them for reading simply by offering the wide variety of materials and programs they do. Beyond the practical skill building that library programs for young people can provide, Norfolk (1995) points out that library programs in shelters help children who “not only need to believe in a positive future, but need to be prepared for that future. Books can be the answer to both of those needs.” Additionally, for families without the support network of extended family and community, parent/child library programs fill many gaps, providing advice, support and models of reading and other parenting skills (Celano & Neuman, 2001).

One way to gauge just how important the types of programs traditionally offered by public libraries are to people experiencing homelessness, is to note how frequently they are offered by providers other than local libraries. For example, in Corona, CA, where more than half of the homeless population is children, a high school student began a volunteer project that brought books to a local shelter and provided weekly homework help. One mother commented that having these services in the shelter rather than off-site at the local library meant she could put her toddler to sleep while her older child was tutored. Both the volunteer and local social service providers agreed that for many of the children living in the shelter, exposure to books and reading enrichment opportunities was new and something that offered them real hope for their futures (Johnson, 2007).

Similarly, in response to a report by a New York City Assemblyman detailing the poor education of young people in the city’s shelter system, R. Sinatra (2004), Associate Dean and Chair of the Department of Human Services at St. John’s University’s School of Education, recommended out-of-school time programs as a means to help these students overcome the achievement gaps caused by high absenteeism and other factors. Optimally, the programs would be held at the shelters, eliminating problems of transportation, particularly when students in the same shelter are attending different schools (as allowed under the McKinney-Vento Act), or at a central location. He cites the CampUs program in New York City, a partnership of After-School All-Stars (ASAS) of NYC, Inc., St. John’s University, and the NYC

Terrile/ Library Services to Children, Teens and Families Experiencing Homelessness

Department of Homeless Services, as an example of using a summer camp model to encourage children from city family shelters in reading, writing and computer skill activities. Not only did participants' English Language Arts scores increase, so did their own sense of themselves as readers, making students eager to get up early to attend the camp held at a local college.

At the shelter where she works, D. Colon (personal communication, November 21, 2008) actively seeks volunteer support in order to offer tutoring, job skills and enrichment programs for parents and children on-site. Volunteers from a local parochial high school provide one-on-one tutoring for children every day after school, and a local college runs a Big Buddy program on the weekend. A partnership with New York Cares, a non-profit volunteer placement agency, has resulted in multiple programs for the residents, everything from mock interviewing for parents, to an arts and crafts program for kids. Since these programs are held on-site, residents are more likely to participate.

Library science students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill worked with a local shelter to create an on-site lending library. The shelter director pointed out the importance of selecting books that "address the emotions felt by children and teens with a disrupted home life." In addition, since many parents were working to strengthen their own literacy skills, there needed to be titles at a level where they could read them to their children. The students opted to use a color-coding system to arrange the books by reading level, rather than by age, alphabetically or by the Dewey Decimal System. Realizing they wanted a system all the residents could understand and be comfortable using, they threw out traditional library organization and opted for something that worked well for the library's users (Pierce, 2005).

All of the programs described above, frequently provided by volunteers, are essentially library programs without the library. They speak strongly to the information needs of families and children experiencing homelessness and, in combination with the types of services in place at many libraries around the country, offer practical suggestions for how these services can be arranged.

Model Programs

A request for program summaries and information posted to several electronic library listservs resulted in information about a broad range of programs and services being provided to children, families and teens experiencing homelessness.

The DeKalb County Public Library in Georgia, which includes the city of Atlanta, has been offering Project Horizons since 1989, bringing library programs and services to shelters. Project Horizons includes paperback deposit collections at each shelter, as well as storytellers who visit for read-alouds and to model reading behaviors to parents (Norfolk, 1995). This long-running program has received numerous awards and is currently being funded through DeKalb County Public Library's Literacy Endowment Campaign, which seeks to fund literacy programs in perpetuity.

In Charleston, South Carolina, the Charleston County Public Library has been working with the Carolina Youth Development Center (CYDC), which, since 2006, provides housing, education and other services for youth who are, or are at-risk of being, abused or neglected. The partnership is facilitated through the Young Adult Services department and is run by M. Hermann (personal communication, November 20, 2008), Library Assistant V, who visits two of the residential settings to do book talks and library card registrations, works with teens to organize and improve a library in CYDC's career center, and runs a book club which originated from ALA's Great Stories CLUB. Hermann sees ten to thirty-five teens per visit, depending on the setting and program, and she has noticed both that the success of the program is definitely encouraging more circulation, and that the book club is providing a safe place for these teens to talk about some of the difficult issues in their own lives.

Youth service librarians at the Akron-Summit County Public Library in Akron, Ohio, have been partnering with Project Rise, an educational enrichment program of the local school district in ten Akron-area homeless shelters, since 2005. The library brings summer reading programs to the shelters and sees approximately 150 children and teens each year. K. Sutherland (personal communication, November 10, 2008), who worked with the project in previous summers, points out that the programs had consistently high attendance, as well as many requests from the children that the librarians return for more programs.

N. Hutchinson (personal communication, November 20, 2008), Regional Branch Services Director at Las Vegas-Clark County Library District explains that the Homework Help Center at the West Las Vegas Library, which opened in 2007, was created specifically to meet the needs of the area's homeless youth and teens who were at-risk of dropping out of school. In the year the Center has been open, twenty-eight hundred students have used its free online tutoring, computer lab, study spaces, and have worked with homework helpers.

Terrile/ Library Services to Children, Teens and Families Experiencing Homelessness

In August, 2003, the director of children's services at Los Angeles Public Library, started Camp LAPL, a pilot program in a camp format to introduce some of the city's many homeless elementary school children to the library as place, a resource with many different services, and of course, to the variety of arts and literature contained within the library's walls. Although Abramson (2003) initially did not distribute library cards to the campers, concerned that possible lost books and fines could prevent them from returning to the library, and that some of the children would not have the transportation to visit again, she was surprised that one of the parent chaperones on the first day of camp applied for a card for her child. At that point, Abramson opted to explain the application procedure to the parents and offered applications to anyone who wanted to apply. Campers who lived close to the library began coming in on their own before the end of the week-long program, excited about the vast number of "treasures" available to them free of charge. Most importantly, Abramson points out, they took that message back to the shelters and hotels where they were staying, encouraging other children to visit the library.

The Literacy Service of the Woodland Public Library in Woodland, California, began providing literacy education in an area homeless shelter early in 2008. Building on twenty-five years of successful adult literacy programs, Literacy Coordinator S. Bigelow (personal communication, October 23, 2008) and her staff were looking for a way to bring these programs to people experiencing homelessness since efforts to get them into programs at the library had not been successful. In the program's first three months, over 160 individual residents attended literacy classes, and the parallel children's education and homework program averages five children per session.

Library services for homeless children and families at the Santa Barbara Public Library System began in 2003 when librarians began including visits to a preschool for homeless children into their schedule of bilingual outreach services to Head Start and other local preschools, all of which were primarily serving Latino families. J. Rorick (personal communication, November 11, 2008), Youth Services Librarian, soon saw the need for book collections for teens who were experiencing homelessness or were in detention; this led to deposit collections at six locations in three towns. The preschool program has since added parenting workshops to the schedule; both programs are run by a male Outreach Technician, earning praise from the school for being able to provide a positive male role model for the children.

The New York Public Library (NYPL) has been offering library services to children and families experiencing homelessness since 1987. Outreach Services Specialist, Y. Bonitch (personal communication, November 13, 2008), explains that the earliest programs were at the request of a local Community

Board, as well as the city itself, which wanted to place a program that was no longer feasible at the Queens Library. This latter program is a partnership with New York Cares, a non-profit that matches volunteers with projects at sites around the city. This “Read-to-Me” program is a staple of New York Cares’ project calendar, where volunteers visit a family shelter to meet the children, then escort them to a local library for a librarian-led story time followed by one-on-one reading and other fun activities. This program sees over fifteen hundred children each year. NYPL’s Summer Storytime Program is a weekly reading program at several family shelters in the boroughs served by NYPL; after the read-alouds, children are given gift books and a performer is brought in for the last session of the summer. Over 275 children attend the storytimes each summer.

Neighboring library system, Brooklyn Public Library, also works with New York Cares to run the “Read-to-Me” program at three family shelters in the borough. Two of those programs, as well as other services to shelters are managed through the library’s The Child’s Place for Children with Special Needs. C. Banks (personal communication, November 20, 2008), the Child’s Place Supervising Librarian, and her staff provide parenting workshops, class visits to one shelter’s on-site day care center, and traditional library service through the “children’s library on wheels,” the Kidsmobile. Local branches have also begun partnerships with shelters in their neighborhoods, providing library cards, summer programs and other services. The programs through The Child’s Place alone reached over 425 children in 2007, and while Brooklyn Public Library does not track measurable outcomes, Banks and other staff members have noticed an increase in library use by the children and families they see at their outreach visits.

Conclusion

Based on the research, it is clear that people of all ages who are experiencing homelessness can only benefit from the types of programs and services public libraries already provide in-house. In particular, early, family and adult literacy programs, print and media rich experiences, and programs that combine literature with other art forms are all proven ways to engage participants and improve their skills.

One of the biggest obstacles to bringing these programs to shelters and other temporary housing locations may be the same thing that has left so many families homeless: the recession. Libraries are struggling to keep their doors open, to be able to continue purchasing new materials and to keep up with ever-evolving technology; adding a new slate of outreach services may seem like nothing more than a pipe dream. Clearly, it is possible to do many of the

Terrile/ Library Services to Children, Teens and Families Experiencing Homelessness

programs outlined above with little more than creative arrangement of staff schedules; many programs survive through a healthy volunteer program. What the model programs all have in common is a commitment to making these services a priority, recognizing what the possible long-term effects of not doing anything could mean, not just for individual children and families, but for communities--and their libraries--as a whole.

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Terrile/ Library Services to Children, Teens and Families Experiencing Homelessness

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