Executive Summary
Fostering Resiliency in African-American School-Age Boys Experiencing Homelessness

Report on literature related to race, gender, and homelessness

The People's Emergency Center (PEC) housed 376 young boys and male teens and almost 400 families in fiscal years 2011 through 2013 (July 1, 2010 – June 30, 2013). During this time span, staff noticed that the boys and young men living in PEC's emergency, transitional, and permanent housing programs were experiencing disproportionate challenges with mental health, academic performance, interaction with authority figures, and positive relationships with adult males. Based on these observations, staff asked the question:
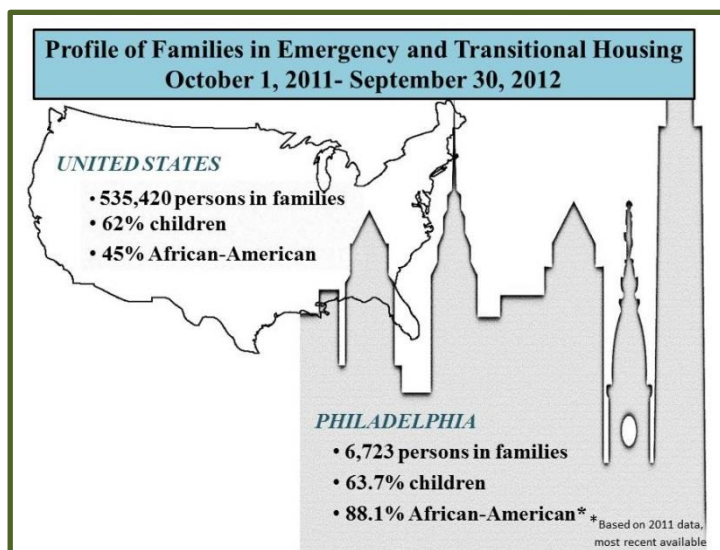

How do messages and perceptions around race and gender affect youth experiencing homelessness, and what can we do to support the needs of African-American male youth living at PEC during critical stages of development?

To help answer that question, this report summarizes current research related to race, gender and homelessness. This report serves two purposes for PEC staff and for other homeless service providers:

1) To deepen our understanding of our children's specific needs; and
2) To discuss the implications this information has on the services we provide.

While this investigation found no research on the compounding impact of race, gender, and the experience of homelessness on childhood development and achievement, we know that African-American boys and young men experiencing homelessness face a myriad of risks. It is essential that we examine these risks not only to better understand the challenges, but also to find opportunities to provide support and protect children who are often invisible to service providers.

Profile of Families in Emergency and Transitional Housing October 1, 2011- September 30, 2012

UNITED STATES
- 535,420 persons in families
- 62% children
- 45% African-American

PHILADELPHIA
- 6,723 persons in families
- 63.7% children
- 88.1% African-American* *Based on 2011 data, most recent available

It is important to understand that context matters – an individual's behavior and development is influenced by the environment around him/her, including relationships, institutional policies and even historical legacy. For any agency that serves school-age young boys and male teens, this report can offer a variety of perspectives on how to foster the resiliency these children have, and support the challenges they face. The depth of these issues is complex, but at the core is a very simple concept: every child has **the right to be a child.**

What do we know?

In addition to this report on race, gender and housing, PEC is conducting an analysis of PEC's internal data, surveys with PEC staff, as well as focus groups and personal interviews with PEC residents. This information will help PEC staff to take into account broader research, local context, and individual feedback to identify the specific needs of the boys living at PEC (Thomas & Stevenson, 2009; Fantuzzo et al., 2012).

The references below direct readers toward the full report so that they can easily pick out information that is applicable to their work. This investigation did not find specific research exclusively addressing the needs or experiences of African-American boys who experience homelessness. It is a survey of literature related to race, gender and housing status for children/youth, and is not meant to be all inclusive.

We can estimate that in 2012 approximately 1,800 African-American male youth accessed emergency or transitional housing in Philadelphia. While often invisible to service providers, understanding the risks associated with race, gender, and the experience of homelessness offers opportunities to provide targeted support for African-American boys experiencing homelessness.

This section covers the importance of socio-emotional skills; the effects of racial discrimination, particularly on boys; the importance of peer support; and the concept that "tough" behavior can be a mechanism to cover up feelings of vulnerability, particularly among African-American teen boys.

This section addresses the complications of parenting style and behavior in the context of homeless housing, racial socialization practice, and research around fatherhood as it relates to race, housing and family structure. Parenting practice is determined not only by the individual, but also by structural factors such as housing rules, neighborhood social climate, family structure, and the relationship between two parents. Parenting behavior may also affect boys differently than girls.

This section addresses how familial and neighborhood factors (such as the nature of family activities, poverty, unemployment and neighborhood social cohesion) can effect children's behavior, emotional health and school outcomes. While high-stress environments and cultural disconnects can pose risks for children, factors such as family support, school attachment and community engagement can also mediate these risks.

The section discusses the importance of the legacy of discriminatory policies in this country, as well as the current theory that race is so important to everyday life that black and white children's experience is too different to compare. This section also addresses the importance of culturally competent and open spaces where young people of color can feel safe to express themselves without fear of being discredited or questioned.

Where do we go from here?

Based on the literature, there are four main points that relate to social service environments:

1. Adaptability of service environments: The adaptability of service environments is essential to providing supportive services to children/youth of varying backgrounds, home environments and lived experiences. Children's behavior, coping mechanisms, and learning needs are the result of individual reactions to multiple environmental factors, and supporting learning-related skills should be emphasized (Mendez et al., 2002; Matthews et al., 2010). Adaptable service environments also relate to creating safe spaces where young people feel secure in expressing themselves and explore confusing emotions without fear of being discredited or questioned (Howard, 2008; Cassidy & Stevenson, 2005).

2. Serving the whole family: Providers could re-examine how they choose to define "family." Family supportive services could be extended to include:

- Nonresidential fathers;
- Significant others;
- Extended family;
- Godparents; and
- Other adult role models (coaches, neighbors, pastors, etc.)

One study suggests that the quality of the paternal relationship is more influential on the child than whether or not the father lives in the home (Salem et al., 1998). While residential status tends to predict father involvement (Thullen, Henly, & Hans, 2012), focusing on supporting relationships with positive male figures could be an effective way for organizations to address this issue within their capacity.

3. Provide context-specific services: Populations are so often defined by one or two characteristics, such as race or gender, without recognizing the many layers that shape lived experience and individualization. As previously discussed, structural limitations affect the environment within which a child receives services. Local and organizational context has an effect on services, and should be taken into account by getting direct input from staff and clients.

4. The need for partnerships: Temporary homeless housing offers an opportunity to provide meaningful services, but presents structural limitations because stays in emergency and transitional housing are often very short (at PEC the median length of stay in emergency housing is a little more than 2.23 months). Partnerships with community organizations that do complementary work, such as mentoring, community development and youth leadership work, could be a cost effective way to provide holistic support for boys living in homeless housing, and beyond housing stays. Partnerships could also give boys opportunities to build connections in the community, and expand their social networks.

About Us:

People's Emergency Center nurtures families, strengthens neighborhoods, and drives change. We are committed to increasing equity and opportunity throughout our entire community.

Leigh Wilson authored this work. Ms. Wilson is an Emerging Leader Fellow supported by the Stoneleigh Foundation working at PEC.

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