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## Homeless Children Having Children

Yvonne M. Vissing  
*University of New Hampshire - Main Campus*

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# Homeless Children Having Children

*Yvonne M. Vissing, Ph.D.*

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*Homeless teenagers who have babies pose a significant population of concern for those in health and human services. This article explores demographic, structural, and economic changes for homeless young and single-parent families. It proposes that their homelessness is due to these barriers and the problems that result. Case studies illustrate the process of troubled teens becoming homeless women with babies. Policy recommendations for assisting these youngsters are offered.*

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**W**hile the term “homelessness” engenders stereotypes of urban bag ladies and skid row bums, there is another group of homeless that is more invisible and vulnerable — homeless teenagers who are having babies. These sexually active teenage “children” have babies and experience all the challenges of adulthood without the developmental, financial, educational, or social advantages of that role. As a result, their ability to fulfill the roles of successful parent and employee are significantly jeopardized. Their personal problems are exacerbated by their youth, social, educational, and economic obstacles, and dysfunctional homes. Because these teenagers are considered neither child nor adult, they struggle without the privileges of either status but with the burden of both, as children developmentally who are carrying out adult responsibilities.

The teenagers portrayed in this article endured social and personal problems for some time before they became homeless. In every case, they demonstrated remarkable strength in handling adverse personal and social situations. In each case, had social intervention been accessible to them, their homelessness would not have resulted.

Yet these children having children consistently found themselves falling through the cracks in the social service delivery system. Assistance typically provided to children was not available to the teens who were older than fifteen. Since they have not been emancipated (to be emancipated requires that their parents sign forms to indicate the child is “independent”), the homeless teens did not qualify for many forms of adult financial assistance.

*Yvonne M. Vissing, adjunct professor at the University of New Hampshire and Salem State College, is director of Community Organization and Child Advocacy Associates.*

I supply the number of homeless children and families, identify problems for young and single-parent families, and discuss how these problems contribute to homelessness. Case studies that illustrate the process from being a teen with troubles to being homeless with a baby are included. I conclude with policy recommendations for assisting this homeless population.

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### **Data Sources**

The case studies presented here were obtained in two concurrent studies. One profiled homeless students for the New Hampshire State Department of Education,<sup>1</sup> while the other was part of a University of New Hampshire sociophotography course, "Being Homeless Through the Eyes of a Child." These studies afforded detailed interviews with homeless children, along with photographic illustration.

In both projects, the homeless children were from New Hampshire. While most of them lived in cities, the cities were small (50,000 or less). All the teenage subjects had middle- or lower-middle-class backgrounds and had lived in homes their parents had owned or rented for extended periods of time. None had been homeless until the past year or two. All of them resented being called homeless, preferring to see themselves as living independently. The subjects were interviewed in their own environment about the cause of their homelessness and its social and psychological impact on their lives.

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### **Homeless Families and Children**

Homeless families and children, who were 10 percent of the homeless population in 1980, today constitute at least a third of the national homeless population.<sup>2</sup> Families are the fastest growing subgroup of the homeless.<sup>3</sup> In some cities, more than half the homeless are families.<sup>4</sup>

The majority of homeless family members are children who are spending their formative years on the streets without the basic resources necessary for healthy development. Most of these children are five years old or younger.<sup>5</sup> More than 100,000 children are homeless on any given night.<sup>6</sup> A U.S. Department of Education report, based on state estimates, asserts that annually there are 220,000 homeless school-age children. But the National Coalition for the Homeless estimates at least twice as high a figure of homeless children.<sup>7</sup>

The National Academy of Sciences<sup>8</sup> has termed the growing phenomenon of homeless children as "nothing short of a national disgrace that must be treated with the urgency such a situation demands." Without elimination of homelessness and the resultant health risks and concomitant problems, the desperate plight of homeless children, the suffering, and the needless deaths of homeless Americans will continue.

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### **Challenges for Young Families**

Both single parents and young two-parent families are in "extraordinary trouble" — trouble that can lead to their becoming homeless. Since the early 1970s, young families have suffered a frightening cycle of limiting earnings, decreasing numbers of people marrying, a near doubling of birth rates among unmarried women, increasing numbers

of single-parent families, falling incomes (down 25 percent from 1973), and skyrocketing poverty rates.<sup>9</sup>

Young workers, of whom there are 20 million non-college-bound sixteen- to twenty-four-year-olds, suffer extraordinarily high unemployment rates: 6.8 percent for whites and 32.4 percent for blacks. Their actual income is and has been in steep decline for more than a decade. Males aged twenty to twenty-four earn fully one-quarter less than the identical age group did thirteen years earlier, earning \$9,027 in 1986.

Incomes of families headed by twenty-five-to-thirty-four-year-olds rose faster than others' between the late 1940s and early 1970s, but since the early 1970s, have fallen farther behind other age groups. Much of this decline is due to plummeting earnings of high school graduates; it has put home ownership beyond the reach of many.<sup>10</sup>

Young families have borne the weight of this economic dislocation. The real median income of families headed by someone under twenty-four fell 27 percent from 1973 to 1986. Their ability to purchase homes also declined sharply, with ownership among married household heads under age twenty-five falling from 39 percent to 29 percent between 1973 and 1986.<sup>11</sup>

Between 1974 and 1986, the proportion of married twenty-to-twenty-four-year-olds living with their spouses plummeted by half, from 39 percent to 21 percent. The percentage of males of that age able to support a family of three above the poverty level dropped by a quarter, from 58 percent in 1973 to 24 percent in 1986. The rate of decline among blacks in the same age group was more than twice as great — a full 55 percent.<sup>12</sup> The result is an increase of single parents, who are typically female.

Single mothers find themselves systematically prohibited from earning adequate incomes. While women bear children and are expected to care for them, they earn 60 percent of what their male counterparts earn in the workplace.<sup>13</sup> One of two female householders earns less than 50 percent of the median wage.<sup>14</sup> The pay gap between men and women has not improved for women; in 1986, women made 64 cents to a man's dollar — exactly the same gap working women faced in 1955. By 1988, women with a college diploma were making 59 cents to their male counterparts' dollar.<sup>15</sup> Even if they are able to find an appropriate job, it takes 1.7 wage earners to reach what the government defines as "middle income."<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, there is no nationally subsidized quality day care program, so mothers are constantly struggling with maintaining a balance between work and child care.<sup>17</sup>

One parent must work forty hours a week at \$5.40 per hour for fifty-two weeks a year in order to earn \$11,200, the current poverty line for a family of two adults and two children.<sup>18</sup> It is virtually impossible to pay for quality child care, adequate housing, and meet the rising costs of food, clothing, and transportation. Many of these jobs have no benefits, thus health care becomes an additional burden for these families. Given the extraordinary costs that young and single parents must confront, it is no surprise that many cannot meet the debts and become homeless.

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### **Poor Young Families Can Become Homeless Families**

Homelessness does not typically occur as a sudden single "event"; rather, it is the result of a variety of personal and structural factors that go awry over time.<sup>19</sup> A young family's financial and child care struggles, coupled with a depressed economy that has few available jobs for the unskilled and uneducated, puts them at high risk



for becoming homeless. This is especially true for those who do not have a strong social network to help them.<sup>20</sup>

According to the Children's Defense Fund,<sup>21</sup> a typical poor family with children spends 70 percent of its income for housing, leaving them with \$3.49 a day for all other expenses. Between 1970 and 1989, the proportion of children living in doubled-up households rose by 42 percent. Federal funds for low-income housing were cut by more than 80 percent during the 1980s, while the number of poor households in need of assistance rose dramatically. Only about one in four poor households now receives any housing assistance at all.

Only 6.3 percent of all single-parent families were able to afford payments for their own home in 1987, down more than half from 14 percent in 1973. As a result, the number of young, single-parent renter households nearly doubled. It is estimated that these young families would have had to pay 81.1 percent of their total income to afford decent rental housing in 1987, up from 46 percent in 1974. In 1986, 32.6 of every 100 families headed by a person under twenty-five was poor, triple the rate for all American families in 1986 and more than double that of 1976.<sup>22</sup>

With financial problems come personal problems. Sometimes personal problems may cause financial problems, but more often financial problems beget an avalanche of personal disaster. Young families do not have the equipment to survive such calamity. As Woody Guthrie left his wife and children during the Depression when he could no longer support them, countless families break apart today because of financial and personal duress. This leaves young women alone to care for their children as best they can.

Hundreds of thousands of new "families" are begun by single teenage girls each year.<sup>23</sup> For these new mothers the responsibilities of child care, combined with limited educational and economic mobility, virtually assure that a state of poverty will result. In addition, conditions that contribute to poverty among both men and married women — lack of education, inadequate job skills, poor health, racism, and lack of job opportunities — are exacerbated for single women.<sup>24</sup>

Which families become homeless most frequently? At the 1989 national conference on Health Care for Homeless Mothers, Children, and Youth, it was found that the majority of homeless families consist of single women and their children. Mothers of homeless families tend to be young, ranging from fourteen to fifty, with a median age of twenty-nine. Over half gave birth to their first child by age twenty, and one-fourth became mothers by age seventeen. The average size of the families was two to three children.

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### **Homeless Teenagers Who Have Babies**

The homeless population of most concern here is that of children having children. For a teen, to be pregnant or parenting is a crisis. To be homeless is a crisis. When these problems occur together, they exacerbate each other. Both conditions increase the risk of a poor birth outcome. While pregnancy and parenthood heighten a teen's need for health care and other services, homelessness reduces the ability to gain access to these services. For teens who have not completed high school, have poor employment skills, and are not socially, psychologically, or financially "mature adults," parenthood provides another obstacle for their achievements.

The Shelter Committee of the Illinois Caucus on Teenage Pregnancy identified several subgroups of homeless pregnant girls.

- Runaways and throwaways who have become pregnant since leaving home; some may have run from foster care. These young people are often reluctant to seek help from public agencies due to their concern that custody of the child may be taken away.
- Teens from relatively stable homes who are forced out because of their pregnancy, or might have moved out to be with a boyfriend and then been deserted.
- Teens whose already troubled families cannot bear the additional stress or expense of another child. Many of these teens and babies move from family member to friends and often do not come into contact with any service system.

The National Health Care for the Homeless Project found that pregnancy rates sharply distinguished homeless girls from girls nationally; 14 percent of homeless girls thirteen to fifteen became pregnant compared to 1 percent for "housed" girls of the same age; for girls sixteen to nineteen, the pregnancy rate difference is 31 percent for homeless and 9 percent for nonhomeless girls, respectively.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, homelessness can be seen as a contributing factor to teen pregnancy. Once homeless with children, a teenager confronts escalating problems.

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### **Sexuality, Pregnancy, and Homelessness**

In our studies, teenagers who become homeless were found to have had chronically troubled family lives. The most commonly cited problem leading to teen homelessness in the New Hampshire studies was the ongoing parent-teen conflict, which was exacerbated by the parents' financial problems. Because of these problems, the relationship between parent and child became so strained that the teenager often felt unloved. Parents who attempted to use coercive physical or verbal means to control the teen's behavior often lacked the skill to convey their concern for their child. As a result, the teen became increasingly marginal to the home, seeking outside sources of support. When their external sources of support were deemed unacceptable by the parents, the teens and parents became further alienated. One problem fed on another until every incident became volatile and the teens were forced from the home.

The girls who became homeless were often looking for somebody, anybody, who might give them love and protection. In the study of school-aged children, it was found that many estranged teenage homeless girls looked for a Prince Charming who would sweep them up and whisk them away from their misery. The girls typically became sexually active as a way to maintain relationships that they hoped would keep them from being out on the streets alone.<sup>26</sup>

The four categories of teens who were forced out of the home to become homeless in the New Hampshire Case Profiles of Homeless Children study were (a) children who were kicked out of the house and not allowed to return; (b) children who were pushed out of the house and probably could return if either the parent or

child would modify their behavior (but neither will); (c) children who were either pushed out or left who would like to return, but cannot go back; and (d) children who left the house voluntarily and refuse to return.<sup>27</sup>

In all four categories, had the family received appropriate intervention, the teenagers may not have become homeless. Once homeless, the risk of pregnancy for girls skyrockets. Once pregnant, the ability of the girl to provide economically for herself diminishes.

The progression of homelessness begins with family conflict that fragments the family members. Once alienated teens are pushed out of the household and forced to "live independently," they find themselves in need of someone who can care for them. In their search for physical and emotional security, they may find themselves sexually active, with pregnancy a likely outcome. Babies pose significant pressures on any family, and are especially problematic for young people, who in many ways are still children themselves. Homeless teens do not have access to the resources that would enable those who are more socially and financially secure to get through this time with fewer problems. Even relatively secure male-female relationships can become strained when babies come; pressures are compounded when social, housing, educational, and financial strains are added. If a girl doesn't start out as a single mother, she may find herself one when all the stressors prove too much for the couple relationship.

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## Case Studies

The following steps illustrate young women who are in various stages of this homeless progression.

### *Family Conflict, Alienation, Homelessness*

Kristen's parents were divorced when she was eleven, whereupon she and her mother lived satisfactorily together. Once her mother remarried, life became more difficult for Kristen. She and her mother fought all the time, and Kristen felt that nothing she did was okay. "They seemed to think I was so bad, but I really didn't do much of anything." The conflict between them escalated over the years. Staying with her biological father was not a realistic option for Kristen, because she did not approve of his new wife, "who is just a couple years older than me."

Kristen did her best to stay away from home by holding down two part-time jobs and attending high school. Eventually, she decided she could not stand it anymore and moved in with a boyfriend. That situation "didn't work too well." She has moved from living with one boyfriend to another, in hopes that one will marry her and make her life better. She has not applied for any financial aid from social service agencies, because "all the kids like me tell me that I won't qualify. They tell me the workers ask all kinds of questions and then don't give you nothing. I'm better off trying to handle things myself."

### *Maybe . . . If I Sleep with Him . . .*

Elizabeth became homeless because her father disapproved of her friends and lifestyle and threw her possessions into the street. He put all her clothes and personal belongings in a pile on the front lawn and set them on fire. With only the



clothes on her back, she was told to "get the hell out of here, and don't you ever come back." People were good about giving her their extra clothes, but no one gave her underwear or shoes that fit. No one even thought to ask what she needed most, so Elizabeth was forced to ask the school counselor (whom she did not know) if there was any way she could get an extra set of underwear. Her school counselor contacted thirty-five social service organizations to find a place for her, but for a variety of reasons, Elizabeth did not qualify for assistance. Therefore, taking care of herself is "the best option I've got."

In the past six months, she has lived in eight different places. She has lived in houses and trailers, with friends and alone. She lives with some friends for a couple of weeks, then has to find a new place. Often these friends are males. The longest she lived with one boyfriend was a month. Elizabeth currently lives with another boyfriend, his parents, and his two siblings. She has lived there for two weeks. She is sexually active with him and thinks he treats her "bad," but she tolerates him because she has nowhere else to go. She uses no contraception and depends on her boyfriend to do what is right. "I'm very embarrassed about my situation and I always try to hide it from the other kids. It's really not my fault, but I feel guilty." While staying with him is "bad," she has no place else to go.

### *If We Love Each Other . . .*

Heidi and Joe met in the fall of 1989 at a Florida high school. By Halloween they were serious about each other. Heidi was living with her mother and stepfather in a home where there was more bickering than love. Joe was living with his mother and her abusive boyfriend, whose loud arguments often turned physical when they were drunk. And that was most of the time, he said.

Both teenagers wanted out of these problematic families as much as they wanted to be together. Joe called his father in New Hampshire and told him about the problems he and Heidi were experiencing in Florida. His father agreed to let him move north, and an uncle paid his plane fare. Heidi took a less direct route to New Hampshire. She bounced around a couple of places in Florida after she moved out of her mother's house. Then she moved to New York to live with her grandparents. This was a calculated move because no one in her family wanted her to go to New Hampshire to be with Joe. She wasn't there a month when Joe drove there to take her to New Hampshire. His parents had agreed she could live with them. For the first time, things appeared to be falling into place. They thought they would finally live in what was a more stable home where they could finish their schoolwork and earn high school diplomas.

Heidi got pregnant. "After that, things got real uncomfortable. We knew the rule about no sex in the house. We goofed. But we never thought it would come to this," Heidi asserted. She was told she had to move. A teacher at the high school, who taught classes for pregnant teens, knew of her troubles and contacted the homeless shelter. This solution solved her housing problem, but posed severe relationship problems. Joe was put in a situation: "I felt torn. What do I do? Go with the woman I loved (and become homeless) or stay with the family I loved? What family do I go with?"

They lived in the shelter from March through high school graduation in June. Heidi, the more accomplished of the two in the classroom, is generally an A student.



She was given an outstanding achievement award for her work in her Law II class. Joe is an average student, although he said he enjoyed school much more now than he did when troubles at home dropped education off his list of priorities. "I love [school] now," he stated.

At the shelter they sleep in bunk beds, and their expenses are covered by city welfare, food stamps, and two jobs that must be part time to fit around their full-time school days. Medicaid pays the medical bills. They have \$400 in the bank. Without a car, they are dependent either on their own two feet to get them around or on the generosity of friends for a lift. They always offer to help pay for gas.

Both Joe and Heidi said they feel far older than their age. They seldom have time to be "kids," but did make plans to go to the high school prom. Heidi found a dress at a used clothing store for \$50, and Joe bought the \$20 prom tickets. Instead of going out to eat before the prom, they are eating at the shelter. "I would have liked all the extra stuff for her," Joe stated. "Fancy restaurant, limo, and all the fun stuff that a lot of my friends are doing. But it's too expensive."

After graduation, they planned to move back to Florida. They are going to Heidi's mother's house; this time Heidi is confident things will be better. "This baby's changed a lot in my family. It's brought my family closer together." While Heidi goes to live with her mother, Joe will fly to Michigan to begin a five-year hitch in the navy. He chose the service because of the instant paycheck it will provide his young family and for the credits he will receive toward college tuition. After Joe is out of boot camp, after the baby is born, after he's assigned to a base, Heidi will join him. "We're banking on the fact that the navy will be the start of the end of our struggle," Joe stated.

Both teenagers get angry at the people in their school who seem to take money for granted, and for those who characterize people on welfare as shiftless and exploitative. "There are people who don't care and who don't want to try," they admit. "But then there's people like us. We'd do anything to get out of [the homeless shelter]," according to Joe. "People should open their eyes and see that the homeless aren't just the people you see on the streets and in doorways." "There are a lot of people out there with a lot of different reasons for being without a home," said Heidi.

### ***Homeless Once, Twice — What Next?***

Randi's father molested her when she turned twelve. "I believe he was devastated because he lost a good job and all his money for some scam his friend talked him into. He was never the same after that. Our family was happy and good. Then this happened. He got more unhappy, and he started hitting on me. My mom never believed [he was sexually abusing me]." But the school counselor did, and Randi was put into a group home where "I didn't want to be at all. The kinds of stuff they made you do there was ridiculous. So I started acting up to get what I wanted. I wasn't gonna get anything any other way. Finally, they kicked my ass out, said they'd had enough of me, that they didn't care where I went." The group home packed her bags and put her out at five one night. "I was free! But I had nowhere to go, and bummed around here and there for a while.

"Then Billy and I got together. He worked some and I had a [Social Security] check, and we got an apartment together. I quit school and we partied. Then I got pregnant. Billy stayed around for a while; he was good to me. But he lost his job and couldn't find another. He'd fix supper for me when I came home from work 'cause

I'd be too tired. I was a clerk and on my feet all day, pregnant. Then baby came, and I couldn't work and keep the baby too. We had no money, so Billy left.

"After he left, I tried to keep my place by taking in a girlfriend as a roommate. But I came home one day and found she left, and took most of my things. I had no money and no [house furnishings] anymore, so I had to move back in with my parents.

"My dad made it real clear that I could stay if I would be 'available' for him. He tried to put the moves on me, and 'cause I wouldn't, he threw me down the stairs. My mom heard us fall and pulled his hands off my neck in time. Yeah, I could go live there, but who in the hell would want to? That's why I am here at the shelter. I am blacklisted in this city because I couldn't pay my rent back when Billy left me. No landlord will rent to me. I got no savings for a deposit, and I don't have enough schooling to get me a good job. [Social services] are seeing if they can get me adult aid, but my dad won't emancipate me [so I cannot qualify for assistance]. I am trying so hard to be a good mother to my baby, but I need help. I can only stay at the shelter two more weeks. What then for my baby and me? You tell me."

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### **Recommendations for Interventions**

The teen families portrayed in this article did not have to become homeless. There were logical points for intervention, as follows:

#### ***Family Conflict Resolution***

The conflict teens experienced with their parents is not dissimilar to that experienced by countless other teens. However, for those who became homeless, there appeared to be no negotiation, no mediation, only unyielding boundaries set by both parent and teen. The demands of each became increasingly unacceptable to the other, which resulted in the teens being kicked out, pushed out, or leaving voluntarily. The families did not have the personal skills to salvage the parent-child relationship, nor were outside agents typically sought to assist them.

Once a teen is out of the home, it is difficult for both parent and child to find face-saving ways to bring the teen back into the family. Neither party can back down without admitting fault. There is also the fear that a teen who asks to come home would be rejected again.

I've had enough. I want to go home. But they don't want me back, and I don't know how to make them want me. I've picked up the phone a hundred times to call them; sometimes I do, and then I hear his voice. I can't talk. My throat closes up, and I hang the receiver up.

Therefore, conflict resolution is important to preventing teen homelessness in the first place, but it is also an important vehicle for the reconciliation of homeless teens and their families. Family conflict resolution training should become a regular part of high school instruction, so that students have skills with which to manage conflict with their parents or their partners.

#### ***Providing Assistance***

Teens who do not live with their parents often do not qualify for financial assistance when they are under eighteen and unemancipated. Yet parents may refuse to provide care and protection to the teens, or the teens may refuse to accept the condi-

tions of their offer. This leaves them in a Catch-22 situation in which they cannot obtain social service benefits as either child or adult. The result in these studies was that the teens typically have not received aid at all.

Homeless shelters may find themselves in a legal bind by not being able to take in underage teens. Yet shelters realize the bind put on teens who have nowhere else to go. The study found a paucity of places that an independent living teen, who was not emancipated, who had no financial aid or significant source of regular income, could stay. Such teens were left going from person to person, place to place, making do as best they could. They reported experiencing a variety of organizational obstacles that prohibited them from obtaining shelter, food, and other basic necessities.

Sometimes assistance may be available, but the teens perceived that the social service system would not be able to help them. Whether they are given clothes, services, aid, or shelter, the teens reported that they were not asked what they needed or wanted, that those who were in the position to give made assumptions about what was necessary. If the teens had been more actively involved in their care-providing process, they probably would have been more adequately served, with greater satisfaction from the services received. The teens reported hearing from other teens that agencies had lots of red tape without being able to help them. As a result, all too often they didn't even apply for aid.

Community resource information for assisting families and teens in conflict should be made available at a variety of readily accessible locations, at a cost that is not prohibitive for teens and poor families. The system needs to find ways to be welcoming, instead of discouraging, for this high-risk population.

### ***Alternative Arrangement Provisions***

Some homeless teens could go back home if both parent and teen adhered to guidelines generated from a conflict resolution effort. However, many teens become homeless because it is safer for them to be on the streets than in their own home. Teens who are the victims of physical and sexual abuse may find it safer to brave the uncertainties of "independent living" than enduring the known certainty of abuse. Social policies must reflect this reality and make alternative living provisions for such teens.

For teens who are found to be living "independently" yet are not emancipated, there needs to be some sort of official resolution to this situation. Efforts should be made to bring the parent and teen together when possible, but when it is not in the best interests of the teen to do so, a policy for alternative living must come into effect. If the parents feel that they do not wish to be responsible for the child, their rights could be terminated, allowing the state to approve aid to assist the teen in meeting basic necessities. In this way, someone would be legally responsible for seeing that the teen's basic needs are met, and help keep teens from falling through the cracks of the human service system by assuring they meet assistance criteria.

When teens ask for help, help should be provided. Failing to provide it will increase their problems and the likelihood that they will require future assistance; increase the severity of their subsequent problems; and decrease their faith that the social structure will assist them. Deterioration of faith in the system fosters decreased respect for, and adherence to, the social order.



### *Schools: Sex Education and Career Development*

The teenagers studied were generally sexually active, many with multiple partners. The basic fundamentals for building solid, committed relationships were not always present as the teens searched for intimacy, comfort, and momentary pleasure that could lead to a lasting relationship. Sometimes the teens conveyed a lack of information about conception and contraception. Sexual education, availability of contraceptive devices, and information and support for the establishment of healthy relationships appear essential for high-risk teens.

The acceptance of traditional female role prescriptions keeps girls locked in their own repression. The illusion that "babies will make everything better" has contributed to their sexual involvement with inappropriate partners. Homeless girls desire someone who will love them, who cannot go away, and this person may be a baby. Many homeless girls reported wanting to be good mothers so their babies would not grow up to repeat their mother's unfortunate experiences. When asked what they would like in the future, most of the homeless girls reported wanting to be married (with a husband who would take care of them), or jobs in a day care center. Home and family take precedence over career-oriented goals that would help the teenage girls become self-sufficient. As illustrated in the case of Heidi, many homeless girls do very well academically in high school. They could go on to college, given the right support. However, their personal problems and homelessness result in their putting academic and career achievement on the back burner in order to address their immediate survival needs. Once poor, homeless, and with children, teenage girls with aspirations may find themselves poor, entrenched adults with limited opportunities for college or career growth.

Homelessness in teens and its subsequent personal and social problems is preventable. Social service, education, and family policies must address the needs of teenagers to prevent countless numbers from being "homeless children with babies of their own." Social service agencies must address the needs of this population more effectively. As Lisbeth Schorr notes, much information exists on how to serve the disadvantaged successfully.<sup>28</sup> The question is not whether there is a lack of information or implementation strategies; there are many creative and effective ways to turn those who are disadvantaged into winners. The question is whether our policies and funding priorities will make this transformation possible.

It does not appear that this transformation will occur in the near future, if one relies on current national leadership. President Bush asserted in his 1992 State of the Union address that he wants to cut welfare for those who keep having babies, and to encourage them to find jobs and help themselves. Yet there was no talk of employment opportunities, no discussion about how to help the disenfranchised help themselves, no attack on the sexist, racist, elitist policies that keep the poor in that status. He stated that the poor must be helped, but there must be program, policy, economic, and occupational opportunities to transform rhetoric into action. Minimizing, ignoring, and denying the existence of the problems that lead children to have children, blaming the victims for their own lot in life, and their homelessness only exacerbates other personal and social problems. Those who need to pull themselves up by their bootstraps can do so only when they are wearing boots.

Additionally, young women could greatly benefit from policies that encourage their academic and career development rather than stereotyped female roles. To

prevent homelessness, we must address the issues of gender and economic discrimination while providing adequate intervention services. ♀

*I owe special thanks to Fred Bloise, who provided the information about Heidi and Joe.*

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## Notes

1. Yvonne M. Vissing, *Case Profiles of Homeless Children in New Hampshire* (Concord: New Hampshire State Department of Education, Bureau of Compensatory Education, 1991).
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