

## **The Los Angeles County Homeless Child Study**

Bonnie Zima, M.D., M.P.H.

Professor in Residence, UCLA Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

Associate Director, UCLA Center for Health Services and Society

The Los Angeles County Homeless Child Study was conducted in 1990-91. It was a county-wide study of 169 children ages 6-12 years living in 18 homeless family shelters. This was my first research project, and I was fortunate to have the support of the Robert Wood Johnson Clinical Scholars Program and the outstanding mentoring of national experts in the fields of sociology, biostatistics, health services research, and child and adolescent psychiatry.

We found that exposure to violence was relatively high, such that almost one-half (48%) of the children endorsed being a witness to or victims of serious violence. Some parent reported that their children had been witness to physical assaults, stabbings, and shootings, and been victims of beatings and rape. Overall, more than three fourths (78%) of the children suffered from either depression, a behavioral problem or severe academic delay. Among children having a problem, only one-third of the parents were aware of any problem, and few of those children (15%) had ever received mental health care or special education.

Further, we found that children were not the only ones to have unmet need for mental health services. The majority (72%) of sheltered homeless mothers reported high correct psychological distress or symptoms of a probable lifetime major mental illness or substance abuse. However, few mothers (15%) in need of service received mental health care, and the main point of contact for those with a mental health problem was the general medical sector. Mothers with a probable mental disorder were also significantly more likely to have children with either depression or behavior problems.

However, quantitative data does not capture the experiences of these children and families. I had only a glimpse of their worlds as I interviewed the children in the shelters, churches, playgrounds and on the street. Perhaps it was what the children said between my standardized interview questions and the pictures they drew that were the more valuable lessons learned. I am so grateful to the children and families for the trust that had in me to share their stories. Sitting side by side with the child on doorsteps, in church pews, and sometimes in the only small space in which they could call it their own, are the experiences that strengthened my commitment to improving the mental health care for high risk children in our community.

Zima BT, Wells KB, Freeman HE. Emotional and behavioral problems and severe academic delays among sheltered homeless children in Los Angeles County. *Am J Public Health*. 1994;84:260-264.

Zima BT, Wells KB, Benjamin B, Duan N. Mental health problems among homeless mothers: relationship to service use and child mental health problems. *Arch Gen Psychiatry*. 1996;53:332-338. Reprinted (abstract) in *JAMA*. 1996;276:432.

Zima BT, Bussing R, Forness SR, Benjamin B. Sheltered homeless children: their eligibility and unmet need for special education evaluations. *Am J Public Health*. 1997;87:236-240.

Zima BT, Forness SR, Bussing R, Benjamin B. Homeless children in emergency shelters: need for pre-referral intervention and potential eligibility for special education. *Behavioral Disorders*. 1998; 23:98-110.