

Children's homelessness: it is not only a matter of having a street address, but of building a more cohesive and inclusive society. The critical role of Early Childhood Development (ECD).

The characteristics and causes of homelessness around the world are complex and varied. While most of those experiencing homelessness are single males, a large, growing percentage of the homeless population includes families with children.

About 1.6 billion, more than 20 percent of the world's population, may lack adequate housing. While countries may differ in how they define, calculate, and report homelessness data, there is no doubt that homelessness exists across the developing and developed world.

No matter how small is the percentage of a country's homeless population, the problem is difficult to ignore.

People forcibly displaced because of climate change, natural disasters or conflicts are particularly vulnerable to homelessness.

Displaced children and their families lose much more than shelter when forced out of an area. They lose access to healthcare, education, livelihoods, social services and networks, security and identity associated with a sense of home.

Children and adolescents constantly on the move live daily with uncertainty and instability. They experience overwhelming uncertainty about where they will sleep, if they will eat, and instability due to the lack of comforting personal belongings.

Homelessness is devastating to all aspects of child development. Particularly at risk are youngest children (0-3).

Experiences during early childhood shape the very architecture of the developing brain, establishing the foundations for later learning, behavior and well-being. An event in the first few years of life (0-3) and even before birth plays a vital role in shaping health and social outcome.

Prolonged and repeated adverse experiences, malnutrition, toxic stress in the earliest years of life inhibit a child's optimal brain development, resulting in harmful psychological processes and interpersonal relations, inadequate learning and lower wages in later years.

Violence also plays a significant role in the lives of those experiencing homelessness, particularly children.

Children who witness violence are more likely than those who do not, to exhibit frequent aggressive and anti-social behavior, increased fearfulness, higher levels of depression and have a greater acceptance of violence as a means of resolving conflict.

Children experiencing homelessness are sick at twice the rate of children who have homes. They also go hungry twice as often as children who have homes; they have twice the rate of learning disabilities and three times the rate of emotional and behavioral problems of children who have

homes; they are physically abused at twice the rate of other children, they may get recruited into gangs, become addicted to drugs and suffer from mental health issues.

Nurturing care ECD services can protect vulnerable children against the detrimental effects of early adversity, which can improve health, education, employment, income, mental health, resilience to stress and prosocial competencies in later childhood and adulthood.

Optimal brain development requires a stimulating environment, adequate nutrients and social interaction with attentive caregivers. Indeed, children's homelessness cannot be understood in isolation from the economic precariousness of their parents and their inequality in relation to a range of human and social rights.

Families need more basic support beyond decent affordable housing to thrive; housing is not just a physical structure of a roof and walls. Food, education, employment, child care, transport, health / mental healthcare, and childcare services are among the significant support services needed to break the cycle of homelessness.

Quality and culturally-sensitive ECD services in crisis settings integrate preventive care, mental health and psychosocial support for caregivers, who are often traumatized by their experiences, as well as parental coaching, to rebuild the caregivers' capacity to provide nurturing care to their young children and rebuild family life.

New promising evidence is emerging of how ECD services can result in more resilient, inclusive and cohesive societies, directly influencing economic, education, health and social outcomes for individuals and society. While growth paths are indeed necessary to reduce poverty, they are unlikely to be sustainable in contexts where social cohesion is low or deteriorating.

Social cohesion impacts poverty reduction by sustaining long-term growth (growth sustainability) and by ensuring the inclusion of the disadvantaged in the growth process, as well as greater equity in the distribution of its benefits (growth with equity).

Enhancing social cohesion through a comprehensive policy package, including ECD services, is crucial to reduce socioeconomic disparities and fractures both in developed and developing societies.

The fight against, and prevention of homelessness can start with children, their families and the transformative power of ECD services.