

Pilot project offers blueprint for addressing mental health needs of homeless children

14 February 2017, by Mary Haskett

A research team led by North Carolina State University outlines the lessons learned in a five-year pilot project that was designed to help meet the mental health needs of children in homeless families – and could serve as a blueprint for similar efforts around the country.

"There have been very few programs focusing on the mental health needs of [children](#) experiencing homelessness, so by publishing this overview of the work, we're hoping it can serve as a template for similar efforts in other communities," says Mary Haskett, a professor of psychology at NC State and lead author of a peer-reviewed book chapter describing the work. "The scale of the problem is enormous," Haskett adds, pointing to a 2014 report from the National Center on Family Homelessness which found that 2.5 million children are homeless each year in the U.S.

At issue is a program called Community Action Targeting Children who are Homeless (Project CATCH), which works with all 11 shelters in Wake County, N.C., that serve families. Project CATCH, which is implemented by The Salvation Army, has three focal points: services targeting children; services to help parents support the well-being of their children; and services to help shelters identify and meet the needs of families with children.

"We've learned a lot over the past five years," Haskett says. "For example, we found that by having all 11 family shelters in Wake County come together, they were better able to advocate collectively for improved community services – such as better access to Head Start, mental health providers and organizations that provide educational support.

"This not only helps kids and families, but has significantly boosted job satisfaction among shelter staff," she says.

CATCH has also helped researchers better

understand the scope of mental health needs for children experiencing homelessness. For example, in 2015, Haskett's team published findings that 25 percent of children who are homeless are in need of [mental health](#) services.

"Project CATCH shows us that parents who are homeless want to help their children succeed, and they want the sort of support that CATCH can provide," Haskett says. "And this is not about creating new resources – it is about helping homeless families access resources that are already available in the community. Projects like CATCH are efficient, cost-effective and make a real difference for children. Over five years, Project CATCH has cost \$121,000 annually and has helped approximately 2,000 children; Project CATCH currently serves 30-50 children a month.

"Now we want to help other areas replicate this model," Haskett adds.

The book chapter, "Interagency Collaboration to Promote Mental Health and Development of Children Experiencing Homelessness," is published in a book of peer-reviewed research titled *Child and Family Well-Being and Homelessness*.

More information: *Child and Family Well-Being and Homelessness*.

www.springer.com/us/book/9783319508856

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