

# Home, Sweet Homeless!



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*"The welfare of the people shall be the supreme law."*

## **SYNOPSIS**

Children are rarely seen as members of the homeless population. Their voices are seldom heard.

Described is a Homeless Children's Art Project undertaken in 1998 by a coalition of metropolitan St. Louis organizations to bring attention to the plight of homeless children and families. Participating children and families appeared not to differ demographically from those in the metropolitan homeless population, which contained sizable numbers of children.

The Art Project included the production of pictures by homeless children and their display during Homelessness Awareness Week. Some troubling characteristics of twenty paintings by these children are mentioned.

Concern is expressed that public and private programs often ignore homeless families and children. Picture displays such as that described in this article may reduce stereotyping of homeless people and build support for effective programs and policies. Future displays of homeless children's art might consider an appropriate integration of advocacy, research and clinical components.



# **Home, Sweet Homeless!**

## ***Drawings of Homeless Children***

*Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home.  
A charm from the sky seems to hollow us there,  
Which, seek through the world, is ne'er met with elsewhere*

*John Howard Payne (1791-1852)*

Many assume, and it can be reassuring to assume, that homeless persons are not like us. Rather, they are losers and derelicts. Through personal failings, they forsake the bounty available to all Americans. Homelessness is a sanction visited on adult dropouts.

The American ethos reflected in “Home, Sweet Home”, however, suggests that homelessness is an extreme sanction. A house (preferably a very large one) has become part of the American Dream and US Tax Code. Inadequate and unstable housing and shelter can be a nightmare. Erratic and unsafe living arrangements exacerbate personal and public health problems, and can have long-term negative consequences for health, participation in labor markets, and integration into community life.<sup>1-3</sup>

The limited research now available shows that the experience of homelessness can have profound effects on children.<sup>4</sup> Yet, the image of homelessness rarely has a child's face. Very little is known about the number and characteristics of homeless children, except that their number is substantial, perhaps more than a million any one night.<sup>4,5</sup> This article describes an attempt to let some homeless children speak through pictures. One painting is shown on the cover.

In common with pictures produced by 31 other children, this one possesses some characteristics that may be related existentially to experiences of homeless children. Some background is provided concerning the setting in which pictures were obtained and the demographics of the homeless population. A summary review of the content of the children's pictures then is presented, followed by a brief discussion and conclusion.

## **Setting**

The pictures were obtained for Homelessness Awareness Week in 1998 from children, 4-16 years, in metropolitan St. Louis homeless shelters. The Homeless Children's Art Project had been planned for more than a year, and was undertaken by a broad coalition of groups that interacted with homeless persons. These included state and county service agencies, city and county government officials, universities (students from Maryville University and Washington University), the United Way, St. Patrick's Center, St. Louis Empowerment Center, and advocacy groups such as the Mental Health Association of St. Louis and National Alliance for the Mentally Ill. Significant contributors to this coalition were the homeless shelters themselves.

Children at Hope House, Christian Service Center, Salvation Army Community in Partnership, and Urban League Passage House completed thirty-two pictures. Local artist educators and occupational therapists volunteered to work with children at these shelters. Three themes were selected for the children: "Dream House", "No Place Like Home", and "My Favorite Place". One theme was used at each shelter. Children

produced pictures using finger paints, tempera, construction paper, and cutouts for collages.

Materials were supplied through the coalition, and volunteers provided instruction. Sessions with children lasted between two and three hours. The number of volunteers per child ranged from 1:4 to 2:1. Often pictures required more than one session for completion. In some cases, mothers simultaneously created their own works; however, these were not saved or exhibited.

A professional volunteer matted all the pictures for the children. The matted pictures were displayed in the St. Louis City Hall, St. Louis County Council Offices, Barnes-Jewish Hospital, and Maryville University. The Missouri Association for Social Welfare arranged to have the pictures displayed within the State Capitol, Jefferson City, Missouri.

Media attention was excellent. The displays colorfully informed the public about children and homelessness without exposing either children or parents to potentially harmful media attention. The pictures also provided a vivid and often eloquent display of the attitudes of children toward homelessness. Favorable comments came from the public and members of the State Legislature. The display at the State Capitol was used to build support for ongoing efforts to expand the Missouri Housing Trust Fund. Such pictures and their appropriate use were an effective way to focus attention on the health, mental health, housing and education needs of homeless children and families.

## Demographics

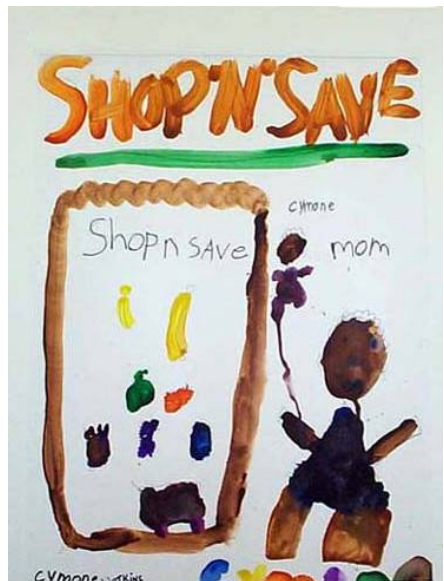
Since the focus of the Art Project was on the delivery of a service directly to children using volunteers and advocacy, the



collection of systematic data describing children and families was neglected. Attempts to reconstruct a database have been unsuccessful due to the difficulty of tracing all families. Nevertheless, on the basis of information obtained, families appear not to differ from those commonly housed in homeless shelters in

metropolitan St. Louis. The characteristics of the homeless population in shelters has been obtained during four censuses of homeless shelters conducted by the Missouri Association for Social Welfare (MASW) and also by St. Louis City and County for more than ten years on The Regional Online Services Information Exchange (ROSIE).<sup>6,7</sup>

*Numbers served in shelters.*  
The City and County



of St. Louis from which the families and children were drawn contains approximately 1.5 million persons. Homeless shelters served about 3824 heads of household in 1999. A head of household can be a single unaccompanied person or an individual accompanied by children and another adult. The number of heads of household using shelters may be less than a fourth of the total metropolitan homeless population at any one point in time. Typically, the homeless shelters operate at 85% capacity, depending upon seasonal fluctuations and weather.

*Composition of shelter households.* Slightly less than half the heads of household in shelters were unaccompanied adults. Nine percent of the single males in the shelters were there with one or more children; however, one or more children accompanied 70% of the single females. Approximately, 7% of the adult women in shelters were pregnant. *Race, gender and education of shelter households.* Seventy-eight percent of the sheltered population was African-American. Sixty-six percent of the sheltered population was female. About 21% of the adults in shelters reported some post-high school education, 35% were high school graduates, 8% held GED, and 35% had neither diploma nor GED.

*Numbers of children and family composition.* During the first eleven months of 1999, more than 2800 school age children were referred to shelters in St. *Louis* City and County. Approximately 3 school age children were found to every 4 adult-sheltered head of household. About 1390 of the children were in families with 2-4 children, and 500 in families with 5+ children. Very few of the adults with children in shelters were there due to

reported abuse of themselves or a child, less than 6% of the females and 1% of the males.

*The modal parent in shelters.* The typical parent in shelters was between 30-40 years of age, with more than one child. Appearance at the shelter frequently occurred after several periods of homelessness and fruitless searches for adequate shelter.

*Known characteristics of Art Project participants.* As noted earlier, the children and parents involved in the Art Project followed the demographics of the sheltered population. Most participating parents were African-American single, female heads of household who were in their mid-thirties. A third of the participating children may have been in shelters with two accompanying adults.

*Characteristics of Art Project children.* Most children were between 9-13 years of age with siblings also in the shelter. While the percentage of male children slightly outnumbered females in the sheltered population, this order was reversed slightly among those who produced pictures. Many participating children had been through several periods of homelessness and searches by parents for suitable shelter. Often in these families two to three years of stability in housing were followed by periods of shelter seeking and readjustment. Children and parents frequently moved between shelters during these periods.

## **Comments on the Content of Twenty Children's Pictures**

Children at four homeless shelters produced pictures, but only at two shelters were pictures drawn and painted. The themes used by children at these two shelters were "My Favorite Place" and

“No Place Like Home.” Comments below are restricted to the twenty paintings done at these shelters. The palettes and materials used were similar, and instructions provided by volunteers consistent. Many studies of children’s drawings and paintings have been reported in the literature.<sup>8-10</sup>

Six pictures made with glue and construction paper were obtained at another shelter in response to the theme “My Favorite Place”. At a fourth shelter, six pictures were collages made of poster board and cutouts from news media on the theme “My Dream House”. We are not commenting on these constructions or collages, since we have insufficient information about how the construction materials were distributed and how instructions were conveyed to children.

Below, we briefly report on some conspicuous characteristics of the twenty children’s paintings. These pictures were not collected in a manner that permits more detailed analysis. A few comments also will be made about the picture included with this article and one published in Public Health Reports.<sup>11</sup>

Despite differences in themes, the “No Place Like Home” and “My Favorite Place” paintings shared a common characteristic. Ninety percent of the paintings about home used cold colors such as dark blues as background as did 70% of the favorite place pictures.

Several differences, however, exist between the two groups of paintings. In the “No Place Like Home Pictures”, a child was depicted in only 30% of the pictures, and other members of the family in only 10%. Half the pictures had spots similar to “black suns”, which when found in children’s pictures have been

associated with responses to natural disaster, fear, death, melancholy, and desperation.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast, responses to the theme “My Favorite Place” were somewhat more positive. Seventy-percent had a child in the picture, and 60% showed other members of the family. Black sun like images appeared in only 30% of the paintings. The images depicted as my favorite place included a sailboat in water, a public library, outdoors with autumnal trees, a convenience store, a skyline viewed from a park, a child alone indoors with a video game, an amusement park, and a pumpkin patch. None of these paintings represented the home as a favorite place, except perhaps indirectly in the video game picture. Favorite places were not always depicted in pleasant ways.

The pumpkin patch picture, for example, shows the pumpkin with an angry frown not a grin, and the child and pumpkin are encased by dark green grass that mimics the teeth of the pumpkin. The overall appearance is that of the child in the mouth of an outer surface. The scarecrow is black, and a black sun appears in the picture. The video game picture drawn by an older male child shows him *alone* on a bed in a blue monochromatic room.

The picture published on the cover of this article is one of the “My Favorite Place” pictures. The trees are leafless with five leaves falling to the ground. Four of the leaves are red; however, the one at the lower extreme right is dark black. The sky is a dark blue. Neither the child nor the family is shown in this favorite place. In the painting the child comments, that “I feel safe outside.” This comment may be significant in that homeless shelters are



often considered to be unsafe places, particularly for females. The artist was an eight-year-old African-American female in a shelter with both parents and

three siblings. The family had moved to three shelters in a three-month period.

A picture published in Public Health Reports is one on the “No Place Like Home” theme that was drawn and painted by an eleven-year old African-American



female in a shelter with a single mother and six siblings. This child had been in and out of shelters, since she was two years of



age. The drawing shows an indefinite or ill-defined image of a house cut through a dark blue sky that is being drawn apart like a curtain. The

painting depicts the child, but her image is faintly painted in light orange or amber. The child's head and extremities dematerialize at the doorway.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The display of the children's pictures appeared to be effective in stimulating interest on the part of viewers in the need to provide services for homeless children and families.

Unsurprisingly, the lack of affordable housing and the need for better support of homeless shelters were initial foci. However, attention soon turned to the mental health, health, and education of children. Many of the pictures raise concerns about the needs of children subjected to periods of homelessness. Examination of the pictures suggests that many children may be troubled. The possible long-term effects of this experience on children and parents can only be guessed. We do know that direct access to education and health services is impeded.

Discussions of homelessness often assume that some personal deficit produces homelessness.<sup>5</sup> Little attention has been given to the possibility that a period of homelessness or instability in living arrangements can lead to outcomes promoting chronic homelessness and social deviance.<sup>13-14</sup> Certainly, interactions within families can be altered profoundly.

Due to the manner in which the children's pictures were obtained, little can be said about the clinical condition of children or parents. Further efforts to collect such expressive works would benefit from the presence of professional art therapists on the team.

Indeed, the more systematic and scientific collection of data need not impede its use for display and public education, and may be very helpful to families; professional care providers; and service agencies, including homeless shelters. Unfortunately, advocacy groups in their eagerness to “do something” may discount the utility of systematic data collection.

Effective use of children’s pictures combined with demographic information describing family situations can lower barriers between viewers and homeless people. Homeless parents involved in this project and at shelters do not appear to be strikingly different from the general public in terms of education and a number of other characteristics.<sup>15</sup> Most parents appear to have satisfactory educational skills, at least as measured by credentials. Difficulties appear to arise from failure to earn a regular and sufficient income and perhaps also from family size. These are difficulties not uncommon among lesser-educated and low-income wage earners in the United States.

Appropriately directed information about homeless persons may reduce stereotypes. Homeless people are not just single, mentally disturbed, male substance abusers. Substantial portions of the homeless population are homeless families like the subjects of this article. Inattention to homeless families is a quiet failure of hospitals, clinics, schools, correctional facilities, and other public and private institutions. The future public consequences of the private pain of children may be substantial and is disquieting.

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## Addendum: *Demographic Update for 2003*

*Numbers served in shelter:* During 2003, homeless shelters served 3,159 heads of household. The number of children included in those households numbered 4,285. When comparing the same data from 1998 with those of 2003, it shows that 665 fewer households were served in 2003. In fact, there is more to the story than the numbers tell. Between 2001 and 2003, three emergency shelters closed, creating a bed deficit of 80 to 100 beds. A three year effort to replace those beds has netted 25 beds opened in an existing shelter. At the same time, the number of households requesting shelter increased between 12-17% since 1999

*Composition of shelter households:* Fewer beds and more need have created a crisis that is best demonstrated in the following statistics: 24,541 households requested shelter: 86% were women and children; 14% were men; 65.14%, or 15,987, were unable to be referred, and; shelter bed utilization rates rose to 131% or 31% over capacity. Single males and females represented 10.90% and 7.40% respectively. Racial and ethnic breakdown shows: 89.79% were African American; 9.4% white; .48% Hispanic; .06% Asian, and; .23% Native American.

*Numbers of children and family compositions:* At any time during 2003, the average number of children in shelter remained relatively constant. Of that number, 2,828 were school aged. Family size varied from one adult with one child to one adult with 4 or more children.

*The modal parent in shelters:* The age breakdown of adults in shelter with children was between the ages of 19 and 42. Reasons for requesting shelter include: loss of income; lack of

income; never independent; and, substandard housing. The average annual income for a homeless household in 2003 was \$8,949.



