The Mental Health of Children Exposed to Maternal Mental Illness and Homelessness

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**Method Section:** This experiment looks at the association between female veterans’ homelessness and their children’s mental health. Women entered an evaluation at eleven different Veterans Affairs hospitals across the country. Out of the 582 women who took the evaluation, 195 reported that they had at least one child and were proven to suffer from a psychiatric symptom. The independent variable was living arrangement. The four experimental groups were the living arrangements of homeless, living with friends or family, institution, or housed. Data was collected on both mother and child through face to face interviews. The mothers answered question relating to age, race, marital status, income, current living arrangement, total days homeless within the last thirty days, support from others, and incarceration. They were also asked how many traumatic experiences they had had in their life. The dependent variable was the reported psychiatric symptoms the child had. Mothers evaluated their children on two psychiatric scales. The first one indicated emotional problems and the second indicated self-esteem and they were asked if the child had witnessed or was the victim of abuse and violence. The outcome of the tests showed the children in the sample could fit into four possible categories: depression/anxiety, clingy behavior/separation anxiety, obsessive traits, and emotional withdraw. The original hypothesis was that children who had mothers who were homeless would experience more psychiatric incidences.

**Discussion Section:** In this study, the original hypothesis that homelessness would affect the child’s psychiatric well-being was not supported by the evidence. Moreover, it was found that homelessness and adverse living arrangements caused a negative trend in school enrollment and attendance but not in psychiatric well-being. It was found that mothers who had increased emotional problems and incarceration rates had children who exhibited greater risk for emotional inconsistencies. Differences in experimental groups were that children who lived with a mother who was married and resided in a home had less emotional problems, while children with a mother who was a single parent tended to show more emotional instability. Another significant difference is that children who were victims of abuse were associated with more severe emotional problems. Children with a mother who was homeless or on the verge of being homeless had a lower possibility of being enrolled in school. However, more reports of children with emotional problems came from those who were enrolled in school. There were many limitations in this study. The first is that the study was done on female veterans with psychiatric problems, in turn the data will be hard to generalize to others. Secondly, the results were self-reported by the mothers, which could have led to biases on reporting about psychiatric disorders relating to their children. Also, mothers only reported symptoms of their youngest child. Lastly, at the time of this study, only thirty six percent of the children reported on lived with their mother.