CHILD HOMELESSNESS & TOXIC STRESS: FAR-REACHING CONSEQUENCES

HOW CHRONIC STRESS & HOMELESSNESS IMPACT THE DEVELOPING BRAIN

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) such as poverty and homelessness can cause chronic stress during childhood. Typically, the more adversity a child experiences (the higher their ACE score), the higher their risk for long-term negative consequences.

Chronic stress is powerful because it can alter brain circuits, causing the child’s stress response system to go on high alert, unable to shut off. This impairs the pre-frontal cortex, hurting executive function. It also hurts the hippocampus.

In turn, a child’s ability to learn, regulate their emotions and behaviors, and interact in socially appropriate ways is diminished. This helps explain some of the academic outcomes we see in children who are homeless.

PREVALENCE OF STUDENT HOMELESSNESS

The number of schoolchildren who are homeless in Washington state. This is an 82% increase since the 2006-07 school year.

ACADEMIC CONSEQUENCES

On average, children who are homeless change schools multiple times a year. Each time a student moves, 4-6 months of learning progress is lost, which widens the learning gap.

ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES IN THE CLASSROOM

Children coping with significant adversity will have a harder time learning. Out of a 30-child high school classroom, only 11 students will have experienced one or zero ACEs.

MORE ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES INCREASE RISK FOR ADULT HOMELESSNESS

As ACE scores increase (e.g., the level of adversity someone experiences in childhood), so does adult homelessness.