

Chapter 58

Advocating for the Mental Health Needs of Children Living in Rural Poverty

Denise Lenares-Solomon

Augusta University, USA

Christina Conti

Augusta University, USA

Christina George

Augusta University, USA

ABSTRACT

A person's mental health involves their social, psychological, and emotional wellness, all of which are important to their development. Lack of resources and access to effective mental health services can have a negative impact on the mental health of children residing in poverty-stricken rural communities. In advocating for this population, the authors have highlighted five factors that work as barriers in the mental health of children living in rural poverty. These factors were identified as early development, healthcare accessibility, parental/caretaker's educational level, educational system, and mental health stigma and stress. Furthermore, the authors presented a multi-layered approach for addressing these barriers. The components of the multi-layered approach include school-based resources, community-based resources, medical-based resources, and government-based resources. A case illustration is used to demonstrate the practical application of one aspect of the multi-layered approach – the school-based resources. Lastly, the authors stated that more research is needed for this population in regard to the effects of rural poverty on the mental health of children.

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INTRODUCTION

A snapshot of a mental health update across the United States found that one in five Americans (46.6 million) have a current mental illness. It has been reported that mental illness is not only the main cause of disability in youth but has also resulted in more deaths than any other health condition (Sawyer et. al, 2012 & World Health Organization [WHO], 2014). Reports like these highlight the importance of addressing mental health issues especially in younger populations (Petruzzelli, 2018). Mental health involves an individual's social, psychological, and emotional well-being (MentalHealth.gov, n.d.). In 2018, approximately 38.1 million Americans lived in poverty (Semega, Kollar, Creamer, & Mohanty, 2019) with people under the age of 18 representing 31.1% of these individuals. One out of every five children living in a rural area are considered to be living below the poverty line (Mammen, Dolan, & Seiling, 2015). Those who live in poverty face several stressors that impact their quality of life, one being access to mental health care (Fifield & Oliver, 2016; Hill, Cantrell, Edwards, & Dalton, 2016). The mental health concerns of families and individuals living in rural and poor communities are often overlooked and under-researched (Tickamyer, Sherman, & Warlick, 2017). Not only are their mental health concerns overlooked, but individuals living in rural communities are less likely to seek help for psychological distress than their urban counterparts (Cheesmond, Davies, & Inder, 2019).

Rural poverty can negatively affect the mental health of children. It is the opinion of the authors of this chapter that leaders and advocates of this population need to understand the mental health issues affecting these children. Consequently, the authors of this chapter will discuss the various barriers that affects the mental health of children and families living in rural poverty and present a multi-layered approach that will provide leaders and advocates with means in which they can address these barriers. The specific barriers that will be discussed are early development, healthcare, parental/caretaker's education, the education system, and mental health stigma and stress.

BACKGROUND

The United States government defines poverty as a state of living below the federal poverty line or earning less than \$24,000 a year for a family of four (Kena et al., 2015). In 2013, approximately 21% of school-age children were living in households considered to be in poverty (Kena et al., 2015). A child in poverty can be negatively affected by a variety of environmental and situational factors ranging from lack of proper nutrition, differing parental level of education, stress, and lack of care, both physically and mentally (Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010). These factors affect a child's ability to learn, regulate their emotions, and fight against hopelessness (Evans, 2016). A deficiency in these skills negatively influences the child's mental health. Mental health skills from early childhood and adolescence are vital to a person's success later in life.

According to the American Psychiatric Association (2019), experiencing healthy relationships, adapting in the face of change and adversity, and engaging in productive activities all allude to mental health. Mental illness can also occur when one experiences problems and/or dysfunction in family, social, or work relationships (American Psychiatric Association, 2019). Mental illness is a treatable medical condition. Unfortunately, Americans residing in rural environments face higher rates of mental illness, depression, and suicide compared to those residing in urban areas (American Psychiatric Association, 2019). Despite discrepancies such as these, rural residents are less likely to receive or seek mental health services than

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