



Fostering Resiliency in African-American Boys Living at PEC

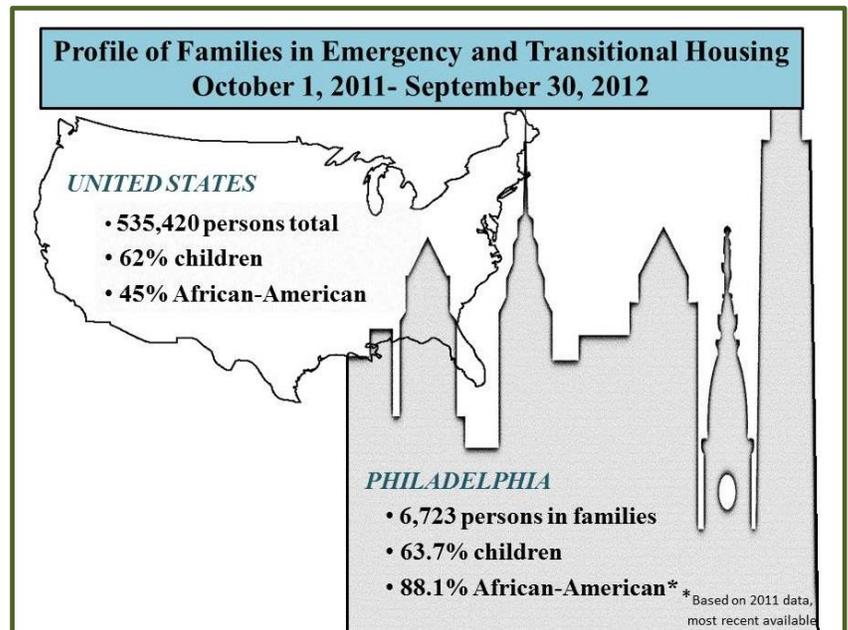
The homeless system rarely discusses the healthy development of boys who are growing into men. With support from the Stoneleigh Foundation, People’s Emergency Center (PEC) staff responded by organizing an investigation to answer the following question:

What can we do to support the needs of African-American male youth living at PEC during critical stages of development?

PEC addressed these questions using multiple methods, including a literature report, an analysis of internal data; and focus groups and interviews with PEC residents. This report summarizes the results of the project.

The People’s Emergency Center (PEC) housed 376 young boys and male teens and almost 400 families in fiscal years 2011 through 2013 (July 1, 2010 – June 30, 2013). During this time span, staff noticed that the boys and young men

living in PEC’s emergency, transitional, and permanent housing programs were experiencing disproportionate challenges with mental health, academic performance, interaction with authority figures, and positive relationships with adult males. This reflects evidence that African-American male youth are at the highest risk, when compared to both white youth and African-American girls, for challenges associated with health, juvenile justice, and educationⁱ. Additionally, the experience of homelessness in childhood, particularly as an infant or a toddler, is associated with a higher likelihood of emergency room visits, mental health symptoms, developmental delays, and academic achievement compared to low-income, housed children.ⁱⁱ



In Philadelphia in 2012, over half (63.7%) of the 6,723 persons in families who stayed in emergency or transitional housing were children and youth under age 18 (n=4,073).ⁱⁱⁱ Nearly 49% of those children are male, according to city reports from 2011, the most recent data available^{iv}. According to data from the City of Philadelphia’s Office of Supportive Housing^v, as well as a population based study conducted in Philadelphia^{vi}, approximately 90 percent of persons in families in the Philadelphia emergency housing system are African-American. Based on these data, **we can**

estimate that in 2012, more than 1,800 African-American boys and young men under age 18 stayed at least one night in emergency or transitional housing in Philadelphia.

Key Findings: The following themes were consistent throughout all components of the project:

Safety

Safety was a reoccurring theme in regards to physical safety and overall well-being in the neighborhood, and within society. Mothers and sons do not feel like they have control over their son's or their own safety due to both street violence and an expectation of failure that surrounds Black men in our society. This fear reflects the findings of the [Philadelphia Urban ACE Survey](#), which found that respondents who were male or African-American were more likely to have witnessed violence, and had an adverse neighborhood experience.^{vii}

Independence and Isolation

Both girls and boys ages 7 to 17 value independence as a positive quality of their role models and an essential quality of a good parent. They put particular value on being educated and having financial stability. The majority of girls (83%) and boys (53%) stated that they prefer to deal with problems on their own. Mothers spoke about independence as a source of pride, but themes of isolation emerged when they spoke about stress around raising their sons as women. The majority of PEC staff identified the lack of male staff and positive male presence as a factor that isolates the boys living at PEC. Additionally, research shows that lack of privacy, lack of control over time/space, and observation/monitoring of parenting practice creates barriers to supportive parenting in the context of homelessness.^{viii, ix}

Components of the Project

- [Literature Report](#) on race, gender, and homelessness.
- **Staff Advisory Committee** of over 20 volunteer staff members
- **Quantitative analysis** of demographic data from fiscal years 2011 to 2013.
- **Survey** of 31 PEC staff members
- **Focus groups and interviews** with 34 residents (9 girls and 15 boys ages 7 to 17, and 10 mothers). Emergency and transitional housing residents were interviewed separately from permanent housing residents. Children/youth were also interviewed separately from mothers, and were divided by both gender and age group (ages 7-10/ages 11-17).

“My only fear’s losing them because it’s hard out here especially for the boys. Just not too long ago, my son was walking home from the park, and he had to run home because they were shooting. It’s like, I can’t even let my boys outside to play and be boys. They might not come home one day.” – Mother, *Permanent Housing Focus Group*

Snapshot of School-Age Boys Living at PEC, Fiscal Years 2011 to 2013

- 376 boys in 394 lived in PEC emergency, transitional, and permanent housing
- 63.24 percent (N=234) of the male residents were ages 0-5 upon intake into PEC’s emergency and transitional housing, which reflects demographics in [Philadelphia and Pennsylvania in 2012](#).
- The median age of boys is 4.3 years old in emergency, 4.5 in transitional, and 5.6 in permanent housing.
- Families’ median length of stay is 67 days in emergency housing and 257 days in transitional.

Positive Male Figures

Boys living at PEC define “being a man” as males who have strength, independence (having employment and taking care of themselves), and the ability to protect themselves. The mothers spoke repeatedly about the lack of male role models, and the need for more positive adult males at PEC. While fathers are often not visible at PEC, 67% of boys stated that their father is an important man in their life, and 20% said their father is a role model or positive influence. When asked what it means to be a Black man, themes among mothers and sons included: stereotypes, an expectation of failure, and the influence of societal pressure on young boys. Mothers in particular spoke about the challenge of protecting their sons from the negative influence of societal stereotypes and pressure. Researchers have found that African-American youth’s perceived discrimination predicts conduct behavior, depressive symptoms, academic performance, and self-esteem.^x

Next Steps:

Include men in the definition of family

Many homeless housing agencies do not have the capacity to house fathers, but there are still opportunities to recognize positive male figures. Research indicates that the quality of the paternal relationship has more impact on the child than the father's residential status.^{xi} Incorporating positive male figures, including fathers, uncles, grandfathers, coaches, and mentors, into services could provide additional support to both mothers and sons, who reported feeling isolated due to a lack of male role models. Providers can re-examine how they choose to define "family". Social networks and supportive relationships with family and peers are an essential element of healthy development. The definition of family could be extended to include: nonresidential fathers, significant others, extended family, godparents, and other adult role models (coaches, neighbors, pastors, etc.). These important family figures could be incorporated into supportive services with family dinner nights, field trips, or available recreation space where families can spend time together.

I think it's really hard because everything you do you really got to do your best, because people expect you to fail. They think that you gonna fail at everything you do, think that you're gonna play around, instead of doing work.

- Boy, Focus Group Ages 11-17, Permanent Housing

Provide a safe, supportive physical and psychological space

Structural limitations affect the environment within which a child receives services. In the case of homelessness, this can translate to limited space for parent-child materials or developmentally appropriate materials.^{xii} In focus groups and interviews, 90 percent of the comments mothers made about the neighborhood surrounding PEC were about safety concerns. Additionally, 53 percent of male respondents said that when they have a problem, they try to deal with it alone. Both residents and staff emphasized that the children, and boys especially, need space where they feel physically and psychologically safe, autonomous, and supported. As suggested by mothers, sons, and PEC staff, this can be done in two ways: designating a room or space specifically for children and youth (preferably different spaces for designated age groups), and recruiting a positive, consistent male presence within that space. A physically and psychologically safe environment is particularly important because long-term exposure to stress and fear can lead to a physical stress-system overload which affects a child's behavior and social interactions.^{xiii}

You need somebody to hold you up when your back is up against the wall, because you can't do everything, but you're doing everything. But it's hard because who will hold you up when you're trying to hold your kids up . . . I just need somebody to help juggle stuff, and keep me from tipping over. - Mother, Emergency/Transitional Housing Focus Group

Capacity Building through Partnerships

Building partnerships is a way to provide new services without exceeding the funding or staffing capacity of one organization. Staff reported in surveys that limited funding and staffing capacity were the two main challenges to creating more services. As a result of this project, PEC will be partnering with Rising Sons (www.risingsons.org), to provide weekly group mentoring for the boys that includes employment training, community service, student-planned events, and group discussions.



Recognize the service context

Inevitably supporting clients and residents requires also recognizing the needs of staff and the organization. In order to understand a service environment it is imperative to incorporate frontline staff into all service decisions, and have reliable data. At PEC, data shows that the median length of stay in emergency housing is 67 days for residents over the last three fiscal years (FY2011-13). It is even lower (median of 35 days) for residents who do not move on to PEC's housing transitional program (most often these residents move in with family or friends). Therefore, it is imperative that services are designed to capture children and families in a short period of time. For this reason, PEC is targeting a group mentoring model rather than a one-on-one program, which takes time to establish and sustain. It is important to understand organizational factors such as this one, in order to offer programs that are specific to the client needs and service context.

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People's Emergency Center

The People's Emergency Center's mission is to nurture families, strengthen neighborhoods and drive change in West Philadelphia. Through a community of more than 240 housing units and five educational centers offering job training, parenting and early childhood education, financial education and planning, life skills and technology coursework, PEC seeks to change the life trajectory for the women and children who seek its services and inspire them to aspire to new heights. This report was written by Leigh Wilson, Stoneleigh Emerging Leader Fellow at PEC. All inquiries can be sent to policy@pec-cares.org.

PEC Policy Research Advisory Group

The PEC Policy Research Advisory Group fosters partnerships between local researchers and local family service providers in order to connect research, policy, practice. The Advisory Group works collaboratively through a community-based participatory research (CBPR) framework to develop a plausible plan to understand how to best support families and children experiencing homelessness in Philadelphia. For more information, visit www.pec-cares.org/policy.html.

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