

CHILD, YOUTH, AND FAMILY HOMELESSNESS IN THE U.S.



Undercounted and Misunderstood

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For the past year, 14-year-old Kyah has slept on the floor of a relative's house, living out of a single room with her mother and older sister. Throughout the United States, homeless children like Kyah remain hidden in their communities as they sleep on the couch or floor of another person's home, in hotel or motel rooms, cars, or on public transportation.

Homeless children, youth, and families have to stay where they can due to a lack of alternatives and/or fear of authorities. Many communities have no family or youth shelters, and even if they do, shelters are often full. Shelter policies may also prevent families from all staying together. As a result, children and youth often end up in situations that force them to be hidden in their community and disconnected from assistance.

While homelessness for children and youth can take different forms, it always results in frequent upheaval, volatility, and a loss of stability. Children and youth are forced to make frequent moves and cycle between inadequate and often unsafe situations, causing disruption to children's education, healthcare, and more. These situations often result in overcrowding, which is particularly dangerous during a pandemic because it makes social distancing and remote learning near impossible.

Child and youth homelessness in the United States is all too common —the latest national data shows that an **estimated 1-in-41 school-age children are homeless**.¹ Young children — those under 6 — experience twice that rate with **1-in-18 living in homeless situations**.² Homelessness is even more prevalent among children of color —Black, Hispanic, Native American, Native Hawaiian, and Alaskan high school students disproportionately experience homelessness compared to their white or Asian peers.³

The negative economic reverberations of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to be strongest for families with children who were already struggling to make ends meet. While aid including cash assistance, income support, rental assistance, subsidized health care coverage, nutrition assistance, and more have mitigated spikes in hardship, communities are still seeing high levels of homelessness and housing instability.

Quantifying the actual increase in child and youth homelessness as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak remains difficult at this point, as there is a lag in national data reporting and the disruptions of in-person attendance at many schools and other public institutions over the past 20 months made it hard for school homeless student liaisons and other service providers to find and identify homeless children and youth in their community. A November 2020 survey from the University of Michigan

1 Calculated by First Focus Campaign for Children using the latest data from the [U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Homeless Education](#), which shows that there were 1.384 million homeless students in the 2018-2019 school year and U.S. Census Bureau data on school age children in 2018, which shows that there were 58,176,000 million school-age children in 2018.

2 "Early Childhood Homelessness State Profiles," U.S. Department of Education, 2021, <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/disadv/homeless/early-childhood-homelessness-state-profiles-2021.pdf>.

3 SchoolHouse Connection, "Student Homelessness: Lessons from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey," October 2021, <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/student-homelessness-lessons-from-the-youth-risk-behavior-survey-yrbs/>.

and SchoolHouse Connection found that homeless student liaisons identified an estimated 420,000 fewer children and youth experiencing homelessness at that point in the 2020-21 school year,⁴ despite evidence of rising student homelessness from around the country.^{5,6}

Millions more children and youth remain at risk of homelessness. Recent data from the Census Household Pulse Survey showed that more than 5.7 million adults in households with children — or about 21% — are behind on rent. This number is even higher for Black households, with nearly 30% of Black renters with children behind on rent.⁷ A recent study from Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago found that 3.8 million young adults ages 18-to-25 have little or no confidence in their household's ability to pay next month's rent. Hispanic young adults were roughly **twice** as likely and Black youth were nearly **three times** as likely as their White peers to report little or no confidence in their ability to pay next month's rent.⁸ With the national eviction moratorium no longer in place, millions of households remain at risk of losing their homes.

Impact of Homelessness on Child Development

Homelessness is both a symptom and a cause of trauma for children, youth, and families. Half of all homeless school-age children experience depression and anxiety.⁹ The earlier and longer a child experiences homelessness, the more dangerous it is to their healthy development.¹⁰ Infants born to mothers who experienced homelessness while pregnant are more likely to have low birth weight,¹¹ and homelessness during infancy is associated with delays in socio-emotional development and language skills.¹² Negative physical outcomes, such as chronic illness and higher blood lead levels,¹³ are more common among these children. These conditions are also compounded — and sometimes caused — by a lack of regular access to medical care.

The frequent transition associated with homelessness leads to learning disruptions. Homeless students are more likely to change schools frequently, and a study out of California found that homeless students are twice as likely to be chronically absent from school compared with their peers, with the greatest absentee rates among Black, Alaskan, and Native American children.¹⁴

4 "Lost in the Masked Shuffle and Virtual Void: Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness Amidst the Pandemic," Poverty Solutions at the University of Michigan and SchoolHouse Connection, November 19, 2020, <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/lost-in-the-masked-shuffle-and-virtual-void/>.

5 Schneider, Sarah, and WESA. "Student Homelessness Has Likely Increased During Pandemic Though Tracking Hasn't Kept Up," WITF, 22 March 2021, <https://www.witf.org/2021/03/22/student-homelessness-has-likely-increased-during-pandemic-though-tracking-hasnt-kept-up/>.

6 Carpenter, Tim. "Homeless Advocate: COVID-19 Relief Insufficient, Eviction Surge Puts Families in Peril," Kansas Reflector, 13 September 2021, <https://kansasreflector.com/2021/09/13/homeless-advocate-covid-19-relief-insufficient- eviction-surge-puts-families-in-peril/>.

7 Gartland, Erik. "Families with Children at Increased Risk at Increased Risk of Eviction, With Renters of Color Facing the Greatest Hardship," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, November 2021, <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/families-with-children-at-increased-risk-of- eviction-with-renters-of-color-facing-greatest>.

8 Morton, Matthew, and Daniels, Gerald. "Untold Stories: Young Adult & Racial Dimensions of COVID-19," Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago and Howard University, June 2021, <https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/Untold-Stories-Final-Report.pdf>.

9 "Effects of Poverty, Hunger, and Homelessness on Children and Youth," American Psychological Association, Created in 2009, <https://www.apa.org/pi/families/poverty>.

10 Sandel, Megan, Sheward, Richard, and Sturtevant, Lisa. "Compounding Stress: The Timing and Duration Effects of Homelessness on Children's Health," Children's Health Watch, National Housing Conference, and Center for Housing Policy, June 2015, https://www.childrenshealthwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/Compounding-Stress_2015.pdf.

11 "Young Children Experiencing Homelessness: An Overview," SchoolHouse Connection, 17 February 2020, <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/young-children-experiencing-homelessness-an-overview/>.

12 Ziolo-Guest, Kathleen M., and McKenna, Claire C.. "Early Childhood Housing Instability and School Readiness," American Psychological Association, 2014, <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2014-04324-007>.

13 Gultekin, Laura E., Brush, Barbara L., Ginier, Emily, Cordon, Alexandra, and Dowdell, Elizabeth B.. "Health Risks and Outcomes of Homelessness in School-Age Children and Youth: A Scoping Review of the Literature," The Journal of School Nursing, September 2019, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1059840519875182>.

14 Burns, Dion, Espinoza, Danny, Ondrasek, Naomi, and Yang, Man. "Students Experiencing Homelessness: The Conditions and Outcomes of Homelessness Among California Students," Learning Policy Institute, 14 June 2021. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/students-experiencing-homelessness-report>.

They are also more likely to be suspended or experience disciplinary action,¹⁵ and to leave school — **homelessness is associated with an 87% greater likelihood of a student dropping out of school.**¹⁶

It is important to note that these outcomes are pervasive for children and youth experiencing all forms of homelessness. Children and youth experiencing homelessness are vulnerable and experience negative outcomes regardless of where they lay their head at night — whether it's a friend's couch, a shelter, or a car.

Who are the children, youth, and families experiencing homelessness?

In addition to school closures, a lag in national data reporting makes it difficult to quantify the actual increase in child and youth homelessness.

The latest available national data suggests that nearly 1.4 million children from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade and nearly 126,000 unaccompanied youth were experiencing homelessness in the 2018-2019 school year.¹⁷ Data published in January 2021 by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) showed only a slight increase in family homelessness in 2020,¹⁸ but these numbers are misleading since they exclude the majority of children and youth experiencing homelessness in the United States.

As of 2019, nearly 10% of all public high school students across 24 states experienced homelessness but at least 2/3 of students who experienced homelessness were not identified as experiencing homelessness by their school.¹⁹

Unaccompanied Youth and Young Adults

Unaccompanied homeless youth and young adults — those experiencing homelessness outside the immediate care of a parent or legal guardian — are particularly vulnerable to victimization, and face a high risk of trafficking, bullying, physical and sexual abuse and other forms of predation, whether on the street, in shelters, or couch surfing. In the 2018-2019 school year, the U.S. Department of Education identified nearly 126,000 unaccompanied homeless youth in public schools. A 2016-2017 survey by the Voices of Youth Count initiative through Chapin Hall found that unaccompanied youth experience homelessness at a greater rate than those in the care of parents or guardians. The survey identified nearly 4.2 million unaccompanied individuals— **1 in 30 youth ages 13-17 and 1-in-10 young adults ages 18-25**— experiencing homelessness at some point during the year.²⁰

Many unaccompanied youth experience homelessness after leaving or being kicked out of their home due to domestic violence, abuse, and other family conflict. Too often young adults become homeless after exiting child welfare or juvenile justice systems. The lack of safe options for unaccompanied youth and young adults exacerbates their trauma at a time when they are still undergoing critical stages of development, and provides additional barriers to stability and

15 Erb-Downward, Jennifer and Blakeslee, Michael. "Recognizing Trauma: Why School Discipline Reform Needs to Consider Student Homelessness," University of Michigan Poverty Solutions, 18 May 2021, <https://poverty.umich.edu/publications/recognizing-trauma-why-school-discipline-reform-needs-to-consider-student-homelessness/>.

16 Ingram, Erin S., Bridgeland, John M., Reed, Bruce, and Atwell, Matthew. "Hidden in Plain Sight: Homeless Students in America's Public Schools," Civic Enterprises and Hart Research Associates, 2017, https://www.americaspromise.org/sites/default/files/d8/2016-12/HiddeninPlainSightFullReportFINAL_0.pdf.

17 "National Overview," National Center for Homeless Education at SERVE, 2019, <http://profiles.nche.seiservices.com/ConsolidatedStateProfile.aspx>.

18 "The 2020 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress," U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Community Planning and Development, January 2021, <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2020-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>.

19 Hatchimonji, Danielle R., et al, "High School Students Experiencing Homelessness: Findings from the 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System," Nemours Children's Healthy System, https://www.pec-cares.org/uploads/2/9/3/9/29391481/j6934_res_homelessnessinteensresearch_report_v2_drh_rev_1_.pdf.

20 Morton, M.H., Dworsky, A., and Samuels, G.M. "Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in America National Estimates," Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago and Voices of Youth Count, 2017, <https://voicesofyouthcount.org/brief/national-estimates-of-youth-homelessness/>.

economic mobility.

Pregnant and Parenting Youth and Young Adults

A significant number of homeless youth and young adults are pregnant or parenting, with many of them experiencing homelessness with their children. Therefore, when we consider policy solutions to support families with children experiencing homelessness, it is critical to take into consideration that many of the parents in these families are still adolescents or recently adolescents themselves.

According to Chapin Hall, nearly 1.1 million children lived with a young parent who experienced homelessness recently.²¹ While pregnant and parenting youth and young adults require additional services and support systems tailored to their developmental needs and those of their children, including adequate pre- and postnatal care, they are often unable to access even the limited benefits for which they are eligible. In fact, as of 2018, only 36% of parenting youth reported having ever received Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits and 64% having ever received assistance through the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).²² Additionally, relatively few homelessness providers serve minor parents,²³ increasing the need to identify pregnant and parenting youth who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness in order to give them the resources they need to thrive.

Young Children

It is particularly reprehensible that our youngest children are also the ones most likely to experience homelessness.²⁴ Homelessness interferes with the development of a child's physical and mental health, educational outcomes, biopsychosocial development, and overall well-being, and is particularly harmful to young children given the crucial brain development that occurs in the early stages of childhood. A 2021 study by the Childcare Services Association found that 1.3 million infants, toddlers, and preschoolers —1-in-18 children under the age of 6 — experience homelessness every year.²⁵

Additionally, data recently released by the Office of Head Start shows an upward trend in the rate of homelessness among its enrollment. In 2019, 5.7% of children enrolled in Head Start were experiencing homelessness; in 2021, that number rose to 6.2% of total enrollment.²⁶ Children and youth who experience homelessness are at greater risk of additional traumatic incidents known as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) than stably housed children.²⁷ ACEs are potentially traumatic events or environmental conditions that occur during childhood and diminish a child's sense of safety, security, and bonding, and are linked to negative lasting impacts on physical and mental health, educational outcomes, and socioeconomic mobility in adulthood.²⁸

Adverse experiences can result in “toxic stress,” which can change a child's brain development and affect their ability to pay attention, make decisions, learn, and respond to stress. It is important

21 “Missed Opportunities: Pregnant and Parenting Youth Experiencing Homelessness in America,” Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago and Voices of Youth Count, May 2018, <https://voicesofyouthcount.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/VoYC-Pregnant-and-Parenting-Brief-Chapin-Hall-2018.pdf>.

22 Ibid, 22.

23 Ibid, 22.

24 Sucsy, Anna. “An Invisible Crisis: Early Childhood Homelessness - A Primer,” Child Care Services Association, August 2021, https://www.childcareservices.org/wp-content/uploads/CCSA_2021_An_Invisible_Crisis_Early_Childhood_Homelessness_A_Primer.pdf.

25 Ibid, 25.

26 “Head Start Data Shows Drop in Overall Homeless Enrollment During Pandemic, But Steady Increase in Rate of Homeless Enrollment,” SchoolHouse Connection, 20 October 2021, <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/head-start-data-shows-drop-in-overall-homeless-enrollment-during-pandemic/>.

27 Ibid, 25.

28 “Violence Prevention: Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Updated 6 April 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/fastfact.html>.

to note that adverse experiences are both a cause and a result of child, youth, and family homelessness.²⁹

How can policymakers intervene to put children, youth, and families experiencing homelessness on the path to long-term stability?

Families with children and youth on their own often become homeless due to traumatic experiences such as job loss, substance abuse, mental health issues, and domestic violence. **While poverty is inextricably linked to homelessness, often these issues are discussed and addressed in policy silos, as if children experiencing poverty and children experiencing homelessness are two completely separate populations.**

Time and time again, research has shown that prevention and early intervention are crucial to breaking the cycle of homelessness for children, youth, and families. Children and youth who are identified and given access to services are more likely to experience positive outcomes in physical and mental health, and in education.³⁰ At least one-quarter of all children experiencing homelessness go unidentified by schools or other institutions, depriving them of educational support and other assistance.

The following recommendations are critical to identifying and connecting homeless children, youth, and families to the holistic support they need to achieve stability.

Pass the Homeless Children and Youth Act

Most homeless children, youth, and families do not meet the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's narrow definition of homelessness and as a result, are not eligible to be assessed for and subsequently receive HUD Homeless Assistance. This discrepancy forces millions of homeless children and youth to remain hidden in dangerous living situations, and results in communities of hidden homeless children, youth, and families that are not competitive for public or private funding for assistance. At the same time, these same children, youth, and families may be identified as homeless and highly vulnerable by other federal agencies, such as the Department of Education or U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

The bipartisan, bicameral Homeless Children and Youth Act (S. 1469), reintroduced by Sens. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), Rob Portman (R-OH), and Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) in the 117th Congress, and slated for introduction in the House of Representatives by Reps. Mikie Sherrill (D-NJ) and Van Taylor (R-TX) would:

- » Streamline the federal definition of homelessness and allow children and youth identified as homeless through a series of federal programs to be eligible for HUD homeless services;
- » Provide communities with the flexibility to compete for HUD funding based on the cost-effectiveness of their goals rather than their prioritization of certain populations or program models;
- » Improve data by requiring communities to include children, youth, and families experiencing homelessness in all forms in local counts.

This legislation is supported by 70 national organizations and hundreds of state and local organizations.³¹

²⁹ Ibid, 25.

³⁰ "Five Facts Educators Need to Know About Student Homelessness," SchoolHouse Connection, 22 September 2021, <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/five-facts-educators-need-to-know-about-student-homelessness/>.

³¹ "HCYA Supporters," <http://helphomelesskidsnow.org/supporters/>. Last accessed November 15, 2021.

Establish a New Program within HHS to Combat Children, Youth, and Family Homelessness

We recommend that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) create a new grant program to combat child, youth, and family homelessness. HHS oversees programs on early childhood, runaway and homeless youth, and other providers with a long history of working together at the intersection of these issues, making the agency a natural place to command and coordinate assistance to end the cycle of homelessness.

This new program should:

- » Establish a new funding stream through the agency's Administration for Children and Families (ACF) to allocate funds directly to local agencies, housing authorities, education programs, legal service providers, and others who directly serve homeless children, youth, and families.
- » Allow funds to be spent on support and prevention services that stabilize families and youth experiencing or at risk of homelessness, such as civil legal aid, housing assistance services, education support, behavioral health services, and more.
- » Prioritize the allocation of funds to programs serving historically marginalized families of color, pregnant and parenting youth experiencing homelessness, children under age 6, and children with disabilities.

Increase Funding of the Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) Program

The COVID-19 pandemic and its economic fallout heightened the barriers and challenges faced by students experiencing homelessness, especially students with disabilities, students of color, and students learning English.³² The McKinney-Vento Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program is the only federal education program that removes barriers to school enrollment and attendance, and provides opportunities for students experiencing homelessness.³³ EHCY subgrants provide crucial funding for outreach and identification of students experiencing homelessness, enrollment assistance, transportation, school supplies, and other items that help students experiencing homelessness attend school and maintain educational stability.³⁴ The pandemic increased the cost of these services, yet EHCY funding to local school districts remains severely underfunded.³⁵ We urge Congress to approve an increase of at least \$40 million for EHCY in FY 2022, as included in the FY 2022 Senate Labor, Health and Human Services, Education Appropriations Subcommittee bill.³⁶

Increase Access to Affordable Housing

Studies show that housing instability and homelessness exert long-term adverse physiological, academics, and economic effects on children. Housing instability, which includes situations such as falling behind on rent and frequent moving, is associated with an increased risk of poor child health,

32 "Senate Committee Proposes 38% Funding Increase for Homeless Education Program," SchoolHouse Connection, 4 November 2021, <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/senate-committee-proposes-funding-increase-for-homeless-education-program/>.

33 "FY2022 Funding for the Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program," SchoolHouse Connection, April 2021, <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/EHCY1pagerFY22April2021.pdf>.

34 Ibid, 34.

35 Ibid, 34.

36 "Senate Committee Proposes 38 Percent Funding Increase for Homeless Education Program," SchoolHouse Connection, November 4, 2021, <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/senate-committee-proposes-funding-increase-for-homeless-education-program/>.

including hospitalizations, and of maternal depression.³⁷ Yet despite the great need for housing assistance in the United States, only 1-in-4 families who are eligible for rent assistance receive it. In addition, families with children represent a decreasing share of federal housing assistance beneficiaries³⁸ even though the majority of households on the waitlist (60%) are families with children.³⁹

The bipartisan Family Stability and Opportunity Vouchers Act (S. 1991) by Sens. Chris Van Hollen (D-MD) and Todd Young (R-IN) would create an additional 500,000 housing vouchers over five years for families with young children and pregnant women experiencing homelessness or housing instability. The legislation would cover some of the most vulnerable homeless children who are living in motels or doubled-up with others because they have nowhere to go. In addition to rental assistance, families would also receive services such as landlord outreach and counseling to help them move to high-opportunity neighborhoods. These vouchers and mobility services should be in addition to assistance included in the Build Back Better Act.

To address the challenges that many families face in using housing vouchers, Congress must also consider ways to put housing assistance directly into the hands of families, for instance through a renters tax credit like the one proposed by then-Sen. Kamala Harris (D-CA) and Rep. Danny Davis (D-IL) in the Rent Relief Act of 2019.⁴⁰

Prevent Evictions

Even before the pandemic, tens of millions of households with children were experiencing housing instability and were at risk of eviction. Households with children are evicted at much higher rates than those without children. Children who experience eviction often move frequently and face unstable living environments that inhibit their education, physical health, mental health, and interpersonal relationships.⁴¹

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) instituted a national eviction moratorium that lasted from September 4, 2020 through July 31, 2021, and continued on a more-limited basis from August 3, 2021 through August 26, 2021, when the U.S. Supreme Court ended it. The moratorium helped prevent or delay eviction in many cases, but excluded many homeless families with children and youth on their own. Nearly half of renters live in areas with state or local government protections against eviction, but not all renters are covered, and many have little or no protection from eviction.⁴²

Along with rental assistance, civil legal services and eviction prevention programs help keep children and families in their homes and protect them from the negative effects of eviction. Yet most low-income families lack access to these services. The bipartisan Eviction Crisis Act (S. 2182), led by Sens. Michael Bennet (D-CO) and Rob Portman (R-OH), would increase funding for the Legal Services Corporation so more renters could access civil legal services for housing disputes. The legislation

37 Sandel, Megan, Richard Sheward, Stephanie Ettinger de Cuba, Sharon M. Coleman, Deborah A. Frank, Mariana Chilton, Maureen Black, Timothy Heeren, Justin Pasquariello, Patrick Casey, Eduardo Ochoa, and Diana Cutts. "Unstable Housing and Caregiver and Child Health in Renter Families," *Pediatrics*, January 2018, <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/141/2/e20172199>.

38 Kingsley, G. Thomas. "Trends in Housing Problems and Federal Housing Assistance," Urban Institute, October 2017, <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/94146/trends-in-housing-problems-and-federal-housing-assistance.pdf>

39 "The Long Wait for a Home," National Low Income Housing Coalition, Housing Spotlight 6. no. 1, (Fall 2016), https://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/HousingSpotlight_6-1.pdf.

40 "S. 1106 - Rental Relief Act of 2019," 116th Congress (2019-2020), Congress.gov, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/1106?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22%5C%22rent+relief+act%5C%22%22%2C%22%5C%22rent%22%2C%22relief%22%2C%22act%5C%22%22%5D%7D&r=2&s=1>.

41 Desmond, Matthew, An Weihau, Richelle Winkler, and Thomas Ferriss. "Evicting Children," *Social Forces* 92, no. 1, September 2013, https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/mdesmond/files/social_forces-2013-desmond-303-27.pdf.

42 Davis, Christopher, and King-Viehland, Monique. "With Limited State and Local Protections, the End of the Federal Eviction Moratorium Puts Millions of Renters at Risk," Urban Institute, *Urban Wire: Housing and Housing Finance*, August 30, 2021, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/limited-state-and-local-protections-end-federal-eviction-moratorium-puts-millions-renters-risk>.

also would improve data on evictions in the United States, expand access to landlord-tenant community courts, and establish an emergency assistance fund for renters at risk of eviction.

Increase Access to Cash and Nutrition Assistance

Evidence shows that greater access to cash assistance reduces family homelessness.⁴³ The relationship is particularly pronounced in areas with high rental costs and in school districts with a greater share of Native American or Black students.⁴⁴ A landmark study from the National Academy of Sciences also found that cash assistance reduces child poverty and improves children's long-term health, educational, and economic outcomes by increasing access to resources that support children's healthy development and reducing household stress, giving parents and caregivers more mental and emotional bandwidth for their children.⁴⁵

Improvements to the Child Tax Credit (CTC) made in the American Rescue Plan⁴⁶ have provided much greater support to families with children, most importantly to households with little or no income who are now able to access the CTC for the first time since the credit was enacted. The American Rescue Plan advanced half of the CTC monthly, starting in July to help families meet monthly bills, such as rent and utilities. The payments are slated to continue through December 2021. As of September 2021, the payments had reached roughly 60 million households and kept 3.4 million children from experiencing poverty.⁴⁷ The American Rescue Plan also improves the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) by increasing the amount of the credit for adults without qualifying children, and by lowering the age of access — to 19 for all adults without qualifying children and 18 for young adults in foster care or experiencing homelessness, including full-time students. The EITC credit can help these young people pay for rent, transportation to and from job training, school, or community-based support and for other services.

These CTC and EITC improvements end at the close of 2021 if Congress fails to act, which would cause child poverty to nearly double. It is critical that Congress extend all of these improvements before they expire, and ideally make them all permanent. In addition to improving the tax code for families, Congress must reform the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program and expand its reach to more families with children experiencing deep poverty, especially families of color who have been excluded as a result of TANF's deliberate design to limit assistance to Black mothers and children.⁴⁸

Finally, Congress also must increase access to nutrition assistance for children and youth experiencing homelessness by improving the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and child nutrition programs. The U.S. Department of Agriculture recently revised SNAP's Thrifty Food Plan to increase benefits by more than 25% of pre-pandemic levels — the largest increase in the program's history. This change represents an important first step, but SNAP benefits remain far too low and administrative barriers too high, preventing families from getting the consistent support they need.

Lawmakers also must ensure that all children have steady access to school meals throughout the year by reforming the National School Lunch Program to provide free school meals to all students

43 Parolin, Zachary. "Income Support Policies and the Rise of Student Homelessness," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, April 2, 2021, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0002716220981847>

44 Ibid 44.

45 National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, "A Roadmap to Reducing Child Poverty," 2019, <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/25246/a-roadmap-to-reducing-child-poverty>.

46 "The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA; P.L. 117-2): Title IX, Subtitle G - Tax Provisions Related to Promoting Economic Security," Congressional Research Service, Updated March 16, 2021, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46680>.

47 "Expanded child tax credit continues to keep millions of children from experiencing poverty in September," Columbia Center on Poverty & Social Policy, October 27, 2021, <https://www.povertycenter.columbia.edu/news-internal/monthly-poverty-september-2021>.

48 Cara Baldari, "TANF turns 25: let's maximize its reach to children in need," First Focus Campaign for Children, August 17, 2021, <https://firstfocus.org/blog/tanf-turns-25-lets-maximize-its-reach-to-children-in-need>.

regardless of income and create a permanent Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) program for when school is out, whether during summer break or any other extended shutdown. The COVID-19 pandemic proved that when schools close, students lose not only learning, but food and other critical resources.

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