

Despite improvements in the economy, the recession continues to have a significant effect for millions of Americans, resulting in a record number of children and youth that continue to experience homelessness.

We must address this growing problem by establishing and funding programs that will provide a safety net to families at-risk of homelessness and keep them in their home. For children and youth who are already homeless, it is imperative that they are able to access homeless assistance, affordable housing, school, and additional supportive services as needed.

HOW MANY CHILDREN ARE AFFECTED BY HOMELESSNESS?

The answer to this question is not as simple as it seems. Federal agencies differ in how they count homeless children and youth. There are two categories of homeless children and youth: those who are living with their families, and unaccompanied homeless children and youth, who are living unattached to any family or caregivers.

U.S. Department of Education

In the 2013-2014 school year, the U.S. Department of Education identified 1,301,239 homeless students enrolled by U.S. preschools and K-12 schools.¹ This is a 100 percent increase since the 2006-2007 school year.

- This includes children and youth who are living in emergency or transitional shelters; those who are sharing the housing of other persons (“doubling up”) due to loss of housing or economic hardship; as well as those living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations.²
- It also includes both children and youth living in families, as well as those who are unaccompanied. In the 2013-2014 school year, there were 88,966 unaccompanied homeless youth identified by the U.S. Department of Education.³

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) identifies homeless individuals through their annual Point-in-Time Count, which identifies people living in emergency homeless shelter or transitional housing programs or living on the street.

Homeless Families

- There were 127,787 children (under 18) identified, making up nearly one-quarter of all homeless people.⁴
- In 2015, there were 206,286 homeless people in families with children, making up nearly 36 percent of the homeless population.⁵
- Homelessness among people in families with children declined by 5 percent between 2014 and 2015 and by 12 percent between 2007 and 2015.⁶

Unaccompanied homeless children and youth

- There were 4,667 unaccompanied homeless children (under 18) and 36,907 unaccompanied homeless youth (18-24).⁷

Child Homelessness: A Problem of Epic Proportions

The Point-in-Time Count significantly undercounts homeless children and youth, because it fails to count those living in motels (unless they are paid for a charitable organization or federal, state, or local government program for low-income individuals) or living with temporarily with others because they have nowhere else to go. Despite recent efforts to better identify and serve unaccompanied runaway and homeless youth, these populations remain significantly undercounted, because they fail to access shelters or services due to fear of being reported by authorities as criminal offenders. The National Network for Youth estimates that 1.3 to 1.7 million youth experience one night of homelessness a year and 550,000 are homeless a week or longer.⁸

National Center on Family Homelessness

The National Center on Family Homelessness estimates that 2.5 million children, or 1 in every 30 children, are homeless annually in the U.S. by compiling the data from the Department of Education on school-aged children and combining it with an estimate of younger non-school aged homeless children in the US.⁹

CAUSES OF CHILD AND YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

There are many reasons for the rise in child and youth homelessness. The lack of affordable housing has pushed many families into homelessness. In addition, unaccompanied homeless youth often lack the resources to live on their own and support themselves.

Maternal Trauma and Depression

- In a recent longitudinal study that tracked a group of homeless children and families for a year and a half, 93 percent of homeless mothers had a history of trauma.¹⁰
- The most common trauma experienced was interpersonal violence, and trauma symptom severity and low self-esteem in the mothers were the only two predictors for residential stability after 30 months.¹¹
- Poor outcomes for children were predicted by maternal major depressive symptoms.¹²

Lack of Affordable Housing

- In 2013, over 40 percent of households with children (both homeowners and renters) report that they struggle to afford housing, or their housing is physically inadequate or overcrowded.¹³ HUD defines housing as “affordable” when any rent or mortgage payments comprise 30 percent or less of monthly household income.¹⁴
- For every 100 extremely low income renter households, there are just 31 affordable and available units.¹⁵
- As of 2013, 11.3 million renter households pay more than half of their incomes on housing.¹⁶
- The number of households spending more than 50 percent of their income on rent is expected to rise at least 11 percent by 2025.¹⁷

Leaving Home/Aging Out of Public Systems

- 43 percent of homeless youth report being beaten by a caretaker and leave home to escape this abuse or other family conflict.¹⁸
- 90 percent of youth accessing youth shelters for minors through the federally funded Basic Center programs state that they experience difficulty at home, such as constant fighting or screaming.¹⁹
- 25 percent of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth reported family rejection as the reason for their homelessness.²⁰ Up to 40 percent of homeless youth identify as LGBT.²¹
- Out of 700 former foster youth surveyed in 2010-2011 in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin, 36 percent had experienced homelessness by age 26.²² Over 20,000 youth age out of the foster care system annually.²³

EFFECTS OF HOMELESSNESS ON CHILDREN

When children and youth experience homelessness, they are thrown into a world of instability. They are living in transient situations that are chaotic, overcrowded, and stressful, and often provide no quiet place for a student to sleep or study. This negatively affects their educational performance, as well as their physical and mental health.

Education

- Homeless children and youth face a unique set of barriers such as the inability to meet enrollment requirements (providing proof of residency), lack of transportation, lack of school supplies, and lack of other basic necessities such as clothes and food.
- Children who switch schools have lower levels of math and reading achievement than their more stable peers, even after controlling for poverty and other family characteristics that are associated with both residential mobility and poor academic performance. Each move equals a reduction of one month of school.²⁴
- Children and youth who experience numerous moves are also less likely to graduate from high school than children who move less frequently.²⁵

Health

- Physical and mental health, interpersonal relationships, and resilience and resistance against risky activities also suffer when a child faces homelessness or an instable living environment.²⁶
- Homeless children are more likely to utilize emergency rooms, are less likely to have a stable source for medical care, and overall are more likely to have worse physical health when compared to the overall population and low-income children that are housed.²⁷

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Homelessness is a lagging indicator, so we may very well continue to see an increase in homelessness due to the recession in the coming months and even years. In order to stem this increase, we need to support programs and funding streams that will help families stay in their homes.

- **Pass the Homeless Children and Youth Act (H.R. 576/S. 256)**

Re-introduced in the 114th Congress, the Homeless Children and Youth Act (HR 576/S 256) would help more of America's homeless children and youth access homeless assistance services such as transitional housing. This legislation would amend the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development definition of "homeless" children by including children and youth who have been verified as homeless by personnel in other federal programs. In addition, it would allow – but not require – local service providers to prioritize funding for homeless families and unaccompanied youth based on the needs in their communities.

- **Through the annual appropriations process, fully fund HUD's McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Grants and prioritize homeless children, youth and families.**

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Grants are the main source of federal funding for efforts that assist homeless families and individuals. These grants fund local, regional, and state homeless assistance programs and provide supports such as shelter, food, and mental health services for homeless individuals and families.

While many of the fiscal year (FY) 2013 sequester cuts to discretionary housing investments were restored in 2014, increased funding is still necessary to fully implement the HEARTH reforms. President Obama's FY 2016 budget proposes a 16 percent increase to the Homeless Assistance Grants program, though any increase should also be accompanied by a change in the program's implementation, so that all homeless children and youth are eligible for these programs, regardless of where they stay at night.

- **Increase funding for the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education for Homeless Children and Youth program (EHCY) to \$115 million for FY2016**

This program provides legal protections to homeless students as well as critical supports to help stabilize their education. It requires public school districts to identify homeless children living in their district, enroll them in the school that is best for the child, and ensure that the child has the proper resources to succeed in school. Yet this program is severely underfunded and most school districts do not receive a subgrant to implement the program. An increase in funding would provide school districts with the resources they need to provide educational stability to all homeless students in the U.S.

- **Reauthorize the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (H.R. 1779/S. 262)**

The Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) expired in September 2013 and has yet to be reauthorized. It provides services such as Street Outreach programs that conduct outreach to homeless youth and connect them to services, Basic Center programs that provide temporary housing along with crisis intervention services, and Transitional Living programs that offer longer-term housing with supportive services. The bipartisan, bicameral Runaway and Homeless Youth and Human Trafficking Act (H.R. 1779/S. 262) would reauthorize RHYA and make critical improvements. In addition, to fully implement RHYA, Congress needs to increase funding to \$165 million.

- **Implement the National Housing Trust Fund (NHTF), which was created by Congress in 2008 to address the severe shortage of affordable rental homes**

Despite its creation nearly six years ago, until recently there was no funding for the NHTF. However, in late 2014, it was announced funds can now be allocated to the NHTF from the Federal National Mortgage Association (Fannie Mae) and the Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corporation (Freddie Mac).²⁸ In January 2015, HUD published an interim rule implementing the NHTF, and there are plans to publish sub-regulatory guidance in early spring 2016.

The NHTF will address the current severe shortage of affordable rental homes by creating new affordable housing units, as well as preserving existing rental units and making additional units available. It is targeted to rental housing for extremely low income households - those with income below 30 percent of the area median income or the national poverty level, whichever is greater.

- **Pass the Family Unification, Preservation, and Modernization Act (S. 2289)**

Introduced in November 2015, this legislation would make critical improvements to the Family Unification Program (FUP). This program provides housing assistance vouchers to families involved in the child welfare system as well as youth who have aged out of foster care and are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. These improvements would help to stabilize families and youth who have come in contact with the child welfare system by increasing the time limit and expanding eligibility of these vouchers as well as providing services along with the vouchers for families and youth.

- **Reauthorize the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program order to help families and children in need.**

TANF is currently operating under short-term extensions, which have continued the flat rate of funding for the overall block grant. Far fewer families now receive TANF than in 1996, and for families that do receive assistance, it does not provide enough to meet their basic needs. In most states, the level of assistance that families receive through TANF is at least 20 percent below 1996 levels.²⁹

States need to be incentivized to serve a target percentage of families in need and be rewarded based on this outcome. In addition, resources for TANF need to be increased to meet the large need for cash assistance, which can help families meet expenses such as rent and utility bills.

- **Encourage more states to take advantage of a state option to extend care for youth up to age 21 under the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008.**

Under the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, states were given the option to allow youth to remain in the foster care system until age 21. Less than half of states have taken advantage of this option so far.³⁰ We need to encourage additional states to use their Title IV-E funds for youth beyond age 18. This would give youth that are near aging out of the foster care system the opportunity to prepare for the transition to independence, finish school or job training programs, and the ability to save enough money to secure housing as they leave the system.

- **Protect the existing safety net for homeless children and youth.**

Supports such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) lift millions of children out of poverty every year and keep them fed and healthy. We must continue to extend CHIP as well as protect SNAP, Medicaid, and other programs critical to the well-being of homeless children.

¹ The National Center for Homeless Education, *Education for Homeless Children and Youth Federal Data Summary School Years 2011-2012 to 2013-14*, November 2015, available at: <http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/data-comp-1112-1314.pdf>.

² (U.S. Code, Title 42, Chapter 119, Subchapter I, § 11301), the term "homeless children and youths"

1. means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence (within the meaning of section 11302 (a)(1) of this title); and

2. includes —

A. children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement;

B. children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings (within the meaning of section 11302 (a)(2)(C) of this title);

C. children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings;

D. migratory children (as such term is defined in section 6399 of title 20) who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this part because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (A) through (C).

³ Id.

⁴ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Community Planning and Development, *Homeless Resource Exchange, 2015 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress*, 1, November 2015, available at: <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2015-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>.

⁵ Id.

⁶ Id.

⁷ Id. p. 32.

⁸ National Network for Youth, "General Information About Homeless Youth in America," visited November 24, 2015: <https://www.nn4youth.org/learn/>.

⁹ National Center on Family Homelessness, "America's Youngest Outcasts: A Report Card on Child Homelessness," November 2014, p. 14, available at: <http://www.homelesschildrenamerica.org/mediadocs/282.pdf>.

¹⁰ The National Center on Family Homelessness: A practice area of the American Institute for Research's Human and Social Development Program, *The Service and Housing Interventions for Families in Transition (SHIFT) Longitudinal Study*, available at: <http://www.familyhomelessness.org/shift.php?p=sm>.

¹¹ Id.

¹² Id.

¹³ U.S. Census Bureau and Department of Housing and Urban Development, *American Housing Survey (2014)*. Tabulated by Department of Housing and Urban Development, available through *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being 2015*, Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, at: http://www.childstats.gov/pdf/ac2015/ac_15.pdf.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, "Affordable Housing," available at <http://www.hud.gov/offices/cpd/affordablehousing/>.

¹⁵ Extremely low income renter households are those with incomes at or below 30% of the Area Median Income (AMI). National Low Income Housing Coalition, *Out of Reach 2015*, 5, available at: http://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/oor/OOR_2015_FULL.pdf.

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