

CHILD AND YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN THE UNITED STATES REQUIRES A HOLISTIC SOLUTION

Cara Baldari

Senior Policy Director
Family Economics,
Housing and Homelessness

First Focus

Millions of children and families experience homelessness in the United States each year, and numbers continue to increase. Homelessness, even for a brief time, is extremely detrimental to a child's healthy development. The younger and longer a child experiences homelessness, the greater the cumulative toll of negative health outcomes;¹ moreover, homelessness is associated with an 87 percent greater likelihood of dropping out of school.²

Families and youth often become homeless due to traumatic experiences such as job loss, substance abuse, mental health issues, and domestic violence. Therefore, homelessness is both a symptom and a cause of trauma for children, youth, and families. Homelessness causes instability in a child's life, resulting in multiple moves and overcrowded living situations, and too often, homelessness puts children directly at risk of physical harm and abuse.

The U.S. Department of Education identified 1.2 million homeless children and youth in public schools in the 2014–2015 school year. This is a 34 percent increase since the end of the recession in 2009. In addition, a recent study from Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago found that 1 in 30 youth (ages 13–17) and 1 in 10 young adults (ages 18–25) experience homelessness on their own each year.³

Homelessness can take many different forms and often results in very fluid and unstable situations. This is because homeless families with children, and youth who are on their own, stay wherever they can. These situations often include run-down motels or overcrowded spaces temporarily shared with others because there is no family or youth shelter in the community, shelters are full, or shelter policies exclude them. Chapin Hall also reports that two-thirds of the youth surveyed reported couch-surfing or other less visible forms of homelessness at some point. This is particularly true in rural communities, where the rate of youth homelessness was just as high as in urban and suburban communities. These less visible forms of homelessness mean that youth are often invisible to public systems, putting them at high risk of harm, abuse, and neglect, including trafficking. According to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, runaway/homeless status and unstable housing are among the top five risk factors for human trafficking.

Public schools, including early childhood programs, recognize all the forms of homelessness that children and youth experience, but the homeless assistance system

administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development—including emergency shelters and transitional living programs— does not. Its eligibility criteria exclude some of the most vulnerable homeless children and youth from accessing the programs and services that they need. This keeps many children, families, and youth invisible to public systems and excluded from policy decision making.

In addition, communities are often barred from serving homeless children, youth, and families in a way that is responsive to their unique developmental needs, including offering interventions that couple services for children and parents with housing assistance. Early care and learning, adult education, employment assistance, and mental health services must go hand in hand with housing if families are to stay housed and children are to recover from the trauma and disruption of homelessness.

The bipartisan Homeless Children and Youth Act of 2017 (S. 611 / H.R. 1511), reintroduced by Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), Senator Rob Portman (R-OH), Congressman Steve Stivers (R-OH-15), and Congressman Dave Loebsack (D-IA-2) would remove barriers that communities face in addressing family, child, and youth homelessness, and give them the flexibility to tailor homeless assistance interventions based on the unique needs of their homeless population.⁴

Communities would have the discretion to target services based on local assessment of need, and to serve the most vulnerable homeless children, youth, and families, regardless of what form of homelessness they are experiencing. This approach would increase visibility and awareness of child, youth, young adult, and family homelessness through increased data transparency; more accurate counts; and collaboration with early childhood programs, institutions of higher education, and local educational agencies, thus helping communities to leverage and attract more public and private resources to address homelessness.

In order to truly reduce family homelessness in the United States, we must acknowledge that family and youth homelessness is a complex problem that takes many forms. Without a holistic solution, families will be unable to maintain stable housing and may find themselves homeless once again, thereby generating future cycles of family homelessness and poverty for the foreseeable future.

For more information and to take action, please visit www.helphomelesskidsnow.org.

ENDNOTES

1. Megan Sandel, Richard Sheward, and Lisa Sturtevant, *Compounding Stress: The Timing and Duration Effects of Homelessness on Children's Health, Insights from Housing Policy Research* (Washington, DC: Center for Housing Policy; Boston: Children's HealthWatch, 2015), <https://www.issuelab.org/resources/21731/21731.pdf>.

2. Erin S. Ingram, John M. Bridgeland, Bruce Reed, and Matthew Atwell, *Hidden in Plain Sight: Homeless Students in America's Public Schools* (Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises and Hart Research Associates, 2016), <http://www.americaspromise.org/report/hidden-plain-sight>.

3. M. H. Morton, A. Dworsky, and G. M. Samuels, *Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in America—National Estimates* (Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 2017), http://voicesofyouthcount.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/ChapinHall_VoYC_NationalReport_Final.pdf.

4. First Focus Campaign for Children, "Take Action on the Homeless Children and Youth Act 2017," accessed March 23, 2018, <https://campaignforchildren.org/take-action/>.