IC PH Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness

The Hidden Homeless: Families with Children in the U.S.

Family homelessness is a national crisis. It is estimated that over a quarter million (259,473)—about one-third—of individuals experiencing homelessness in the United States are members of families with at least one adult and one minor child, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) 2024 estimates.[1] The number of people in families saw the largest increase among all types of homelessness, rising 39% over the prior year.[2] Family homelessness is a public health crisis that will adversely impact an entire generation of children. Addressing family homelessness requires not only larger scale policy solutions but also immediate action to assist those families who have already fallen through the cracks into homelessness.

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Drivers of Family Homelessness in the U.S.

Many factors contribute to family homelessness nationwide.

- There is a **shortage of just over seven million units** that are available for extremely low-income renters.[3]

- Wages are not keeping up with the **ever-increasing cost of living and bureaucratic barriers** are preventing families from quickly accessing safety net programs.[4,5]

- Under- and unemployment, especially among single mother families, adversely affect the housing stability of families.[6] **Many single moms are part of the 24/7 economy working in low-paid, long-hour jobs that require them to "be available on demand."** Finding safe, affordable childcare that fits non-traditional hours is a challenge that contributes to this issue with only eight percent of childcare centers open before 7 am or later than 6 pm.[7,8]

- Many mothers with children become homeless because they are **fleeing domestic violence** with some studies noting that up to 80% had previously experienced domestic violence.[9]

- **Previous homelessness or foster care stays** contributed to current family homelessness especially among mothers. This factor played a role even more for those who had been homeless more than three times or for more than a year.[10,11]

Urban, Suburban, Rural Issue

Headlines often shout about homelessness in large urban centers like New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago—a perception shaped largely by the visibility of single adults experiencing street homelessness in subways or encampments. **However, family homelessness does not discriminate.** It appears prominently in every corner of the U.S.—from remote rural regions and suburban neighborhoods to cities in every state.

Research points to a lack of emergency shelters in many rural communities, as well as the fact that homelessness often "looks different" compared to urban centers—with people in rural America more likely to live in cars, campers, barns, or garages—contributing to this misperception.[12] In fact, from 2021 to 2022, there was an overall increase in rural homelessness.[13]

Addressing Family Homelessness Requires a Multipronged Approach

Family homelessness is a pervasive issue that is caused by an intricate web of interrelated factors, often systemic, and having little or not at all to do with factors within a family's control. It impacts families in every state, crossing racial and geographic boundaries, and has health—including mental health—educational, and financial consequences for families and the nation. A combination of short- and long-term solutions include:

- Access to safe, emergency shelter with wrap-around services and **immediate interventions to bring families inside** who are living on the streets, in cars, and other uninhabitable situations.[14] Purpose-built or purposely adapted shelters offer programming that positively impacts the families that stay there and helps them reach their goals.

- A focus on **permanent housing access** that is truly affordable for families in all markets—urban, suburban, and rural.

- Breaking the cycle of homelessness before it begins through **robust prevention efforts** and **addressing the root causes** of homelessness.[15,16]

- Supporting post-shelter housing stability through a period of aftercare **follow-up or connections to community-based services.** These can range from short-term help in the form of monthly check-in calls and financial management training or guidance on how to resolve conflicts with a landlord to more intensive services like behavioral health referrals.[17,18,19]

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NOTE: This does not include unaccompanied youth who are experiencing homelessness.

For questions or to schedule a presentation to a class or community group, please email **INFO@ICPH.org**.

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The Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness (ICPH) raises awareness and advances the public conversation about family homelessness through the production and dissemination of publications, resources, and other tools. Its public policy insights are informed by field-based practices in education, employment, and social services at family shelters.

For questions or to schedule meetings, presentations, or for media inquiries: INFO@ICPH.org

(212) 358-8086

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