

# Homelessness and the Youngest Children

Written by Sharon McDonald November 27, 2018



More than 140,000 children age five or under spent a night in a homeless shelter or transitional housing program over the course of 2017, according to the recently released [HUD Annual Homeless Assessment Report \(AHAR\)](#). More than 30,000 were infants.

Each year when localities take a one-day snapshot of homelessness, voluntary surveyors find children in unsheltered locations. This means children are spending the night in cars, garages, abandoned buildings, campgrounds or other outdoor locations.

Outraged? We all should be.

## Ending Children's Homelessness

The best thing that homeless service systems can do for young children is to help them and their parents reconnect quickly to permanent housing and prevent them from ever experiencing a night without a roof over their head.

This has clear benefits for children. A recently released [study](#) found that prolonged homelessness (defined as living in shelter, transitional housing, motel, unsheltered location or with no consistent place to sleep) is associated with adverse outcomes for infants and toddlers.

Helping families and children quickly and safely exit homelessness also helps the broader family homelessness system. When families reconnect to permanent housing more quickly, crisis housing resources (including emergency shelter and transitional housing) can be deployed to help other families in need. This can prevent children and their parents from ever experiencing unsheltered homelessness or being denied shelter entry when it is desperately needed.

## We Can Do More

A [recent analysis by the National Alliance to End Homelessness](#) indicates that nationally only a third of families who experience a shelter or transitional housing stay receive targeted help (e.g. rapid re-housing or permanent supportive housing) to help them reconnect to permanent housing.

**Other funding resources are typically required to get to the scale necessary so that every family has the help they need to exit homelessness.** This can include public housing agencies prioritizing families experiencing homelessness for permanent rent assistance. It can include committing Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or other state-controlled funding resources to provide temporary or permanent rental assistance.

State and local partners can also dedicate staff time — from TANF agencies, Workforce Development organizations, mental and behavioral health programs and Community Action Agencies — to help minimize the time children and their parents spend homeless.

**But young children and their parents need more.** Early childhood is a very critical time in people’s development with long-term consequences for their future well-being. The overwhelming stress that accompanies homelessness, along with other risk factors, can interfere with parents’ ability to provide developmental support to their young children.

The homeless service community cannot do it all, but we *can* make better connections to early childhood providers to ensure that very young children, and their parents, have access to skilled and evidence-based interventions, such as [Home Visitation Programs](#). By partnering with child-focused organizations to offer voluntary services, providers and advocates can make connections that will extend well beyond the housing crisis and offer continuity in care and support for children and their families.

Many providers are already making innovative and inspiring connections across service systems. [People Serving People](#) in Minneapolis, for example, connects expectant mothers to doulas, so that first time parents are prepared to deliver a healthy child and have access to skilled support and information in the early days of a child’s life.

Advocacy is also needed. Children experiencing homelessness are prioritized for Head Start services, and quality child care for low-income families is available. But providers may need to do more locally to build the bridges necessary to ensure that children in their programs have access to these interventions.

## **Unifying Our Efforts**

Solving family homelessness is a challenge. It requires the full attention of homeless service systems, a creative approach to leveraging new or different funding streams, and a commitment to building partnerships with early childhood providers. The challenge may be high, but we know that the stakes are higher.

Developing partnerships with early childhood development providers and advocates allow us to do more to promote the long-term well-being of children and families.