Families with children are the fastest-growing homeless population, although statistics vary between one-half million and a million homeless families in the United States on any given night. Homeless families currently account for about 40% of the homeless population. Homelessness is on the rise in industrialized nations around the world. In this entry, discussion of family homelessness is centered on the experiences of homeless families in the United States, which are somewhat generalizable to other industrialized nations but are inapplicable to nonindustrialized nations torn by wars, famine, disease, and other catastrophic conditions precedent to homelessness.

Definitions of Homelessness

Definitions of homelessness have changed over time, reflecting public opinion, social values, and economics of time and place. In the early 1900s, skid-row residents, vagrants, and people without social networks and resources were considered homeless—heart and hearth were considered together; after World War II, “acceptable” quality of housing became the standard, moving toward definitions of homelessness that equate it with houselessness. By the 1960s definitions had changed to attribute homelessness to people with no fixed address. Homelessness emerged as a major social problem during the 1980s, under the Reagan administration. In the 1980s, the definition shifted again so that people were considered homeless if they had no private sleeping quarters, regardless of whether that sleeping place changed from day to day.

The Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987, codified in 42 United States Code Annotated (USCA) Section 11302(a), defined a homeless person as an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate residence or a person who resides in a supervised residence, shelter, welfare hotel, transitional program or place not ordinarily used as regular sleeping accommodations, such as streets, cars, movie theaters, or abandoned buildings. In addition, individuals who are staying in their own or someone else's home but will be asked to leave within the next month were considered homeless. People in jail were not homeless, regardless of whether they would become homeless upon release.
In 2000, the McKinney Homeless Assistance Act was renamed the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. Title VII of the McKinney-Vento Act authorized four programs: the Adult Education for the Homeless Program and the Education of Homeless Children and Youth Program, both administered by the Department of Education; the Job Training for the Homeless Demonstration Program, administered by the Department of Labor; and the Emergency Community Services Homeless Grant Program, administered by the Department of Health and Human Services. Since 1995, overall funding for McKinney-Vento programs has declined considerably and the Job Training for the Homeless program has been terminated.

The McKinney-Vento Act does not specifically define homeless families, but families living in shelters and welfare hotels are generally considered homeless while those living in federally or locally subsidized housing are not. Under McKinney-Vento, homeless children and youths are individuals who lack a fixed, regular nighttime residence or who share the housing of other persons because of loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds because of the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement. In 2001, Congress again reauthorized the McKinney Education of Homeless Children and Youth Program as the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002. McKinney-Vento is equal access legislation; its purpose is to assure every homeless child or youth receives the same educational opportunities, including public preschool education, as other, nonhomeless children.

In practice, homeless families are generally defined as one or more adults accompanied by one or more children under the age of 18. Unaccompanied youths, such as runaways and others separated from an immediate family unit (e.g., children living with family or friends while other family members seek shelter) are not generally included in definitions or counts of homeless families. The 2002 U.S. Conference of Mayors on homelessness in 25 major cities concluded that 41% of individuals that were homeless on any given night were members of homeless families.

Definitions of homelessness that take place within a value system driven by economics tend to include families with children among the “worthy homeless” when determining
who deserves aid and assistance. Migrant children who are living in one of the described situations are also considered homeless under the McKinney-Vento Act if they also meet the conditions outlined in section 1309 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Yet, inconsistent definitions of homelessness and diverse methods for counting homeless people explain discrepancies in reports of the number of homeless people and families nationally and locally.

Causes of Homelessness

The complexity of the problem of homelessness makes it difficult to identify its causes. It is also often difficult to separate causes from effects. In the United States, major natural disasters such as hurricanes in the southern coastal states have suddenly increased the numbers of homeless families. Governmental assistance included efforts to relocate displaced families out of shelters, in part so that shelters would still be available to families. It is too early to know yet whether individuals and families displaced by these natural disasters will be significantly represented in populations of chronically homeless people. Foster care history, drug and alcohol abuse, family violence, runaway, incarceration, and mental and physical illness can precede or follow a family’s experiences of homelessness. Each individual situation needs to be assessed to identify causes or offer remedies. Even so, there are some obvious, systemic causes of homelessness: lack of affordable housing, lagging incomes, domestic violence, and reduced governmental services and assistance.

Lack of Affordable Housing

Researchers agree the primary cause of homelessness is a lack of housing that very low-income people can afford. The Department of Housing and Urban Development sets the standard of “affordable” at no more than 30% of family income. Millions of low-income families pay over half of their incomes for housing or live in severely substandard structures. The shortage of affordable housing began in the 1970s and continues to increase. Related is the problem of delayed returns of children out of foster
care because of poor quality housing. The provision of stable housing has been the only measure ever proved to be a solution to family homelessness.

**Lagging Incomes**

According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, in no jurisdiction in the United States does a minimum wage job provide enough income for a household to afford the rent for a modest apartment. Federal minimum wage was established as law in 1938. The period from 1997 to 2006 is the longest phase in its history during which minimum wage had not been adjusted. During this time, states set their own minimum wages, higher than those established by the federal government. Two states that report high numbers of hungry people have responded by leading the nation in state minimum wage increases: Washington and Oregon.

**Domestic Violence**

Violence against women is a widely recognized cause for family homelessness in all regions of the United States. Various studies indicate that about 50% of homeless women with children report domestic violence as the immediate cause of their homelessness. Evictions of women who experience and report abuse are a cause of homelessness of single-mother families. Close to 100% of homeless mothers report severe physical and/or sexual abuse during childhood or adulthood.

**Reduced Governmental Services and Assistance**

More and varied types of housing subsidies are widely recognized as the single most cost-effective measure government can take to solve the problem of family homelessness. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) terminated a 61-year history of entitlement of cash assistance to families. The 1996 revisions to welfare converted Aid for Dependent Children
Emergency Assistance and work programs to a block grant, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program, with essentially fixed funding, and it initiated a 5-year-maximum lifetime limit on assistance. PRWORA also reduced food stamp funding by $27.7 billion, and it denied food stamp assistance to legal immigrants. Adjustments were made in 2002, removing some of the barriers for homeless people and legal immigrants and giving states new flexibility in their plans for distributions of food stamps.

Consequences and Conditions of Homelessness for Families with Children

Females in their late 20s with two children under the age of 6 head the majority of homeless families. There are many variations on this pattern of homeless families, however, and the population of homeless school-age children continues to grow. There are single-father heads of households, grandparent heads of households, and two-parent homeless families; all of the myriad variations of family makeup would benefit from affordable housing, minimum wage adjustments, and improvements in the systems of government services to poor and homeless individuals and families. Areas in which the experiences of homelessness have distinct, detrimental impact to people and families, are discussed in this section.

Health

In comparison with the general population, homeless adult family members, primarily females, experience a higher incidence of asthma, anemia, ulcers, upper respiratory infections, skin diseases, and trauma-related problems and injuries. Homeless mothers are at significantly higher risk for HIV than are low-income housed mothers. Alcohol and drug abuse and dependency, tobacco use, and obesity are also significant health risk factors for homeless mothers.

Asthma, ear and respiratory infections, diarrhea, infectious and communicable diseases frequent to shared living conditions, skin ailments, lice and scabies, lead exposure, delayed immunizations, and poor nutrition and hunger are significant health risks
for homeless children, sheltered and unsheltered. Chronic and frequent illnesses of homeless children may prohibit access to services and school attendance. There are also reports that homeless children are at high risk for iron deficiency, delayed growth, and obesity. High levels of stress are thought to cause psychological trauma, depression, anxiety, developmental delays, and behavior problems in homeless children.

Food Security and Hunger

Traditionally, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) used two labels for food insecurity: “with hunger” and “without hunger.” In 2006, the agency renamed food insecurity without hunger as “low food security” and food insecurity with hunger as “very low food security”—leaving hunger out of the definition. Low food security is defined as reports of reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet, with little or no indication of reduced food intake; very low food security is defined as reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake. USDA rational for the change is based on the claim that hunger is not a scientifically accurate term for understanding food security. The change was further prompted by the USDA’s assertion that hunger is an individual, not a household, experience. Critics believe the term hunger has political implications, whereas the term food insecurity does not. The consequence of renaming food security and of not assessing hunger is still to be determined. Predictions are that more children will be hungry.

Disruption and Dissolution of Families

Homeless youths sometimes become homeless because shelters discourage or do not serve families with older children, especially male children. Families who are homeless are sometimes able to find housing for their children with relatives and friends, while the parent(s) live in shelters or on the streets. Children living with friends and relatives often have the most profound experiences of instability, caused by separation from parents and other family members; frequent moves between the residencies of caretakers; and occasional stays in shelters when the informal
system of housing fails. Neglect, abuse, and family conflict are said to account for the more than 1 million 12- to 17-year-old minors who experience homelessness on their own. One in five homeless children is placed in foster care, and foster care placements in families that have experienced or are experiencing homelessness are typically longer than placements of nonhomeless children. Childhood homelessness is also a precursor of adult homelessness, perpetuating the separations of families intergenerationally. Because family homelessness has only recently been recognized as a major social problem, there is not a substantial research base with which to understand the generational impact of homelessness. Domestic violence is often the most immediate cause for family separations. Reunification of families disrupted by homelessness is rare.

Education and Homeless Families with Children

The relationship between education and family homelessness is particularly complex: Education of parents does not add to the predictive power of who will become homeless. Almost half of homeless adults had not obtained a high school diploma by age 18, and well over half of homeless adults left school altogether or had left school for a period of time during elementary, middle, or high school. There is also evidence that homeless and other poor students are more frequently expelled from schools. On the other hand, well over half of homeless adults do have a high school diploma.

Barriers to school success include lack of access to educational services. Head Start and other publicly funded preschool programs, gifted and talented programs, advance placement programs, special education, family literacy programs, and programs for English language learners have been identified as presenting especially difficult barriers to access for homeless families with children.

Title IX of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act requires, among other things, that the district notify [p. 494 ↓ ] parents in homeless situations of their child's educational rights. General guidelines are provided to district personnel responsible for coordinating how homeless students are registered, enrolled, transported, linked to community resources,
and integrated rather than segregated in classroom environments. Homeless students must be allowed to enroll in school and attend classes even if they do not have all of the required medical records and proof of residency. To stabilize students disrupted from their home settings, the NCLB Act requires schools to provide transportation from shelter to school in some situations. The importance of school as a place of shelter, stability, structure, and accomplishment is sometimes undermined by systems and individual actions that inspire children to report feeling like outcasts, invisible and unwanted. Segregation of homeless children in special schools or classrooms is not allowed under the NCLB Act, except for short periods of time. Exceptions were also made for states already segregating homeless students prior to 2001 (e.g., Arizona). Private foundations have financed some segregated schools for homeless children. Because homelessness disproportionately affects children of minority races and children who speak languages other than English as their primary language, segregation of children living in severe poverty is a controversial affront to efforts to ensure educational equity to all children.

Justifications offered for segregation is that children who are homeless have lower academic achievement and irregular attendance, and experience more emotional, behavior, and mental health issues than housed children. Researchers have demonstrated that homelessness is unlikely to result in long-term depression of children's cognitive or motor development; however, lack of access to education will have such deleterious impact.

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See also

- Domestic Violence
- Family Influences
- Poverty
- Risk Factors and Development

Further Readings


