

## Handout 2

# Research on Homelessness from the National Coalition for the Homeless

Homeless children suffer a great number of setbacks at the hands of society. What homeless children need most of all is a home. While they are experiencing homelessness, however, children desperately need to remain in school. School is one of the few stable, secure places in the lives of homeless children and youth--a place where they can acquire the skills needed to help them escape poverty.

## National Estimates of Homelessness

The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty estimates that approximately 760,000 people were homeless on any given night in 1996, and 1.2-2 million people who experience homelessness during one year.

## Dimensions

- The fastest growing segment of the homeless population is families with children.
- Families with children constitute approximately 40% of people who become homeless, while on any give night, an estimated 20% of the homeless population are families.
- A survey of 29 U.S. cities found that in 1996, children accounted for 27% of the homeless population. These proportions are likely to be higher in rural areas; research indicates that families, single mothers, and children make up the largest group of people who are homeless in rural areas.
- Homelessness among families is increasing. Requests for emergency shelter by families with children in 29 U.S. cities increased by an average of 7% between 1995-1996.
- The same study found that 24% of requests for shelter by homeless families were denied in 1996 due to lack of resources.
- Every city surveyed expects an increase in the number of emergency shelter by families with children in 1997.

## Causes

Poverty and the lack of affordable housing are the principal causes of family homelessness.

- There has been an increase in the number of Americans living in extreme poverty. In 1996, 14.4 million people—nearly two-fifths of all poor persons—had incomes of less than half the poverty level.

- The number of poor people increase 41% between 1979 and 1990; families and children under 18 accounted for more than half of that increase. Between 1989 and 1994, a period of relatively strong economic growth, the number of children in working poor families increased by 30%.
- Stagnating wages and changes in welfare programs (principally, restrictive eligibility requirements and erosion of benefits) account for increasing poverty among families. Between 1973 and 1993, the percentage of workers earning wages below the poverty line increased from 23.9% to 26.9%, while the percentage of workers earning less than 75% of the poverty line doubled.
- More than a third of poor children in America live in families where at least one parent works year-round.
- Nearly half of minimum wage earners are over 25. Thirty-nine percent are the sole breadwinner in their family. Three out of five minimum-wage workers are women.
- As recently as 1967, a year-round worker earning the minimum wage was paid enough to raise a family of three above the poverty line. From 1981-1990, the minimum wage was frozen at \$3.35 an hour, while the cost of living increased 48% over the same period. Although Congress raised the minimum wage to \$5.15 per hour in 1996, this increase made up only slightly more than half of the ground lost to inflation in the 1980s.
- In 45 states and the District of Columbia, families would need to earn at least double the minimum wage in order to afford a two-bedroom apartment at Fair Market Rent.
- Between 1970-1994, the typical state's *AFDC* benefits for a family of three fell 47%, after adjusting for inflation. In every state except Alaska, a family of three would have to spend more than their total monthly *AFDC* grant to pay the fair market rent.
- The shrinking supply of affordable housing is another factor underlying the growth in family homelessness. The gap between the number of affordable housing units and the number of people needing them is currently the largest on record, estimated at 4.7 million units. Only 26% of those households eligible for housing assistance receive it.
- In 1995, approximately 39 million Americans had no health care insurance, including 10 million children. Poor health is closely associated with homelessness. For families already struggling to pay the rent, a serious illness or disability can start a downward spiral into homelessness, beginning with a lost job, depletion of savings to pay for care, and eventual eviction.
- Domestic violence also contributes to homelessness among families. The single largest cause of injury to women in the U.S. is domestic violence. Women are more often victims of domestic violence than of burglary, muggings or other physical crimes combined.

- Lack of affordable housing and long waiting lists for assisted housing mean that many women are forced to choose between abuse and the streets. Forty-six percent of cities surveyed by the U.S. Conference of Mayors identified domestic violence as a primary cause of homelessness.
- Approximately 20-25% of the single adult homeless population suffers from some form of severe and persistent mental illness. While only 5-7% of homeless persons with mental illness needs to be institutionalized, they do need access to supportive housing and/or other treatment services. The mental health support services most needed include case management, housing, and treatment.
- Substance abuse does increase the risk of displacement for the precariously housed, although most people addicted to drugs or alcohol never become homeless. In 1995, about 22% of Health Care for the Homeless clients were diagnosed as suffering from substance abuse disorders. A 1992 national study of service providers found that 80% of the local treatment programs surveyed could not meet demand and were forced to turn homeless clients away.

## **Consequences**

- Homelessness severely impacts the health and well-being of all family members. Compared with housed poor children, homeless children experience worse health; more developmental delays; more anxiety, depression, and behavioral problems; and lower educational achievement.
- Homeless children face barriers to enrolling and attending school, including transportation problems, residency requirements, inability to obtain previous school records and/or immunization records and lack of clothing and school supplies. According to a 1995 survey of 116 shelters by the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 40% of shelter providers cited transportation as the biggest barrier to education for homeless children.
- Homeless children's access to education has significantly improved as a result of the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act. However, only 3% of all local education agencies receive McKinney funds.
- Homelessness frequently breaks up families. Families may be separated as a result of shelter policies which deny access to older boys or fathers, placement of children in foster care when families become homeless, and the necessity of leaving children with relatives and friends in order to save them from the ordeal of homelessness or to permit them to continue attending their regular school.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that homelessness is often the result of a complex set of circumstances that push people into poverty and force impossible choices between food, shelter, and other basic needs. Only a

concerted effort to ensure jobs that pay a living wage, adequate benefits for those who cannot work, affordable housing, and access to health care will bring an end to homelessness. The National Coalition for the Homeless is a national advocacy network of homeless persons, activists, service providers, and other committed to ending homelessness through public education, policy advocacy, grassroots organizing, and technical assistance. Their online library provides a searchable bibliographic database with references to research on homelessness, housing, and poverty. Five directories list contact people, email addresses, and web pages for more than 100 local, statewide, and national organizations.

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### **Books about homelessness:**

*The Visible Poor: Homelessness in the United States*, Joel Blau, 1992, Oxford University Press  
*Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America*, Jonathan Kozol, 1988, Random House  
*Tell Them Who I Am*, Elliot Liebow, 1993, The Free Press – a division of Macmillan, Inc.  
*A Far Cry From Home: Life in a Shelter for Homeless Women*, Lisa Ferrell, Noble Press, 1991.  
*American Homelessness*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Mary Ellen Hombs, 1994, ABC-CLIO, Inc., 800/442-2546  
*No Place to Be: Voices of Homeless Children*, Judith Berck, forward by Robert Coles, 1992, Houghton Mifflin.  
*Schooling Homeless Children: A Working Model for America's Public Schools*, Sharon Quint, 1994, Teachers College Press.

### **For Children:**

Please review these first to make sure they're appropriate for your child or children.

*Cave Under the City*, Harry Mazer, 1986, Harper Collins.  
*Changing Places: A Kid's View of Shelter Living*, Margie Chalofsky, et al., 1992, Gryphon House.  
December Stillness, Mary Downing Hahn, 1988, Avon Books.  
*Fly Away Home*, Eve Bunting, 1991, Houghton Mifflin Company.  
*The Homeless Hibernating Bear*, by Kids Livin' Life, 1993, Gold Leaf Press, 800/748-4900.  
*I Want to Go Home*  
*Mandy's House: The Story of a Homeless Family Who Finds a New Place to Live*, Ruth Spanger, 1990, Society of St. Vincent de Paul, 1015-CS. Preston, St. Louisville, KY 40203  
*Mr. Bow Tie*, Karen Barbour, 1991, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich  
*Uncle Willie and the Soup Kitchen*, Dyanne Disalvo-Ryan, 1990, Morrow and Company Inc.  
*We Are All In the Dumps with Jack and Guy*, Maurice Sendak, 1993, Harper Collins