

The Hidden Homeless: Children and Families

✖ *As a call to service in honor of Martin Luther King Day, we bring you an eye opening child advocacy post from guest blogger Dr. Heidi Román, who works with underserved children and their families in California .*

Early in my pediatric residency training I entered the exam room to see a one-year old patient. Her mom blurted out excitedly, “We finally have a place to live.” It turned out that they had been living in motels or with relatives for most of the child’s life. I paused for a moment as I realized that it had never really registered. She had been seen in our clinic for multiple visits, but no one had noticed the changing addresses. No one had asked the questions in a way that allowed her to tell us. *They were homeless.* This was my wake up call. Since then, I have met many families affected by homelessness. Many hard working families are pushed into poverty and homelessness by loss of a paycheck, foreclosure, or divorce. They are reluctant to talk about it. Children and families are the “hidden” homeless.

While the mainstream media consistently covers the recession, quoting jobs numbers and the like, there is a disturbing new set of data out that doesn’t seem to be getting much press.

Last month the [The National Center on Family Homelessness](#) released their report on child homelessness entitled [“America’s Youngest Outcasts 2010”](#), and the news is not good. During the time period of the recession (2007-2010) there was a 38% spike in the number of homeless children. Currently, there are 1.6 million homeless children in the United States. Children now [make up almost 40%](#) of the homeless population and families with children are the most rapidly growing segment of the homeless population.

That’s a lot of kids and families. And, as children are often not included in homeless statistics, the number is probably higher. Why don’t we hear about it more? Well, homeless families tend to be the invisible segment of the homeless population. They fly under the radar. They move from place to place. They “double up” with friends or relatives for a few months, and then stay in a shelter or motel for a while. They sleep in their car. Parents may not even report that they are homeless to teachers or health care providers for fear of losing their children. There are various reasons that families become homeless. Certainly worsening poverty, due to job loss or changes in welfare programs, is a major cause of housing loss for families. But, [domestic violence](#) or parental separation is also very often to blame.

Once families become homeless, it is very difficult to escape. Even if the parents are lucky enough to find a job, it will likely pay only minimum wage. Adequate housing is still out of reach for these families. This is [true regardless of the state](#), city, or town the family lives in; and the gap between

income and housing costs is even greater in areas with a high cost of living.

Experiencing homelessness [profoundly affects](#) a child's physical, psychological, and educational health. Homeless children have higher incidence of trauma-related injuries, poorly controlled [asthma](#), developmental delays, [growth problems](#), and anemia, among other health problems. Homeless children are far less likely to have a medical home or adequate health insurance. They are far more likely to utilize the ER for care at a later stage of illness. Homeless adolescents have much higher risk of being victims of violence or sexual abuse and have higher rates of substance use, HIV, and teen pregnancy.

Homeless children, regardless of cognitive ability, [do far worse in school](#). They are more likely to change schools during the year or miss more school days, greatly affecting their ability to do well academically and flourish socially. Even simple things, like being asked by a teacher to draw their room or describe their house, become awkward and painful.

What's being done about this? Sadly, not much. Per the [State Report Card on Child Homelessness](#), only seven states have extensive plans relating to services for homeless families. In

the current economic and political climate, the number of homeless children and families continues to increase and the services provided to them are shrinking.

What can we do?

- **If you or someone you know is at risk of homelessness:**
 - Talk to someone you trust- a physician, teacher, church staff, or social worker. Learn about emergency assistance programs in your area.
 - If you will be homeless in a few days or weeks, The National Coalition for the Homeless has a list of things to do. It includes making sure you have a current and available ID, packing a bag of essentials for each family member, and applying for public and transitional housing. Search the Coalition's directory of homeless advocacy organizations and shelters.

- **If you are a person who cares about these kids and families:**
 - Learn about the "hidden homeless" and start talking to friends and colleagues. Work to change misperceptions about homelessness. Find out how your state is doing in terms of providing services to homeless families.
 - Consider volunteering with or donating to an organization that fights to end homelessness. National organizations include The National

Coalition for the Homeless, The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, and The National Center on Family Homelessness. Find a local organization to work with here or via internet search.

- The National Coalition for the Homeless has a great list of other creative ways to get involved.
- Finally, contact your [congressperson](#) and tell them you support [H.R. 32 The Homeless Children and Youth Act of 2011](#). This bi-partisan bill changes the definition of “homeless person” to include certain adolescents and youth that are currently excluded for technical reasons. Their inclusion would allow them to access much needed services. If I can’t convince you, perhaps these [kids](#) can. They testified about their experience being homeless at the H.R. 32 hearing on child and youth homelessness, held by the U.S. House of Representatives’ Financial Services Subcommittee on Insurance, Housing, and Community Opportunity last December.

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