Ending Family Homelessness, Improving Outcomes for Children

Having a stable home benefits children for a lifetime, improving their overall well-being, health, education, and future employment opportunities. When families experience homelessness and housing instability, children suffer. They face a significantly higher risk of chronic or unaddressed health and developmental issues than their peers. Those issues can affect their education and employment opportunities and, ultimately, their success.

Given its complexity, family homelessness is not something that any single agency, level of government, sector, or system on its own can solve. Government, public agencies and schools, businesses, non-profits, and philanthropy all have roles to play in investing in and driving solutions. We must work together with urgency to ensure that every child grows up with opportunities to achieve their fullest potential.

The Impact of Family Homelessness on Children

Public schools reported that 1.3 million students experienced homelessness at some point during the 2013-2014 school year. That includes sharing the housing of other people due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason, or living in hotels/motels due to the lack of adequate alternates. According to estimates from the 2015 Point-in-Time count, family homelessness has been reduced 19% between 2010 and 2015, but there are still more than 206,000 people in families experiencing homelessness on any given night. Those families are most often headed by a single woman in her late 20s, with approximately two children, one or both younger than six years old. They face challenges and traumas, including increased exposure to family and community violence. The effects of those experiences on young children can last a lifetime:

Children's health is particularly vulnerable to the impact of housing instability and homelessness.

- HUD's Worst Case Housing Needs Report, which examines trends among renters with very low incomes, found that children experiencing homelessness are more vulnerable to mental health problems, developmental delays, poor cognitive outcomes, and depression.
- The HUD report also shows that children who are born into or experience homelessness early in life face many risks, and many also go on to experience physical, psychological, and emotional harm. Research has shown that trauma and extreme stress in childhood can lead to detrimental changes in brain structure and function later on in life.
- Children without stable housing were more likely to use emergency department services as a result of a lack of a regular health care provider.[1]

Children and youth experiencing homelessness and housing instability are less likely to be academically successful, and less likely to graduate from high school and make it to and through college.

- Grade-school children with more than two school moves are 2.5 times more likely to repeat a grade,[2] and adolescents who experience school moves are 50% less likely to graduate from high school.
- Students experiencing homelessness are up to nine times more likely than their non-homeless peers to repeat a grade. Among students identified as experiencing homelessness in one study, 17% had repeated at least one grade.[3]
- Grade repetition also increases the risk of dropping out: one study estimates that students who are held back are almost three times more likely to drop out.[4]

[1] Nabihah Maqbool, et al. (2015) The Impacts of Affordable Housing on Health: A Research Summary Center for Housing Policy INSIGHTS and Jellyman, T. and Nicholas Spencer (2008) "Residential Mobility in Childhood and Health Outcomes" *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 62 (7) 584-592.

[2] Am J Public Health. (2011) U.S. Housing Insecurity and the Health of Very Young Children. http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3134514/#bib18 and U.S. General Accounting Office (1994) "Elementary School Children: Many Change Schools Frequently, Harming Their Education". General Accounting Office publication GAO/HEHS-94-45

[3] Homes for the Homeless (1999) http://www.icphusa.org/PDF/reports/AccesstoSuccess.pdf

[4] Karl L. Alexander et al. (2003) On the Success of Failure: A Reassessment of the Effects of Retention in the Primary Grades. 2nd ed. Cambridge University Press.

Episodes of homelessness cause family separations, compounding the effects of housing instability on children.[5]
- Child welfare case workers have reported that for at least 10% of children placed in foster care, inadequate housing was one of the reasons for removal from their home.[6]

Investing in Solutions that Work

In 2010, with the launch of *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness*, the federal government committed to ending family homelessness in 2020. The President's FY 2017 budget calls for significant new investments necessary to achieve that goal, including:

- $11 billion in mandatory funding over 10 years to provide both short-term rapid re-housing subsidies and services and longer-term Housing Choice vouchers for families experiencing homelessness
- $2 billion in mandatory funding over the next five years to test new approaches for providing emergency aid to families facing significant financial hardship and crises
- $112 million in increases in discretionary spending to provide Housing Choice vouchers targeted to families experiencing homelessness and to create new rapid re-housing opportunities.

These proposed investments, and a number of new federal initiatives to support children and families, are based on the knowledge that:

Housing assistance helps lift households out of poverty, and consequently impacts health.
- HUD's ongoing five-year Family Options Study is showing that providing families experiencing homelessness with access to a permanent housing subsidy leads to significant spillover effects, including dramatic reductions in family separations, domestic violence, psychological distress, food insecurity, and school mobility — all of which have powerful impacts on child well-being.
- When compared to their peers whose families were on the wait list for subsidized housing, children living in subsidized housing were more likely to be food secure, less likely to be seriously underweight, and more likely to be classified as "well" on a composite indicator of child health.[7]

By supporting children's educational success in their younger years, we can also help reduce the likelihood of repeated experiences of homelessness.
- The interagency *Every Student, Every Day National Initiative to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism* is a cross-sector effort to identify and support students who are, or are at risk of becoming, chronically absent, with the goal of reducing chronic absenteeism by at least 10% each year, beginning in the 2015-16 school year. Chronic absenteeism is particularly prevalent among students experiencing homelessness or housing instability.
- The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, which reauthorized the McKinney-Vento Act, improves protections and services for students experiencing homelessness to ensure they can enroll in and attend school, complete high school, and continue on to higher education. The Department of Education will continue to issue guidance to support the implementation of new requirements under ESSA.
- The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), signed into law on July 22, 2014, strengthens an integrated service delivery system to support in-school and out-of-school youth. It provides youth and young adults with tools and guidance to explore career paths, continued support for educational attainment, opportunities for skills training in in-demand industries and occupations, and enrollment in post-secondary education.

There is a lot of work still to be done. Join us, and partners in your community, to ensure that efforts to increase housing stability are connected with outcomes associated with health, education and employment, and overall well-being — for every child experiencing homelessness, their families, and their futures.

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[5] Debra J. Rog and John C. Buckner (2008) Homeless Families and Children. https://aspe.hhs.gov/legacy-page/2007-national-symposium-homelessness-research-homeless-families-and-children-146546

[6] As reported in Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Report System data.

[7] Children's HealthWatch Medical-Legal Partnership (2009) Rx for Hunger: Affordable Housing www.childrenshealthwatch.org/upload/resource/RxforhungerNEW12_09.pdf