Fact Checker

Accurate Statistics on Homelessness

Family Homelessness

FEBRUARY 2007

Every year 600,000 families with 1.35 million children experience homelessness in the United States, making up about 50 percent of the homeless population over the course of the year.[1] Homeless families, mothers, fathers, grandparents, and children are scattered across the country. Families experiencing homelessness live in urban, suburban, and rural areas, sleeping in shelters, cars, motels, and abandoned buildings.

The existing—and most conclusive—research identifies the lack of affordable housing as the primary cause of homelessness among families in the United States.[2] This is both because there is an inadequate supply of affordable housing and because incomes are so low that families cannot pay for the housing that is available. The rising cost of housing, accompanied by declining wages, creates conditions that put families at risk of losing their housing and makes it even more difficult for families to find housing once they become homeless.[3]

The threat of homelessness looms constantly over most poor families who struggle to meet their rent or mortgage payments, but there are risk factors or predictors of homelessness that suggest that some families affected by the affordable housing crisis are more likely to become homeless than others. Families that become homeless tend to share certain characteristics: they have *extremely* low incomes, tend to have young children and be headed by a younger parent, lack strong social networks, and often have poor housing histories or move frequently.[4] That said, homeless families are, in many ways, very similar to other poor families who do not become homeless. Both housed and homeless poor families have the *same* (albeit high) incidences of domestic violence and similar rates of mental illness.[5] Both poor housed children and homeless children suffer from high rates of anxiety, depression, behavioral problems, or below-average school performance.[6] It seems that homeless families are a subgroup of poor families that, for either an economic or a personal crisis, have lost their housing and cannot get back into the housing market.

While family homelessness is more prevalent then many think, it is possible to greatly decrease and end family homelessness. Several communities have quantifiable outcomes showing decreases in length of stay in shelter, fewer families entering emergency shelter, and more families entering permanent supportive housing.

- In Columbus, Ohio, family homelessness declined 40 percent from 1,168 families in 1995 to 696 families in 2004.[7]
- From 2000 to 2004, the number of families experiencing homelessness declined 43 percent in Hennepin County, Minnesota.[8]
- In New York City, from 2003 to 2006, family homelessness declined 19 percent.[9]
- The number of homeless families in shelter in Westchester County, New York declined by 57 percent over a four year period.[10]

These communities have provided insight into promising strategies to end family homelessness. Five common strategies among these communities and others showing progress are:

- **Prevention.** Prevention efforts include mediation services that help families negotiate with their landlord, financial assistance to help families pay for back rent or utilities, and emergency assistance in food, clothing, transportation vouchers, and other basic necessities.
- **Housing First.** An approach that guides a set of interventions designed to help families transition more rapidly out of the shelter system; it includes crisis intervention, rehousing quickly as possible, follow-up case management, and housing support services to prevent the reoccurrence of homelessness.
- **Providing housing assistance.** Families often need help paying for housing. This can range from a one-time payment of a security deposit and first month's rent to a short–term subsidy that helps families pay for housing for several months or a shallow subsidy of $100 to $300 per month for a year or more.
- **Targeting services.** Well matched services can help families access and maintain stable housing as well as increase economic self-sufficiency and improve family and child well-being.

- **Data and planning.** Data is used help design plans to end homelessness, evaluate programs, assess cost-effectiveness, and efficiently target scarce resources. The use of plans and data allows communities to set specific goals and identify progress.

Studies have shown that families exiting homelessness with a housing subsidy remain stably housed over time; they are 21 times more likely to remain stably housed than comparable families exiting a shelter without a subsidy.[11] However, at current funding levels, federal programs cannot close the gap between those who can afford housing and those who cannot. Today, approximately 5 million households receive federal assistance to help pay for housing—mostly in the form of Section 8 housing vouchers, which families can use to rent housing on the private market.[12] But there are 10 million families eligible for housing subsidies that do not receive them because of lack of funding. Most cities have waiting lists that stretch from two to five years for housing units and rent subsidies. Without a housing subsidy, a family has to make $16.31 an hour ($33,924.80 annually) to afford housing at the national fair market rent; the hourly rate is much higher in higher-cost rental markets, such as Washington, DC; Boston, Massachusetts; and Alameda County, California.[13]

In addition to housing, families experiencing homelessness need and benefit from services. Because families who experience homelessness have different needs, there is no cookie cutter service delivery model that works for all families. While some families are able to transition out of homelessness with minimal supportive services, others require more intensive supportive services to exit the homeless assistance system and remain stably housed. Communities and programs that show promise are targeting services to meet the unique needs of each family. Services include helping families successfully manage conflicts with landlords, manage unanticipated expenses and their budget, and providing assistance to help families access and sustain employment. After moving into housing, some families, particularly those in which a parent has a mental illness or substance use disorder, on going services, also known as wraparound services, are provided to the family. These services include, links to income support programs, employment services, child care, and recreation and support services for children.

Federal policy plays a key role in ending homelessness for families. The federal government needs to significantly expand affordable housing programs, particularly the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program, and target federal housing programs to the families who need them the most. Once back in housing, links to mainstream services—for example, mental health counseling, child development services such as HeadStart, or employment training—are important for building strong families that are no longer at risk of homelessness. Other federal programs, including child care subsidies, child support enforcement, TANF assistance, Medicaid, and the Earned Income Tax Credit, also play key roles in ending and preventing family homelessness.

Endnotes

[1] Culhane, D. 2004. *Family Homelessness: Where to From Here?* October 14, 2004 to the National Alliance to End Homelessness Conference on Ending Family Homelessness. Powerpoint available online at http://www.endhomelessness.org/back/FamilyHomelessness.pdf.

[2] Burt, M.R. 2001. "What Will it Take to End Homelessness?" Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Shin, M., Weitzman, B.C., Stojanovic, D. Knickman, J.R., Jimenez, L., Duchon, L., James, S., and Krantz, D.H. 1998. "Predictors of homelessness among families in New York City: From shelter request to housing stability." *American Journal of Public Health*, 88 (11): 1561–1657.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Bassuk, E.L., Buckner, J.C., Weinreb, L.F., Browne, A., Bassuk, S.S., Dawson, R., and Perloff, J.N. 1997. "Homelessness in female-headed families: Childhood and adult risk and protective factors." *American Journal of Public Health*, 87 (2): 241–248.

[7] National Alliance to End Homelessness. 2006. Community Snapshot: Columbus. Washington, DC: National Alliance to End Homelessness.

[8] National Alliance to End Homelessness. 2005. Community Snapshot: Hennepin County. Washington, DC: National Alliance to End Homelessness.

[9] National Alliance to End Homelessness. 2005. Community Snapshot: New York City. Washington, DC: National Alliance to End Homelessness.

[10] National Alliance to End Homelessness. 2007. Community Snapshot: Westchester County, NY. Washington, DC: National Alliance to End Homelessness.

[11] Shin, M., Weitzman, B.C., Stojanovic, D. Knickman, J.R., Jimenez, L., Duchon, L., James, S., and Krantz, D.H. 1998. "Predictors of homelessness among families in New York City: From shelter request to housing stability." *American Journal of Public Health*, 88 (11): 1561–1657.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Pelletiere, D., Wardrip, K., and Crowley, S. 2006. "Out of Reach: 2006." Washington, DC: National Low Income Housing Coalition.

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