



EARLY CHILDHOOD HOMELESSNESS: AN OVERVIEW

[updated February 2020]

Many Young Children Experience Homelessness

- Infancy is the age at which a person is most likely to live in a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) shelter.ⁱ
- 1.1 million children have an 18- to 25-year-old parent who experienced homelessness during the past year.ⁱⁱ
- According to the U.S. Department of Education, in 2017–2018, there were 1,455,537, or one-in-16, children under six years old who experienced homelessness. Six percent of children under age six were experiencing homelessness.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Approximately half of children staying in HUD homeless shelters are under age six.^{iv}

Public Schools and Head Start Programs Have Enrolled More Young Children Experiencing Homelessness in Recent Years

- In the 2015-2016 school year, public schools enrolled 43,559 homeless children ages 3-5 in preschool programs run by school districts.^v This is a 9% increase over the previous year.
- In the 2015 program year, Head Start and Early Head Start programs served 52,708 children experiencing homelessness, which represents 4.9% of all children served.^{vi} This is a 5% increase over the previous year.

Many Parents Who Experience Homelessness are Youth and Young Adults

- Forty-three percent of homeless young women ages 18-25 are pregnant or parenting.^{vii}
- Youth who are parenting are three times more likely to experience homelessness than non-parenting youth.^{viii}
- Over 27% of families in HUD shelters are headed by someone under the age of 25.^{ix}
- Homeless teens are at particularly high risk for pregnancy, with as many as 20% becoming pregnant.^x

Homelessness During Pregnancy is Harmful to Child Development

- Pregnant women experiencing homelessness are less likely to receive adequate prenatal care, and their children are at increased risk for low birth weight, which can harm cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development.^{xi}
- Children who experience homelessness before birth are more likely to have been hospitalized since birth and were in fair or poor health compared to those whose mothers had never been homeless.^{xii}

Homelessness Hurts the Health, Development, and Education of Young Children

- Homelessness in infancy is associated with early harm to children's health and development, poor caregiver health and maternal mental health, and additional material hardships for families.^{xiii}
- Experiences of homelessness and housing instability in early childhood are associated with delays in children's language, literacy, and social-emotional development.^{xiv}
- Homeless children begin Head Start behind their low-income peers in cognitive, socio-emotional and physical development.^{xv}
- The longer a young child experiences homelessness, the more that negative health outcomes are magnified, causing lifelong effects on the child, and in turn, the family and community.^{xvi}



- Twenty months after staying in an emergency shelter, children scored worse in pre-reading skills and had higher rates of overall behavior problems and early development delays compared to national averages for children their age.^{xvii}
- Homelessness in early childhood is correlated with poor classroom engagement and social skills in early elementary school.^{xviii}
- The achievement gap between homeless children and their low-income peers in elementary school tends to persist, and may widen.^{xix}
- Homeless infants and toddlers are more likely to experience later child welfare involvement and early school failure.^{xx, xxi}

Homeless Children Are Less Likely to Access Early Education Programs

- Families experiencing homelessness confront more barriers to accessing child care and other early childhood education programs than impoverished families who have stable housing.^{xxii}
- Mothers who have experienced homelessness are less likely to access subsidized child care than those at-risk of homelessness or those with stable housing.^{xxiii}
- Documented barriers include lack of documentation, mobility, lack of transportation, waiting lists, and lack of awareness and outreach by providers.^{xxiv}
- Homeless families who are staying with other people (i.e. not in shelters) face additional barriers. They are often isolated, and they are not as well connected to school resources and opportunities as families who are staying in homeless shelters.^{xxv, xxvi}

Resource:

<https://www.schoolhouseconnection.org/learn/early-childhood/>

ⁱ Gubits, D., Shinn M., Bell S., Wood M., Dstrup S., Solari, C. (2015). *Family options study: Short-term impacts of housing and services interventions for homeless families*. Washington, D.C.: Prepared for U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research by Abt. Associates and Vanderbilt University.

Retrieved from https://www.huduser.gov/portal/portal/system/files/pdf/FamilyOptionsStudy_final.pdf

ⁱⁱ Dworsky, A., Morton, M. H., Samuels, G. M. (2018). *Missed opportunities: Pregnant and parenting youth experiencing homelessness in America*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

ⁱⁱⁱ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2020). *Early Childhood Homelessness in the United States: 50-State Profile*. <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/disadv/homeless/early-childhood-homelessness-state-profiles-2020.pdf>

^{iv} U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2015). *Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress (AHAR): Volume 2*. Retrieved from <https://www.hudexchange.info/onecpd/assets/File/2015-AHAR-Part-2.pdf>. Many families with young children who experience homelessness do not stay in shelters because shelters don't exist in their community; shelters are full; or shelters have prohibitive rules about who can stay there. As a result, many homeless children and their families are forced to stay temporarily with other people, or in motels. HUD does not count these children as homeless, but they do meet the definition of homelessness for public schools, Head Start, the Child Care and Development Fund program, Early Intervention programs under Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and the Child Nutrition Act.

^v U.S. Department of Education (2017). *Preliminary Numbers*. Retrieved from <https://eddataexpress.ed.gov/data-elements.cfm>.

^{vi} Office of Head Start (2016). *Services Snapshot. National All Programs (2015-2016)*. Retrieved from <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/service-snapshot-all-programs-2015-2016.pdf>

^{vii} Dworsky, A., Morton, M. H., Samuels, G. M. (2018). *Missed opportunities: Pregnant and parenting youth experiencing homelessness in America*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

^{viii} Morton, M.H., Dworsky, A., & Samuels, G.M. (2017). *Missed opportunities: Youth homelessness in America. National estimates*. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

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- ^x Thompson, S., Bender, K., Lewis, C., Watkins, R. (2008). *Runaway and Pregnant: Risk Factors Associated with Pregnancy in a National Sample of Runaway/Homeless Female Adolescents*. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2742657/>
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- ^{xiii} Cutts, D, Bovell-Ammon A, et al. *Homelessness During Infancy: Associations With Infant and Maternal Health and Hardship Outcomes*. Cityscape: A Journal of Policy Development and Research, Volume 20 Number 2, 2018. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Retrieved from <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/periodicals/cityscape/vol20num2/article8.html>
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- ^{xvi} Sandel M, Sheward R, Ettinger de Cuba S, et al. *Timing and Duration of Pre- and Postnatal Homelessness and the Health of Young Children*. Pediatrics. 2018;142(4): e20174254 Retrieved from <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/early/2018/08/30/peds.2017-4254.full.pdf>
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