

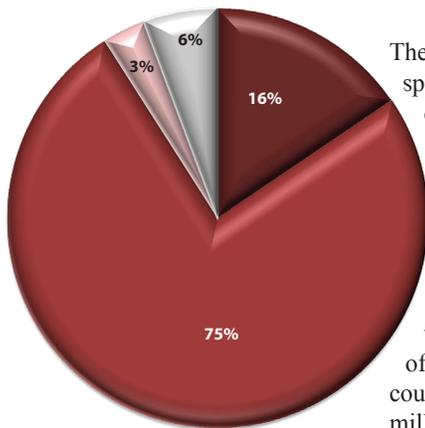
There are about 1.2 million homeless children in the United States according to recent estimates. Often indiscernible from their peers in outward appearance, homeless children and youth face unique challenges associated with residential instability that compound many other difficulties associated with living in poverty.

Prepared by Neil Damron

What Is Homelessness?

Homelessness includes a range of experiences, from living in a shelter to living out of a car. Federal law defines homelessness as “a lack of fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.” This includes temporary accommodations like shelters, transitional housing, or welfare hotels, and public or private places not intended for human habitation. The definition also includes “doubling up” or sharing housing with others. Over 75% of homeless children in the U.S. are doubled up and over 15% live in some sort of shelter.

Figure 1. Three-Quarters of Homeless Children Are Sharing Housing



■ Shelters ■ Doubled-up ■ Unsheltered ■ Hotels/motels

Source: National Center for Homeless Education.

Contrary to popular conceptions, most homeless minors (95%) are part of a family. However, a small minority of homeless youth are on their own, unaccompanied by an adult. Some have run away from home and others have been forced to leave by family members or guardians. Many feel they cannot return home due to ongoing conflicts with their families. During the 2011–2012 school year, nearly 60,000 homeless minors (~5%) were unaccompanied youth.

Who Is Homeless?

United States

In 2013, a point-in-time count of one night in January identified 138,149 minors as homeless in the U.S. However, when considering the course of an entire year and accounting for doubled-up minors, over 1.2 million children and youth (and 222,000 families) were identified as being homeless. That’s more than double the population of Milwaukee, WI; five times the population of Madison, WI; or roughly equal to the population of Hawaii.

Wisconsin

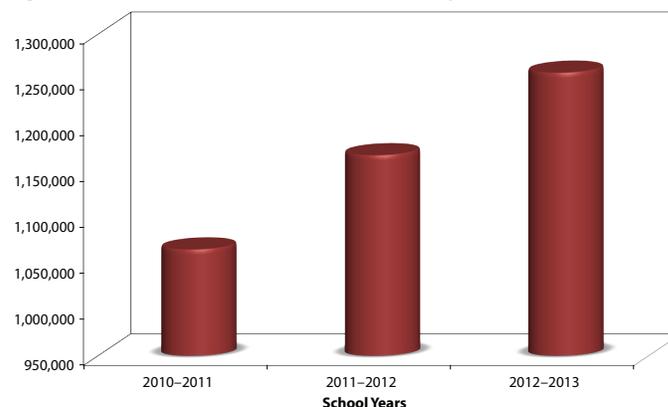
In Wisconsin in 2013, nearly 18,000 children and youth (and more than 3,100 families) were identified as being homeless at some point during the year. That’s roughly equivalent to the total student population at Stanford University or enough children to fill every seat at a basketball game at the University of Wisconsin–Madison’s Kohl Center.

A Growing Concern

The financial crisis of 2007 and the subsequent spikes in job loss, unemployment, and foreclosures disproportionately affected those at the middle and bottom of the income distribution. For less-educated, low-wage workers and their families, this struggle continues in 2015.

In both Wisconsin and the U.S., the number of homeless children and youth has grown rapidly since just before the crisis. Between the 2006–2007 and the 2012–2013 school years, the conservative estimate of the number of homeless minors counted through the course of each year grew over 85%, from 629,000 to 1.2 million. In Wisconsin, the trend is even more pronounced: in the same time period, the recorded population of homeless children and youth increased by more than 183%, from 6,246 to 17,716.

Figure 2. Homeless Children Enrolled in School Steadily Increased, 2010–2013



Source: National Center for Homeless Education.

Being Homeless

Homeless children and youth experience many of the same recurrent stresses as their peers from low-income families with fixed housing. This overlap in experiences makes it difficult to tease out which outcomes can be distinctly attributed to homelessness and which are part of living in poverty regardless of one’s housing situation. However, there are some distinct aspects of child homelessness, especially:

Residential Instability

Homelessness often involves repeated moves, short stays in multiple locations, and stays in crowded or cramped accommodations. Children and youth who endure this mobility often face severe stress, which can have implications for emotional and physical health.

Barriers to Education

Despite the national infrastructure for supporting school enrollment (see p. 2), some homeless children and youth are still unable to attend school.

Homeless children who do attend school often face psychological and social isolation, which has been shown to affect school performance. They may feel stigmatized because of their unstable housing situation and related stress factors.

Homeless students also change schools more than housed students, which can lead to lower school achievement and increased risk of dropout.

Poor Health

Evidence suggests that health outcomes are worse for homeless children and youth than for their low-income peers with a home. Homeless children are often malnourished, food insecure, and lack access to adequate health care. In addition, due to the chronic stress, violence, or victimization that homeless children and youth often experience, they have a greater incidence of mental health problems than their housed peers.

How Does a Child or Family Become Homeless?

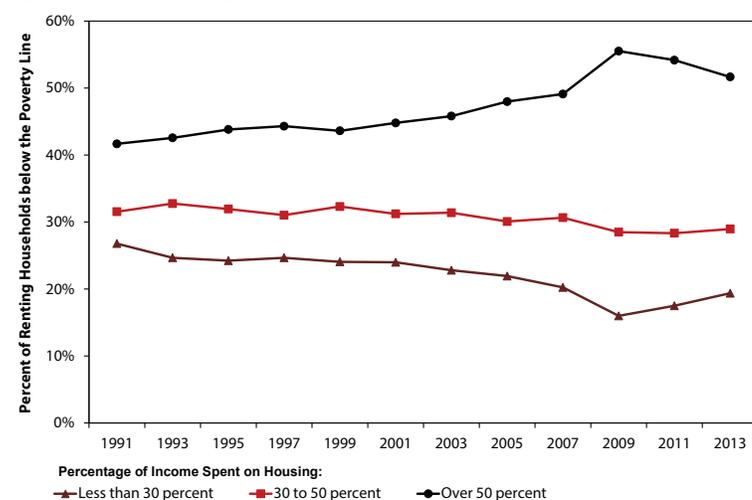
Lack of Affordable Housing

A contributing factor to homelessness is a lack of affordable housing (i.e., less than 30% of a household's expenditures). Under this definition, in no state in the Union can a household with a single breadwinner earning minimum wage afford the local rent for a two-bedroom apartment. A lack of affordable housing is exacerbated by rising rent costs, a growing proportion of renting households, and stagnant wage growth. In the last 16 years, median inflation-adjusted rent in the U.S. has increased by over 70%.

Economic Insecurity

Challenges associated with lack of affordable housing can be compounded by an already precarious economic situation. Allotting a large portion of income to housing can leave a family with little money for other necessities and little buffer for unexpected expenses such as a needed car repair.

Figure 3. Most Poor Renting Families Devote Over Half of Their Income to Housing



Source: American Housing Survey, 1991–2013.

Eviction

Eviction both causes and intensifies the instability that can lead to homelessness, and households with children are particularly at risk. Research shows that neighborhoods with a higher percentage of children experience more evictions, and among tenants tried in eviction court, those with children are significantly more likely to receive an eviction judgment, even after controlling for other factors.

A record of eviction limits a family's ability to secure adequate and safe housing over time as landlords often reject housing applications with eviction records. Unsurprisingly, involuntary displacement is correlated with higher rates of residential mobility and substandard housing conditions.

Domestic Violence & Abuse

Many women and children become homeless because they are fleeing domestic violence, and a high proportion of unaccompanied youth experience or witness emotional, physical, and sexual abuse before running away from home.

Policy Approaches to Homelessness: School Access, Re-Housing, and Protection

McKinney Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act

This legislation aims to guarantee homeless schoolchildren equal access to public education by requiring school districts to immediately enroll them in school, ensure enrollment at one's school of origin, provide transportation to and from school, and protect homeless students from stigmatization.

Rapid Re-Housing Policies

Two federal programs seek to reduce instability for homeless or at-risk families by providing services such as rental and housing relocation assistance. These services are often provided across scattered sites and thus serve to decentralize rather than cluster homeless families, which can limit access to much-needed support services, especially for homeless families in rural areas.

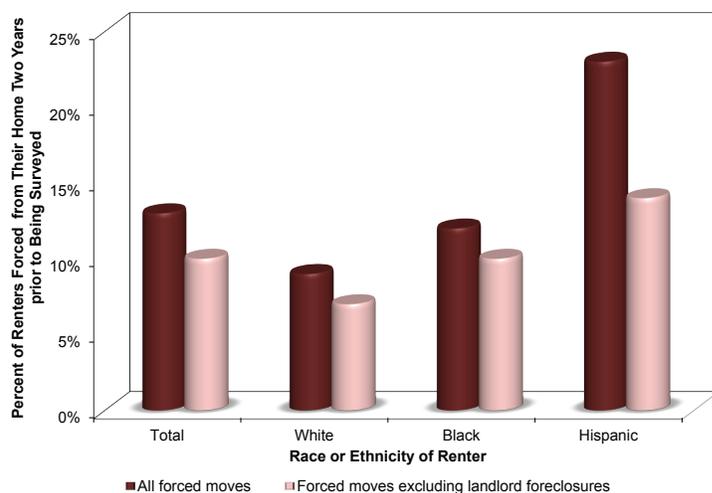
The Runaway and Homeless Youth Protection Act

This legislation aims to support runaway and homeless youth by providing emergency shelter, health services, counseling, family reunification, transitional-living programs, and funding to agencies that provide assistance to homeless youth.

Research-Informed Policy Options for the Future

- Increase permanent housing subsidies targeted at homeless families with children and unaccompanied youth.
- Provide aid to families that experience a temporary loss of income from shocks like job loss or a medical emergency.
- Provide low-income tenants with legal counsel in eviction court.
- Increase funding for physical and mental health services in communities and schools.
- Establish a consistent definition of homelessness across federal agencies (as in the proposed Homeless Children and Youth Act), which may increase government services to homeless minors.

Figure 4. Black and Hispanic Renters May Be Evicted from Their Homes at Disproportionately Higher Rates than Their White Counterparts.



Source: Milwaukee Area Renters Study, 2009–2011.

This fact sheet was prepared by Neil Damron.

For a list of the sources used for this brief and further reading, visit www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/factsheets.htm.

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