

Homeless children and their families in Minnesota

Homelessness is especially traumatic for children. It exposes them to experiences that cause toxic levels of stress – violence, inadequate nutrition, inadequate sleep, and disrupted relationships, to name just a few – which can take a toll on their physical and emotional growth and their ability to learn. Wilder Research’s 2009 statewide study of homelessness found more children than ever who were exposed to these risks.

This issue brief presents key facts from the study to help identify what this level of homelessness means to Minnesota.

3,900 homeless children per night in Minnesota: Largest number yet

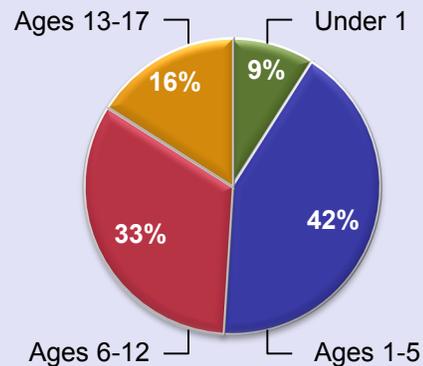
Since the study began in 1991, children and their parents have been the fastest-growing segment of the homeless. On October 22, 2009, the study counted 1,675 homeless families with 3,251 children age 17 and younger, up 19 percent from the previous study in 2006. We estimate there are actually around 3,900 homeless children on any given night, and over the course of a full year more than 14,000 children experience homelessness.

Half of homeless children are 5 or younger

Half of Minnesota’s homeless children are 5 or younger, including nearly 1 in 10 who are under one year old. It is during these most formative years that the risks associated with homelessness are most likely to negatively affect development.

These effects multiply when several risk factors are combined, such as chronic poverty, neglect or abuse, exposure to parental mental illness or substance abuse, or exposure to violence. Each of these risk factors – higher among homeless families than those who live in stable homes – raise the odds of long-term harm to the child’s learning.

AGES OF HOMELESS CHILDREN



Data show that homeless children enter kindergarten equally capable but less prepared for success. Worse yet, on average, they lose ground each year in school achievement compared to their peers.

The effects of these problems can be minimized, however, through effective services to homeless children and their families such as Head Start and other early learning programs. These programs help to support their developmental needs and daily stability.

Unfortunately, while the proportion of homeless children in Head Start or other early childhood programs has been increasing since earlier surveys, only 40 percent are enrolled in these programs.

One-third of homeless parents were homeless themselves as children

Thirty-four percent of homeless parents have themselves experienced homelessness as a child. This is a significant increase from the 25 percent of parents in the 2006 study.

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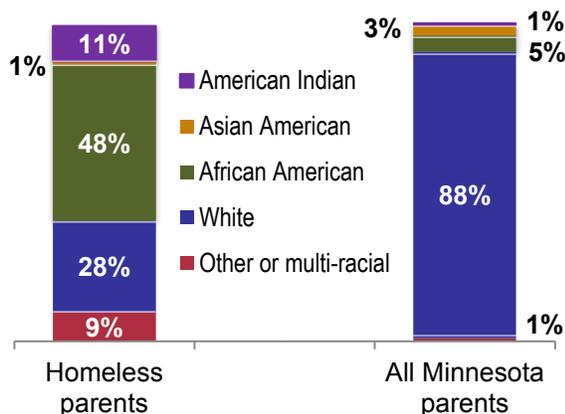
Reflecting the effects of chronic, toxic stress, parents who had been homeless before compared to those experiencing homelessness for the first time were more likely to report higher rates of most health disabilities, more experiences of violence, and lower employment rates. Not surprisingly, they also more often reported that their children had emotional and school problems.

These patterns suggest that if we do not break the cycle of intergenerational homelessness, the numbers will continue to grow from year to year. This represents a serious loss of human potential, as well as unnecessary future costs.

Racial and ethnic minorities are disproportionately affected

African American and American Indian families are more than 30 times as likely to be homeless as their white neighbors in Minnesota. These racial disparities, similar to those for homeless people of all household types in the state, have persisted since the first study in 1991. They reflect persistent and systematic biases in educational, housing, and job opportunities.

RACE AND ETHNICITY



Child and family homelessness is a homegrown problem

More than four out of five homeless families had stable housing in Minnesota at some point before they became homeless. Three-quarters were living in Minnesota at the time they became homeless. Of those who had been in Minnesota for less than two years, one-third had lived here before.

Causes of homelessness among families are primarily economic

The top three reasons cited by parents for becoming homeless were the inability to pay the rent or mortgage (cited by 45% of parents), loss of a job or cutback in work hours (37%), and eviction or non-renewal of a lease (36%).

One-quarter of parents (24%) had been laid off within the six months before the survey. Only 11 percent of this group had received unemployment benefits.

The combination of high housing costs and low wages puts many families at risk. In 2009, fair market rent for a two-bedroom apartment in the Twin Cities area was \$873, but the median monthly total income of homeless parents was only \$532. Nearly two-thirds of homeless parents were on a waiting list for subsidized housing, but this program is not able to serve all those who need it. On average, these parents had been waiting 13 months. Another 16 percent of parents had tried to get on a waiting list but had been turned away because the lists were full and not accepting any new people.

To address homelessness it is critical to confront its economic causes. This requires a safety net that includes education and employment prospects as well as affordable housing, Earned Income Tax Credits, and rent and utility subsidies.

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For more information

This summary presents highlights of the 2009 *Statewide Survey of Homelessness*. For more information on homelessness in Minnesota go to www.wilder.org/homelessness.0.html.

For more information about this report, contact Ellen Shelton at Wilder Research, 651-280-2689.

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