

Congressional Briefing on the Effect of the Great Recession on Child Well-Being
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Housing Instability and Homelessness—Effects on Children

INTRODUCTION:

Good afternoon, I'm so happy to have this opportunity to speak with you about a passion I have for safe, affordable housing. It's one of the best investments in our children's future that we can make. For the past 15 years, I've worked directly with homeless and unstably housed families in our Nation's Capital, and since 2008 I've seen firsthand the effects of housing instability and homelessness – which have grown tremendously since the Great Recession—on child well-being.

I'm going to talk a little bit about the proportions of the problem by discussing the rise in family homelessness in D.C. and nationwide since the 2008 recession. I'll then discuss the effects of housing instability and homelessness on children—who are more adversely affected than adults. Finally, I'd like to talk a little about which programs we're seeing work well and not so well on the ground in Washington, D.C., which will hopefully help you in your deliberations over how to stem the rising tide of child homelessness in America.

THE NUMBER OF HOMELESS FAMILIES AND CHILDREN IS RISING:

It's not what you think of when you think of “homeless” but approximately one-third of Americans who use shelters annually are parents and their children. Last night in our Nation's Capital, more than 1600 children were homeless. They resided in emergency family shelters such as DC General Family Shelter, which is not too far from here. DC General is located on the site of an abandoned hospital complex that is also home to the city's STD and methadone clinics, a women's shelter, the DC jail, and a building that used to house the city's morgue. They also resided in domestic violence shelters and in transitional housing facilities. And in addition to these 1600 children, an uncounted number of homeless children were doubled-up with friends, relatives, or acquaintances, often in overcrowded, substandard housing and often moving from pillar to post on a weekly or even nightly basis. Of these doubled-up children, some are with their families, but some are “unaccompanied youth” who “couch surf” from one friend's house to another and sometimes engage in risky behaviors in order to avoid the more significant dangers inherent in sleeping on the streets.

In Washington, DC, family homelessness has increased 86% since 2007, the year before the Great Recession hit.¹ (It increased 50% from 2010 to 2014 alone.²) It continues to rise in DC

¹ Compare Metro. Wash. Council of Govs., Point-in-time Counts of Homeless Persons for January 2007 and January 2014, available at http://www.mwcog.org/store/item.asp?PUBLICATION_ID=189. Comparing these two counts shows there were 2,038 persons in families who were homeless on one day in January 2007 and 3,795 persons in families who were homeless on one day in January 2014.

because of our severe gap between income and rents that persists even post-recession recovery. Studies show that for many segments of DC's population, there has been no post-recession recovery. These include single parents, those with only a high school diploma, and formerly low-wage workers—their unemployment rates for these groups remain at 20%.³

There is good evidence that child homelessness is on the rise nationally as well. According to the U.S. Department of Education, there were 1.3 million homeless children enrolled in U.S. public schools in 2012-2013 school year.⁴ This represented an 8% increase over the previous school year and an 85% increase since the beginning of the recession. This 85% increase mirrors DC's statistics for the same period.

And while the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development statistics show small declines in family homelessness each year since 2011, HUD's numbers only count those families in shelters and on the streets. HUD does not count families that are doubled-up with other families or staying in unsafe but not easily discoverable places. But when families can't access shelter this is exactly what they do.

In the past few years I've worked with families who, when they could not access emergency shelter: remained with abusers; stayed overnight in hospital emergency rooms, all-night Laundromats or restaurants; rode DC buses all night long; or stayed in their cars. Others stayed in abandoned buildings or were doubled up in dangerously overcrowded or substandard units or in units where illegal activities such as prostitution and drug trafficking were occurring.

Homeless experts agree that the Department of Ed stats are more reliable because they count all homeless families, not just those in shelters. Among homeless experts there also is widespread recognition that even the Department of Ed count of 1.3 million homeless children is an undercount because many families do not report to their children's school that they're homeless, due to the stigma. There is also widespread agreement among homeless advocates that we need to do a better job of counting unaccompanied homeless youth by conducting the count during the school day and looking in places where homeless youth congregate.

Finally, as we heard earlier, one in three children in the U.S. is living in a household that is considered "rent burdened," meaning the household spends more than 30 percent of its income on rent. Low-income and minority households are both more likely to be rent burdened than higher income and white households, and are more severely rent burdened than high income and

² MWCOG, Homelessness in Metropolitan Washington: Results and Analysis from the 2014 Point-in-Time Count of Homeless Persons in the Metropolitan Washington Region, May 14, 2014, available at <http://www.mwcog.org/uploads/publicdocuments/ql5bX1820140714163555.pdf>.

³ Marina Manganaris, DC Fiscal Policy Inst., *For Some Groups of DC Residents, Unemployment Remains High in the wake of the Recession*, March 7, 2013, available at <http://www.dcfpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/3-7-13-Unemployment-Paper-Final.pdf>.

⁴ Ellen Bassuk, MD, et al., American Institutes for Research, *America's Youngest Outcasts: A Report Card on Child Homelessness*, November 2014, available at <http://www.homelesschildrenamerica.org/mediadocs/280.pdf>. See also Greg Kaufman, *The Nation*, *This Week in Poverty: Ignoring Homeless Families*, April 2013, in which Kaufman states that "Since 2007, there has been a 19 percent decline in chronically homeless single adults. In contrast, family homelessness has increased by more than 13 percent over the same period. Matthew Adams, principal policy analyst for [the Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness], noted that the number of homeless school-aged children surpassed 1 million for the first time during the 2011-12 school year—a 57 percent increase since 2006-07."

white households. Many of these children are in families living from paycheck to paycheck, meaning that they are just an illness or car breakdown away from homelessness.

THE EFFECTS OF HOMELESSNESS ON CHILDREN:

These numbers should shock the conscience, especially considering that we know that children are more adversely impacted by the experience of homelessness than adults. Homelessness involves dislocation of a child from all of his or her familiar surroundings including not just their physical home, but often their friends, relatives, neighborhoods, and schools. A homeless episode can often entail a split up of the immediate family as well.

This week I've been working with a father who became homeless with his four young children after his wife was diagnosed with cancer and then passed away. The children, on top of having to deal with the loss of their mother, were also suffering from a loss of their father because each night he had to place them with friends while he slept in his car. Relative, peer, neighborhood, school (and of course parental) attachments are absolute necessities for the emotional well-being of children.

In addition to this dislocation, exposure to an unstable and unsafe environments can result in lasting harm to a child simply from the stress or fear it instills in that child.⁵ Children, understandably, cannot sleep well in communal-style homeless shelters like those that you may have read about DC using last winter. Their sleep is affected by their fear and their exposure to outside stimuli. In the long term, sleep deprivation and stress can lead to depression, anxiety disorders, and other chronic health problems that are caused by severe stress.⁶

Being in an overcrowded shelter or housing situation can have a lasting negative impact on a child as well. There is a significant correlation between being in an overcrowded environment and poor performance in school.⁷ Furthermore, chaotic and crowded environments have been associated with both behavioral and psychological consequences for children especially, including “social withdrawal, elevated levels of aggression, psychological distress, poor behavioral adjustment in school, and lower levels of social and cognitive competency.”⁸

Overcrowded and chaotic environments have also been shown to have a significant impact on the mental health and coping mechanisms of parents, which in turn affect their children. Studies have found that social withdrawal is a common coping strategy for someone placed in an environment in which they cannot regulate the amount of interpersonal contact to which they are

⁵ See Elizabeth K. Hopper et al., *Shelter from the Storm: Trauma-Informed Care in Homelessness Services Settings*, 3, OPEN HEALTH SERVICES and POL'Y J. 80 (2010) (defining trauma as “an experience that creates a sense of fear, helplessness, or horror, and overwhelms a person’s resources for coping.”).

⁶ See generally Jack P. Shonkoff, M.D. and Andrew S. Garner, M.D. et al., *The Lifelong Effects of Early Childhood Adversity and Toxic Stress*, 129, *Pediatrics*, (2011) available at <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2011/12/21/peds.2011-2663.full.pdf> (finding that toxic stress in children can cause permanent impairments in physical and mental health).

⁷ See Dominique Goux & Eric Maurin, *The Effect of Overcrowded Housing on Children’s Performance at School*, 89 J PUB ECON. 797, at 816 (2005) (“Specifically, the probability of being held back a grade in primary or junior high school increases very significantly with the number of persons per room in the home.”); See also JA 332-333, 428-29.

⁸ Judith Samuels, Marybeth Shinn & John C. Buckner, *Homeless Children: Update on Research, Policy, Programs, and Opportunities*, U.S. Dep’t of Health and Human Servs. Roundtable on Homeless Children (May 2010) at 22, available at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/10/homelesschildrenroundtable/index.shtml> (citing study on the negative effects of chaotic environments on childhood development.)

exposed.⁹ When parents are overwhelmed and withdraw, they may be less responsive to their young children, harming both parent and child.¹⁰

As a result, children experiencing homelessness have worse health, emotional, behavioral, and educational outcomes than their peers who have stable housing. They:

- Are sick four times more often than other children. They have:
 - Four times as many respiratory infections;
 - Twice as many ear infections;
 - Five times more gastrointestinal problems; and are
 - Four times more likely to have asthma.
- They go hungry at twice the rate of other children.
- They have higher rates of obesity due to nutritional deficiencies.
- They have three times the rate of emotional and behavioral problems compared to non-homeless children.

Children experiencing homelessness also are:

- Four times more likely to show delayed development.¹¹

They also:

- Have less than half the rate of proficiency in math and reading as their housed classmates;
- And less than 1 in 4 graduates from high school.¹²

They are also more likely to enter foster care.

We experienced this phenomenon first-hand in DC beginning in 2011. After three years of post-recession increases in family homelessness, the DC government decided to stop sheltering families except when legally obligated to do so, which in DC is only when the temperatures are below freezing. My client, Ms. B, had lived and worked in DC for more than 20 years, but a series of debilitating illnesses had left her unable to work. She fell behind in her rent and was evicted. After staying with friends and family members for a while, she turned to DC's shelter system for help. But there she found no offer of shelter and was threatened with removal of her children by child protective services.

It is estimated that one-third of children in foster care in the U.S. could be reunited with their parents if their families had stable housing.¹³ (A 2007 GAO report on African American

⁹ See generally Gary W. Evans & Wachs, T.D. (Eds.), *Chaos and It's Influence on Children's Development: An Ecological Perspective* (2010), American Psychological Association.

¹⁰ See *Id.* at 233, Gary W. Evans, John Eckenrode & Lysha Marcynyszyn, *Chaos and the Macrosetting: The Role of Poverty and Socioeconomic Status* ("Crowding and noise...each interfere with the development and maintenance of warm, supportive parent-child interactions.").

¹¹ See: <http://www.familyhomelessness.org/children.php?p=ts>

¹² Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness, *The American Almanac of Family Homelessness 2013*, available at <http://www.icphusa.org/Publications/AmericanAlmanac/>.

¹³ Deborah S. Harburger & Ruth A. White, *Reunifying Families, Cutting Costs: Housing-Child Welfare Partnerships for Permanent Supportive Housing*, 83 CHILD WELFARE 493, 501 (2004) (citing three separate studies conducted between 1996 and 2003 that each found that 30% of foster children could be reunited with their birth families if those families had affordable housing).

Children in foster care identified housing as a major contributor to the overrepresentation of minorities in foster care.)

And foster care is an expensive alternative to affordable housing. According to the National Center for Housing and Child Welfare the average annual cost of foster care for the children of one family is \$56,892. By contrast, it costs on average approximately \$13,193 to house one family and provide supportive services for one year. An investment by HUD in affordable housing for all families separated due to lack of housing could save the U.S. more than \$101 million in foster care expenditures.¹⁴

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Despite these heart-wrenching statistics, stories, and the effects we know homelessness and housing instability have on children, since 2000, HUD has largely abandoned America's homeless children. Federal attention and resources have been focused—even since the 2008 recession—mostly on chronically homeless single women and men and on veterans. And it's worked...for those populations. The Housing First model, which has gained so much attention because of its success, and Housing Choice Vouchers set aside for veterans, have led to a 30% decline in chronically homeless single adults from 2007 to 2014.¹⁵

We can do the same thing for America's homeless children. Through investments in targeted and cost-effective programs that we know work for families, we can reduce child homelessness as well. Specifically, I want to make four recommendations:

1. The federal government should set a numerical goal for reducing family homelessness in America like we've done for reducing chronic singles homelessness and veteran homelessness.

- This is achievable. We know the programs that work. They just need to be adequately funded. And we know that every dollar spent now means cost savings in the future, cost savings because:
 1. A child graduates high school...
 2. A child's physical and emotional health is strong...
 3. A child does not need special services at school...

2. Invest in long-term affordable housing programs for families like Permanent Supportive Housing, federal Housing Choice Vouchers, and Family Unification Program vouchers.

- Permanent supportive housing vouchers house chronically homeless¹⁶ families by making up the difference between what a family can afford to pay in rent and market rent. Supportive services are provided to ensure the family can maintain

¹⁴ Ruth White, *Housing Solutions for Child Welfare Families and Youth* PowerPoint, 2013, available at <http://www.nchcw.org/training-events-and-tools.html>.

¹⁵ See http://www.endhomelessness.org/pages/chronic_homelessness.

¹⁶ Chronic homelessness is usually defined as those who have been homeless for a year or longer, or who have experienced at least four episodes of homelessness in the last 3 years and have a serious physical or mental health disability.

their housing. The program has a 90% success rate nationally. For singles, many jurisdictions have found that PSH pays for itself or even saves taxpayer dollars by reducing emergency room visits, shelter costs, hospitalizations, stays in detox facilities, 911 calls, and incarceration.¹⁷

- Housing Choice (or “Section 8) vouchers likewise make up the difference between what a low-income family can afford to pay in rent and market rent. Vouchers sharply reduce homelessness, lift more than a million people out of poverty each year, and give families an opportunity to move to safer, less poor neighborhoods. These effects, in turn, are closely linked to educational, developmental, and health benefits that can improve children’s long-term prospects and reduce costs in other public programs.¹⁸ The President’s proposed budget includes \$21.1 billion for the HCVP program—enough to cover existing vouchers, as well as restore funding for 67,000 vouchers that were cut due to the 2013 sequestration.

I worked with Ms. D., a mother of two teenage girls, for three years. During that time she had three episodes of homelessness—of coming into shelter, moving out of shelter and into short-term “Rapid Rehousing” programs, and then back into shelter when the subsidy ended and she couldn’t hang on to the unit. When she was in shelter, she spent every day seeking housing. And because her RRH subsidy was so shallow and short-term, when she had housing, she spent every day trying to figure out how she would make ends meet and what she would do when her subsidy ended. Last year Ms. D made it to the top of the DC Housing Authority’s waitlist for an HCVP voucher. She had been on the list for 20 years. Her voucher has given her the stability she needed to focus on job training, education and finding a good job. Today she works for the U.S. Courts and has a good salary and benefits. One of her daughters is in college now.

- Family Unification Vouchers are Section 8 vouchers for families at risk of separation due to homelessness or in need of housing in order to reunify from foster care. They’re also used for youth aging out of foster care so that they do not age out into homelessness, a common phenomenon. From 1992 to 2011, HUD funded 46,656 FUP vouchers,¹⁹ enabling over 200,000 children to be reunited with their families from foster care, or to avoid foster care placements altogether.²⁰ HUD has funded no new FUP vouchers since 2010.²¹

¹⁷ Findings from an evaluation of a Seattle PSH program included taxpayer savings of more than \$4 million over the first year of operation, due to significant reductions in hospital emergency room visits, inpatient hospitalizations, and stays in sobering facilities and shelters. Larimer, Dr. Mary, et al., [Health Care and Public Service Use and Costs Before and After Provision of Housing for Chronically Homeless Persons with Severe Alcohol Problems](#), Journal of the American Medical Assoc. April 2009, 301(13):1349-1357. For a review of the many studies on the cost effectiveness of PSH, see *Supportive Housing is Cost Effective*, National Alliance to End Homelessness, Solutions Brief, January 2007, available at <http://www.endhomelessness.org/library/entry/supportive-housing-is-cost-effective>.

¹⁸ In addition, most voucher households that can reasonably be expected to work, do work. In 2010, 66 percent of non-elderly, non-disabled households using vouchers were working or had worked recently. Moreover, vouchers enable more than 1 million elderly or disabled individuals to afford to live independently.

¹⁹ NCHCW, Cumulative List of HUD’s FUP Sites 1992-June 2011, available at http://www.nchcw.org/uploads/7/5/3/3/7533556/fup_cumulative_list.pdf.

²⁰ NCHCW, HUD’s Family Unification Program, at 1, available at http://www.nchcw.org/uploads/7/5/3/3/7533556/fup_overview_june_2012.pdf

3. Third, invest in homelessness prevention. The recovery act's prevention dollars helped thousands of U.S. families avoid homelessness. Homeless prevention dollars keep families in their homes and preserve affordable housing by slowing turnover rates in rental housing.

4. Finally, there's the wage side of the housing affordability crisis. It should give all of us pause that 44% of homeless persons in the U.S. are working. Increasing the national minimum wage by even a few dollars would lift thousands of hard-working households out of poverty and out of homelessness. Certainly we can all agree that hard-working American families should not be homeless.

CONCLUSION:

Child homelessness is a great challenge, but it is not unsolvable. We know what the solutions are, and Congress plays a vital role in effecting those solutions. We need your commitment to adequately fund the programs that work. Without that support, this litany of devastating statistics will surely grow longer. But with your support, we can assure that all American children have a safe, decent and affordable place to call home.

²¹ See National Center for Housing and Child Welfare, Cumulative List of HUD's FUP Sites 1992-June 2011, available at http://www.nchcw.org/uploads/7/5/3/3/7533556/fup_cumulative_list.pdf.