

ALL HOMELESS CHILDREN AND YOUTH ARE VULNERABLE, NO MATTER WHERE THEY LAY THEIR HEAD AT NIGHT

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There has been a lot of recent media attention discussing how the federal government tracks and accounts for homeless children in our society. This is because it's confusing – federal agencies define homelessness differently. This is based on differing viewpoints on what situations make children and youth the most vulnerable.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) reports there were 127,787 homeless children under 18 in the United States in 2015. They make up nearly a quarter of the homeless population, based on a count of children and youth who are living in emergency shelters, transitional housing, or living unsheltered on the street.

In contrast, the U.S. Department of Education identified 1.3 million homeless students attending public schools in the 2013-2014 school year, which is double the number of students identified since the start of the recession. In addition to children and youth living in shelters or on the street, this number includes children and youth who are living in run-down motels, or with others because they have nowhere else to go (commonly known as “doubling-up”).

No matter which data you look to, it is indisputable that children and youth make up a large percentage of the homeless population in the United States. And they are all vulnerable.

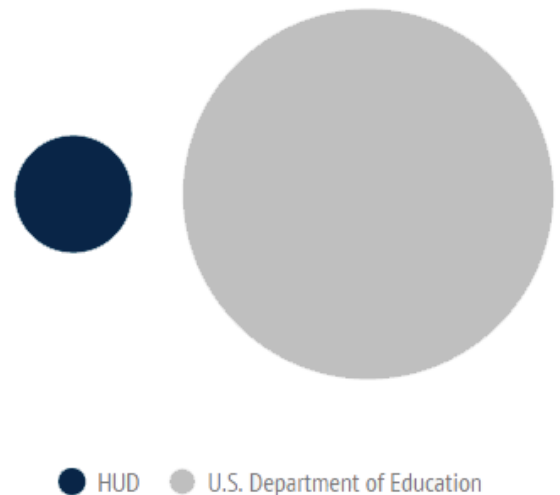
Homeless families with children and unaccompanied youth are living in extremely transitional situations. The reality is that they stay wherever they can, which moving from a shelter one night, to a couch in someone else's home, to a motel, to yet another person's couch or basement floor. There are not enough shelters available in most communities, and even if there are open shelter beds, there are many reasons why a family with children or an unaccompanied youth might avoid them.

In the worst of circumstances, homelessness is dangerous – putting children and youth at risk of physical harm, including physical and sexual abuse and trafficking. In all circumstances, homelessness results in trauma for children and youth – creating instability and disruption to a child's education and emotional well-being. It means situations of constant uncertainty, for homeless families and youth have little or no legal right to remain wherever they are staying, and know can be kicked out at any time.

There is no better way to appreciate the vulnerability that homeless children and youth face than to hear from them directly.

Four years ago, on December 15, 2011, the House Financial Services Committee, Subcommittee for Insurance and Housing [held a hearing](#) on the barriers faced by homeless children and youth in accessing homeless assistance services and included testimony from children and youth who had, or currently were experiencing homelessness.

Homeless Children and Youth Identified



● HUD ● U.S. Department of Education

Brooklyn Pastor, age 12, from Shirley, NY, spoke to the stresses of doubling-up:

“When we lived with other people, they were not always nice to us. We couldn’t ask them for anything. They were mostly mad that we were there and did not want anyone else to know, especially their landlord. They would never let us say we were there. My mom could never tell anyone where we lived, or for how long. It was like being invisible.”

Rumi Khan, age 11, from Carlisle, PA, testified to the abuse she faced while living with her mother’s friend:

“We left our home in June last year and went to stay in a hotel for a couple nights. My mom didn’t have enough money to stay longer. She tried to find a shelter for us to stay in but they didn’t have any room.

One of her friends from work offered to let us stay there with her and her son. It was about an hour drive from where we used to live and where my mom worked. My mom had to drive every day to get to work and keep her job. I had to go with her because she didn’t want me staying by myself at her friend’s house. I didn’t want to stay there either because her friend changed and would get really mean with me. Sometimes she was nice but you never knew when she would smack her son or pull his hair. Once the lady pushed me up the stairs and she was really mad at me. She made me feel down, afraid and not safe...we stayed at this house for about a month. When my mom said something to her about pushing me up the stairs she told my mom to just leave.”

As articulated by Brooklyn and Rumi, children and youth who are living with others are often put in extremely vulnerable situations.

Yet federal homeless assistance policy, administered by HUD, operates under the assumption that the most vulnerable in our society are living in shelters or on the street. Therefore, families with children or unaccompanied youth who are living with others or in run-down motels are not considered to be homeless, but instead “unstably housed” or “at-risk of homelessness.” As you can imagine, this impacts their eligibility for homeless assistance services and creates large barriers to accessing homeless assistance services.

Brittany Amber Koon, a youth from Upper Arlington, OH, testified to the many dangerous and vulnerable situations she faced while she was living doubled-up with others, but still faced documentation barriers to accessing homeless assistance services:

“I feel that making youth document their homelessness through the people they couch surf with will only create another barrier and more frustration with the system. None of the people I lived with would have been willing to write letters or sign papers to document that I was living there. They would have been suspicious and afraid of getting in trouble. Also, many of them I didn’t know well enough to ask them.”

When families and unaccompanied youth are not counted or considered homeless, they not only face barriers to accessing services, but they are also not taken into consideration when determining the need in a community. Homeless assistance providers cannot include those children and youth living with others to display need in their community when applying to the federal government for funds.

It’s true that federal homeless assistance services are limited, and cannot solve the whole problem of child and youth homelessness in the US. There is also desperate need for an increase in the supply of affordable and adequate housing, and without meeting this need, we will continue to have a large homelessness problem.

Yet many of these families and unaccompanied youth became homeless because of additional barriers – trauma from domestic abuse or exposure to violence, mental illness, substance abuse, or a combination of these factors.

For them, they need more than affordable housing – they need homeless assistance services that combine housing with supportive services, such as transitional housing.

The [Homeless Children and Youth Act \(H.R. 576/S. 256\)](#) would help the most vulnerable homeless families and unaccompanied youth in the U.S. access services by streamlining the way that homeless assistance services are administered.

Under this legislation, homeless families with children and unaccompanied youth are automatically considered eligible for HUD homeless assistance services if they are certified as homeless by federal program staff, such as homeless student liaisons in public schools implementing the McKinney-Vento Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program.

Services would not be mandated for eligible children and youth – instead, for communities that identify a large and vulnerable population of homeless families with children and/or unaccompanied youth, they would now have the flexibility to assist this population using homeless assistance services based on the greatest need.

Going back to Brittany’s testimony, she said it best:

“I believe that allowing homeless education liaisons and others to help youth document their situation would be best because it would be easier for a youth to trust caring adults who are already trained and sensitive to their situation. Most youth who are doubled up are getting used. They are not able to become stable enough to get out on their own.”

It will soon be four years since the hearing when Brooklyn, Rumi, and Brittany told their stories to members of Congress. And yet homeless children and youth continue to face barriers that often prevent them from accessing homeless assistance services.

Let’s call upon Congress and the Obama Administration to get homeless children and youth the help they need to keep them safe, healthy, and housed.

For more information and to take action, please visit www.helphomelesskidsnow.org.