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ABSTRACT

Among the signs of recovery in Washington, D.C. is a decline in the number of homeless families in shelters. However, the unemployment rate remains over 8% in the District of Columbia, and the reduction in shelter use is explained by a reduction in shelter financing rather than a decreased need for shelters for homeless families. Interviews with 120 families with more than 300 children help explain the real dimensions of homelessness for children in the District of Columbia. In the city, homelessness is neither short-lived nor a singular occurrence for most homeless families. More than 40% of those surveyed had been homeless more than once. The children of these families experienced prolonged periods of academic instability. Multiple transfers and excessive absences place educational success out of reach for these children. The more chronic the family's homelessness, the worse the children's situation becomes. The multiple challenges faced by homeless families in the District suggest that welfare reform will have a profound impact on many homeless families in Washington. Prospects such as these make today's homeless children likely to become homeless adults. (SLD)

Inside the Beltway: the State of Homeless Children in Washington, DC A Report of Homes for the Homeless

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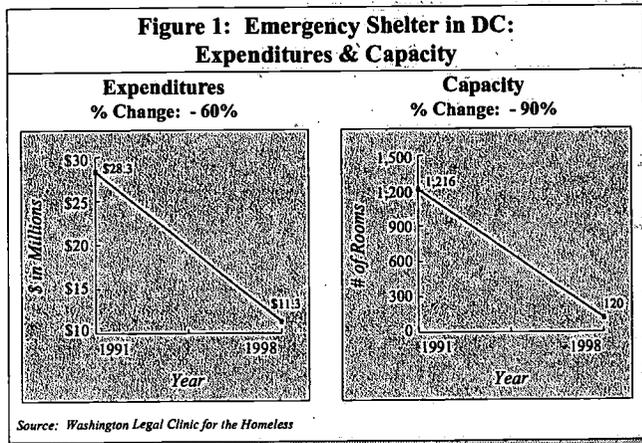
Inside the Beltway

The State of Homeless Children in Washington, DC

On the Rebound?

Some say that Washington, DC, is finally showing signs of recovery: crime rates have dropped, city services are improving, and city officials project a substantial budget surplus.¹ Family homelessness also appears to be on the decline. In 1991, roughly 1200 families lived in emergency shelters; today only 120 do. Our capital's hard times seem to be ending.

However, there is more to this story than meets the eye. Despite a booming national economy, the District's unemployment rate remains over eight percent—double the nation's. While crime rates have dropped, its homicide rate is still the highest of any large American city.² And although the number of homeless families in shelter is down, it is the reduction in shelter funding, rather than a decrease in need, that explains the dramatic drop (See Figure 1).³ Services and space have been replaced by a waiting list, and capacity is so low families wait *six months or more* for shelter placement. In fact, last year alone nearly 900 children and their families, in need of services, were turned away.⁴



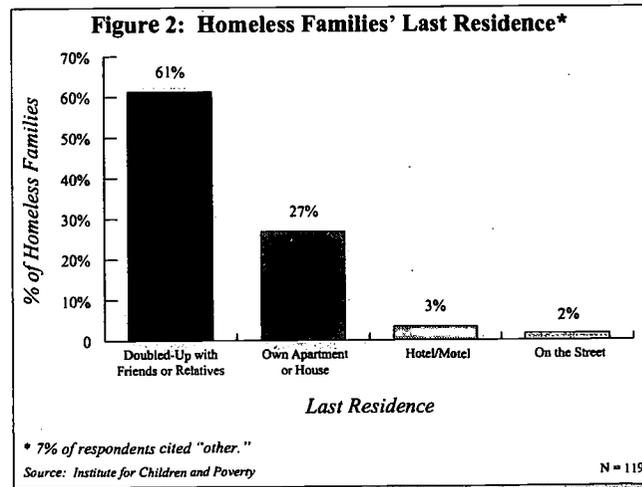
Throughout the 1990s, funding for homeless services in DC was more than halved. As a result, by 1998 DC shelters could accommodate just one tenth the number of families served in 1991.

To better understand family homelessness in the nation's capital and its effect on children, the Institute for Children and Poverty interviewed 120 families—with over 300 children—either residing in shelters or currently on the shelter waiting list. The results of that survey follow.

Residential Instability...Academic Instability

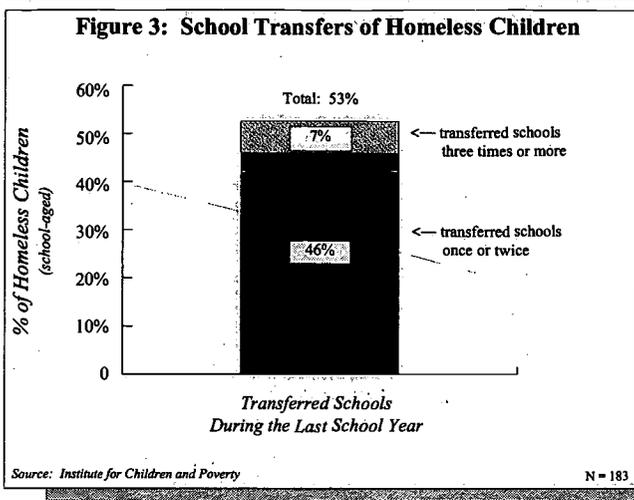
Homelessness is neither a short-lived nor singular episode for most homeless families in the District. Rather, homelessness is characterized by extended periods of residential instability. Nearly two-thirds of the families surveyed lived doubled- or tripled-up with friends or relatives before entering a shelter—one and a half times the portion of all homeless families nationwide (61% vs. 44%)—while only twenty-seven percent came to a shelter directly from their own home or apartment (See Figure 2).⁵ Moreover, forty percent of those surveyed had been homeless more than once.

While these figures are troubling in and of themselves, what is more disturbing are the consequences of such circumstances for homeless children. The study found that while families face prolonged residential instability, children experience extended periods of *academic instability*.



Only one-fourth (27%) of homeless families entered an emergency shelter directly after leaving their own apartment or house. Fully two-thirds (66%) last lived doubled-up with friends or relatives, in a welfare hotel or motel, or on the streets.

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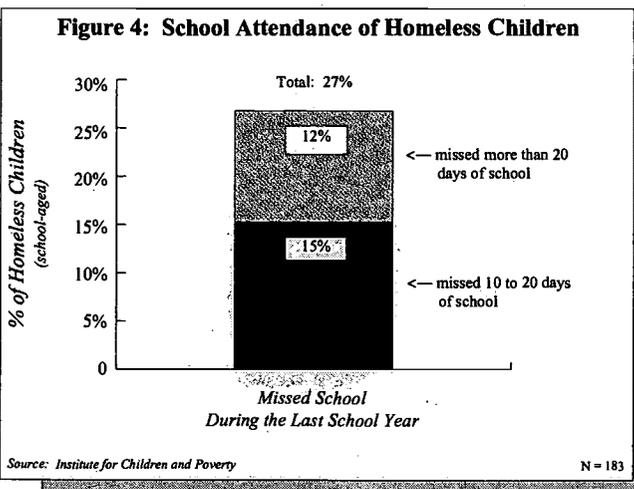


On average, more than half (53%) of homeless school-aged children transferred schools during the last school year: forty-six percent transferred schools once or twice; and seven percent transferred schools three times or more.

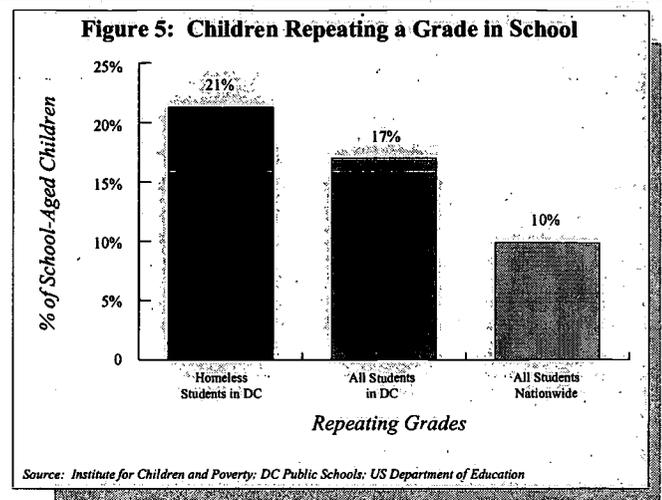
During the last school year, more than half (53%) of the children in families surveyed transferred schools at least once, with almost ten percent transferring three times or more (See Figure 3).⁶ Additionally, one in four (27%) missed more than ten days of school, with several students missing as much as *ten percent* of the school year (See Figure 4).

Multiple transfers and excessive absences place educational success out of reach. Ten percent of homeless children have been placed in special education classes and already one in five (21%) has repeated a grade. Washington's homeless children repeat grades nearly twenty-five percent more than all public school students in DC, and *twice as much* as all children nationwide (See Figure 5).⁷

Most alarming is that students' achievement declines as



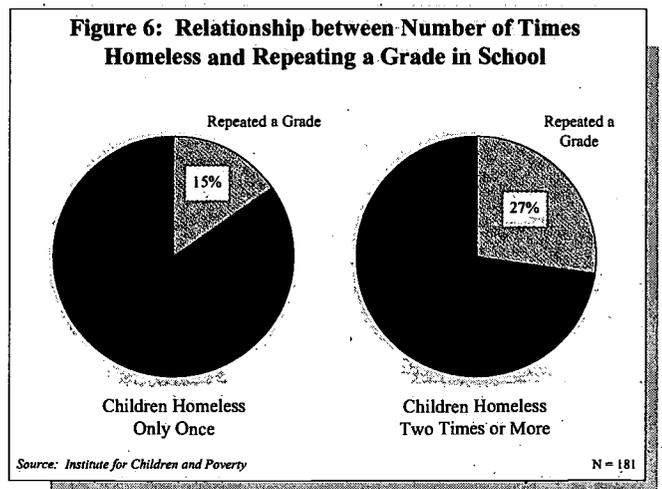
On average, one in four (27%) homeless children missed more than ten days of school during the last school year: fifteen percent missed between ten and twenty days; and twelve percent missed more than twenty days.



Homeless children in DC repeat grades nearly twenty-five percent more than non-homeless DC public school students and at more than twice the rate of all children nationwide.

academic instability intensifies. The Institute found that the more chronic a family's homelessness, the worse the situation becomes: children who have been homeless more than once are nearly *twice as likely* to repeat a grade in school as children homeless only once (See Figure 6). Chronically homeless students are one and a half times as likely as other DC students, and *three times as likely* as all children nationwide, to be left back.

The impact of grade repetition on educational attainment is also severe: students who repeat grades face greater chances of dropping out of school.⁸ Without a high school diploma, they will be less likely to find well-paying employment, and more likely to face poverty and welfare dependency, as adults. In sum, there is little room for optimism about these children's futures.



School-aged children in families experiencing homelessness for at least the second time were held back at nearly double the rate of children in families homeless for the first time (27% versus 15%).

Table 1: A Profile of Homeless Parents in DC

Gender	%	Number of Children	%
Female	98	1	19
Male	2	2	34
		3	24
		4 or more	23
Age	%	Education Level	%
18 - 24 years	33	< High School	48
25 - 34 years	32	High School or more	52
35 - 44 years	31	Employment Status	%
> 44 years	4	Employed	24
Average Age	30	Unemployed	76
Race / Ethnicity	%	Time on Welfare	%
African American	89	None	14
Latino/Hispanic	5	< 6 months	10
White	3	6 months - 1 year	12
Other	3	1 - 2 years	25
		> 2 years	39
Marital Status	%	Homeless Episodes	%
Single	85	1	60
Married	15	2 or More	40

Source: Institute for Children and Poverty

N = 120 families

The typical homeless family in DC is headed by an unmarried, thirty-year old, African American woman who is currently unemployed. She has two to three young children and a two in five chance of being homeless more than once

Prospects for the Future

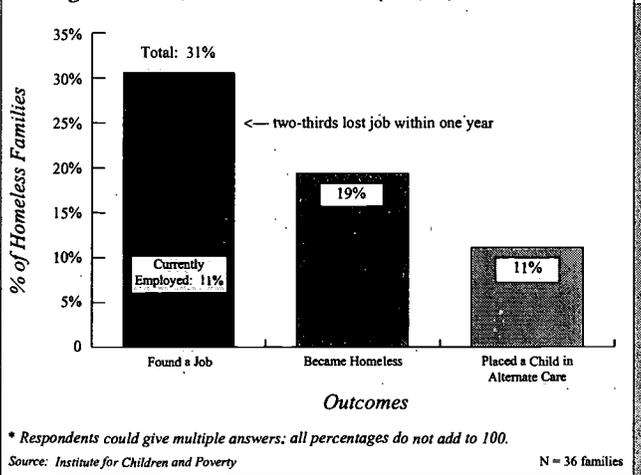
Homeless parents and families often face multiple challenges simultaneously, such as residential instability, unemployment, undereducation, single parenthood and poverty. In many cases, the particulars of welfare reform—such as benefit time limits—are creating additional obstacles. Thirty-nine percent of the families surveyed have relied on welfare (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) for more than two years, while just fourteen percent have never received welfare at all (See Table 1). This suggests that welfare reform will profoundly impact a large portion of homeless families in Washington.

At the time of the survey, one-third (31%) of respondents had already had their welfare benefits reduced or cut. Of those, thirty-one percent reported finding a job directly as a result. However, two-thirds (64%) of those newly employed had lost that job in less than one year. Apparently, such employment proves not so secure. What is more, one in five (19%) families reported becoming homeless as a direct result of benefit reductions, and one in ten (11%) reported being forced to surrender at least one child to alternate care (See Figure 7).⁹ With welfare reform's prospects of providing long-term employment and stability still in question, it would appear that the worst is yet to come for many homeless children and families.

This brief study is a wake-up call to the nation's capital. With less affordable housing, low-wage work or unemployment a fact of life, and public assistance on the decline, many families in Washington now face an even greater risk of becoming homeless.¹⁰ Due to decreased shelter capacity, the demand for the District's emergency homeless services is increasingly exceeding supply. This places more and more families in limbo, homeless with no options for shelter and struggling just to stay together.

But what is happening to homeless children deserves our immediate attention. Academic instability is holding them back; excessive school absences and transfers interrupt their education and increase their chances of dropping out before graduation. Prospects such as these make today's homeless children likely to become tomorrow's homeless adults. The nation's capital may be willing to wait six months or more to provide these children with shelter; but should this nation be willing to wait yet another generation before demanding a suitable response? With children at risk, the answer is obvious.

Figure 7: Outcomes of Welfare (TANF) Reductions*



Of those whose welfare was reduced, one in five (19%) reported becoming homeless and one in ten (11%) was forced to separate from at least one child directly as a result. Only one-third (36%) of those who reported finding a job as a result of reductions were employed at the time of the interview.

Footnotes

1. Janofsky, Michael. *Washington Meets Its Mayor: Forgive Him for Being Early.* *The New York Times* 5 January 1999: A12.
2. Lipton, Eric. *In the City, Promises Unfulfilled; Middle-Class Dreams Faded As Quality of Life Declined.* *The Washington Post* 1 January 1999: A1.
3. Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless.
4. Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness.
5. *Ten Cities: A Snapshot of Family Homelessness Across America.* New York City: Homes for the Homeless, 1998.
6. Education-related statistics illustrate the experiences of children five to eighteen years of age.
7. Student Accounting Branch of DC Public Schools; Department of Education. *The Condition of Education 1997.* "Percentage of all children aged 5-17 and those who repeated at least one grade, by English language usage and proficiency, and disability status: October 1992 and 1995."
8. National Center for Education Statistics. *Dropout Rates in the United States: 1995.*
9. "Alternate care" living arrangements include the following: another relative, child's other parent, a friend, foster care or a group home, or an adopted family.

10. The number of low- and mid-cost rental units in DC declined dramatically from 1977 to 1990 and were replaced by high-cost units. *Washington, DC, Consolidated Plan: Executive Summary*. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1995.

HOMES FOR THE HOMELESS (HFH) is dedicated to reducing tomorrow's homelessness by providing families with the tools to build independent lives today. Since its inception in 1986, HFH has become the nation's largest single provider of residential education and training programs for homeless children and families, and has served more than 17,100 families, including 29,200 children, in New York City's five boroughs. Every day, over 530 families benefit from the innovative programs available at HFH's American Family Inns. In addition, more than 6,000 children from shelters city-wide have attended one of HFH's summer camps, the third of which opened in 1997.

The Institute for Children and Poverty, a project of Homes for the Homeless, seeks to provide innovative strategies to combat the impacts of homelessness and urban poverty on the lives of children and their families. Through the dissemination of quantitative research findings, the Institute hopes to enhance understanding of issues surrounding children and homelessness, as well as encourage the development of effective public policy initiatives.

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