

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 454 346

UD 034 274

TITLE Deja Vu: Family Homelessness in New York City.
INSTITUTION Institute for Children and Poverty, New York, NY.
PUB DATE 2001-04-00
NOTE 8p.
AVAILABLE FROM Institute for Children and Poverty, 36 Cooper Square, 6th Floor, New York, NY 10003. Tel: 212-529-5252; Fax: 212-529-7698; Web site: <http://www.instituteforchildrenandpoverty.org>.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Access to Education; Child Health; Children; Elementary Secondary Education; *Family Life; *Homeless People; Poverty; Social Services; Violence
IDENTIFIERS *New York (New York); Working Poor

ABSTRACT

This report describes family homelessness in New York City, which has risen sharply since 1980. Currently, the City's family shelter system is at capacity. Homeless children are typically raised by single mothers who receive no child support, are 27 years old, are unemployed and receiving welfare, and have had at least one public assistance benefit recently cut. Typical homeless families have been homeless for at least 9 months, live with friends or relatives before entering a shelter, and move twice every year. Many homeless people work, yet move rapidly from stability to homelessness and public assistance. Typical homeless children are 5 years old, change schools frequently, repeat grades frequently, cannot access a quality education, receive primary medical care at walk-in clinics or emergency rooms, and have high asthma rates. Violence pervades their lives, affecting their physical and emotional health. New York has homeless-friendly laws, yet the City has ever increasing numbers of families needing shelter. A work plus housing plan could transform shelters into homes where families get the support and skills they need, where working is expected, where children are nurtured, and where families feel a sense of community. (SM)

Homes for the Homeless Institute for Children in Poverty

Déjà Vu: Family Homelessness in New York City

April 2001

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND
DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS
BEEN GRANTED BY

R. Nuñez
Homes for the Homeless

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

- This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
- Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

- Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

2

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Déjà Vu: Family Homelessness in New York City



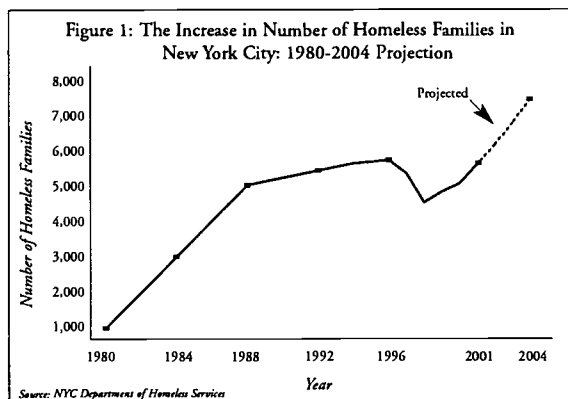
APRIL 2001

A REPORT OF THE INSTITUTE FOR CHILDREN AND POVERTY

Much has been said of the prosperous times and unprecedented growth that our nation has witnessed over the last few years. New York City was no stranger to these good times, surpassing the nation in job growth and watching as crime rates plummeted. Yet much has also been made of the increasing inequality of incomes or the widening gap between the rich and the poor.

This tale of two cities is nothing new. In New York City and other urban areas around the world, extreme poverty and extreme wealth have always coexisted. What has changed, is the scope of the problem. As New York City approaches welfare time limits, family homelessness is exploding. Today, the City's family shelter system is at capacity. Over 16,000 men, women, and children spend their nights there on a regular basis. Another 500 families crowd into the Department of Homeless Services' Emergency Assistance Unit (EAU) each evening awaiting placement in shelter. Sometimes, their wait can be days or even weeks.

In light of these facts, the Institute for Children and Poverty, faculty of Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs, and *Political Science Quarterly* performed a survey of 350 families, including over 600 children, living in shelters in New York City. What surfaces is not a story of two cities, but of two children, one with a prosperous and bright future, the other with poor health, sporadic education, and little social stability. With a rising number of families becoming homeless over the past twenty years, a 500% increase since 1980, the latter child's story has become the poverty standard (see Figure 1).



From 1980 to 2001, there has been a 500% increase in the number of homeless families residing in New York City shelters. In 1998, what appears to be a drop in family homelessness is, in fact, a result of stricter eligibility requirements. There were still record numbers of families living doubled-up with friends or relatives. In fact, the numbers have again begun to rise, increasing 10% in the last year. If this trend continues, by 2004, there will be close to 8,000 homeless families in New York City each day.

The typical homeless family in New York City:

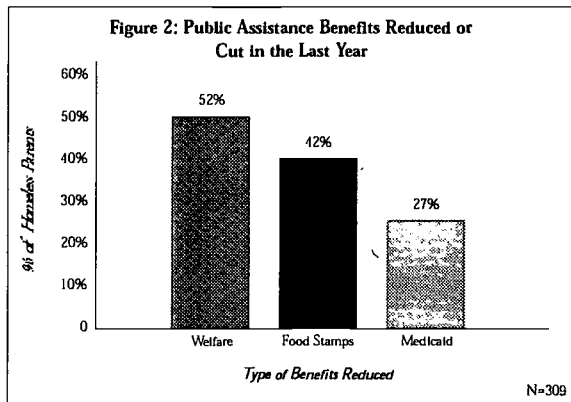
- has been homeless for at least nine months;
- lived doubled-up with friends or relatives before entering the shelter system; and
- moves twice every year, twelve times the rate of the average American family.

The typical homeless parent in New York City:

- is a single, twenty-seven year-old mother with two young children;
- is most likely unemployed and receiving welfare; and
- had at least one of her public assistance benefits cut in the last year.

The typical homeless child in New York City:

- is five years old;
- has suffered from an increase in emotional distress since becoming homeless;
- has had to change schools in the last year;
- is more than twice as likely to repeat a grade as a non-homeless child;
- is four times as likely to suffer from asthma as a non-homeless child; and
- receives primary medical care in an emergency room or walk-in clinic.

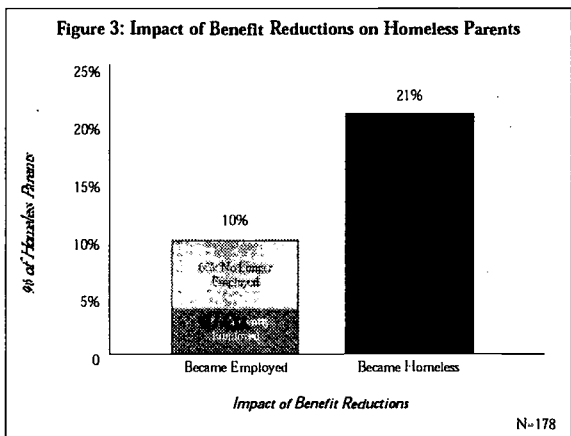


Over half of homeless parents report that they had their welfare benefits reduced or cut in the last year, 42% report having their food stamps cut, and 27% experienced cuts in Medicaid.

Prelude to Homelessness: The History of Homeless Parents

The story of a homeless child begins with the story of his or her parent. Homeless children today are typically raised by a single mother who receives no support from the child's father.¹ She is twenty-seven, eight years younger than the typical homeless parent over a decade ago.² In all likelihood she is unemployed, and is almost as likely to have completed high school as not. Also, nearly half of all homeless parents (47%) report a history of abuse.

She has probably been receiving public assistance as her primary source of income—84% are currently receiving welfare and 57% have relied on it for more than one year. She is also likely to have had her benefits reduced or cut in the last year; 52% have had their welfare benefits reduced or cut, 42% have had their food stamps reduced or cut, and 27% have had their Medicaid benefits reduced or cut in the last year (see Figure 2). Strikingly, of those losing benefits, 21% became homeless as a result. Ten percent reported finding a job as a result of welfare



One-fifth of parents who had their benefits reduced or cut in the last year report becoming homeless as a result, while only 10% report finding a job as a result. Of those who report becoming employed, less than half are currently working.

Gender	Female 97%	Education Level	≥ High School 48%
Race	African-American 59%	Employment	Currently Employed 15%
	Hispanic 32%	Public Assistance	Currently Receiving Welfare 84%
	Other 9%	Social Indicators	Foster Care as a Child 13%
Average Age	27 yrs.		Homeless as a Child 8%
≤ 21 Years	23%	Average Time Homeless	9 mos.
Marital Status	Single 88%	Homeless More than Once	33%
Average # of Children	2		
			N=350

reductions, yet less than half of those individuals (40%) are still working (see Figure 3).

Many homeless parents can probably sympathize with their child's early exposure to the social service system: 8% of homeless parents were homeless as children themselves and 13% were in foster care (see Table 1). Eleven percent of these parents have remained linked to the foster care system—they currently have at least one of their own children living in foster care or with a friend or family.

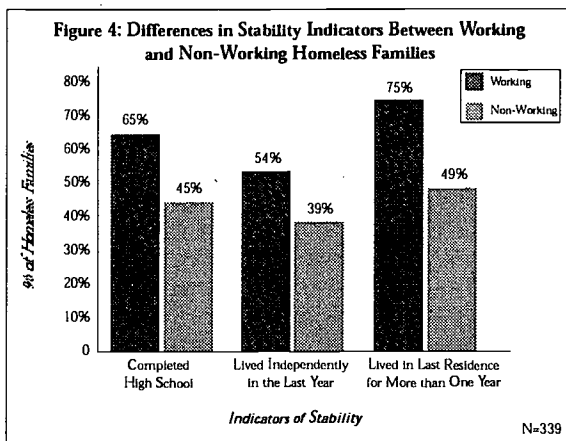
Different Families, Different Stories

The Working Homeless

The story of the typical homeless family in New York City does not provide the complete picture. There are segments of the population who have very different histories. For example, 15% of the homeless population is employed. In comparison to unemployed homeless parents, those who are employed were significantly less likely to be welfare recipients (67% vs. 88%). Moreover, these employed parents cannot be characterized as long-term welfare dependents: 40% have received welfare for less than one year. In short, the working homeless are not long-term welfare recipients. Instead, they appear to have moved rapidly from stability to homelessness and public assistance.

In addition to a relatively short history of welfare receipt, working homeless families were more likely to have completed high school than their unemployed counterparts (65% vs. 45%). Working homeless parents were also more likely to have been living in their own apartment or house (54% vs. 39%) and 53% more likely than unemployed parents to have been living in the same residence for more than one year prior to becoming homeless (75% vs. 49%) (see Figure 4). By all accounts, they do not appear to differ significantly from other low-income working families. The question then becomes, why are they homeless?

The answer to this question may lie in welfare reductions. Sixty-nine percent of working homeless families report that they had at least one of their public assistance benefits cut in the last year. Compared to unemployed homeless parents, they



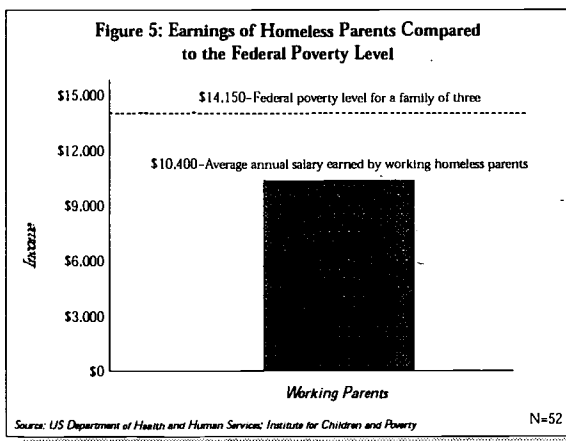
Working homeless parents were more likely to have completed high school, more likely to have lived independently and more likely to have been living in the same residence for more than one year prior to becoming homeless than unemployed parents.

were significantly more likely to have faced benefit reductions or cuts (69% vs. 60%). Not surprisingly, 44% of families report that their public assistance benefits were cut or reduced because of their employment.

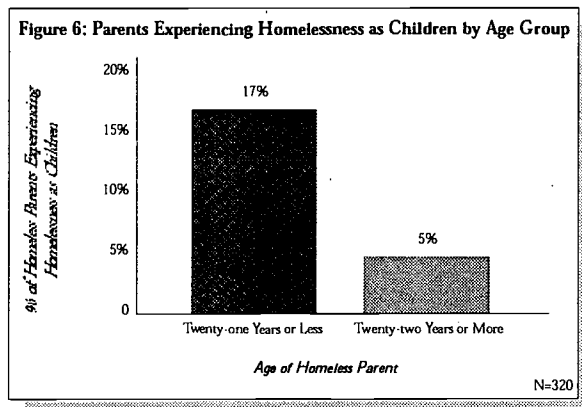
The logic of welfare reform is that employment earnings should replace families' public assistance benefits. However, rather than gradually transitioning to independence, many working homeless parents lost the support systems that they needed to maintain their families. Their new wages are not enough to sustain them. On average, employed homeless parents earn only \$200 per week, or \$10,400 per year, holding them well below the poverty line for a family of three (\$14,150)³ (see Figure 5). Rather than achieving the self-sufficiency that welfare reform demands, these working families became homeless.

Younger Parents

Nothing more clearly exhibits the ill effects of foster care and homelessness on a child's life than an examination of the youngest members of the adult homeless population. *Those*



On average, employed homeless parents earn only \$200 per week, or \$10,400 per year, 73% of the poverty line for a family of three (\$14,150).



Young heads-of-household were more likely to have experienced homelessness as children.

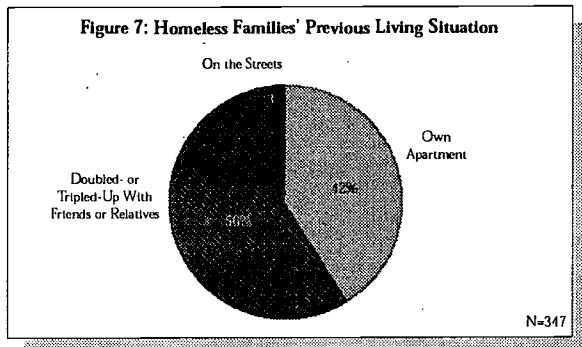
who are twenty-one years of age or younger are three times as likely as those who are over twenty-one to have been homeless as a child (see Figure 6). In fact, these parents are young enough to have been swept up in the rising tide of homelessness in the early 1980s. For them, *coming to a shelter is like coming home*.

Additionally, homeless parents twenty-one years of age or younger are twice as likely to have a history of foster care (14% vs. 7%). Their early acquaintance with the shelter system is easily explained. Parents who were in foster care as children were less likely to have lived independently prior to becoming homeless (30% vs. 43%) and, even though they are younger than the average homeless parent, they are significantly more likely than those who have no history of foster care to have been homeless more than once (50% vs. 31%). In other words, *these parents have transitioned from a group home for youth in the foster care system to a group home for adults in the shelter system*. In short, a childhood history of homelessness and foster care become strong predictors of homelessness later in life.

Part One: A Child's Road to Shelter

Before they found themselves at the doors of the EAU, homeless children in New York City had been traveling the road to homelessness for some time. Prior to their current residence, over half of homeless families (56%) lived with friends or relatives, sleeping on couches or floors and trying to carve out a normal life in a crowded space (see Figure 7). When an argument inevitably ensues, they must piece together new accommodations. In fact, over half of those who lived doubled-up (55%) left their last residence due to overcrowding or disagreements.

Another 42% of families lived in their own apartment or house before becoming homeless. These families were twice as likely as those who were living doubled-up to be employed (20% vs. 12%) and less likely to have experienced frequent moves (67% vs. 79%)—both indicators of stability. However, their lives are filled with their own struggles to remain independent, such as trying to piece together enough income and benefits to make



Prior to entering the shelter system, the majority of homeless families lived doubled- or tripled-up with friends or relatives.

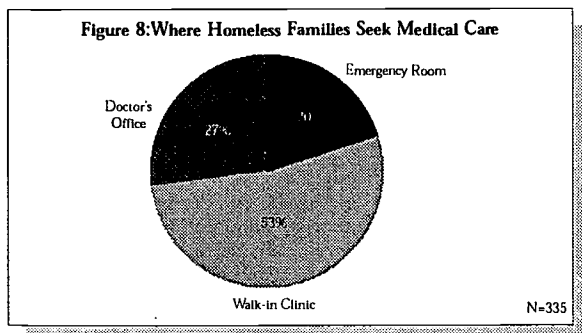
ends meet. Ultimately, 49% left their homes because they were unable to pay rent or were evicted.

The road to homelessness is marked by frequent moves and long periods of time living in shelters. Whereas the typical family in America moves once every six years, *the typical homeless family in New York City moves twice every year.* And one-third of the families (35%) relocated three or more times in the last year. As for the children, on average, they are homeless nine months at a time, or *an entire school year*, and one-third (33%) have been homeless at least once before.

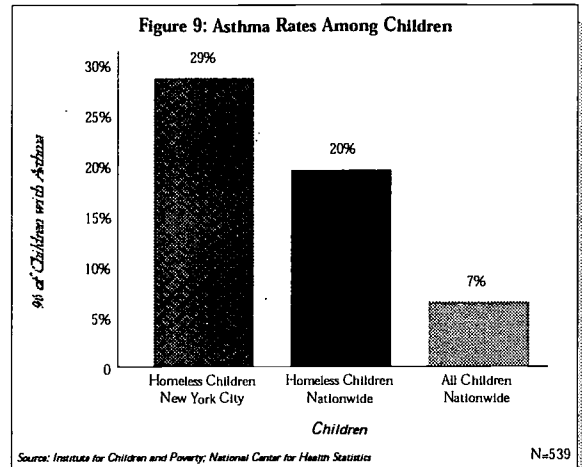
The nomadic life that results from homelessness has a dramatic effect on homeless families. In the parent's struggle to obtain the necessities—shelter, food, and clothing—a child's emotional, physical, and educational needs are neglected. What is worse, these children become poised to repeat the same cycle of poverty and homelessness that traps their parents.

Part Two: Their Failing Health

Whereas a sick child living in prosperity would be taken to his or her family doctor when ill, a homeless child is afforded no such luxury. Instead, homeless children receive sporadic care, usually in an emergency room or clinic, and almost no preventive care. This occurs despite the fact that they are likely to have serious illnesses that require consistent treatment, to be sick



Seventy-three percent of all homeless families receive their primary medical care in an emergency room or a walk-in-clinic.



Homeless children in New York City were one and a half times as likely to suffer from asthma than homeless children nationwide and over four times as likely to suffer from asthma as all children nationwide.

more often since becoming homeless, to have their poor health exacerbated by hunger and poor nutrition after becoming homeless, and to have been born under conditions that encourage illness. Compounding these facts, they may have experienced Medicaid cuts.

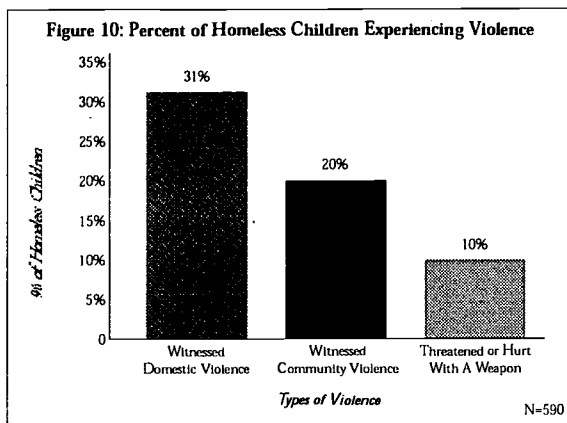
One-fifth of homeless parents in New York City (20%) report that their children go to emergency rooms for medical care and another 53% go to walk-in clinics (see Figure 8). This occurs in spite of homeless children in New York City being four times as likely as non-homeless children nationally to suffer from asthma (29% vs. 7%)⁵ (see Figure 9). Homelessness also leads to higher rates of general illness: 54% of these children become sick more often after becoming homeless.

Moreover, whether due to appetite changes or the inconsistent quality of available food, nearly half of these children (47%) eat less after becoming homeless. This and other factors, such as a 13% occurrence of low-birthweight among this population, predispose these children to poor health—yet they are not immune to Medicaid cuts. Twenty-seven percent of families have had this benefit reduced or cut in the last year, despite remaining eligible.

Part Three: Violence in Their Lives

Violence, common in both their homes and their communities, pervades the lives of homeless children. Nearly one-third of all children (31%) have witnessed domestic violence; one-fifth of school-aged children (20%) have witnessed violence in their community; and one in ten school-aged children (10%) have been threatened or hurt with a weapon (see Figure 10).

The effects of this violence overwhelm children, affecting both their emotional and physical health. School-aged children who have witnessed either domestic or community violence were



A third of all children have witnessed domestic violence according to their parents. One fifth of school-aged children witnessed violence in their community and one in ten have been threatened or hurt with a weapon.

44% more likely than those who have not (91% vs. 63%) to suffer emotional distress since becoming homeless. Additionally, they were more than twice as likely as those who had not witnessed such violence to be more fearful and anxious (36% v. 14%) and were significantly more likely to become ill more often since becoming homeless (66% v. 45%).

Part Four: Children Left Behind

Homeless parents express the hope that their children will have the opportunity to build a more prosperous future in this city of countless opportunities. Yet, as a result of their homelessness, many of these children are denied access to the quality education that would help them prepare for a successful adulthood.

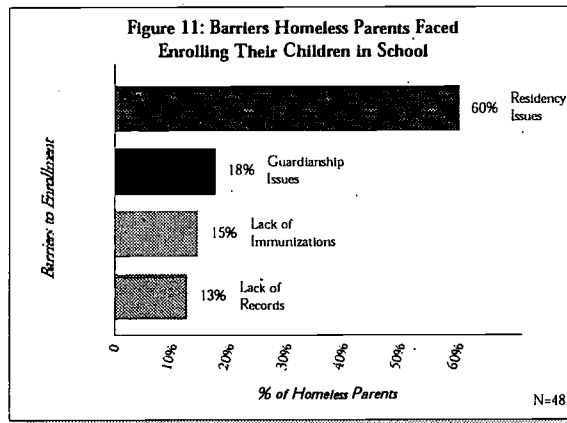
Pre-School

Half of homeless children in New York City (51%) are under the age of five. Because the instability in their lives can affect the development of their cognitive and social skills, they have perhaps the greatest need for early childhood education. However, **41% go without preschool.**

School-Aged

New York City's older homeless children face educational troubles of their own. A recent national study found that roughly three-quarters of homeless children perform below grade level in reading and spelling (75% and 72%, respectively), and half (54%) perform below grade level in math.⁶ Considering these facts, it is not surprising that **one in four homeless school-aged children (25%) in New York City repeats a grade in school**—more than twice the national rate for all children.⁷ Children who repeat a grade are more likely than those who are not left back to develop a negative self-image, drop out of school, and get into trouble with the law.⁸ To be sure, children who continually experience homelessness are prime candidates to repeat grades and eventually drop out of school completely.

Frequent school transfers are another common cause of prob-



Sixty percent of parents who had problems enrolling their child in school cited residency issues, 18% cited guardianship issues, 15% said it was because their child lacked the proper immunizations and 13% said it was because they lacked the proper records.

lems in school. In the last year, **almost two-thirds of New York City's homeless children (57%) changed schools.** Researchers estimate that it takes a child four to six months to recover academically from such transfers.⁹

Despite federal provisions requiring schools to immediately enroll all homeless children, barriers still exist. Today, roughly ten percent of those who are school-aged (11%) are not enrolled in school. **In New York City, over one-quarter of parents (27%) have problems enrolling or keeping their children in school once they become homeless.** They report residency complications, lack of records, lack of immunizations, and guardianship issues as common barriers to enrollment (see Figure 11). Parents who are victims of domestic violence—one of the largest populations in City shelters today—tend to have even more difficulty. They are almost twice as likely as other homeless parents (36% vs. 19%) to have problems enrolling their children in school. Additionally, parents who were in foster care as children were twice as likely as those who were not to have problems enrolling their children in school (52% v. 24%).

Creating Communities of Opportunity

While family homelessness has become a common denominator of poverty in New York City, it is important to know that New York has some of the most homeless-friendly laws in the nation. Nowhere else in the United States are citizens guaranteed the right to shelter. Moreover, the City has committed hundreds of millions of dollars in resources to shelter families to provide them with everything from food, health care, and clothing, to the necessary support services of education, job training, and employment.

Still, there appears to be no end to the number of families in need of shelter in New York City. In fact, a recent Tier II Coalition plan for ending homelessness notes that there are currently over 300,000 applicants on the City's waiting list for subsidized housing.¹⁰ In addition, they call for \$10 billion to

provide 100,000 affordable units over the next ten years. And, although Mayor Giuliani recently approved spending \$1.2 billion over the next four years to build an estimated 10,000 units, very few are slated for low-income renters. Consequently, the Coalition reports that many families who have already entered the shelter system are languishing in transitional housing for years due to the lack of affordable permanent housing.¹¹ However, it does not have to be that way.

Families residing in shelters must come to recognize that their stays are going to be longer and, in many cases, without alternative; shelter operators must do the same. And with the majority of the homeless families residing in shelters without work, employability must become their immediate goal. As for those in need of supportive services, participation in programming must be the norm. Without building individual responsibility and independent living skills, shelters will indeed become permanent warehouses for the poor. However, if we view them as homes where people become employable and continue their education, we can reduce their permanency, since life skills and work foster opportunity and independence. This in essence is the goal of "*work plus housing*"—shelters transformed into homes where families get the support and skills they need, where going to work is expected, rewarding and leads to self-sufficiency, where children are nurtured, and where families feel a sense of community.¹²

"*Work plus housing*" can be financed in several ways: housing assistance vouchers could be targeted to these homes; residents who work could pay some form of rent; and partnerships could be formed to enhance services. Such partnerships might include New York City Department of Youth Services targeting afterschool program dollars and community health clinics linking preventative care services to these settings. And this is only the beginning. The more comprehensive the network of services, the more effective the "*work plus housing*" community, and the more successful the reduction of family homelessness.

Much of the groundwork for this has been set. Here in New York City, "*work plus housing*" already exists.¹³ Many family shelters have been transformed into communities where parents return to their education while children begin and enhance theirs, where parents are job-readied, trained and employed, and where young mothers gain independent living skills—eliminating dependence on public assistance. In essence, "*work plus housing*" is a community that offers employment, education and support resulting in responsibility, initiative, and independence. For children, it is an oasis of educational supports.

But, even in New York, the job is not complete. Too many people continue to view shelters as temporary or emergency centers. Unfortunately, that is no longer the case. With very little affordable housing currently being produced and no sign of massive production on the horizon, shelters are, at least for the time being, the low-income housing of today. What we know, given the current social and political environment, is that many

of New York's poorest families will at some point call a shelter their home. Today, we have the ability to transform shelters into communities of opportunity and change the lives of homeless families forever.

The purpose of this report has been to profile what family homelessness looks like in New York City today and to suggest a potential strategy for reducing it as we approach tomorrow. If every shelter in New York City were to move towards "*work plus housing*," we would deal a decisive blow against homelessness and poverty. And, more importantly, we would give families, and especially children, the dignity they deserve by transforming shelters, creating new homes, and removing the stigma of being homeless.

Endnotes

1. Institute for Children and Poverty. *Multiple Families: Multiplying Problems* (New York City: Institute for Children and Poverty, 2000), 1.
2. Institute for Children and Poverty. *The New Poverty* (New York City: Institute for Children and Poverty, 1992), 3.
3. US Department of Health and Human Services. *The 2000 HHS Poverty Guidelines* (Washington, DC, 2000).
4. Sheridan Bartlet. "The Significance of Relocation for Chronically Poor Families in the USA." *Environment and Urbanization* 9, no.1 (1997):122.
5. National Center for Health Statistics. *Number of Selected Reported Chronic Conditions Per 1,000 Persons by Age: United States, 1995* (Washington, DC, 1999).
6. David H. Rubin et al., "Cognitive and Academic Functioning of Homeless Children Compared with Housed Poor Children." *Pediatrics* 97 (March 1996): 289.
7. National Center for Education Statistics. "Grade Retention, by English Language Usage and Proficiency, and Disability Status." in *The Condition of Education 1997* (Washington, DC, 1997).
8. Yvonne Rafferty and Marybeth Shinn. "The Impact of Homelessness on Children." *American Psychologist* 46, no.11 (1991): 1175.
9. Laurene M. Heyback and Patricia Nix-Hodes. "Reducing Mobility: Good for Kids, Good for Schools." *The Beam: The Newsletter of the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth* 9, no.1 (1999): 5.
10. Supporting Housing Network, Tier II Coalition et al., "A Blueprint to End Homelessness in New York City." March 6, 2001.; Tier II shelters are New York City's version of transitional housing. Practically every shelter in New York City is of the Tier II variety. Tier I shelters are congregate facilities.
11. Ibid.
12. Institute for Children and Poverty. *A Shelter is Not a Home—Or Is It?* (New York: Institute for Children and Poverty, 2001).
13. For an example, see www.homesforthehomeless.com and Ralph Nunez. *The New Poverty: Homeless Families in America* (New York: Plenum, 1996) for information about American Family Inns.

The Institute for Children and Poverty is an independent research and policy think tank that works in close association with Homes for the Homeless. Through the development of effective public policy initiatives and the dissemination of quantitative research findings, the Institute examines and offers unique strategies to combat the impact of homelessness and poverty on the lives of children and their families.

Homes for the Homeless (HFH) is a private non-profit organization based in New York City that operates American Family Inns. Since 1986, HFH has worked to break the cycle of poverty and dependence among homeless families through education-based services.

36 Cooper Square, 6th Floor
 New York, NY 10003
 p 212 529.5252 • f 212 529.7698
www.instituteforchildrenandpoverty.org

Leonard N. Stern, *Founder & Chair*

Ralph Nunez, *President & CEO*



U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)



NOTICE

REPRODUCTION BASIS



This document is covered by a signed "Reproduction Release (Blanket) form (on file within the ERIC system), encompassing all or classes of documents from its source organization and, therefore, does not require a "Specific Document" Release form.



This document is Federally-funded, or carries its own permission to reproduce, or is otherwise in the public domain and, therefore, may be reproduced by ERIC without a signed Reproduction Release form (either "Specific Document" or "Blanket").