

Homeless Children

DEFINITION

Homeless children is the number of Rhode Island children under age 13 who received emergency housing services at emergency homeless shelters and domestic violence shelters during the State Fiscal Year 2008 (July 1, 2007 to June 30, 2008).

SIGNIFICANCE

Lack of affordable housing, unemployment, low-paying jobs, extreme poverty, and decreasing government supports all contribute to the problem of family homelessness. Other causes of family homelessness include domestic violence, the changing demographics of the family, the fraying of social support networks, mental illness, and substance abuse.^{1,2}

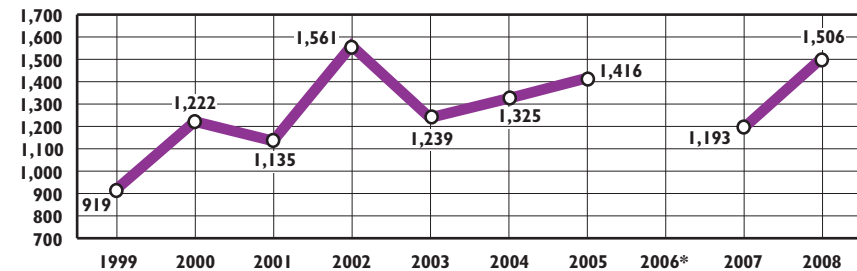
Compared to their peers, homeless children are more likely to become ill, develop mental health issues (such as anxiety, depression, and withdrawal), experience significant educational disruption, and exhibit delinquent or aggressive behaviors. Homeless children go hungry at twice the rate of other children and are more likely to experience illnesses such as stomach problems, ear infections and asthma. Infants, toddlers and preschoolers who are homeless are more likely to have one or more developmental delays compared with poor children living in stable housing.³

Families who have experienced homelessness have higher rates of family separation than other low-income families. Homeless children are 12 times more likely to be placed in foster care than other children. Homelessness is also a barrier to reunification for many families. Studies suggest that more than 30% of children in foster care could return home if their parents had adequate housing.⁴

In Rhode Island, 953 Rhode Island families received emergency shelter between July 1, 2007 and June 30, 2008, a 21% increase from the previous year.^{5,6} More than one in six (18%) of the children in these families had experienced homelessness before.⁷

In Rhode Island, it is likely that several forces contributed to increases in the number of homeless families. Between December 2007 and December 2008, Rhode Island's unemployment rate increased from 5.2% to 9.4%.⁸ At the same time, the average rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Rhode Island increased by 8% and many families (both renters and owners) lost their homes to foreclosure.^{9,10} In 2008, 6,583 properties in Rhode Island were filed for foreclosure, up from 1,838 in 2007.^{11,12}

Children under Age 13 Living in Shelters, Rhode Island 1999 – 2008



Source: Rhode Island Emergency Shelter Information Project 1999 – 2008. *Data were not available for 2006 due to data system issues.

◆ In Rhode Island, 1,506 children under age 13 received emergency housing at homeless shelters and domestic violence shelters in 2008. Of these children, 895 (59%) were under the age of six.¹³

Supporting Homeless Children in Schools

◆ The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act requires that state and local educational agencies support homeless students by allowing them to enroll in school even if they lack required documents (such as birth certificates or immunization records), allowing them to remain in their “home” school district, and providing transportation when needed.¹⁴

◆ School districts across the U.S. are reporting increases in the number of homeless children in the classroom.¹⁵ Schools can support homeless families by ensuring that families and staff are aware of students’ rights under the McKinney-Vento Act, developing relationships with community agencies serving homeless families, and helping children get food, clothing, school supplies, and other supports they need to succeed in school.¹⁶

References for Homeless Children

^{1,3,4} National Center on Family Homelessness. (2008). *The characteristics and needs of families experiencing homelessness*. Retrieved February 15, 2009 from www.familyhomelessness.org

² *Hunger and homelessness survey: A status report on hunger and homelessness in America's cities*. (2008). Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Mayors.

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