



Children suffer in economic downturn



BY STEPHANIE GELLER
RI KIDS COUNT

The number of homeless families in Rhode Island is on the rise. Last year, 953 families, including 1,770 children, found shelter at one of Rhode Island's emergency or domestic violence shelters. For many of these children, this was not their first experience with homelessness.

Homelessness disrupts children's lives in ways that affect their health, development, and emotional well-being. Homeless children are more than twice as likely to go hungry as other children and more likely to experience illnesses like stomach problems, ear infections, and asthma. They are also more likely to experience delays in development and do poorly in school. In fact, fewer than a quarter of homeless children finish high school. Homeless children also experience higher rates of anxiety, depression, and withdrawal than other children and are more likely to exhibit delinquent or aggressive behaviors.

Rhode Island is experiencing a perfect storm that is likely to lead to an increase in the number of families and children experiencing homelessness. More Rhode Islanders are unemployed or underemployed, and it is becoming more difficult for families to find and keep affordable housing due to increasing rents and the large number of families who have lost their homes due to foreclosure. To make matters worse, Rhode Island's safety net for poor families (RI Works) is weaker than ever before. Last year, more than 1,500 families lost their cash assistance, mostly due to a policy change that eliminated children's entitlement to cash assistance, and by the end of June, 3,000 more families will likely lose their cash assistance, this time due to new, stricter time limits.

Not one Rhode Island child should be homeless. Every child needs the stability of safe, affordable housing where they can grow, play and learn. Policy makers, community leaders, schools, and shelter providers all have a role to play in ending this tragedy. What Rhode Island needs is more affordable housing, a stronger safety net for families struggling in this difficult economy, and a range of supports to help families avoid homelessness and minimize the harm to children.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is a children's policy organization that provides information on child well-being, stimulates dialogue on children's issues, and promotes accountability and action. For more information, visit www.rikidscount.org.