

## Family Homelessness in the United States

1.6 million American children, or one in 45 children, are experiencing homelessness in a year. As of 2012, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, families have come to represent 38 percent of the homeless population nationally (The National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009).

*Children experiencing homelessness are America's Youngest Outcasts. They have gradually become a prominent part of a Third World that is emerging within our own nation. Despite their growing numbers, homeless children are invisible to most of us; they have no voice and no constituency. Without a bed to call their own, these children have lost safety, privacy, and the comforts of home as well as their friends, possessions, pets, reassuring routines, and communities. These losses combine to create a life-altering experience that inflicts profound and lasting scars. (The National Center on Family Homelessness, 2011)*

Families move often; within a single year, 97 percent of homeless children move up to three times (The National Center on Family Homelessness, 1999). An estimated 40 percent attend two different schools in a year, and 28 percent attend three or more different schools (The National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009).

## The Traumatic Stress of Homelessness

Many homeless individuals have experienced childhood abuse and neglect, as well as the stresses associated with poverty and the loss of their home, safety, and sense of security. Traumatic stresses are cumulative and increase the risk of developing health, behavioral, and social problems as adults. These experiences affect how children think, feel and behave, and can have long-term effects on their ability to form sustaining, supportive adult relationships (The National Center on Family Homelessness, 2011).

Homelessness hurts children in many ways:

- **Brain Development:** 54 percent of preschoolers experiencing homelessness have major developmental delays (e.g. language, gross motor, fine motor, social). Homeless children also have three times the rate of emotional and behavioral problems and are twice as likely to have learning disabilities (Child Trends, 2012).
- **Stress:** children growing up in very poor families experience levels of "toxic stress" that triggers a flood of cortisol in the brain's hippocampus which subsequently impairs language development and memory (University of Michigan, 2011)
- **Parenting** Given the tremendous challenges faced by homeless parents, young homeless children may experience less positive interaction with adults (The National Center on Family Homelessness, 2011).
- **School Readiness** Homeless children are eight times more likely to be asked to repeat a grade, three times as likely to be placed in special education classes, and twice as likely to score lower on standardized tests. Youth experiencing homelessness are sixteen percent less proficient in reading and math than their peers (The National Center on Family Homelessness, 2011).
- **Health and Well-being** Children with a homeless episode experienced higher rates of physical disabilities than other low-income children who were stably housed and go hungry at twice the rate of other children. (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2011)

