

# Children Pay the Price for Homelessness

Family homelessness remains a deeply troubling and persistent challenge both locally and nationally. From 1991–2006 the number of homeless families with children in Minnesota more than tripled.<sup>1</sup> New housing development, a softer market, and concentrated efforts to end long term homelessness moderated the problem in the early part of this decade, but the recent economic crisis is once again leading to an increase in family homelessness.

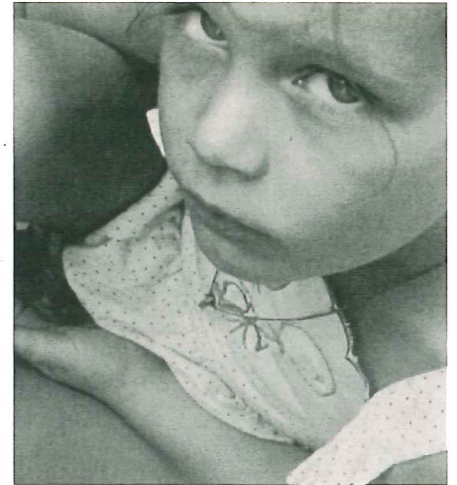
The causes of homelessness are complex and include, among others: the inability to find housing that is affordable; declining wages; foreclosures; public assistance time limits; crises such as job loss, illness, family violence, or divorce; discrimination; and chronic conditions such as chemical dependency or mental illness. The result, however, is

painfully simple—every year thousands of Minnesota children and their parents spend time in homeless shelters and other emergency housing because they have no permanent place to live.

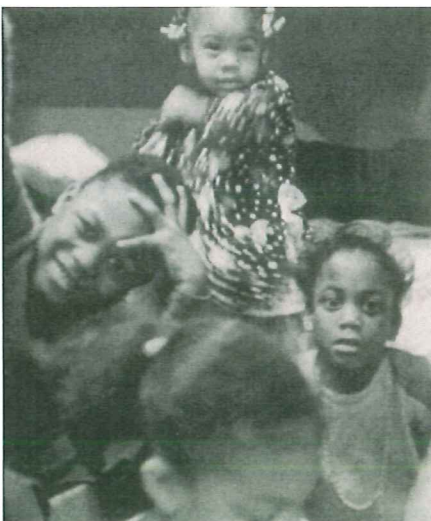
## Homelessness Among Children Remains High

Homelessness among people of all ages has risen sharply in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. From 1991 to 2006, the number of people homeless or living in metro-area temporary housing, such as emergency shelters and transitional housing, went from 2,319 to 5,374.

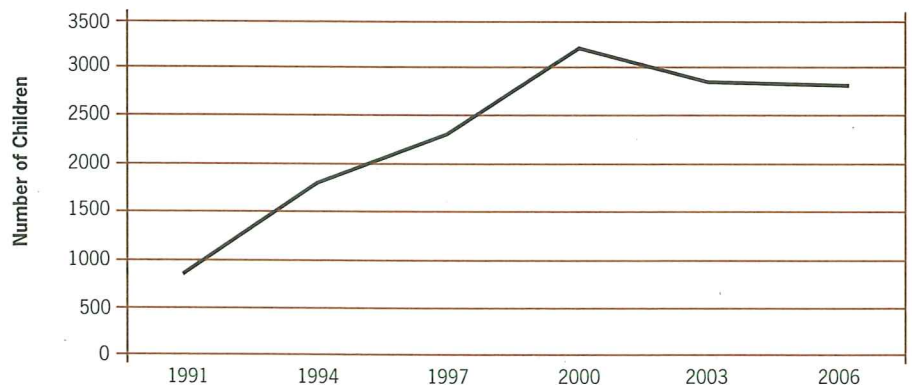
The sheer increase in homelessness does not tell the whole story, however. More than ever before, a homeless person is likely to be a child. According to the most recent Wilder Foundation survey, the number of metro-area home-



less children living with their parents increased from 680 in 1991 to 2,011 in 2006—a 200 percent increase. Nearly 40 percent of the total homeless population is children. Of these children, nearly 85 percent are 12 years old or younger. *Half are five or younger.* Another 1,951 children throughout the state have been separated from their homeless parents.<sup>2</sup>



One-Night Count of Homeless Children in Minnesota



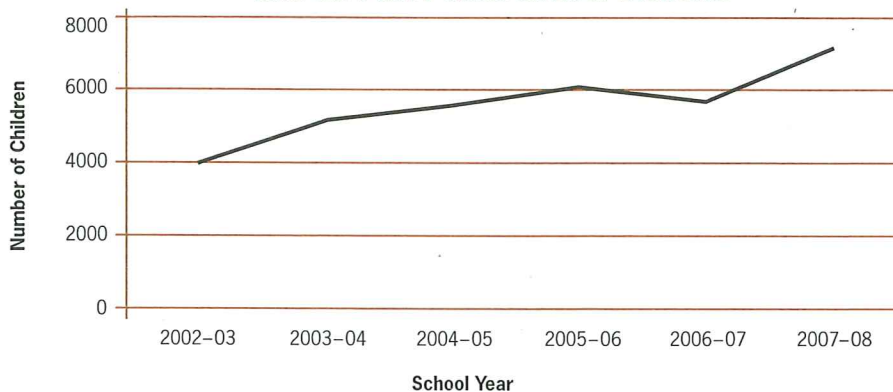
From 1991 to 2006, the number of children in shelters on a single night increased 200%.

"Think of a homeless person. Maybe you are picturing a lone man lying on a park bench...try again. Only this time, picture a sick, frightened, hungry child with no place to call home. As we move into the 21st century, this cruel vision is the new face of homelessness."

—Alvin F. Poussaint, M.D., National Advisory Board Chair, National Center on Family Homelessness



### Homeless Children in the Minneapolis and St. Paul Public School Districts



Homelessness in the central city public schools has increased 80% in the past five years.

#### Homelessness Affects Children's Health

Compared to children with homes, homeless children have:

- Two times the rate of respiratory infections
- Two times the rate of tuberculosis
- Six times the risk of stunted growth
- Seven times the risk of anemia

#### Homelessness Affects Children's Development

Compared to those with homes, homeless children have:

- Four times the rate of developmental delays
- Two times the rate of learning disabilities
- Three times the rate of emotional and behavioral problems

The rise in family homelessness is also affecting local school systems. There are now more than 7,000 homeless children in the Minneapolis and St. Paul public schools, a 23% increase in the last year alone.<sup>3</sup>

The sharp increase in homelessness among children and families is straining public and private agencies' ability to provide emergency shelter to all who need it. And homelessness influences every facet of a child's life, from conception to adulthood. Homeless children are not simply at risk; most suffer specific physical, psychological, and emotional damage due to the circumstances that accompany episodes of homelessness.

#### Homelessness Affects Children's Health and Development

Studies of the effects of homelessness on children's health and development show:

##### Homelessness harms children's physical health.

Homeless children are more likely than housed children to suffer from chronic illnesses such as cardiac disease, neurological disorders, and asthma. Homeless children are also at high risk of infectious disease, such as respiratory infections and tuberculosis. Poor nutrition contributes to homeless children's health problems. Homeless children are six times more likely than others to have stunted growth and seven times more likely to be anemic.

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*"We CAN make a difference! Children who overcome adversity have more protective factors in their lives. Supportive housing programs promote resilience by nurturing security, relationships, opportunities and hope for children and families."*

*—Ann Masten, Ph.D., Director of the Institute of Child Development, University of Minnesota*

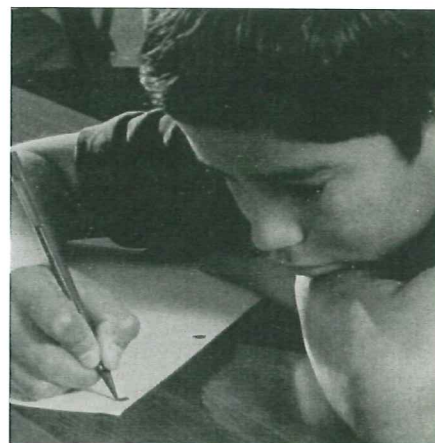
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### **Homelessness interferes with children's development.**

Most homeless preschoolers experience a major developmental delay, such as delayed speech. Older homeless children experience four times the rate of developmental delays, twice the rate of learning disabilities, and three times the rate of emotional and behavioral problems as housed children.

### **Homelessness prevents children from performing well in school.**

In addition to their developmental problems, homeless children experience frequent moves that make it hard for them to keep up in school. Almost half of homeless children attend two different schools in one year. As a result, three-quarters of homeless children perform below grade level in reading, and more than half perform below grade level in math.<sup>4</sup>



## **More Supportive Housing Needed to Serve Homeless Families**

The severe shortage of affordable housing that developed through the 1990s contributed significantly to the dramatic increase in homelessness. Even though nearly a third of homeless parents are working, wages are typically low and it is often difficult find affordable housing.

However, 61 percent of homeless parents suffer from chronic physical and mental illness and/or substance abuse disorders.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, the primary response to the problem of family homelessness is the development of a comprehensive system of supportive housing. Supportive housing combines affordable housing with a wide range of programs and services for homeless families such as job training, child care, transportation, and chemical and mental health support. It strengthens the ability of parents to nurture, care for, and support the healthy development of their children.

A strong push to provide more decent, safe affordable housing, both supportive and not, is needed. Without these resources, children will continue to pay the price for homelessness.

### **Homelessness Affects Children's School Performance**

- 41% of homeless children attend two or more schools in one year
- 28% attend three or more schools in one year
- 75% of homeless children test below grade level in reading
- 54% of homeless children test below grade level in math

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*"The competition for a home is like a game of musical chairs. The music stops, and someone is left standing because there are more players than empty chairs. The people left standing in the housing game are those with the fewest financial and social resources...often poor women and their young children, who live on the edge of economic disaster."*

*—Ellen Bassuk, M.D., President, National Center on Family Homelessness*

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**Notes:**

1. Wilder Research Center, *Overview of Homelessness in Minnesota in 2006: Key facts from the statewide survey*, April 2007.
2. Ibid.
3. Minneapolis and St. Paul School District Title I Homeless Program data.
4. National Center on Family Homelessness, *Homeless Children: America's New Outcasts*, 1999; Housing America, *There's No Place Like Home: How America's Housing Crisis Threatens Our Children*, 1999; Family Housing Fund, *Homelessness and Its Effects on Children*, 1999.
5. Wilder Research Center, *Homeless in Minnesota: A Closer Look—Families and Children*, June 2004.

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**For More Information:**

Family Housing Fund, *Homelessness and Its Effects on Children*, 1999.  
Available from Family Housing Fund, 612-375-9644, [www.fhfund.org](http://www.fhfund.org).

Housing America and Doc4Kids Project, *There's No Place Like Home: How America's Housing Crisis Threatens Our Children*, 1999.

Available from Housing America: 415-771-9850, [www.housingamerica.net](http://www.housingamerica.net).

National Center on Family Homelessness, *America's New Outcasts: Homeless Children*, 1999. Available from National Center on Family Homelessness, 617-964-3834, [www.familyhomelessness.org](http://www.familyhomelessness.org).

Wilder Research Center, 651-647-4600, [www.wilder.org/research](http://www.wilder.org/research).

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**Photos:**

Page 1. (top) Laurel Cazin, *Girl with Gummies* (detail), 2000

Page 1. (bottom) Laura Crosby, *A Metro Shelter* (detail), 2000

The photos listed above are a part of the Fund's "Home Sweet Home" Exhibit.  
All other photos are purchased stock photography.

*This publication is part of a Public Education Initiative on affordable housing sponsored by the Family Housing Fund.*

*The Family Housing Fund is a private, nonprofit organization whose mission is to preserve and expand quality affordable housing for low- and moderate-income families in the seven-county metropolitan area of Minneapolis and Saint Paul. The Public Education Initiative provides information on a variety of issues related to affordable housing in the Twin Cities area.*

*For more information about the Family Housing Fund and/or the Public Education Initiative and other publications available in this series, please visit [www.fhfund.org](http://www.fhfund.org).*



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