Family homelessness continues to be one of the most misunderstood and inadequately addressed public policy issues in America today. One reason is the scarcity of quantitative data available on the subject. In response, Columbia University’s Graduate School of International & Public Affairs and the Institute for Children & Poverty designed and implemented an extensive survey on the demographics of homeless families in the New York City region. Data on more than 140 variables was collected from 743 homeless heads-of-household during the spring of 1997. The parents who were interviewed resided in fourteen emergency and transitional family shelters located throughout New York City and northern New Jersey. The following report summarizes the key elements of this research.

Today’s typical homeless parent . . .

- is a young unmarried mother with two or three young children, who grew up in poverty;
- experienced or witnessed domestic violence at some point in her life;
- never completed high school, often dropping out because of pregnancy;
- has at least one child suffering from a chronic health problem;
- lived with parents, with a partner, or doubled-up prior to becoming homeless;
- left her last residence because of overcrowding, a disagreement or domestic violence;
- is unemployed due to a lack of child care, a lack of work skills or an inability to find a job; and
- is entirely dependent on public assistance to support herself and her family.

by all accounts, she represents a new American poverty.

While these findings illustrate the complexity of family homelessness, the multiple issues surrounding this new poverty must be individually examined and addressed before an effective response can be initiated. A critical first step is collection of primary data. The most crucial steps, however, have yet to be taken: policy makers and the general public must first take notice of the hundreds of thousands of families across the nation who are homeless and then pursue effective strategies to break the cycle of poverty and homelessness.
The majority of homeless parents grew up in families that received public assistance, most commonly welfare and food stamps.

**Figure 1: Homeless Parents’ Public Assistance History as Children**

- Welfare Payment: 46%
- Food Stamps: 40%
- Housing Assistance: 21%
- WIC: 8%

*Respondents could receive multiple types of public assistance; all percentages do not add to 100.
† Includes residence in foster care, a group home or other institutional setting.
‡ Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children
N = 736

Fifty-seven percent of homeless parents resided in potentially unstable living situations associated with poverty before their eighteenth birthday. More than one in five lived doubled- or tripled-up and twelve percent even experienced homelessness as children.

**Figure 2: Homeless Parents’ Residential Histories as Children**

- Public Housing: 33%
- Doubled- or Tripled-Up: 22%
- Institutional Setting: 13%
- Homeless: 12%

*Respondents could give multiple responses; all percentages do not add to 100.
† Includes residence in homeless shelters, welfare hotels, abandoned buildings or on the street.
‡ Includes residence in foster care, a group home or other institutional setting.
N = 722

The majority of parents who are homeless today lived in poverty as children: more than half (53%) grew up in families that received some type of public assistance—most frequently Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC, now TANF) and/or food stamps. (See Figure 1) Conversely, almost half of homeless parents did not grow up on public aid, but in working, self-sufficient families. These findings imply that while half of homeless parents are perpetuating a cycle of poverty, the other half have been “notched down” from more stable circumstances.

The poverty today’s parents experienced as children is also apparent in their residential histories. Fifty-seven percent of parents resided in potentially unstable or tenuous living situations before their eighteenth birthday. (See Figure 2) Forty-eight percent spent time in public housing and/or doubled-up living arrangements. Thirteen percent had been institutionalized within the foster care system, a group home or other institutional facility, and twelve percent were even introduced to homelessness as children, spending time in homeless shelters, welfare hotels, abandoned buildings or on the street.

When asked about violence, forty-five percent of parents reported that they had experienced or witnessed family violence in their households as children or adults. However, such experiences appear to be under-reported here since in-depth studies on domestic violence among homeless families have found that at least eighty percent experienced family violence at some point in their lives. Of those respondents who said that they had encountered family violence, sixty-six percent identified themselves as the victims of physical violence, including assault with a weapon and sexual abuse. The most frequently reported forms of violence were emotional abuse and physical abuse; thirty-six percent reported witnessing or experiencing constant criticism, insults, humiliation or embarrassment, and thirty-two percent said they had been or had seen someone else in their household be slapped, hit, kicked or punched. (See Figure 3) In addition, many homeless parents experienced or witnessed an assault with a weapon (17%) or sexual abuse (13%) in their household.

**Childhood**

The majority of homeless parents grew up in families that received some type of public assistance—most frequently Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC, now TANF) and/or food stamps. (See Figure 1) Conversely, almost half of homeless parents did not grow up on public aid, but in working, self-sufficient families. These findings imply that while half of homeless parents are perpetuating a cycle of poverty, the other half have been “notched down” from more stable circumstances.

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Fifty-nine percent of homeless parents interviewed reported that they had never graduated from high school or earned a General Equivalency Diploma (GED). (See Table 1) For those who did not finish high school, the most common reason cited for having left school was a pregnancy (33%), followed by dislike of school (23%). (See Figure 4)

Respondents who did not finish high school were more likely than other homeless parents to have lived in public housing, doubled-up, in an institutional setting or to have been homeless before they were eighteen. (See Figure 5) Sixty-five percent of homeless parents who did not finish high school resided in at least one of the above living arrangements as children, compared to forty-six percent of those who had earned a high school diploma or GED. That is, children residing in public housing, institutional settings or crowded living quarters were nearly one-and-a-half times more likely to drop out of high school.

More than nine out of ten homeless parents were unemployed at the time of their interview. (See Table 1) While eighty percent of the unemployed heads-of-household had held a job sometime in the past, the typical homeless parent had been unemployed for at least twelve months. (See Figure 6) Not surprisingly, parents who had never finished high school were less likely to have work experience than those with diplomas. Twenty-five percent of homeless parents who did not complete high school had never worked, compared to thirteen percent of those who did finish school.

Lack of appropriate, affordable child care was cited by one in three (33%) homeless parents as the reason for their current unemployment. (See Figure 7) Additional analysis of the data also suggests that parents face a lack of steady jobs for which they are qualified and that pay a living wage. More than one in four parents (28%) were unable to find jobs or were not qualified for the jobs for which they applied. Among those who had previously
Homeless Family Demographics across the New York City Region: Research Note No. 1

The reasons most frequently cited by homeless parents for not working are a lack of child care and an inability to find appropriate employment.

Figure 7: Homeless Parents’ Reasons for Current Unemployment*

- Lack of Child Care: 33%
- Illness, Disability, or Substance Abuse: 11%
- Can’t Find Job/Not Qualified for Job: 27%

Percentage of Respondents

*Respondents could give multiple answers; all percentages do not add to 100.

N = 679

The vast majority of homeless parents rely on public assistance—such as welfare, food stamps, and WIC—to support their families. For three out of four, public assistance is the only source of income.

Figure 9: Homeless Families’ Sources of Income*

- Public Assistance: 90%
- Child Support: 9%
- Work: 7%
- Gifts: 3%

*Respondents could name multiple income sources; all percentages do not add to 100.
†May include money, goods or services from family, friends or partners.

N = 739

The reasons most frequently cited by homeless parents for not working are a lack of child care and an inability to find appropriate employment.

Figure 8: Homeless Parents’ Reasons for Leaving Last Job**

- Lost Job (Terminated or Laid Off): 32%
- Physical (Illness, Disability, Substance Abuse, Pregnancy): 24%
- Financial (Low Pay, Lack of Child Care or Transportation): 26%

Percentage of Respondents

*Respondents could give multiple answers; all percentages do not add to 100.
†The remaining categories—not wanting to work and lack of transportation—were each cited by fewer than 3% of the respondents. 32% cited other unspecified reasons for leaving their last job.

N = 531

The vast majority of homeless parents rely on public assistance—such as welfare, food stamps, and WIC—to support their families. For three out of four, public assistance is the only source of income.

Figure 10: Homeless Families’ Previous Living Situation*

- In own apartment/house: 45%
- Doubled- or tripled-up: 29%
- With spouse/partner: 7%
- With parent(s): 15%

*Includes only those respondents who did not come to their current shelter directly from another shelter. An additional 4% lived in other unspecified situations.

N = 620

Ninety-four percent of all homeless families receive public assistance. (See Figure 9) For seventy-five percent, welfare payments and other forms of public assistance are their only formal source of income. It is interesting to note that although all of the individuals interviewed had children and almost all were single women, only six percent received child support payments.

Housing

The typical homeless family has been residing in its current shelter for an average of six months. Of the eighty-two percent of homeless families who came to the shelter from permanent housing, fewer than half (45%) came directly from their own apartment or house. Twenty-nine percent had been living doubled- or tripled-up with friends or family members prior to entering the shelter system, while an additional twenty-two percent had been living with their parents, or a spouse or partner. (See Figure 10)
Domestic issues—overcrowding, disagreements or domestic violence—forced forty-three percent of respondents from their last residence. (See Figure 11) Although only six percent of the heads-of-household cited domestic violence as their primary reason for leaving, the response “disagreements” with the people they were living with may point to unrecognized or unreported instances of violence as well. Those who lived doubled-up, with their parents or with a spouse or partner reported such issues of crowded living quarters and household violence more frequently than did those who had their own home.

Twenty-one percent of homeless families left their last residence because it was substandard or had been destroyed by a fire or other disaster. Fifteen percent left because they could not afford the rent. Both of these explanations were much more frequent among those who came from their own apartment or house (thirty-eight percent because of physical problems; twenty-six percent for economic reasons) than among the general population.

**Family Health**

The final area of investigation in this study found that homeless children suffer from a lack of consistent, preventive health care. Rather than visit a family physician, forty-three percent of homeless parents reported taking their family to the Emergency Room or calling 911 for medical care. (See Figure 12) This finding is particularly interesting in light of the fact that homeless children, whose intense poverty almost always qualifies them for Medicaid, are actually more likely to have health insurance than children in the general population. While thirteen percent of children nationwide are not covered by health insurance, only five percent of the homeless families surveyed had no children with health insurance.

Despite this greater rate of health coverage, homeless children are much more likely to suffer from respiratory ailments than children generally. (See Table 2) Forty-two percent of the homeless parents interviewed had at least one child with asthma or other respiratory problems, a rate that is at least twice the national average. Worse yet, fifty-four percent of homeless children suffer from some chronic health condition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Health Problems Among Homeless Children vs. Children Nationally*</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of Illness</td>
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<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asthma/Respiratory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ulcers/Gastrointestinal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epilepsy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diabetes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuberculosis</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* An additional 24 respondents (not represented in this chart) find medical help elsewhere or seek none at all. N = 716

While not all ailments commonly associated with poverty occur more frequently among children in homeless families than among children in the general population, one difference stands out: homeless children are more than twice as likely to suffer from asthma or other respiratory problems as other children.
The Future

The portrait that emerges here is a somber snapshot of the over 600,000 families living doubled-up or in homeless shelters across the United States today. It highlights the tremendous obstacles that impede America’s poorest families who are dependent on public support for day to day survival in their move toward employment and stability.

This is not simply a status report on homeless families today, but also a barometer of the storm of homelessness likely to sweep the country tomorrow. This portrait is a warning call to those charged with reforming welfare policies: after early successes in moving welfare recipients to work, their task will grow far more difficult and their stories of success far more rare. In fact, while these numbers represent families who are homeless today, they also represent the hundreds of thousands of families likely to be homeless tomorrow if the public safety net unravels too far.

This regional snapshot, while critical to envisioning the challenge that lies ahead, is only the first step in avoiding future crisis. Research on the face of family homelessness in regions from across the country must follow. The need for universities, research institutes and service providers to work together to gather such information has never been greater. Through such initiatives we can understand the depth of the problem of family poverty and homelessness and finally achieve effective solutions.

Also Available from the Institute for Children and Poverty:

Reports (free of charge):
- Day to Day... Parent to Child: The Future of Violence Among Homeless Children in America (January 1998)
- A Trail of Tears... Trapped in a Cycle of Violence and Homelessness (January 1998)
- Homelessness: The Foster Care Connection (April 1997)
- For Whom the Bell Tolls: The Institutionalization of Homeless Families in America (March 1997)
- Common Sense: Why Jobs and Training Alone Won’t End Welfare for Homeless Families (September 1996)
- The Dollars and Sense of Welfare: Why Work Alone Won’t Work (September 1996)
- The Age of Confusion: Why Teens are Getting Pregnant, Turning to Welfare and Ending Up Homeless (April 1996)
- An American Family Myth: Every Child At Risk (January 1995)

The New Poverty: Homeless Families in America
A book by ICP President Ralph Nunez. 1996. To order, contact the Institute or Insight Bookshelf Plenum Publishing at 1-800-221-9389.

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Notes

1. “Doubled-up” is here defined as residence in an apartment or house shared with friends or family members, often in overcrowded quarters.
3. The “notched down” generation refers to children of the working poor who were notched down into welfare dependence and homelessness by changes in the economy during the 1980s. For in-depth discussion, see R. Nunez, “Family Values Among Homeless Families,” Journal of the American Public Welfare Association 51 (1995).