

Child Homelessness – There is No Place like Home

“There is no place like home.” – L. Frank Baum, *“The Wonderful Wizard of Oz.”* Perhaps you’ve heard this saying as a child while watching the “Wizard of Oz” movie. These words have never been truer for a child who is homeless. Homeless youth, sometimes referred to as “unaccompanied” youth, are individuals under the age of 18 who lack parental, foster, or institutional care.

- Between 1.6 and 2.8 million youth runaway and/or are homeless in a year.
- 5% to 7% of American youth become homeless in any given year.
- Unaccompanied youth account for 1% of the urban homeless population.
- Youth ages 12 to 17 are more at risk of homelessness than adults.
- Homeless youth are evenly male-female, although females are more likely to seek help through shelters and hotlines.
- Between 6 and 22% of homeless girls are estimated to be pregnant.
- 46% of runaway and homeless youth reported being physically abused; 38% reported being emotionally abused; 1.7% reported being forced into unwanted sexual activity by a family or household member.
- 75% of homeless or runaway youth have dropped out or will drop out of school.
- Between 20% and 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBT.⁷

In 2013 there were 591 unaccompanied children who received homeless services in Wisconsin. Unaccompanied children constitute 2% of Wisconsin’s total homeless population of 27,556 and 7% of all homeless children in Wisconsin. Because there are few shelter options available for unaccompanied youth, it is likely this population is undercounted. Families make up a significant portion of those experiencing homelessness in Wisconsin, and children account for 29% of all homeless persons. In Couleecap’s Continuum of Care (CoC) service area of Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe, and Vernon counties, children made up the smallest portion of the total homeless clients served at 20%.⁶

Locally, the La Crosse Salvation Army Emergency Shelter reports on January 16, 2015 they served ten children in shelter, all there with families (four separate families). Of these children/families, none are local to La Crosse but have either been in La Crosse (to include the Salvation Army shelter) in the past or have been living in the La Crosse area for the last year before coming into shelter. One family (three children) has been in shelter for two months. Two families (six children) have been in shelter for just under one month, and the last family (one child) has been in shelter for one week. In 2014, the Salvation Army provided shelter to 892 people, of which 250 were children (28%).

Over 500,000 young people experience homelessness every year in the United States. Despite that, there are only 4,000 youth shelter beds across the country. That means the majority of homeless youth are forced to struggle for survival on the streets. **Currently, there is only one bed available for every 125 young people living without a home.** The National Campaign for Youth Shelter fights for a federal commitment to provide immediate access to safe shelter for all young people under age 24, beginning with an immediate addition of 22,000 shelter beds and services. They’re also pushing for a more accurate count of the number of homeless youth to make sure enough shelter beds are available for homeless youth over the next decade.⁵

Based on a calculation using the most recent U.S. Department of Education’s count of homeless children in U.S. public schools and on 2013 U.S. Census data:

- 2,483,539 children experienced homelessness in the U.S. in 2013.
- This represents one in every 30 children in the U.S.¹

Locally, the number of school districts with homeless students for the 2010-2013 school years, with 3 year totals and averages as of 12/8/2013 are as follows:³

District Name	2012-13	2011-12	2010-11	3 Year Total	3 Year Average
Bangor	0	3	4	7	2
Cashton	0	1	2	3	1
De Soto Area	10	7	3	20	7
Hillsboro	4	0	0	4	1
Holmen	30	18	10	58	19
Kickapoo Area	2	4	0	6	2
La Crosse	163	146	174	483	161
La Farge	1	2	1	4	1
North Crawford	0	2	0	2	1
Norwalk-Ontario-Wilton	0	2	0	2	1
Onalaska	17	14	11	42	14
Prairie du Chien Area	18	28	21	67	22
Seneca	4	5	2	11	4
Sparta Area	69	64	71	204	68
Tomah Area	136	139	107	382	127
Viroqua Area	16	21	17	54	18
Wauzeka-Steuben	0	4	2	6	2
West Salem	28	12	8	48	16
Westby Area	7	0	0	7	2

Point-In-Time Survey

Twice a year a Point-In-Time survey is conducted to collect an unduplicated count of people experiencing homelessness during a designated one-night period. This count includes persons that are homeless and living in emergency shelters, transitional housing, safe havens for the homeless, domestic violence shelters, or who are unsheltered living on the street or any other place not meant for human habitation. The survey conducted on July 30, 2014 with various agencies in Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe, and Vernon counties concluded there were a total of 115 persons under age 18 counted on this date. This figure includes 37 children in emergency shelter, 58 in transitional housing, 12 in permanent supportive housing, and eight in a tenant based rental assistance program.²

America’s Youngest Outcasts reports on child homelessness in the United States based on the most recent federal data that comprehensively counts homeless children, using more than 30 variables from over a dozen established data sets.

Each state is assigned a rank of 1 (best) to 50 (worst) based on a state composite score that reflects each state’s overall performance across four domains listed below. The state of Wisconsin composite score is:

- 1) Extent of Child Homelessness (adjusted for state population) = Wisconsin ranks 23
- 2) Child Well-Being = Wisconsin ranks 10
- 3) Risk for Child Homelessness = Wisconsin ranks 8
- 4) State Policy and Planning Efforts = Wisconsin ranks 37. As of 2013, no statewide planning efforts had taken place in Wisconsin.¹

Causes of Child Homelessness

Major causes of homelessness for children in the U.S. include: 1) the nation’s high poverty rate; 2) lack of affordable housing; 3) continuing impacts of the Great Recession; 4) racial disparities; 5) the challenges of single parenting;

and, 6) the ways in which traumatic experiences, especially domestic violence, precede and prolong homelessness for children and families.¹

According to the National Campaign for Youth Shelter, many homeless young people have fled abusive situations, aged-out of the foster care system with no resources, or been rejected by their families because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. In fact, as many as 40% of the nation's homeless youth are LGBT, even though only 5% of the overall youth population in the U.S. is LGBT.⁵

Impacts of Homelessness on Children

Research shows that homeless children are hungry and sick more often. They wonder if they will have a roof over their heads at night and what will happen to their families. Many homeless children struggle in school, missing days, repeating grades, and drop out entirely. Up to 25% of homeless pre-school children have mental health problems requiring clinical evaluation; this increases to 40% among homeless school-age children.¹ Every time a child has to change schools, his or her education is disrupted. According to the Institute for Children and Poverty, homeless children are nine times more likely to repeat a grade, four times more likely to drop out of school, and three times more likely to be placed in special education than their housed peers.⁴

The impacts of homelessness on the children, especially young children, may lead to changes in brain architecture that can interfere with learning, emotional self-regulation, cognitive skills, and social relationships. The unrelenting stress experienced by the parents may contribute to residential instability, unemployment, ineffective parenting, and poor health.¹

Effective Responses to Child Homelessness

The solution to child homelessness starts with agreeing as a nation that children living doubled-up in basements and attics with relatives and friends are homeless and need our help. Effective responses to child homelessness must include:

- Safe, affordable housing.
- Comprehensive needs assessment of all family members.
- Family-oriented services that incorporate trauma-informed care.
- Identification, prevention, and treatment of major depression in mothers.
- Parenting supports for mothers.
- Education and employment opportunities for parents.
- Further research to identify evidence-based programs and services for children and families.¹

Homeless youth benefit from programs that meet immediate needs first, and then help them address other aspects of their lives. Educational outreach programs, assistance in locating job training and employment, transitional living programs, and health care especially designed for, and directed at, homeless youth are also needed.

Homeless youth would benefit from many of the same measures that are needed to fight poverty and homelessness in the adult population, including the provision of affordable housing and employment that pays a living wage. In addition to these basic supports, the child welfare system must make every effort to prevent children from ending up on the streets.⁷

Couleecap, Inc. is a private non-profit 501(c)3 charitable organization created in 1966. Our mission is to fight poverty and promote self-sufficiency, economic development, and social justice.

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References:

¹ America's Youngest Outcasts <http://www.homelesschildrenamerica.org>

² Continuum of Care, Point-In-Time Survey, Data from July 30, 2014

³ Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) Data <http://homelessdpi.wi.gov/>

⁴ Institute for Children and Poverty. (2008). "National Data on Family Homelessness." <http://www.icphusa.org/index.asp?CID=7>

⁵ National Campaign for Youth Shelter <http://nationalhomeless.org/campaigns/national-campaign-youth-shelter/>

⁶ The State of Homelessness in Wisconsin <http://icalliances.org/wisconsin/data-and-reports/>

⁷ Youth Homelessness <http://nationalhomeless.org/issues/youth/>

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