

# EXAMINATION OF RESIDENTIAL INSTABILITY AND HOMELESSNESS AMONG YOUNG CHILDREN



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A REPORT FROM THE INSTITUTE FOR CHILDREN AND POVERTY

For most homeless children, the experience of homelessness is part of a longer period of residential instability comprised of frequent moves and doubling up with others.<sup>1</sup>

Research shows that such instability can have detrimental effects on a child's development. Instability in housing while more prevalent than homelessness among children living in poverty, may lead to many of the same developmental and social outcomes for these children.

In 2007, 13.3 million children lived in poverty, which represents 18% of all American children under age 18.<sup>2</sup> Almost one-third of these children lived in deep poverty, with family incomes that are less than half the poverty line. Children residing in low-income households are more likely to change residences than those residing in higher-income households, with rates ranging from 4% to 16%. Approximately 25% to 50% of families receiving public assistance fall behind on their housing costs.<sup>3</sup> In 2002, 6.5% of all children and 10.1% of low-income children had been living in their current homes for less than six months.<sup>4</sup>

The experience of homelessness, while rare for all children, is a reality that one in every 50 children face in the United States.<sup>5</sup> Between one-third and one-half of all homeless individuals in 2007 were members of families with children, with more than half of sheltered children being under the age of six.<sup>6</sup> Homeless families with children represent 41% of homeless households, and they are the fastest growing segment of the homeless population.<sup>7</sup>

This report aims to understand the prevalence of homelessness and residential instability among a nationally representative group of children around age five. Empirical literature suggests that residential instability is a key factor in reducing the educational success of low-income children because frequent moves often include school transitions that may result in lower academic performance including high school completion. Likewise, residential instability compromises the school readiness skills of very young children who have just begun or not yet entered school. These early effects, which will likely accumulate

as the child grows older, make clear the importance of understanding the homelessness and residential mobility among young children.

## OVER 50% OF CHILDREN WHO EXPERIENCED HOMELESSNESS BY AGE FIVE MOVED MORE THAN THREE TIMES DURING THAT PERIOD

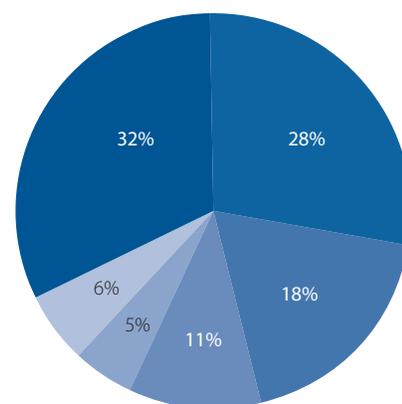
Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a nationally representative sample of approximately 5,000 births between 1998 and 2000 in 20 large United States cities, this analysis sheds light on these children's experiences with homelessness. In the dataset, mothers (and some fathers) are interviewed at the child's birth and again when the child is one, three, and five years old.<sup>8</sup> This report uses mothers' responses from the baseline, one-year, three-year, and five-year follow-up surveys. Sample weights are used to ensure that the descriptive statistics are representative of the population.

### Housing Instability and Homelessness

One key indicator of residential instability is the overall number of moves made by a family. Existing research suggests that frequent moves during early childhood (three or more transitions) create significant challenges for young children.<sup>9</sup> In the Fragile Families data, between the child's birth and the five-year survey, 32% of families did not move

**Figure 1**  
NUMBER OF LIFETIME MOVES AMONG FIVE-YEAR-OLD CHILDREN

■ None ■ 1 ■ 2 ■ 3 ■ 4 ■ 5+

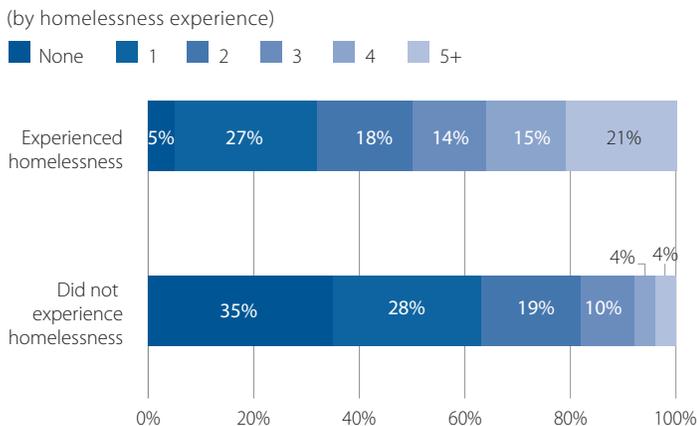


at all. However, the remaining 68% moved with quite a bit of variability (see Figure 1). Among those who moved, families changed residences on average 2.3 times in the first five years of the child’s life.

Yet, the number of times a family moved may not tell the entire story of a family’s residential situation. For example, the frequency with which a family moves does not indicate whether or not that family experienced homelessness. In each survey wave (year 1, year 3, and year 5), however, mothers indicate where they currently live, and if at any time in the past year they stayed in shelter, car, abandoned building, or other place not meant for regular housing. This report classified families as having experienced homelessness if either (1) the mother indicated that her current living arrangement was homeless, in temporary housing, or in a motel or (2) she stayed in one of the aforementioned places in the past year. Among these five-year old children, 8% already experienced homelessness at some point in their lives.

When examining homelessness and residential instability together, interesting patterns come to light. Of those children who did not experience homelessness by the age of five, the majority moved only once or never, compared to children who experienced homelessness (of whom one-fifth had moved five or more times by age five) (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2**  
NUMBER OF MOVES DURING LIFETIME AMONG CHILDREN



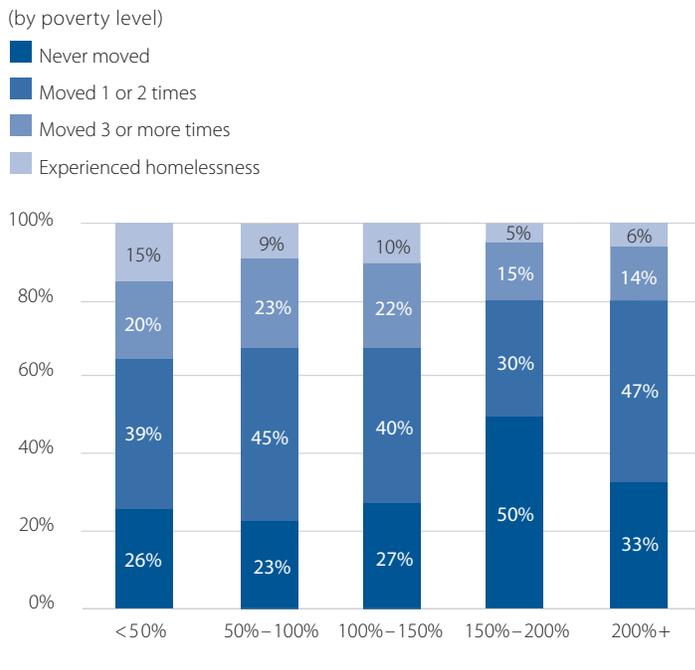
Moreover, most mothers experience homelessness as a one-time occurrence; among mothers who reported experiencing homelessness at some point between the child’s birth and the age five interview 76% did so only once.

**Housing and Poverty**

Finally, the housing histories of families differ depending on the availability of numerous resources—and primarily

household income. Figure 3 groups families into poverty categories at the child’s birth. Among the poorest children (those with household incomes less than 50% of the federal poverty threshold), 15% experienced homelessness and another 20% moved three or more times before the age of five. On the contrary, of those households with baseline incomes more than two times the federal poverty ratio, 6% experienced homelessness by age five and 14% moved three

**Figure 3**  
RESIDENTIAL INSTABILITY AND HOMELESSNESS EXPERIENCE



or more times.

**Conclusion**

Existing research provides a link between housing instability and a range of child and adolescent challenges, from lower school achievement to poorer social and emotional adjustment. Housing instability almost always results in educational disruptions for school-age children, and evidence suggests that housing instability and homelessness early in life (ages 0–5) creates potent and potentially long-lasting effects for young children. Studies have found that frequent moves (three or more) during early childhood were more detrimental for school attainment than were frequent moves during adolescence.<sup>10</sup>

Frequent moves and homelessness may represent a significant source of stress for parents that can affect their psychological well-being and parenting behaviors. A compromised ability to care for one’s child during his or her early childhood years presents serious challenges given the importance

of parent-child interaction in the development of young children's emotional skills. Housing instability may also influence the stability of children's early childcare arrangements, which could in turn adversely affect their developing school readiness skills.<sup>11</sup> All of these potential stressors could have long-term implications for well-being.

The findings presented here suggest that low-income children are at an increased risk of homelessness and housing instability. Over half of children who experienced homelessness at some point by the age of five moved more than three times during that period. Homelessness, coupled with frequent moves, puts these children at risk for negative developmental outcomes.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Debra Rog and John Bruckner, "Homeless Families and Children," *Toward Understanding Homelessness: The 2007 National Symposium of Homeless Research*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Assistant Secretary of Planning and Evaluation and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research, 2007.
- <sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, "2007 American Community Survey."
- <sup>3</sup> Robin Phinney, Sheldon Danziger, Harold Pollack and Kristin Seefeldt. "Housing Instability among Current and Former Welfare Recipients," *American Journal of Public Health* 97 (2007): 832.
- <sup>4</sup> Joydeep Roy et al., "The Hidden Costs of the Housing Crisis: The Long-Term Impact of Housing Affordability and Quality on Young Children's Odds of Success," Washington, D.C.: Partnership for America's Economic Success (2008).
- <sup>5</sup> National Center on Family Homelessness, *America's Youngest Outcasts: State Report Card on Child Homelessness*, Newton, MA (2009).
- <sup>6</sup> Dennis P. Culhane, Stephen Metraux, Jung Min Park, Maryanne Schretzman and Jesse Valente, "The Hidden Costs of the Housing Crisis: The Long-Term Impact of Housing Affordability and Quality on Young Children's Odds of Success," Implications for Policy and Program Planning," *Housing Policy Debate* 18 (2007): 1.
- <sup>7</sup> U.S. Conference of Mayors, *Hunger and Homelessness Survey: A Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness in America's Cities: A 25-City Survey*, December 2002.
- <sup>8</sup> The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study was supported by Grant Number R01HD36916 from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health & Human Development (NICHD). The contents of the paper are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the NICHD. The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is a joint effort by Princeton University's Center for Research on Child Wellbeing and Center for health and Wellbeing, the Columbia Population Research Center and The National Center for Children and Families at Columbia University. For more information, visit <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu>
- <sup>9</sup> Lisa Melman Heinlein and Marybeth Shinn, "School Mobility and Student Achievement in an Urban Setting," *Psychology in the Schools* 37 (2000): 349; Gloria A. Simpson and Mary Glenn Fowler, "Geographic Mobility and Children's Emotional/Behavioral Adjustment and School Functioning," *Pediatrics* 93 (1994): 303; Robert Haveman, Barbara Wolfe and James Spaulding, "Geographic Mobility and Children's Emotional/Behavioral Adjustment and School Functioning," *Demography* 28 (1991): 133; David Wood, Neal Halfon, Debra Scarlata, Paul Newacheck and Sharon Nessim, "Geographic Mobility and Children's Emotional/Behavioral Adjustment and School Functioning," *JAMA* 270 (1993): 1334.
- <sup>10</sup> Robert Haveman, Barbara Wolfe and James Spaulding, "Geographic Mobility and Children's

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The Institute for Children and Poverty (ICP) is an independent non-profit research organization based in New York City. ICP studies the impact of poverty on family and child well-being and generates research that will enhance public policies and programs affecting poor or homeless children and their families. Specifically, ICP examines the condition of extreme poverty in the United States and its effect on educational attainment, housing, employment, child welfare, domestic violence, and family wellness. Please visit our Web site for more information. [www.icpny.org](http://www.icpny.org)



*Finding ways to reduce  
the impact of homelessness and  
poverty on the lives of children*

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