



Bridging the Gap

OCTOBER 2009

*More Homeless Children,
Less Access to Early Education and Care*



**HORIZONS FOR
HOMELESS CHILDREN**

I. Executive Summary

Child and family homelessness are at an all-time high in Massachusetts, due to current economic conditions and fewer families being able to afford their own housing. As of the end of July 2009, there were approximately 2,880 families with about 5,050 children temporarily housed in emergency shelter in the Bay State, including approximately 2,780 children under the age of six. On any given day, there are about 1,000 additional homeless children in the Commonwealth who live in domestic violence shelters, residential programs for teen parents and their families, transitional housing programs, residential substance abuse programs, and HIV/AIDS residential programs, for a total of **over 6,000 homeless children living in shelters in Massachusetts on any given day, about 3,000 of whom are under the age of six – 11% more homeless children than reported in last year’s “Bridging the Gap.”**

The Commonwealth’s emergency shelter system has far exceeded its capacity. As a result, **more than 1,500 of these 6,000+ homeless children and their families are currently placed by the Commonwealth in motels, an increase of 50% since last year’s report. More than 800 of the children placed in motels are younger than school-age.**

Worse still, these statistics represent only the tip of the iceberg of child homelessness in Massachusetts. Tens of thousands more Massachusetts families with children sleep on floors and sofas of friends and relatives, or live in other makeshift arrangements such as cars and campgrounds. According to data collected by the Mass. Department of Elementary and Secondary Education in cooperation with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, which used a comprehensive definition of homeless that includes children living in “doubled-up” situations, rather than a definition limited to children living in shelters, on any given day, an estimated 56,000 Massachusetts school-aged homeless children are homeless.ⁱ Given that for each school-aged homeless child there is a pre-school aged homeless child, this means that **on any given day there are also more than 50,000 homeless Massachusetts pre-school aged children – a total of well over 100,000 homeless children and youth in Massachusetts on any given day, and many thousands more over the course of a year.**

These troubling statistics reflect a national trend, in the midst of the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. According to the U.S. Conference of Mayors, 83 percent of the cities surveyed reported an increase in homelessness in 2008, with an average increase of 12%.ⁱⁱ The National Center on Family Homelessness estimates that **at least 1.5 million U.S. children will experience homelessness over the course of a yearⁱⁱⁱ, and the actual figure is most likely substantially higher.^{iv}** Congress has responded with renewed emphasis on addressing homeless children and their families, and for the first time in memory, a sitting President has acknowledged the importance of doing so.^v

Homelessness has grave impacts on child development, including brain development. As a result, compared with both middle-class and poor housed peers, young homeless children experience more developmental delays, emotional problems such as anxiety and depression, and behavioral issues.^{vi} Without the proper intervention, homelessness,

whether of long or short duration, is a condition that impacts greatly on a child's school readiness as well as later in life.

A ray of hope amidst all of this bad news? Scientific research shows that **quality early education and care makes a significant difference in the well-being and school-readiness of young homeless children, and helps the parents of those children move towards self-sufficiency.**

To determine how many homeless children living in shelter have access to this critical intervention, Horizons for Homeless Children (HHC) conducted a survey of shelters serving homeless families in Massachusetts in the summer of 2009, a repeat of the survey done the previous five years. The results of the survey are detailed in the pages that follow.

Recognizing the need to “bridge the gap” between homeless families’ need to access early education and care and their ability to access it, in December of 2007, the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) and the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) implemented a new policy designed to improve access to early education and care for homeless families living in shelter.^{vii} Under this policy, families living in homeless shelters were entitled to a childcare voucher as soon as they entered the shelter, which the families could then use to enroll their children in fully subsidized early education and care. The policy was designed to provide access to childcare vouchers with minimal red tape, which had been a major problem in spite of well-intentioned efforts in prior years to streamline the process for securing childcare vouchers. As a result of that policy, according to HHC’s 2008 survey of shelters, 64% of children living in homeless shelters^{viii} in Massachusetts accessed early education and care, up from 47% in 2007.

Unfortunately, as a result of the Commonwealth’s current fiscal crisis, the progress that had been made has come to a halt, and is being reversed. First, in November of 2008, limitations were placed on homeless families’ access to childcare vouchers. Then, **as of September 1 of this year, the Commonwealth’s policy of providing homeless families living in shelter with automatic, immediate access to childcare vouchers was suspended.** As a result of the first of these setbacks, **this year’s survey registered a 6% decline in the proportion of homeless children accessing early education and care (57% as of the summer of 2009, down from 64% in 2008).** We anticipate a continuing decline, due to the suspension of the homeless childcare access policy, which occurred after this year’s shelter survey was completed. It is also important to note that the 57% participation rate does not take into account the more than 800 young children placed in motels, of whom anecdotal evidence suggests few are participating in early education and care while living in the motels. Including those children in the analysis would further reduce the “snapshot in time” early education and care participation rate.^{ix}

To improve access to early education and child care for homeless young children, both in Massachusetts and throughout the U.S., **this report offers the following recommendations:**

Recommendation # 1: Restore homeless families' immediate access to childcare vouchers in Massachusetts

As noted above, in response to a funding shortfall, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts recently suspended its ground-breaking policy under which homeless families living in shelter had automatic/immediate access to childcare vouchers. This setback will make it difficult or impossible for many families to move toward self-sufficiency and move into permanent housing, and will also have a direct harmful impact on the well-being of homeless children. **We urge the Commonwealth to restore homeless families' immediate access to childcare vouchers, and explore all options for finding the necessary funding.**

Recommendation # 2: Fund and implement comprehensive homelessness prevention and rapid re-housing strategies in Massachusetts, including early education and care and other child development services

Horizons for Homeless Children applauds the work of the Massachusetts Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness (ICHH), and urges the Legislature to provide the necessary funding to implement the comprehensive homelessness prevention and rapid re-housing strategy being developed by the Council. We commend ICHH for directing the newly-formed "Regional Networks" to address the early education and childcare needs of families as part of their local homelessness prevention and rapid re-housing strategies, and urge the Regional Networks to do so, particularly in light of the Commonwealth's suspension of automatic/immediate access to childcare vouchers for families in shelter. We also commend the Massachusetts Commission to End Homelessness for recommending that the Commonwealth strive to mitigate the negative impact of homelessness on children, by ensuring the availability of child development opportunities for all children who are homeless, at-risk of homelessness, or transitioning out of homelessness. **We urge the ICHH, the Department of Housing and Community Development and the Regional Networks to continue to focus on the critical role of early education and care and other child development services as part of any strategies for addressing and eliminating homelessness.**

Recommendation # 3: Help homeless families in Massachusetts living in motels access early education and care and other necessary supports

As this report goes to print, over **1,000 homeless families in Massachusetts – including more than 1,500 children, of whom over 800 are younger than school-age – are living in shelter overflow motels while they wait for a room in a shelter to open up.** Currently, the average length of stay in a motel is over three months, and considerably longer stays are common. In June of 2008, the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) and the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) issued a policy document that stated that "[s]ince placement in hotels/motels is short term, and eventual shelter placement may not be in an area close to the previous hotel/motel placement it would be better to wait until the family is placed in shelter before offering access to child care." The situation has changed since June of 2008. Several hundred young children and their families are stuck in shelter overflow motels, typically for extended periods of time, and need the opportunity to enroll in early education and care.

We therefore call upon EEC, the Department of Housing and Community Development, DTA, the Regional Networks and the Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies to help these families obtain childcare vouchers, enroll in early education and care, and secure transportation to the early education and care provider.

Recommendation # 4: Provide additional resources to assist Head Start providers in identifying and serving homeless children

Under the federal Head Start re-authorization legislation signed into law in December of 2007, Head Start providers are now required to identify young homeless children in their service area, and prioritize enrollment of homeless children.^x However, finding families living in “doubled-up” arrangements in their local community – an often hidden form of homelessness – can be challenging, especially since many families from diverse cultural backgrounds who are living “doubled-up” do not identify themselves as homeless. Additionally, young children who are homeless have unique educational needs that frequently make it challenging for them to participate in early education and care settings. **Here in Massachusetts, we urge the Department of Early Education and Care, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Department of Housing and Community Development, the Department of Transitional Assistance, local Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, homeless shelters and public school district homelessness coordinators to collaborate with Head Start providers on efforts to maximize the enrollment of homeless children in Head Start programs. At the national level, we urge the Office of Head Start to ensure the delivery of training and technical assistance on how to meet the unique educational needs of homeless children and, we encourage the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the U.S. Department of Education to coordinate their efforts to assist Head Start programs and Local Education Agencies to find and serve homeless children who can benefit from Head Start’s early education and comprehensive child development services and K-12 educational services.**^{xi}

Recommendation # 5: Address the needs of homeless children in “State Plans” submitted to the federal government

HHC recommends that the needs of homeless children, particularly young children, be addressed in the following State Plans (required by the federal government) and planning processes: Transitional Aid to Needy Families (TANF), Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), and McKinney Supportive Housing Program (SHP). The Mass. Department of Early Education and Care made extensive reference to its efforts to meet the needs of homeless families and their children in the state plan submitted to the federal government in connection with the Child Care and Development Fund. Horizons for Homeless Children urges the Massachusetts Interagency Council on Housing and Homelessness to ensure that the above-referenced State Plans address the needs of young homeless children.

Recommendation # 6: Address the needs of homeless children as part of reauthorization of the U.S. Child Care Development Fund/Child Care and Development Block Grant.

The majority of the funds spent by state and local governments to facilitate access to early education and care for children in low-income families comes from federal sources.^{xii} For example, in Massachusetts, 68% of state spending on early education and care is derived from federal funding.^{xiii} In FY09, federal funding dedicated to early education and care through the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) is approximately \$7 billion, comprised of \$4.1 billion in Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) funds and \$2.9 billion in CCDF Mandatory and Matching funds. CCDF/CCDBG is due for reauthorization. **Just as Congress prioritized homeless children for enrollment as part of reauthorization of Head Start (see recommendation no. 4, above), so too should Congress prioritize homeless children for use of CCDF/CCDBG funds, through reauthorization of CCDF/CCDBG.**

ⁱ Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, “Homelessness in Massachusetts Public Schools,” Appendix 3 of this report. For a more in-depth analysis, see “A Snapshot of Homelessness in Massachusetts Public Schools: 2005 Youth Risk Behavior Survey and Massachusetts Annual Homeless Enrollment Data (2007, Massachusetts Department of Education, available at www.doe.mass.edu/mv).

ⁱⁱ U.S. Conference of Mayors, “Hunger and Homelessness Survey: A Status Report on Hunger and Homelessness in America’s Cities,” (2008), at 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ National Center on Family Homelessness, “America’s Youngest Outcasts: State Report Card on Child Homelessness” (2009).

^{iv} NCFH based its estimate on the number of specifically identified homeless children reported by public school district personnel. There is substantial anecdotal evidence, along with research evidence, indicating that only a small fraction of homeless children attending school are identified, and many homeless children do not attend school at all. According to a report issued by the Massachusetts Department of Education, “the discrepancy between the 7,085 Massachusetts students actually identified as homeless and the estimate of 48,000 plus homeless students suggests that a great majority of homeless students are going unidentified by their school systems.” Massachusetts Department of Education, “A Snapshot of Homelessness in Massachusetts Public Schools: 2005 Youth Risk Behavior Survey and Massachusetts Annual Homeless Enrollment Data” (2007, available at www.doe.mass.edu/mv).

^v As noted in the White House signing statement, the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act passed by Congress in May of 2009 “targets assistance to families with children – the fastest growing segment of the homeless population.” U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, “Research Works” (September 2009.) In addition, President Obama previously stated that “I’m heartbroken that any child in America is homeless....Part of the change in attitudes that I want to see here in Washington and all across the country is a belief that it is not acceptable for children and families to be without a roof over their heads in a country as wealthy as ours.” Comments at Presidential press conference, March 24, 2009.

^{vi} See Rog and Buckner, “Homeless Families and Children” (March, 2007), at 4; Rafferty and Shinn, “The Impact of Homelessness on Children” (*American Psychologist*, 1991); Kourgialis et al., “Improving the Nutrition Status of Homeless Children” (*Children’s Health Fund*, 2000).

^{vii} See Mass. Dept. of Early Education and Care Management Bulletin EMB FY 2008 – 01, Appendix 2 of this report.

^{viii} It is important to note that this data does not include any of the children placed in motels. See recommendation no. 3 for further discussion of families placed in motels.

^{ix} As a practical matter, it would be very difficult to do this, as there are no shelter staff at the motels to complete a survey.

^x The “Improving Head Start Act,” H.R. 1429. For a summary of provisions pertaining to homeless children, see National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, “Summary of Head Start Provisions on Homelessness and Foster Care,” attached as Appendix 7 of this report.

^{xi} It is worth noting that because the federal Head Start statute uses a more comprehensive definition of “homeless,” Head Start providers have an opportunity to serve homeless children who are living in “doubled-up” situations. The potential ability of doubled-up homeless families to access early education and care through a Head Start provider can help those families move toward housing stability, and avoid the need to move into shelter.

^{xii} See Barnet and Masse, “Funding Issues for Early Childhood Care and Education Programs,” (2003), Table 8.1.

^{xiii} Associated Early Care & Education, “Facts in Action,” (www.factsinaction.org).