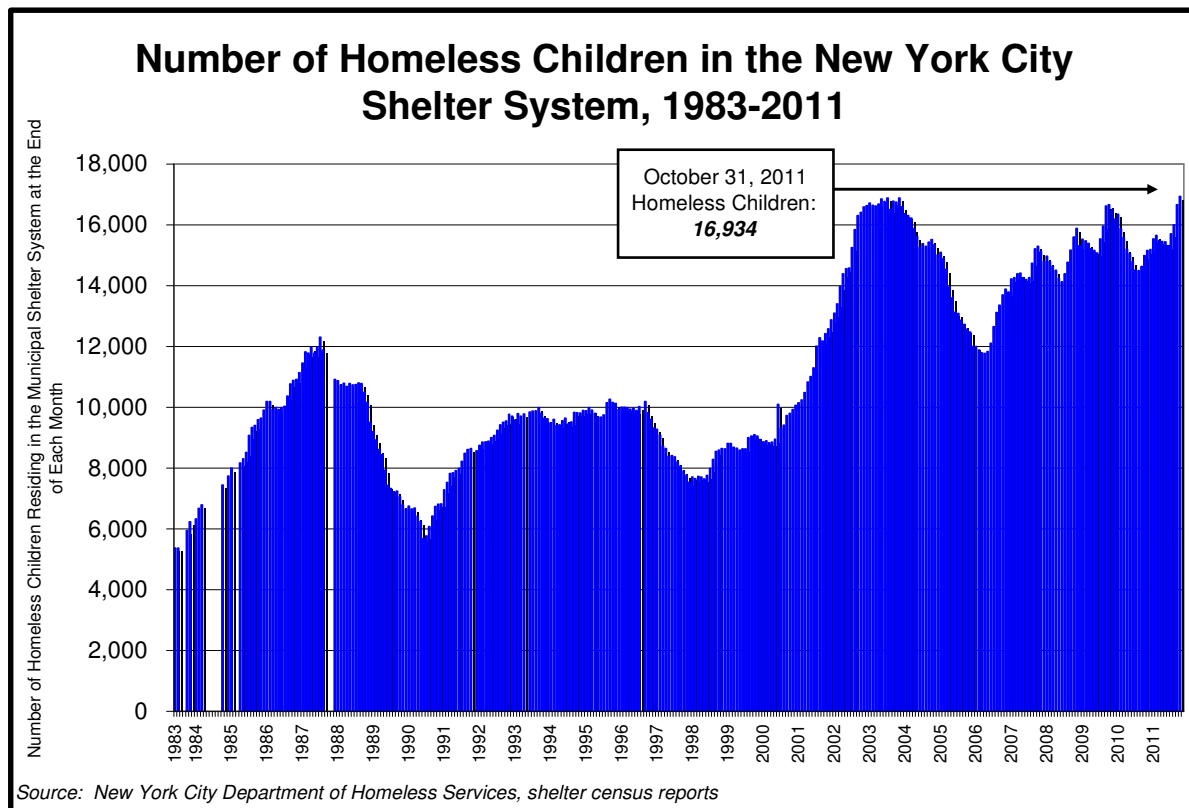


## Briefing Paper Record Homelessness: Impact on Children

November 21, 2011

By Giselle Routhier, Policy Analyst, Coalition for the Homeless

Amidst high unemployment, increasing poverty and an acute shortage of affordable housing, the number of people experiencing homelessness in New York City has reached an all-time high. As of the end of October 2011, nearly 17,000 homeless children bedded down in New York City shelters – the highest number ever recorded. As a result, an ever-increasing number of homeless students are struggling to get a decent education, and facing even greater challenges.



While poverty alone places great stress on students, the instability of homelessness adds more obstacles to a successful education than just poverty alone. A wealth of research has documented the difficulties homeless children face, from school disruption to emotional trauma and health problems.

### The Earliest Studies

Scholarly research over the last three decades has shown the deleterious effects of homelessness on children, particularly children's educational outcomes.

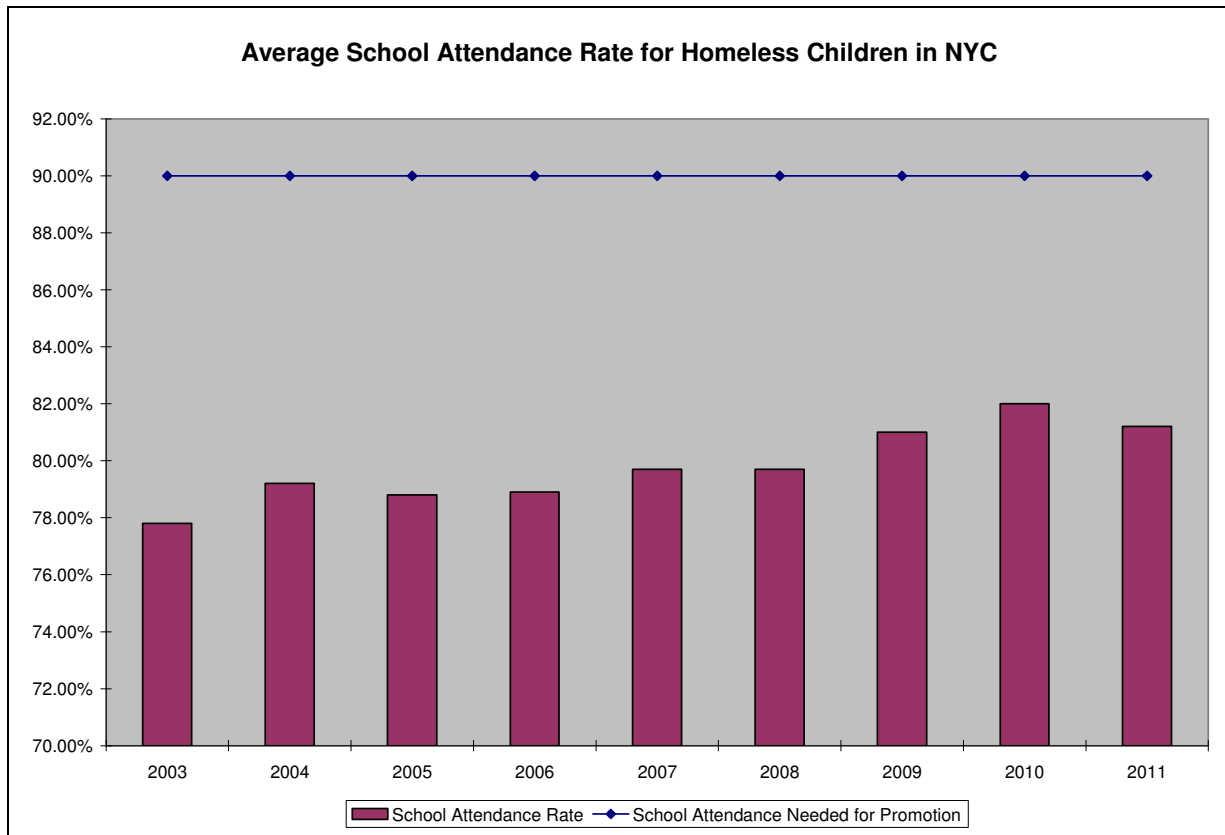
One of the earliest literature reviews conducted in 1991, detailed research findings showing that homeless children experience an array of problems in their health, development, behavior, and

schooling.<sup>1</sup> Authors Yvonne Rafferty and Marybeth Shinn reported that homeless children were more likely to experience acute and chronic health problems, including respiratory infections, ear disorders, and gastrointestinal disorders. Additional health problems were attributed to hunger and poor nutrition among homeless children.

Homeless children were also found to have greater instances of developmental delays, likely due to disruptions in child care and instability in shelter placements. Levels of clinical depression, anxiety, and behavior problems were also found to be higher among homeless children than their poor housed peers.

Not surprisingly, many of these negative factors also contribute to underachievement in school for many homeless children, who have been found to miss more school days, perform lower on tests, and be more likely to repeat grades.

Current City data echo these earlier findings and illustrate the challenges homeless students continue to face just getting to school. In 2011, homeless students have missed an average of 34 days of school each year, putting their average school attendance rate at 81.2 percent – well below the required 90 percent to advance to the next grade.



### Recent Studies Confirm Earlier Findings

In 2004, Rafferty and Shinn did a follow-up study focusing solely on academic achievement among homeless adolescents. The study found that homeless students changed schools more frequently, repeated grades more often, and reported worse school experiences than their housed peers. Additionally, homeless children “scored approximately six percentile points worse

than housed children on both reading and mathematics achievement, controlling for earlier achievement” prior to their shelter stay.<sup>2</sup> Overall,

*Findings are consistent with other recent studies of homeless school-age children, which suggest an underlying continuum of risk, with homeless children experiencing greater risk than their never homeless peers.*

A 2008 literature review examined updated research on the effects of homelessness on children and the results were nearly identical to what had been published before.<sup>3</sup> In almost all studies, homeless children performed worse on measures of academic achievement than their poor, but housed peers. And again, health and developmental problems showed up more frequently among homeless children.

*The overall pattern of findings across these studies suggests that more often than not, children's exposure to homelessness increases their risk of adverse outcomes.*

### Overlooked Consequences of Child Homelessness

Both the 2004 and 2008 studies also addressed an additional concern for homeless children: separation from their mothers and/or caregivers. In 2004, Rafferty et al. found that 44 percent of the homeless mother participants had become separated from one or more of their children during their time of homelessness. Five years later, 79 percent of the children were still separated from their mothers at the follow-up interview.

A 2002 study looked at the issue of mother-child separation more closely.<sup>4</sup> It was found that homeless mothers experienced separation from their children at a vastly higher rate than housed mothers – 44 percent versus eight percent. Other factors such as domestic violence, maternal drug dependence and institutionalization predicted mother-child separations, but no predictor was as strong as homelessness, which was equivalent in size to 1.9 other risk factors.

The most important takeaway from this study was its implication for past and future research – highlighting the fact that studies on homeless children may grossly underestimate negative consequences if they exclude separated children.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, the impact of homelessness on children has become clear through decades of study. While poverty alone creates health, developmental, behavioral, and educational problems for children, homelessness compounds these problems by adding additional stress and instability to children's lives.

The good news is that children who experience homelessness can rebound fully from these challenges with a return to stable and permanent housing. Rafferty's 2008 study showed that declines in educational achievement among homeless children did not continue upon their return to permanent housing. At the follow up interview, these formerly-homeless families were just as stable as families that had been consistently housed. It is important to note, however, that most homeless families in the study received permanently-affordable housing. They did not leave shelter on their own or receive a time-limited subsidy like the City of New York's flawed Advantage program.

Following this wealth of research and particularly in response to the record numbers of homeless children currently in shelter, the Coalition for the Homeless calls on Mayor Bloomberg to change course from his current homeless policy. In 2005, his administration cut off homeless families from receiving priority for federal housing assistance, including public housing and Section 8 vouchers. As a result, homeless families' access to these resources has been severely limited. In fiscal year 2010, homeless families received only 2 percent of 5,500 available public housing apartments and only 3 percent of 7,500 Section 8 vouchers.

Since 2005, the City has experimented with time-limited rental subsidies that do not provide permanent housing critical to stabilizing homeless girls and boys. Instead, they have created a revolving door back to shelter for thousands of formerly-homeless families. And it remains unknown what effects multiple episodes of homelessness have on children's educational and health outcomes.

Coalition for the Homeless calls on Mayor Bloomberg and other City officials to reverse course from current disastrous policies and enact the following:

*1. Immediately begin to use "one in three" available public housing apartments and Federal housing vouchers to help homeless families and individuals move from shelters to permanent housing.*

- This can be swiftly accomplished by using the existing priority system for both the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) public housing and voucher waiting lists, which makes households referred by the NYC Department of Homeless Services the highest priority applicants.
- In addition, NYCHA should act to restore the separate "emergency priority" for all homeless households that was reduced in 2005.

*2. In coming years, the City should set aside a significant percentage of City-assisted apartments - apartments created or preserved by the NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) - for homeless families and individuals.*

- This policy would build on the success of Mayor Koch's ten-year "Housing New York" program which allocated 15,000 affordable apartments – 10 percent of all housing units created or preserved under the program – for homeless New Yorkers.
- Currently Mayor Bloomberg's "New Housing Marketplace" plan allocates only around 4 percent of all City-assisted apartments to homeless people, even at a time of much worse homelessness.
- The City should also allocate a significant share of HPD-administered Federal housing vouchers to help homeless New Yorkers.

---

<sup>1</sup> Rafferty, Y. Shinn, M. The Impact of Homelessness on Children. (1991). *American Psychologist*, Vol. 46, No. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Rafferty, Y. Shinn, M. Weitzman, B. Academic achievement among formerly homeless adolescents and their continuously housed peers. (2004). *Journal of School Psychology* 42.

<sup>3</sup> Buckner, J. Understanding the impact of homelessness on children. (2008). *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 51, No. 6

<sup>4</sup> Cowal, K. Shinn, M. Weitzman, B. et al. (2002). Mother-child separations among homeless and housed families receiving public assistance in New York City. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, Vol. 30, No. 5.