

## Homeless kids need good schooling

### And efforts are under way in Allegheny County to make sure they get it

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By Dr. Joseph Lagana and Nancy Hubley

Who do you think of when you hear the word "homeless" -- the panhandler you pass on the street? The men clustered under the overpass near the highway?

Think again. The homeless population is a growing and surprisingly diverse group. And the fastest growing segment of homeless is not single men, but families with children, many of whom have been impacted by the recession.

Tragically, the number of children experiencing homelessness in Allegheny County could more than fill any one of Pittsburgh's Elementary Schools -- with more than 875 children experiencing homelessness today.

These children represent the full range of talents and abilities, but they live in shelters, or move from one relative to another-doubled up, sleeping on floors and couches, or forced out of their homes because of unemployment or a variety of other reasons.

Because these families aren't typically living out on the streets and the children are often out of school, they go unnoticed. This increasingly common situation has led to the increased use of the term "invisible homeless."

The number of children experiencing homelessness in Allegheny County increased dramatically (by 39 percent) this past year, according to Allegheny County data and a special study conducted by the Duquesne University School of Education and the Homeless Children's Education Fund.

The study highlights information that contradicts common stereotypes of homelessness. For instance, 44 percent of the homeless parents surveyed attended and or graduated from college; 54 percent were experiencing their first episode of homelessness; and, most alarmingly, the number of homeless children in the county now exceeds both the number of homeless men and the national average homeless rate.

The findings of the report were discussed at the "Summit to Ensure Quality Education of Our Homeless Children and Youth" last November. The summit highlighted the work of a host of collaborators, including the Education Law Center, the Allegheny County Intermediate Unit, the Pittsburgh Public Schools, Duquesne University, Operation Safety Net and the National Education Network for Homeless Children and Youth. The summit resulted in the creation of an integrated community network -- now known as the Homeless Education Network.

Its mission is to create and strengthen countywide networks of educators, providers, advocates, other professionals and families to share resources, expertise and data to raise awareness and coordinate efforts to ensure children who are homeless have the same opportunities to attend school and benefit from the full range of public education services as their peers.

National data shows the importance of school stability for children who are homeless. Maintaining a stable school environment while the rest of their lives are in turmoil is crucial to their educational success.

While there are federal laws that protect these children, including the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which guarantees that children who are homeless can attend school in the district where they are living or continue in a school in which they currently are enrolled, children and families still struggle to access public education services when they lack a permanent residence. Accessing services for preschoolers is even more difficult.

The Homeless Education Network is already working closely with its members, including the Education Law Center, a statewide organization at the forefront of policy initiatives and litigation on behalf of homeless students, and Dr. Elizabeth Hardy, a nationally recognized homeless education leader and federal monitor for the McKinney-Vento Act, to develop collaborative approaches to assessing and addressing the current gaps in the educational services to students who are homeless. Its mission has found generous financial support from the local Heinz Endowments and The Pittsburgh Foundation.

Network members are also working at the federal level to raise awareness and address the educational needs of children who are homeless. Pennsylvania U.S. Sens. Robert Casey and Arlen Specter, along with U.S. Rep. Mike Doyle, D-Forest Hills, have supported educational funding for children and youth who are homeless, and it is hoped they will also support reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Act. The legislation is moving through Congress as Senate Bill 2800, titled "Educational Success for Children and Youth Without Homes."

This bill would clarify the right of homeless children to school stability and immediate enrollment, while providing additional funds for needed educational support. The bill also would provide the necessary legal reinforcement at a federal level of the policies and practices the Homeless Education Network supports and is working hard to promote.

The Homeless Education Network recognizes that students who are experiencing the uncertainty of homelessness need the certainty of school and school activities. Others who are willing to work together to make that a reality for every homeless child in Allegheny County should visit [www.homelessfund.org](http://www.homelessfund.org) to learn more.

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