



Responses to Rising Family Homelessness in Massachusetts

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Family homelessness is easily missed because people think of the homeless as unfortunate, isolated men or women who beg on the streets. But on any given night during 2011 in Massachusetts, 38% of all homeless persons were children. Since 2007, family shelter usage in Massachusetts has increased 75 percent, from 2,468 families to a peak of approximately 4,800 families in early 2015. As of July 27, 2015, almost 1252 of those families were sheltered in motels across the state because there was no room in traditional shelter facilities.

Parents and their children can end up homeless because they face competing challenges – looking for work and holding low-wage jobs, caring for and schooling their children, and finding affordable housing or awaiting public assistance. Such families may not look bedraggled and can be hidden in plain view, such as a mother traveling by bus with her children and carrying big bags. If a family is fortunate enough to qualify for emergency shelter, two trash bags of belongings are all they can bring along – so this family may have hit bottom and be on the way to a shelter placement. Many other families teetering on the edge of homeless can be even less visible, because without sufficient shelter placements, families are forced to live doubled up, sleeping on the couches of relatives or friends. These arrangements are unstable and temporary and help to explain why family homelessness has become one of the most pressing social problems in Massachusetts.

The Right to Shelter

In 1983, former Governor Michael Dukakis signed a pioneering right to shelter law and established the first public shelter in Massachusetts. Although some cities nationwide have similar systems, Massachusetts has the only statewide system – which, in theory, should mean that all families with no place to live would have immediate access to a roof over their heads through the state's Emergency Assistance. In practice, however, about 50% of all applicants for shelter are turned away as ineligible and many in need never apply because they believe they are not eligible.

Which Families are at Risk?

Most families without secure homes are headed by females, disproportionately women of color with low levels of education, many of whom have suffered from domestic violence. In 2014, a majority of homeless families (57%) in the Emergency Assistance system became homeless due to health and safety issues such as unfit living arrangements and temporary housing situations; 13% pointed to disruptions due to domestic violence; and nine percent reported loss of support from another state program designed to prevent homelessness.

Poor People Struggling on the Edge

Increases in family homelessness in Massachusetts can be attributed to persistent poverty and wages too low to pay for relatively expensive housing, with both problems exacerbated by the 2008-09 Great Recession and subsequent foreclosures. Amid these unforgiving economic realities, public programs to support family well-being and stability continue to be cut. For poor families, finding adequate childcare is particularly difficult given funding cuts for subsidized care of 23% since 2001. The number of homeless students in the state's public schools has also been on the increase, up more than ten percent from 2010-11 to 2012-2013.

Nearly a quarter of Massachusetts wage-earning families are unable to cover the basic cost of living even with public supports supplementing their income. Also, almost 40% of working families cannot meet their basic needs but are ineligible for various state income supports because the state sees them as earning too much. They cannot get help even though they have too little income to pay their bills – putting some of these families on the road to homelessness, which is of course much more expensive for the state to address.

The Evolving Massachusetts Response

Over the past three decades, Massachusetts has tried to shift its approach to family homelessness by adopting a "Housing First Model" that redirects state money toward prevention programs rather than emergency assistance. Most families at risk of needing emergency shelter are diverted to other supports. The Residential Assistance for Families in Transition program provides at-risk families with cash assistance of up to \$4,000 within a given year. But this is usually not enough to ensure access to a stable family residence. In 2012, the state launched the HomeBASE program which offered time-limited subsidies or flexible cash assistance to lowest-income families and served as an alternative to shelter. However, as the need for this assistance increased, the state eliminated the subsidy component after a few months. The flexible cash assistance program under HomeBASE remains the primary tool to divert or rehouse families from shelter, but is inadequate to meet the short- and long-term needs of most families.

Many families fall between the cracks because prevention programs are inadequately funded and eligibility criteria for emergency shelters have become much stricter. Prior to being deemed eligible for shelter, many must prove that they have spent at least one night in a place not meant for human habitation. Families hitting rock bottom must stay in places such as South Station, cars, or abandoned buildings or offices before the state will give them shelter. In too many cases, unable to meet the burden of proof, families are exposed to further risk and harm.

There is no one-size quick fix to family homelessness. A meaningful solution requires a focus on overall family well-being, taking into account the problems people face when wages are too low to meet the high costs of housing. Current supports for working poor families are insufficient and housing programs are often underfunded. In effect, people are told that low wages from part-time jobs make them ineligible for shelter or housing benefits. Family earners are often encouraged by agency staff to quit in order to put a roof over their children's heads. That makes little sense – and the state must champion policy solutions to fix these deeply broken dynamics.

Read more in Donna Haig Friedman, Katherine Calano, Marija Bingulac, Christine Miller, and Alisa Zeliger, "Children and Homelessness in Massachusetts." *New England Journal of Public Policy* 25, no. 1 (2013).