

Office of the Child Advocate

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Georgia's Homeless Children

By: Tom C. Rawlings, Director

A recent study of the homeless in Georgia reminds us that among those living without adequate shelter are a significant number of children.

Georgia's Department of Community Affairs (DCA) has just released [Homeless in Georgia 2008](#), which for the first time combines actual counts of homeless individuals in selected counties around the state with statistical projections demonstrating the problem of homelessness statewide. The findings? On a given night, an estimated 20,000-plus Georgians are living on the street or in emergency shelters.

All of us are familiar with the adult homeless population, and many of us probably carry a stereotype of the "typical" homeless person. This study, however, reminds us that a significant percentage of the homeless in Georgia are *children*.

Here's how those statistics bear out. In January, surveyors received information from over 2,000 individuals in 23 counties who were either homeless or "precariously housed" in motels or on friends' sofas. Of those, 600 – around 30% -- were children under the age of 18. The Georgia Department of Education, which includes such "precariously housed" children in its definition of "homeless", reports that in the 2007-2008 school year there were 22,888 homeless schoolchildren in Georgia's public schools. While that figure may seem large, it makes sense when you remember that it also represents 30 percent of the 75,000 people the DCA study estimates are homeless in Georgia at some time during the year. In Chatham County, the agency that serves the homeless reported that 13% of those who received its services in 2007 were children.

Children, studies show, are much more likely to suffer when they lack adequate housing. A 1999 report by the Family Housing Fund shows some of the ways homelessness hurts children:

- Children whose mothers are homeless while they are pregnant are much more likely to suffer substance abuse problems and are much less likely to obtain prenatal medical care. Between 20 and 40 percent of homeless women abuse drugs or alcohol, and only half receive prenatal care for themselves and their unborn children.
- Children who are homeless at a young age are much more likely to suffer development delays and emotional problems. According to the Family Housing Fund study, three-quarters of homeless children under age five have at least one major developmental delay, and 38% exhibited emotional and behavioral problems.
- Preschoolers who suffer the chronic stress of lacking a stable place to call home may become school-aged children with behavioral problems and poor attendance. These early stressors lead to a greatly increased chance the child will be placed in special education and a greatly decreased chance that the child will graduate. Three quarters of homeless children perform below grade level in reading, and yet homeless children are less likely to take advantage of additional educational assistance due to constantly changing schools.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure that the less stable a child's home life is, the less chance that child has to develop the social, academic, and life skills he or she needs to grow into a responsible and successful young adult. Fortunately, there are laws protecting the rights of homeless children, and there are many state agencies and nonprofits are working to ease the suffering of homeless children and those without adequate housing. The federal McKinney-Vento Act, for example, ensures that children are not pushed out of a school district just because they have lost their residence. The Georgia Interagency Homeless Council, created by Gov. Perdue in 2004, brings together the Department of Human Resources, the Department of Community Affairs, and community organizations to jointly address the problems associated with homelessness. Churches, synagogues, and other communities of faith are reaching out to help homeless families.

You can read much more about the issue of homelessness in Georgia – and what is being done to combat it – by viewing the [Homeless in Georgia 2008](#) report at: <http://www.dca.state.ga.us/housing/specialneeds/publications/homelessreport08lowres.pdf> You can also find out more about how homelessness affects children by reading the Family Housing Fund's study at: <http://www.fhfund.org/dnld/reports/SupportiveChildren.pdf>.

As the DCA report shows, homeless is a problem that affects too many of our youngest and most vulnerable Georgians, and it does not appear to be going away. Women coming into a homeless shelter are six times more likely than women in the general population to be pregnant, according to the Family Housing Fund. In light of those statistics and the current economic climate, we have much work to do to help these children and their families find the basics they need: shelter, food, clothing, and love.

If you have a program in your area that is working with homeless children, please let us know about it by visiting www.gachildadvocate.org and clicking "contact us." We'll compile the responses we receive and post them to our website so others can know the resources available to children without adequate housing.

Tom Rawlings, Georgia's Child Advocate for the Protection of Children, was appointed by Governor Sonny Perdue to assure quality and efficiency in Georgia's child protective systems. The Office of the Child Advocate is a resource for those interested in the welfare of our state's neglected and abused children. Tom can be reached through the OCA website at www.gachildadvocate.org