



Homeless Children: A Growing Problem

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Overview: Despite the economic boom that California currently experiences, the number of homeless children is *growing* in California. These children face a myriad of problems that other children do not have to cope with. Their physical and mental health, education, and personal safety lag far behind their peers who do not lack the basic human need for shelter.

How Many Homeless Children Are There? It is difficult to get an accurate count of the homeless, children or adults. The Census Bureau is making special efforts this year to get a more accurate count, but even they admit their efforts will result in an undercount.

The Department of Housing and Community Development estimates that there are about 360,000 homeless persons statewide. Homeless families make up over 1/3 of that total. Based on average family size, **it is estimated that there are 80,000 to 95,000 homeless children in California.**

The vast majority of homeless families consist of a single mother and her children. However, there are a growing number of 2-parent families experiencing homelessness, due to high housing costs in the state.

Another separate group of homeless children consists of teens who are not yet 18 years old and are not part of a homeless family. These include young people whose families have kicked them out, abandoned them, or are unable to care for them due to the

parents' own problems (with substance abuse, for example). This group also includes runaways, foster care youth whom that system has failed, and orphans who have fallen through the webbing of our loosely-knit social welfare net.

Based on smaller samples, **it is estimated that there are approximately 40,000 of these older homeless minors on their own statewide.**

In absolute terms, there are more homeless children today in California than ever before. **The percentage of children who are homeless is greater today than at any time since the Great Depression.**

What Special Problems Do Homeless Children Encounter?

As might be expected, homeless children face more problems than other children. Homeless children encounter the following extra burdens while growing up:

- 43% of homeless children are molested; 66% are violently abused.
- Homeless children are 12 times more likely to wind up in foster care than children with adequate housing.
- Over 20% of homeless children do not attend school at all.
- When in school, homeless children are twice as likely to repeat a grade or be suspended.
- Homeless children go hungry twice as often as other children.

- Homeless children have 5 times more stomach and diarrhea problems, and 4 times as much asthma.
- Homeless children are reported in fair or poor health twice as often as housed children.

Is There Hope? Despite all these grim problems, homeless children can shine if provided with the opportunity and resources. One homeless child became student of the year at her middle school. After her story was highlighted in the media, she received an outpouring of public help. Now, years later, she is a junior at U.C. San Diego. A life saved. Public investment saved.

A common activity for children, homeless or otherwise, is to draw. When homeless children are asked to draw what heaven looks like, they often draw houses. They do not draw mansions or palaces; they draw plain houses. This is their hope, a hope maintained in the midst of adversity.



About the artist: Robert lives in a homeless shelter with his family.