

On any given day, there are almost 57,000 families residing in emergency shelters, transitional housing or in places not intended for human habitation, such as cars, campgrounds, sheds or garages. Over the course of a year, approximately 150,000 families will reside in emergency shelters and/or transitional housing programs because they lack a safe alternative.

Why do families become homeless?

The primary cause of family homelessness is a dire shortage of affordable housing. While the cost of housing has increased dramatically in recent decades, family incomes have remained flat. As a result, there are only 37 available and affordable housing units for every 100 extremely low-income households nationwide. Although many families qualify for a housing subsidy, which would allow them to pay no more than 30 percent of their income for rent, only one in four receive it.

Other families are left to manage the best they can. As many as 6.7 million households pay more than 50 percent of their income for housing. Some move frequently. About 4.4 million households double-up, residing with extended family or friends to manage costs.

Who becomes homeless?

Most families who enter an emergency shelter do so after leaving a doubled-up situation. Families may seek out shelter after being asked to leave, or upon finding the living arrangement to be too stressful as a long-term option for their family.

African Americans are vastly disproportionately represented among families experiencing homelessness. More than half (52 percent) of parents in homeless families identify as African American. This is almost four times the number that might be

expected given their representation in the U.S. population.

Nearly half of the children who experience a homeless episode each year are age 5 or under, and 11 percent are under the age of 1. Parents are often young as well: Nearly one in five families are headed by a parent under the age of 25.

Families experiencing homelessness may face challenges, such as a history of domestic violence and/or mental health issues, but large studies have found that their rates are no higher than those of other low-income families that never become homeless.

What can homeless service programs and systems offer families?

Family access to homeless service interventions varies widely within and across states. Nationally, there are more temporary housing units (emergency shelter and transitional housing) available to families than there are families experiencing homelessness.

Emergency shelter offers a short-term place for families to stay until they can reconnect to housing. On average, families spend three months in shelter. Forty-one percent stay for 30 days or fewer.

A small percentage of families (16 percent) enter transitional housing, which offers a long-term temporary place to stay and support services. Transitional housing can

accommodate stays of up to 24 months, however, the average stay is just 5.4 months.

Despite the surplus of temporary housing units, permanent housing resources remain insufficient. Homeless service systems have dedicated resources to re-house approximately 41 percent of all families that enter a homeless service program each year.

Rapid Re-housing is the primary tool used to reconnect families to housing. Rapid Re-housing is a time-limited intervention that provides families with housing search and landlord negotiation assistance, temporary financial assistance (so families can pay rent) and case management services designed to promote housing stabilization and connection to needed supports. Rapid Re-housing is available to approximately one-third of all families that become homeless each year.

Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) is the most comprehensive housing intervention, combining permanent affordable housing and wraparound support services. PSH is typically reserved for families with the most serious needs who would otherwise have a difficult time sustaining housing with less intensive services. Given the current rate of turnover, an estimated 6 percent of all families that become homeless each year will be able to move into an existing permanent supportive housing unit absent new dedicated resources.

Homeless service providers are also developing new tools to respond to family homelessness, including diversion assistance to help families identify alternatives to entering shelter. These tools also include support to promote self-resolution and the provision of housing-focused services inside shelter programs, both of which help families identify and implement their own pathway out of homelessness.

How can Human Service Policy leaders help?

Federal homeless assistance resources are inadequate to end family homelessness. It requires the leadership and resources of state and local partners as well as business, philanthropic and faith-based communities. State Human Service Policy leaders can:

- [Promote policies](#) that **prevent** families from becoming homeless, particularly families receiving state-funded services, by identifying families experiencing a housing crisis early and connecting them with needed [supports](#) to stay housed.
- [Provide financial or staff](#) resources to support interventions that effectively **divert** families from homelessness.
- [Promote the provision](#) of high-quality, low barrier **shelter** so no child is ever without a safe place to stay when homelessness cannot be avoided.
- [Expand state and local](#) capacity to **re-house** families that cannot independently exit homelessness and provide the assistance needed so they can sustain housing.
- [Connect children and families](#) at all stages of housing instability and homelessness with public, community, and natural supports (such as friends or extended family) that can help all family members thrive, achieve greater self-sufficiency, and attain housing stability.
- [Promote investment](#) in affordable housing for low-income families.