

Over ten thousand public school students homeless in Chicago

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Even before the collapse of the US economy in the fall of 2008, increasing social misery had taken its toll on Chicago-area students, with thousands forced to leave their homes and enter into a variety of precarious and temporary living arrangements. Recent months have only seen a further deterioration in the living situations of many area families.

As of the end of the 2008 school year last June, the number of students identified as homeless in figures reported by Chicago Public Schools (CPS) was 10,642, a record. That figure represented a 1.2 percent increase from 2006. However, from November 2007 to November 2008 CPS reported a staggering 28 percent rise in the number of homeless students, so the figure for the 2009 school year will undoubtedly be even higher.

In the eight suburban counties surrounding Chicago, the Illinois State Board of Education reported a nearly 67 percent increase in homeless students from fiscal year 2006 to 2008, with their total number rising to 4,399 from 2,628. When added to Chicago's total, the sum represents 57 percent of the state's 26,238 homeless students.

Some of the suburban counties have seen higher proportional increases than others. McHenry County has seen its population of homeless students increase fourfold from 41 to 170. The number in Will County, located to the south of the city and hard-hit by foreclosures, went from 245 to 603. Some of the more affluent school districts are reporting their first-ever homeless students.

The explosion of homelessness within the student population is a result of the deepening and acceleration of the economic crisis. Illinois companies have been shedding jobs at a rapid pace, and the state's official

unemployment rate in December stood at 7.6 percent, slightly exceeding the national average. This figure represents a sharp increase over the previous year, when unemployment stood at 5.3 percent. The total number of unemployed is at the highest level since 1992.

The pace of home foreclosures has also accelerated statewide. January saw the number of foreclosures increase 85 percent from the year before, and overall foreclosure rate in Illinois is the sixth-worst in the country, at one in every 363 homes. The situation in Cook County, which includes Chicago, is even worse, with one in 274 homes in some stage of foreclosure.

As economic conditions deteriorate, the number of homeless students in the region is expected to grow. Patricia Rivera, the director of the CPS homeless education program, told the *Chicago Tribune* February 13, "It will probably get worse ... it has far reaching consequences for our students."

According to the stipulations of the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, homeless students are supposed to be identified and offered various forms of assistance, including help acquiring supplies, clothing and transportation. Rivera told the *Tribune* that advocates are budgeted only \$100 to cover each homeless child. "It doesn't cover a lot," she said.

In order to receive this assistance, students and their families must self-identify as homeless, and often must reach out to a designated school homeless advocate. Many do not, out of embarrassment over their situation. Others remain unaware that there are programs available, or that they are considered homeless (for example, families doubling up with others). Consequently, what little aid is available frequently does not reach those most in need, and the population of homeless students is under-counted in official

statistics.

The Chicago public school system has historically had a chronic problem attending to the needs of homeless students. Restrictive proof of residency requirements by local school districts have often proven to block enrollment.

It has taken several court cases since 1992 for CPS to acknowledge its duty toward homeless students. In a significant 1996 ruling (*Salazar v. Edwards*), CPS was ordered to provide transportation and remove barriers to attendance. As part of this process, the school system was also ordered to establish homeless liaisons at each school to help students and families in attaining this assistance. The school system has been taken into court numerous times since then over failure to meet these requirements.

What emerges is a picture of official indifference to the plight of homeless children.

In 2008, the state's board of education for the first time allocated funds for homeless student education. The amount allotted was a paltry \$3 million, and was announced so late that many districts did not even know it was available. In light of growing budget shortfalls, the board has recommended eliminating even this miserly sum in the next fiscal year and directed local school districts to seek out federal funds.

Given the increasing number of homeless students, this will have a devastating impact on some of the most vulnerable members of society. Federal funding to CPS for the current school year was only \$700,000, with most of the money spent on transporting students from their current location to the schools they attended before becoming homeless. Total federal funding to assist states with their requirements under the McKinney-Vento Act amounts to just \$64.1 million for the 2009 fiscal year.

The result of the systematic neglect of these students by the school system is a tragic waste of human potential. Homeless students are far more likely to miss school and perform poorly than students with a fixed residence. Because of the difficulty in finding suitable space for completing schoolwork, and the fact that parents of homeless students are busy trying to secure basic necessities, these students often find themselves falling behind academically.

Repeating a grade level or dropping out of school altogether is common and exacerbates the social

isolation to which these children are already subjected. Higher stress and psychological disturbance, lower self-esteem and increased rates of suicide have all been linked to student homelessness.



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