

Student homelessness at all-time high in Washington state

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The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) reported in December that 21,826 of Washington state's 1.04 million school children were homeless in 2009-2010. This represents a 5 percent increase from 2009 and a 56.5 percent increase from 2005-2006. Child homelessness overall totaled 24,038, placing Washington 25th in the nation.

These figures suffer from underreporting due to the difficulty in locating the homeless, as well as the reluctance of many individuals and families to admit their circumstances.

A persistently high level of unemployment—hovering around 9 percent for the last year and a half and currently at 9.3 percent—has contributed to these grim statistics. But it is only one of many factors, which include low wages, high housing costs, poverty, and rising foreclosures.

For school children, year over year, the number living in motels was up by 12 percent, whereas those that doubled up with friends and relatives increased by 9 percent. The higher rates of change in these two figures—as compared to the 5 percent increase in child homelessness overall—reveal a pattern of homelessness creeping up on previously stable families as well as the overcrowding of homeless shelters.

Melinda Dyer, program supervisor for the education of homeless children and youth at OSPI, cautions that the actual homeless numbers are probably higher due to internal reporting issues as well as families not revealing their homeless status due to the stigma attached. The paltry sum of \$850,000 provided by the federal government under the McKinney-Vento Act of 1986 cannot begin to address a problem as acute and complex as child homelessness.

According to a December 2010 US Conference of Mayors study, the three most common causes of homelessness in families are unemployment, lack of affordable housing, and poverty.

According to a study by budgetandpolicy.org published in March 2009, a full-time worker earning the then minimum hourly wage of \$8.07 in Washington needed to work close to 80 hours a week, 52 weeks a year, to afford a two-bedroom apartment built under HUD Section 8 regulation—a program that purports to provide more affordable housing to poor people. This is in fact the 40th percentile of market rents and many needy people are compelled to rent at higher rates.

The typical homeless family consists of a single mother and her two children, and affordable housing is even more out of reach for these families. The average income for a single mother in Washington receiving public support is less than \$550 per month, which would allow her to pay \$157 in monthly rent. The cost of a two-bedroom apartment at the HUD Section 8 rate would be \$672 higher than that.

Bank owned foreclosure inventories in Washington rose by 59.68 percent from December 2009 to December 2010. Month-to-month foreclosure filings have dropped 8.5 percent over that time period, which nevertheless saw 2,228 new filings for December 2010.

A report from the Institution of Taxation and Economic Policy shows that between 1979 and 2003, the bottom 20 percent of Washington residents experienced no perceptible income growth when adjusted for inflation. During this period, however, the income of the wealthiest 1 percent (some 67,000 individuals) increased a full 111

percent above inflation.

According to a report from the National Center on Family Homelessness, “America’s Youngest Outcasts,” 84 percent of homeless families with children are headed by a single mother in her late 20s with two young children. These young parents often have no more than a high school diploma or GED. Nearly all of them have histories of violent victimization, and more than one third suffers from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder—three times the rate of the general female population.

More than 50 percent of mothers experience a major depressive episode while homeless and 85 percent report having had a major depressive episode in the past. Forty-one percent have become dependent on alcohol and drugs, a rate twice as high as in the general female population. Over one third have a chronic medical problem such as asthma, chronic bronchitis or hypertension.

Within a single year, 97 percent of homeless children have moved, 25 percent have witnessed violence and 22 percent have been separated from their families. About half of all school-age children experiencing homelessness have problems with anxiety and depression. Twenty percent of homeless preschoolers have emotional problems that require professional care. Their education is often disrupted and challenges in school are common.

The situation is even worse for youth living on their own, where a documented 42 percent have been abused and those with sexual orientations outside the conventional norm are seven times more likely to be a victim of a violent crime.

More than one in seven homeless children have moderate to severe health conditions—asthma being a common complaint—compared to less than one in sixteen middle-class children who report these conditions. Proficiency rates for homeless children in reading and math are on average 16 percent lower than scores for all students. Less than one in four homeless children graduates high school.

The substantial cuts in the proposed 2011-2013 Washington state budget are guaranteed to further increase child homelessness and general social misery in the coming two years. Governor Christine Gregoire’s submitted budget for 2011-2013 will exacerbate many of

the leading causes of child homelessness as well as remove support for programs that deal with the inevitable fallout from homelessness.

The Democratic governor proposes the elimination of pre-school help for 1,324 poor children, eliminating health benefits for 27,000 children, cutting the Basic Health Plan that provides coverage for 66,000 low-income residents, doing away with Disability Lifeline Medical for 21,000 low-income disabled adults, and eliminating the State Food Assistance Program that provides food benefits for low-income legal immigrants.

Meanwhile, the various cuts to the wages and benefits of state employees will push this sector of workers a step closer to poverty and possible homelessness. The budget demands a 3 percent reduction in compensation on top of no wage increases since 2008, while unpaid temporary layoffs have cost an average employee \$178 per month in 2010. Health care premiums for the average state employee would rise to \$147 (from \$86 in 2010) and workers will pay more in pension contributions, some up to 4.5 percent from 3.9 percent in 2009-2011.

In the light of these progressively more deplorable conditions, Governor Gregoire’s claim in her State of the State address that her budget will set “our state on a trajectory that ensures a strong financial foundation for our kids and grandkids” is a blatant lie. What is actually being proposed is the evisceration of those social programs that provide for the welfare of the most vulnerable sections of society.



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