Poverty, homelessness climb among US schoolchildren

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30 March 2011

In the two years since the onset of the financial crisis in the fall of 2008, the number of children living in poverty increased from 14 million to 16 million, the US Census Bureau reports. The US government estimates that 25 percent of children in America will soon be living in poverty.

On the March 6 installment of the weekly CBS television news program *60 Minutes*, reporter Scott Pelley opened with these harsh statistics. He said of the jump in the numbers of children officially in poverty, "that is the fastest fall for the middle classes since the government started counting, 51 years ago."

The figure of one in four children in poverty is itself is an underestimation. The figure is based on the official US poverty rate of $22,000 a year for a family of four—a ridiculously low sum for a family to live on.

The program cites another record statistic: a total of 1.5 million children, the highest number since the Great Depression, are currently homeless in America.

The 13-minute segment of the CBS TV newsmagazine's weekly program focused on the plight of the rapidly growing population of homeless children who live in the Orlando, Florida, area.

Hundreds of homeless families are crammed into tiny rooms in the aging motels that line one of the highways leading to the famous Disney theme park. School buses have set up regular stops there for the children.

In the "60 Minutes" segment, several families are interviewed about their fears of being split up in shelters or about their profound sadness in having to part their children from themselves and each other, sent out to be cared for by different relatives. Such arrangements recall the desperate conditions of the Great Depression.

An 11-year-old girl in the one of the families featured reports the five-person family—mom, dad and three children—at one point lived in their van. The parents were both laid off from jobs that paid $20 an hour. After begging on the street corner for a job, the father was able to get enough work to keep the family from being evicted from a two-room motel suite.

The girl explains that they had already lost all their possessions, toys, photos—her teen-age brother said he lost his scooter and video system—when the family's storage space was repossessed and the contents sold. The brother has dropped out of high school to look for work now.

In a moving segment, Pelley faces a group of children sitting on bleachers, in what looks like the staging for a typical elementary school class gathering.

When Pelley begins to quiz them, it is clear that these children have worries far beyond whether they are up to date on their homework. When asked how many have ever gone to bed hungry, a large number of hands go up. With tears in their eyes, some of the students describe what it is like to be hungry or what it is like trying to go to sleep with their stomachs hurting from hunger pangs.

Pelley asks the children from families with incomes low enough to receive free school lunch, "How many of you have had the lights turned off at your house?" Nearly every hand in the room goes up.

In another part of the segment, the Seminole County, Florida, director of homeless student services says the number of homeless students in the county goes up relentlessly—5 to 15 more students ask for homeless services every day.

Beth Davalos says the number of homeless children is not the only thing on the rise. So is the duration. She tells Pelley that eight years ago, when she started the program, homelessness lasted two to three months, but now it goes "three months, six months, a year, or two years. This is when these children are developing who they are, and their foundation is broken."

Unfortunately, the CBS news segment was most notable because such reports are so rare as to be remarkable on

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US television. The dearth of coverage is in sharp contrast to the deep decline in the living standards of the working class. The wide dissemination of such true stories to millions of people would make it easier for workers who are suffering the consequences of the devastating economic recession to come to a realization that their problems are social, and not their own.

Recently, the National Alliance to End Homelessness reported that between 2008 and 2009 a majority—31 of 50 states and the District of Columbia—had increases in their homeless counts. The nation's homeless population increased by approximately 20,000 people from 2008 to 2009, a 3 percent increase. There were 656,000 homeless in 2009, up from 636,000 in 2008.

Its new report, *State of Homelessness in America*, highlights that nearly 4 in 10 homeless were living unsheltered, on the street, in a car, or in another place not intended for human habitation. In Wisconsin, twice as many people experienced homelessness without shelter in 2009 as did in 2008.

Key indicators of housing crisis tracked by the group went through triple-digit increases in vastly disparate locations. In Louisiana, (where Hurricane Katrina and flooding ravaged New Orleans nearly six years ago), the homeless population, sheltered and unsheltered, doubled.

The 660,000 homeless reported for 2009 does not include the doubled-up population (people living with family or friends for economic reasons). That figure increased by 12 percent to more than 6 million people from 2008 to 2009.

In Rhode Island, the number of doubled up increased by 90 percent; in South Dakota, the number more than doubled. In the course of a year, the estimated odds of experiencing homelessness for a doubled-up person are 1 in 10.

Among subpopulations, the largest percentage increase was in the number of family households, which increased by more than 3,200 households, a 4 percent increase. Also, the number of persons in families increased by more than 6,000 people (a 3 percent increase). In Mississippi, the number of people in homeless families increased by 260 percent.

A section of the report looks at the causes of rising homelessness. The fall in wages and other supports at the bottom of the income scale is notable. While real income among all US workers decreased by 1 percent in 2009, poor workers' income decreased even more, dropping by 2 percent to $9,151. Poor workers in Alaska, the District of Columbia, Maine, and Rhode Island saw their incomes decrease by more than 10 percent.

In the course of a year, the estimated odds of experiencing homelessness for a young adult aging out of foster care are a staggering 1 in 6. As to homelessness among young people as a whole, the report notes: "It is widely agreed upon that there is a vast undercount of the number of young people experiencing homelessness. Underscoring this is the fact that 35 percent of all communities reported that there were no homeless youth in their communities in 2009."

While the states with the greatest growth of homelessness were Florida, Nevada and California, the Michigan homeless education program released data showing marked increases there in the number of homeless students enrolled in public school districts. From 7,500 in the 2007-2008 school year, the number of homeless students in Michigan rose 300 percent, to 22,673 in the 2009-2010 school year.

The report cites "the current economic conditions in Michigan, and the effects of these on families in our state, particularly, high unemployment and foreclosure rates" as the major causes for the rise.

In four western Michigan counties, Gratiot, Ionia, Isabella and Montcalm, the number of homeless students doubled in less than a year from 666 last spring to 1,242 homeless children in January, 2011.

The *Daily News*, a local newspaper serving Greenville, Belding and Montcalm Counties in western Michigan, quotes Victoria Simon, principal of Threshold Academy in Orleans. She said the number of homeless children was high during the last school year, 11 percent, but now it is up to 15 percent of the school's population.

Simon notes that the increase is "extraordinarily high," and the school's figures don't even count families who are doubled up.

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