

“A Third World in our own backyard”

US child homelessness soars

Barry Grey
15 December 2011

More than 1.6 million children in the United States, or one in 45, are homeless, according to a report released Tuesday by the National Center on Family Homelessness.

The survey conducted by the Massachusetts-based advocacy group concludes that child homelessness surged 38 percent between 2007 and 2010, with the number of children living on the street, in homeless shelters or motels, or doubled up with other families rising over the period by more than 448,000.

Ellen Bassuk, president and founder of the National Center on Family Homelessness and associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the figures suggest “an emerging Third World in our own backyard.”

Among the key findings of the 124-page report, entitled “America’s Youngest Outcasts 2010,” are the following:

- The figure of 1.6 million children homeless in a year equates to more than 30,000 homeless children each week and over 4,400 each day.
- Children experiencing homelessness suffer from hunger, poor physical and emotional health, and missed educational opportunities.
- A majority of these children have limited proficiency in math and reading.
- Only five states reported a decrease in the number of homeless children between 2007 and 2010. Twenty-five states reported that their numbers doubled.

The report is the latest in a series of studies documenting the social devastation in America resulting from mass unemployment and the pro-corporate policies of the Obama administration and both big business parties. Earlier this month a study published by Rutgers University found that only 22 percent of those who lost their jobs between August

2008 and August 2009 were working full-time as of August 2011. Just 7 percent of those initially contacted in the study had regained their previous income level.

Last month, the Census Bureau released a new measurement of poverty in the US that increased the estimate of the number of poor people to 49 million.

The growth of poverty at one end has been accompanied by an ever greater concentration of wealth by a financial aristocracy at the other. In October, the Congressional Budget Office reported that the richest 1 percent of US households nearly tripled their income between 1979 and 2007 and doubled their share of the national income.

With the 2012 presidential campaign season beginning in earnest, one would hardly guess from the statements of any of the contenders that the country is mired in a depression that is swelling the ranks of the poor and homeless at an accelerating rate.

The authors of the homelessness survey note that the reported number of homeless children is likely an undercount, because data collection procedures were changed in California, reducing that state’s total by nearly 163,000 in a single year, from 2009 to 2010. In the three previous years, California had accounted for more than 25 percent of the nation’s homeless children.

The report compares the impact of what it calls the “man-made disaster” of the housing and finance collapse of 2007-2008 with the natural disaster of hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005. Following the hurricanes, the number of homeless children surged in 2006 to 1.5 million, or one in 50. In 2007, following the mass migration from the storm-devastated Gulf region and resettlement of more than a million people, the number of homeless children fell by 385,000, or 25 percent. In that year the rate of homelessness among children fell to one in 63.

Since 2007, however, the child homeless population has soared higher, by 60,000, than the level reached after the hurricanes of 2005.

The “America’s Youngest Outcasts 2010” study compiles figures on a state-by-state basis, using data gathered by school districts. The states with the highest incidence of child homelessness include the highly populated states of New York and California and the much smaller states of Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, Alaska, Louisiana, Kentucky, and Oregon. The states listed as having the highest risk of child homelessness are predominantly in the South and the Southwest, including Texas, Arkansas, Florida, Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Georgia and Arizona.

In a telephone interview Tuesday, Ellen Bassuk, the president of the foundation, said: “What we’re seeing is an escalating number of homeless kids, beginning in 2007 all the way to now. It is a disturbing picture, particularly in a country as affluent as ours.

“These are very poor families with little opportunity. The kids are extremely traumatized. Their outcomes are poor. Many of them don’t graduate from high school. It’s a very sad picture.

“The bulk of these families are headed by women alone. Many of the kids are below the age of six. We’re talking about a whole generation of children who do not have appropriate opportunities to thrive and grow.”

Describing the impact of homelessness on children, Bassuk said, “It’s a very traumatic experience for kids. They lose their friends, their pets, their possessions, their routines. They end up in shelters that tend to be fairly chaotic. Whole families live in one room.

“A lot of kids are hungry in this population. It’s hard to go to school and pay attention when that’s going on.”

Asked about the impact of budget cuts, she noted that the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) is “level-funded,” meaning its funding has not been increased for the past two years. “Therefore it can’t respond to the increase in the number of homeless families,” she said. “We also know there are threats to SNAP (the federal food stamp program) and Head Start, which is a critical program for low-income kids.”

She continued: “Programs that we know benefit these families should not be cut. I think right now we’re

treading water around various programs in the hope that some of these critical programs won’t be further cut.

“Another example is child care vouchers. There are not adequate child care vouchers to help these families. How can a mother go to work who has a bunch of young kids or go to school and learn the skills she needs to earn a livable wage? They need job opportunities and job training to earn a livable wage.

“Everything right now is on the chopping block. There are going to be big domestic spending cuts. Those of us who work in this area are worried.”

Asked if she was disappointed in the policies of the Obama administration, she pointed to the 2009 report “Opening Doors” that was issued by the administration’s Interagency Council on Homelessness. The report “made a commitment to end child and family homelessness in ten years and end some of the other types of homelessness within five years. And if anything we’re seeing a huge spike in numbers. We had certainly hoped that a lot of this would be going in the other direction. It’s been a long, hard four years.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact