

Record number of homeless students in the US in 2013

Isabelle Belanger
29 November 2013

A record 1.1 million students attending public schools in the United States are homeless in 2013. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the number of homeless students has increased by 10 percent in 2013, from 1,065,794 in 2012, to 1,168,354. Forty-three states have reported increases from last year, with 10 states reporting increases of 20 percent or more. The number of homeless children has grown 24 percent over the past three years.

The actual numbers of homeless students are no doubt higher than those reported, because many parents are afraid to report their condition, fearing that child welfare agencies will take their children from them.

A sharp rise in the number of homeless children occurred in the recession of 2007 and has continued ever since. Perhaps most shocking is the fact that in many cases both parents are working, but at jobs that pay miserable wages and come with few or no benefits.

Bill Wolfe, executive director of the Homeless Children's Education Fund based in Pennsylvania, pointed out to the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* that the combined income of families working at minimum wage jobs "isn't enough to rent an apartment, to come up with a security deposit and first month's rent, so they're in shelters or doubled-up situations or living night-to-night in cheap motels [and] living in their cars or vans."

Homelessness has a devastating effect on children and their level of scholastic achievement. According to Wolfe, "for homeless children, keeping up with schoolwork amid chaos—the entire family living in one bedroom of a relative's house, or in a different motel every night, or in the family car—can be a struggle. ... Can you imagine getting homework done, getting a good night's sleep?"

Children who are victims of homelessness without

adequate support in schools, such as health and nutritional services, and extra academic support, are 60 percent more likely to drop out than students living in stable environments.

In schools where support services are provided, homeless children are given a measure of stability in an otherwise chaotic existence. However, with the persistent cuts to education in states across the country, these services are being cut to the bone. In Alabama, where some districts have seen numbers of homeless students double since the start of the recession, the state slashed funding for homeless students by half over the past year, in part due to sequestration cuts.

In addition, homeless students often attend schools in the highest poverty districts—the very schools being targeted by the Obama administration for restructuring, privatization and closure due to low test scores.

A study conducted by the Atlanta-based Southern Education Foundation found that students in poverty make up majorities of public school students in 17 states. These are likely to be the same states seeing the greatest increases in the numbers of homeless students, and also those being most brutally punished by the reactionary testing regime imposed by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, and the more recent Common Core Curriculum.

Homeless students are also likelier to have even more special needs than other poor students. Homeless students with limited English proficiency rose 13 percent between 2009 and 2012, and the number with disabilities rose 24 percent.

Barbara Duffield, policy director of the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth in Washington, points out that the yearly increases in homelessness among school-aged youth have led to a dramatic shift in the provision of

homeless education throughout the country. “Homeless education has stopped being just a few programs in shelters and has become part of the fabric of school systems.” (*Education Week*)

In Mobile, Alabama, school district homeless education liaisons have noted the spike in homelessness this year, far greater than that produced by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, when some 2,000 students were homeless. Currently, there are approximately 5,300 homeless students in the district, victims of the continuing economic crisis. Homeless liaison Denise Riemer commented “I can’t believe the number of food-stamp applications I’ve processed so far for unaccompanied youth. We have new students we find out about every day.”

The Obama administration will not be moved by the new reports of student homelessness, instability and hardship. There will be no measures taken to create decent-paying jobs, low-income housing for the homeless or relief for students experiencing difficulties as the result of the relentless testing at school.

Rather, the Department of Education has, since 2010, required all districts to track the test scores of enrolled homeless students in mathematics and reading, and since the 2011-2012 school year, in science as well. Students who fail to meet standards of proficiency will grow discouraged and be more likely to drop out of school.

In 2012, Barack Obama hailed the achievements of a 16-year-old homeless student, Samantha Garvey, in both his State of the Union Address and his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention. Obama claimed the academic success of one homeless girl was proof that anyone could succeed without government intervention.

It is no fault of Garvey’s, whose family situation was very difficult, that a cynical and hypocritical administration, looking for excuses to justify its own inaction and indifference, held her up as an example by which to punish other homeless students.

The administration will continue to celebrate the supposed success stories even as 60 percent or more of homeless students drop out and face bleak futures. And the government will then claim that the fault lies with the kids and their families for not working hard enough.

To end the afflictions of homelessness and poverty faced by tens of millions of working class families, and

the attack on the right to a quality public education, it is necessary that power be placed in the hands of the mass of people under attack by the capitalist profit system. This requires students, teachers and all workers joining the fight for socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact