

“A permanent Third World in America”

Child homelessness at all-time high in US

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America's Youngest Outcasts, a study released this week by the National Center on Family Homelessness at American Institutes for Research (NCFH), reports that 2.5 million American children were homeless at some point last year, a historic high. The authors of the report warn that if these brutal social conditions persist or worsen, the result will be a “permanent Third World in America.”

More than six years after the height of the foreclosure crisis and fifty years after the declaration of the “War on Poverty,” homeless children account for one out of every thirty children in the country. The number of homeless children increased eight percent between 2012 and 2013 and the total number rose by nearly one million between 2010 and 2013.

This devastating report comes in the sixth year of what President Barack Obama has repeatedly declared to be a great economic recovery. While there has been a recovery for those at the very top, as illustrated by the astronomical rise of the stock market, for most Americans, who have continued to experience a decline in living standards, there has been no recovery at all.

In a particularly nauseating speech delivered at the United Nations in September, Obama insisted that “this is the best time in human history to be born.” The report by the NCFH decisively refutes this ludicrous claim. Rather than the best time to be born, it is the worst of times for millions of children, as they and their families are forced out of their homes and onto the streets.

“Child homelessness has reached epidemic proportions in America,” said Dr. Carmela DeCandia, director of the NCFH. “Living in shelters, neighbors’ basements, cars, campgrounds, and worse, homeless children are the most invisible and neglected individuals in our society. Without decisive action now,

the federal goal of ending child homelessness by 2020 will soon be out of reach,” she concluded.

According to the NCFH report, between the end of the Great Depression and the early 1980s, child homelessness was not a widespread or persistent problem. Child homelessness emerged as a significant and persistent social problem in the middle of the 1980s amidst the social counterrevolution inaugurated by the administration of Ronald Reagan.

Based on the latest federal and state data on child homelessness, including the US Department of Education’s annual count of homeless students in public schools and 2013 US Census data, the report singles out six major factors contributing to high rates of child homelessness. They are: the high national poverty rate; the lack of affordable housing; the continuing impacts of the Great Recession; racial disparities; the challenges of single parenting; and the impact of traumatic experiences on families, in particular, domestic violence.

With a child poverty rate of 19.9 percent in 2013, a large number of American children are living at significant risk of being homeless. Families headed by a single mother are particularly at risk, with more than one third of single mother households living in poverty. An estimated 45 million people lived at or below the federal poverty line in 2013.

Affordable housing is essentially nonexistent for the poor in the United States, putting the poorest of the poor at constant risk of homelessness. Nationally, there are only 30 units available for every 100 extremely low-income families seeking housing. Federal housing vouchers have been repeatedly slashed over the last decade, reducing the amount of assistance available for low-wage workers and the unemployed. Waiting lists for housing assistance average two years.

A 2013 study by the National Low Income Housing Coalition found that there was no state in the US where an individual working a 40-hour minimum-wage job could afford a two-bedroom apartment for his or her family.

Homelessness has been shown to damage the cognitive development of young children, further limiting their opportunities later in life. According to the NCFH report, the effects of trauma associated with homelessness may impair the development of a child's brain structure, disrupting the ability to learn and blocking the development of social relationships, cognitive skills and emotional self-regulation. Approximately 25 percent of homeless preschool age children have serious mental health problems; this rises to 40 percent among homeless school age children.

The report utilized the broad McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness, which counts adults and children who are at any point in a given year without secure housing, in a temporary shelter, living out of a vehicle, squatting in abandoned buildings, residing in a motel, hotel or campground, doubling up with extended family members, or fleeing domestic violence.

The definition used by the report is much broader than the more limited Housing and Urban Development Department's Point in Time study, which measures only the number of individuals sleeping outdoors or in homeless shelters on a single day at the beginning of a given year. The HUD count, which found 216,261 homeless family members at the beginning of 2013, left out hundreds of thousands of children and families in transitory shelter.

The NCFH report ranked states according to a composite of four criteria: extent of child homelessness; child wellbeing; risk for child homelessness; and state policy and planning efforts. While there is no part of the United States that is free from the scourge of child homelessness, the severity of the crisis varies by state and region. The states with the worst composite rating are located in the Southeast and Southwest, while those with the least onerous scores are concentrated in the Midwest and Northeast.

Minnesota had the "best" score with a population of 23,608 homeless children in 2013 and a child poverty rate of 14 percent. Alabama had the worst, with a population of 59,349 homeless children in 2013 and a child poverty rate of 27 percent. Last year in California,

a staggering 525,000 children experienced homelessness, while 190,000 did in Texas, and nearly 140,000 in Florida.

Despite rising to historic levels, the issue of child homelessness was not once addressed during the midterm elections by the Democrats or Republicans. No new tranche of funding or emergency social program was proposed that would aim to eliminate the social crime of child poverty and homelessness. The callous indifference of Democrats and Republicans alike to the plight of the most vulnerable members of American society is not surprising, as they not only serve the interests of the rich, but are themselves in the wealthiest 10 percent of the country. The year 2012 marked the first time that a majority of congressional members had an average net worth of \$1 million or more.



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