

Critical Facts – Why Young Children and Pregnant Persons Should be Prioritized for Housing

Families comprise more than one-third of the overall homeless population nationwide.¹ In 2013, it was estimated that 1 in 30 children may be impacted every year by housing insecurity.² The majority of family members facing housing insecurity are children, more than half of whom are less than six years old.³ In fact, infants are more likely than any other age group to stay in shelters.⁴

The health risks these children face are substantial and severe. Recent research emphasizes the myriad ways in which housing insecurity – meaning both literal homelessness and families living “doubled up” with relatives or friends – negatively impacts the developing brain and increases the likelihood of chronic disease. Evidence has also shown that the effects of housing insecurity compound over time and with repeated instances. This holds true not only for young children living through episodes of housing insecurity, but also for those whose mothers experienced housing insecurity during their pregnancy.⁵

Housing is an important social influencer of health. Housing insecurity, combined with other adverse events in childhood, can lead to an activation of the body's natural stress response. If adverse childhood experiences are not mitigated by the presence of stable and supportive relationships, they can lead to an exaggerated or toxic stress response. Toxic stress can cause disruption of nerve formation and structures in the brain. It can also lead to lifelong and even intergenerational effects, with increased risk of mental health and behavioral issues, heart disease, and diabetes.^{6,7}

Children's HealthWatch estimated that 18,600 hospitalizations associated with early childhood and prenatal homelessness in the U.S. cost more than \$238 million annually. Infants less than one year old accounted for more than half of this cost.⁸ The National Alliance to End Homelessness conducted a series of studies from 2007-2014 and found that the average cost of homelessness to taxpayers is in the \$30,000 range per year for every individual experiencing homelessness. This cost can be halved just by ensuring enough permanent supportive housing for all people living with housing insecurity.⁹

In addition, the racial demographics of homelessness in Chicago reflect deep inequities that must be addressed. According to data from the city of Chicago's 2019 Point in Time Count, 79% of sheltered and 74% unsheltered individuals experiencing homelessness were Black, despite making up less than one-third of the city's population.¹⁰ These disparities extend to the city's children as well. In 2018-2019, Black students made up more than 80 percent of the

16,451 students experiencing homelessness in Chicago Public Schools (CPS), despite making up only 37 percent the overall student population.¹¹

Infants and young children face a lifetime of behavioral and physical health problems when they experience early life adversity, and homelessness is a major toxic stressor that must be addressed.

Effect of Housing Insecurity on Children Birth to Six

- Mounting evidence shows that a child who has experienced multiple forms of early childhood adversity and toxic stress, including homelessness, are at risk for permanent changes to their brain, which may lead to lifetime complications with learning and behavior, increased mental illness, and long-term physical illnesses.^{7,12}
- Studies suggest that adolescents and young adults who have experienced homelessness in early childhood are at an increased risk for problems with attention, working memory and higher-level thinking skills.¹³
- Children who have experienced homelessness are at higher risk of experiencing developmental delays, such as speech delays, lack of school readiness, and academic failures, and depression than children who have been stably housed.^{14,15}
- Housing insecurity exacerbates the myriad and lifelong health effects caused by adverse childhood effects (ACEs), which include asthma, coronary heart disease, stroke, and diabetes.^{6,16}
- Mothers who have experienced homelessness are four times more likely to be followed by child welfare agencies or have children placed in foster care than low-income mothers who have never experienced homelessness.¹⁷

Impact of Homelessness on Infants in the Womb

- Infants born to persons experiencing homelessness are more likely to be born prematurely and with low birth weights, to require a ventilator upon birth, and to require admission to an intensive care unit than those born to pregnant persons who are stably housed.^{18,19}
- If pregnant persons are exposed to extreme stress during pregnancy, their infants may undergo changes to the brain that affect their ability to react to stress for the rest of their life.²⁰

Pregnancy and Concerns Among Persons Experiencing Homelessness

- Pregnant persons who live in shelters are less likely to receive well care in ambulatory settings and are about 50% more likely to use the emergency department for their care.²¹
- Homelessness during pregnancy increases multiple complication risks in pregnant persons compared to housed pregnant persons, especially bleeding complications (1.9 times higher risk), early labor (twice higher risk) and overall complications (2.6 times higher risk.)¹⁹

Policy Recommendations to Prevent and Mitigate the Health Consequences of Child Housing Insecurity.

- Racial equity should be centered in the design and provision of all housing and support services.
- Families comprising children ages birth to six and pregnant persons with housing insecurity should be prioritized for homelessness prevention services.
- Social supportive services should be provided to children and families experiencing housing insecurity with the goal of preventing homelessness.
- Pregnant persons and families with children experiencing literal homelessness should be prioritized for permanent supportive housing, rapid rehousing, and other permanent housing programs.
- Families must be universally considered in the development and/or expansion of supportive and affordable housing.

ICAAP's Mission is to promote and advocate for the optimal child, youth and family well-being, and access to quality healthcare.

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