

PLNU *forward*

The Unexpected Faces of Homelessness: *Families with Children*

by Christine Spicer

Eight-year-old Jason is a friendly, outgoing boy with wavy blonde hair and a quick smile. His favorite subject is math, and he loves reading the book series, "How to Train Your Dragon." He enjoys playing basketball and learning hip-hop dance moves in [his] after-school program and hopes to pursue a career as a basketball player or [police officer].

Jason wasn't always an upbeat kid who enjoys school. His family fell on hard times, became homeless, and moved into a family unit at a shelter. His father is employed, but the family struggles financially. Jason is one of six children.

When the third-grader arrived at Monarch [School for children experiencing homelessness] last summer, he was two years behind in reading and math. At his previous school, he had been a frequent target for bullying and had no friends. At Monarch, he kicked chairs, told his teachers that he hated life and everyone, and cried multiple times a day. He often put his head down on his desk, trying to sleep through the day. If a class assignment involved a lot of reading, he shut down and refused to try. He didn't like sitting near other kids.



Jason's story is, sadly, not unique. About 40 percent of the nation's homeless population is made up of families. In 2009, more than 500,000 individuals in families required emergency shelter or transitional housing. The National Center on Family Homelessness (NCFH) reports that approximately 1.5 million children experience homelessness each year, and service providers have reported seeing increased numbers of families and children living in homelessness in the past couple of years. In San Diego County, for example, homelessness is up 19 percent since 2008, according to the Regional Task Force on the Homeless San Diego. According to the Department of Education, the number of public school students experiencing homelessness rose 20 percent compared to the previous year in 2008-09.

There is no question as to whether homelessness negatively affects children and families. Children in families experiencing homelessness are more likely to have health, emotional, academic, and behavioral problems. Many have been exposed to violence and trauma. Families experiencing homelessness are more likely to suffer separation, and homeless mothers are more likely than other mothers – even other mothers living in poverty – to experience major depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and drug abuse.

The issues surrounding family homelessness are not easily resolved, but federal and local governments, nonprofit organizations, and individuals are working hard to make a difference.



Defining Homelessness

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) says the term homeless applies to “an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.” This includes those living in shelters (“including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill”) or any “public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings” such as a car or park.

According to the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH), the majority of homeless families include one or two young children and a single mother (the NCFH says approximately 84 percent of families experiencing homelessness are headed by women), and more than 80 percent of these families have experienced domestic violence.

Sarita Fuentes (MBA 92) has seen children living in situations across the spectrum of homelessness. In June, Fuentes completed a seven-year stint as CEO and co-principal of the Monarch School, the K-12 school for homeless children in San Diego that Jason attends. Monarch is a unique partnership between the San Diego County Office of Education and the nonprofit Monarch School Project, a 501 (c)(3) organization.

As of March, 52 percent of Monarch students were in traditional or domestic violence shelters; eight percent were living in single room occupancy hotels; 20 percent were doubled or tripled up with other families in a single residence; and 20 percent had recently moved into affordable or subsidized housing and will leave Monarch for another public school at the end of the academic year if their families remain stable.

How It Happens

“Welfare isn’t always enough to afford rent,” said Molly Downs (01). As the emergency services director for the San Diego Rescue Mission, Downs runs an overnight shelter for women and children and coordinates an outpatient therapy clinic.

When families are living month to month and not always making it, problems can spiral out of control, she explained. For example, families just getting by can be forced into homelessness by an unexpected health problem or the loss of a job.

“Past evictions make it so people won’t rent to you,” she said. “Mental health issues such as depression or anxiety are common when people are in long-term stressful situations.”

Large families, long-term financial crises, lack of family support, and drug or alcohol problems sometimes alienate struggling families from friends or family who might have otherwise been able to help them.

“They have sometimes burned all their bridges,” Downs said of her clients. “Some people come from out of state to live with family and friends, but if someone loses a job, that situation falls apart,” Fuentes added.

The economic downturn is also a likely culprit in the rising number of families who can no longer afford housing. Foreclosures have been involved in a minority of cases – Fuentes has seen maybe 10 families at Monarch in the past four years who have been homeless after losing their houses to foreclosure. A more common scenario is unemployment pushing lower-income and some formerly middle class families into homelessness for the first time.

The people she and Downs see aren’t always jobless, however. “Under-employment” and low-wage employment are also common issues. One family that touched Downs’ heart was a grandmother with a full-time job caring for her 15-year-old grandson. Despite her best efforts, they still ended up without a roof over their heads until they came to the Rescue Mission.

The economy is also likely responsible for one of the more disturbing trends Downs has observed: families are staying in the overnight shelter longer than in the past because there is nowhere else for them to go.

“There’s an increase in families but not an increase in shelter,” she explained. “Some people have timed out on all the shelters, which is something new I’ve seen in the last 10 years.”

Fuentes has also observed more families being in need for longer periods of time.

“The biggest thing we have seen is the increase in the population,” she said. “In the fall of 2009, we went from having 100 students enrolled to 150 in three months.”

Due to the increased demand, the shelters in San Diego that can house intact families all have waiting lists, a situation that is common in other cities as well. Some shelters, like the Rescue Mission, can provide emergency overnight shelter only to women and children, meaning that families still together may have to be separated, at least temporarily.

Limited access to long-term affordable housing is also a factor. Even families that are able to get into low-cost housing may not be able to remain stable. Fuentes said one family she knows recently moved into an apartment after receiving a tax refund. She’s not sure they will be able to stay there long, however, since the extra money won’t be available every month. Unfortunately, repeated bouts of homelessness are not uncommon for low-income families.

The Impact of Homelessness on Children

Fuentes and Downs agree that homeless children are at an educational, social, and developmental disadvantage. The severity of the effects of homelessness on kids depends partially on how long their families are without a home.

“For children whose families have been impacted over a period of years, that development piece is going to be huge,” said Fuentes. “We had a graduate who had been here eight years and was homeless the entire time.”

At all ages, homelessness has deleterious effects.



Since there aren't many places for homeless mothers of infants and toddlers to go during the day, Downs said many resort to keeping their little ones confined to strollers until the shelter doors open. Not only do these young children miss out on opportunities to practice their gross and fine motor skills, but many go without the physical contact of being held and talked to during the day.

"I've seen really stable moms who can be really good moms for their kids even though they are homeless," said Downs. "But it's rare. Often the moms are just exhausted and don't have the patience or knowledge or skills to deal with their babies."

Downs spoke of one pregnant mom who also has an "out-of-control" four-year-old. The mom tries to cope by smoking.

Unfortunately, being old enough to go to school doesn't protect children from the disadvantages of homelessness. Some aren't attending school, especially if they are relocating or if the pressures of their situation have made education drop on their parents' priority list. Others have patchy attendance and frequent school site changes that make academic success and social development extra challenging.

"Most students come in academically deficient, including kindergartners," said Fuentes. "Most haven't been in preschool or had enrichment at home. Many don't have basic skills."

Even for those regularly attending classes, homelessness creates many obstacles to students' progress.

"We had some kids who were so hungry after school that they couldn't even have therapy," said Downs. "Another kid wasn't getting enough sleep due to noise, and so he would go to the nurse's office every day to sleep. Another little girl had anger issues that affected her schoolwork. It can be embarrassing to go to school without clean clothes. It's not all the kids. Some are on honor roll. But that's not the majority."

"Every once in a blue moon, we get students who should be offered gifted or honors courses," Fuentes added. "Sometimes we will enroll them concurrently at local community colleges for higher-level classes. Right now, we have 66 high school students. We have four who are eligible for advanced foreign language or science classes."

Although Fuentes stresses that Monarch is "first and foremost a school," programs to meet students' other needs are an important complement. Among offerings are medical, dental, and vision services; tutoring; enrichment activities such as Junior Achievement Butterfly Enterprises, a steel drum band, Tae Kwon Do, tennis, and cooking classes; healthy breakfasts and lunches every school day and family dinners twice a week; and transportation for parents when they need to visit the campus. Monarch also strives to provide consistency for children even once they transition to other schools by allowing them to continue in the after-school program as long as they remain in good academic standing at their new schools.

Both Monarch and the Rescue Mission provide therapy as well since many children have experienced trauma, stress, or neglect. Even seemingly small services, like cleaning children's laundry, make a big difference at both places.

Both Downs and Fuentes say that a place like Monarch is an especially good fit for homeless children because their specific needs are met and they don't have to feel different from the other students because of their situation. "There is no stigma or shame here," said Fuentes. "Everyone is in the same boat. Students feel safe in the small setting, and their siblings are here. They often want to look out for younger ones."

Whatever their age and school setting, it is clear that children impacted by homelessness have myriad needs. Comprehensive services for children and their families are crucial to helping them overcome their situations and reach their potential.

One Story at A Time

There are no easy answers to ending homelessness, although lawmakers and numerous others are working hard to determine the best policies to help. In the meantime, there are worthwhile efforts being made by places like the Rescue Mission and Monarch School. And while the economy can make the problem of family homelessness seem even more daunting, there is hope in knowing that many families are receiving help and are recovering.

"I love my job," said Downs. "It's giving me more compassion. It's really hard to see some of the stuff we see – seeing the kids is probably the hardest part, what they go through. The part that's cool is seeing lives changed."

One of Downs' current staff members is a former meth addict whose child is now in kindergarten and doing extremely well. "Sometimes it takes time," said Downs. "Working at the mission, we can pray with our clients. We can incorporate God, and it makes a huge difference in their recovery and gives them some hope and something to hold onto."

At Monarch, [Jason] began sessions with [a] special education teacher three times a week and worked one-on-one with tutors every day in the academic support hour after school. He participated in art therapy sessions with [Monarch's] expressive arts therapist as well as social skills lessons in the classroom.

Jason's teacher, Tara Barrows, seated him next to students who she knew would show him unconditional kindness. Once he felt accepted, he became more warm and friendly toward others. "Everyone here is so nice," he has said to his teacher. "I love this school!" Jason now eagerly welcomes new students and adult visitors to the school and takes pride in serving as a Monarch ambassador. Jason initiates friendships, even taking a new kid under his wing recently and becoming a good friend to him.

Individualized attention from teachers enabled Jason to progress academically, and he began to realize how smart he is. He's now working at grade level in math and reading and beamed when he recently scored 100 percent on a math test. Last month, he made the High Flyers Honor Roll list. His mom reports that he now reads to his little brother in the evenings.

Barrows says Jason needs one-on-one attention and teachers who believe in him. "When his social and emotional needs are met, he tries harder and excels."

When the school day ends, Jason stays for the after-school program and loves visits to the YMCA and The New Children's Museum. He's also a fan of the D.A.R.E. dance program. There are still occasions near the day's end when frustration gets to Jason, but Barrows knows when to draw him aside and redirect him with compassion and understanding.

Jason's family recently moved to a small apartment. It's crowded and noisy, so sometimes he has a hard time sleeping. The family's struggle in tough economic times continues. But Jason no longer dreads school and is able to look ahead and see a bright future for himself.

***Used with permission from the Monarch School*

How Can You Help?

The *Viewpoint* asked various experts how we might help address the complex problem of homelessness. What they told us was surprisingly simple:



> Give your time by volunteering with an organization that serves the homeless. You might serve as a tutor, provide meals, or offer help in many other ways. If you have a willing heart, a good nonprofit can use you.



> Give of your resources by donating money or in-kind items to nonprofits that assist those who are homeless. Do research to understand the missions and programs offered by each organization, and choose to support places that align with your giving desires.



> Give your kindness and respect when you encounter someone who is homeless by smiling, asking sincere questions, and making eye contact whenever you can.



> Be informed, and be an advocate for the homeless and organizations that serve the homeless.



> Pray.