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1 in 50 American children experiences homelessness

BY DAVID CRARY * AP NATIONAL WRITER * March 10, 2009

NEW YORK (AP) -- One of every 50 American children experiences homelessness, according to a new report that says most states have inadequate plans to address the worsening and often-overlooked problem.

The report being released Tuesday by the *National Center on Family Homelessness* gives Connecticut the best ranking. Texas is at the bottom.

"These kids are the innocent victims, yet it seems somehow or other they get left out," said the center's president, Dr. Ellen Bassuk. "Why are they America's outcasts?"

The report analyzes data from 2005-2006. It estimates that 1.5 million children experienced homelessness at least once that year, and says the problem is surely worse now because of the foreclosures and job losses of the deepening recession.

"If we could freeze-frame it now, it would be bad enough," said Democratic Sen. Robert Casey of Pennsylvania, who wrote a foreword to the report. "By end of this year, it will be that much worse."

The report's overall state rankings reflect performance in four areas: child homelessness per capita, child well-being, risk for child homelessness, and state policy and planning.

The top five states were Connecticut, New Hampshire, Hawaii, Rhode Island and North Dakota. At the bottom were Texas, Georgia, Arkansas, New Mexico and Louisiana.

Reflecting the disarray caused by Hurricane Katrina, the report said Louisiana had the most homeless children per capita in 2006, followed by Texas and California.

However, Bassuk - a psychiatry professor at Harvard Medical School - said many states fell short in regard to policy and planning. Only six were praised for "extensive" planning to curb child homelessness. Twenty-four states received an "inadequate" grade.

Ken Martin, executive director of the Texas Homeless Network, said the large number of homeless children in Texas was predictable.

"It's not surprising when you don't put money into human services that you have issues come up," said Martin, who expressed hope that improvements are forthcoming.

The Texas Interagency Council for the Homeless is fine-tuning a plan for curbing homelessness. Lack of such a plan earned the state an "inadequate" rating in the report.

Michael Gerber, executive director of the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs and chairman of the interagency council, said officials are assessing how to use \$41 million in federal stimulus money Texas expects to receive for homeless programs.

In Arkansas, relatively few homeless shelters cater to families or single fathers, so it took a while for Vaughn Summerville to find Our House Shelter in Little Rock. Because it has separate housing for families, Summerville can stay with his two daughters, who attend an after-school program at the shelter while he works at a museum.

"It was horrible at first, but it's getting better," said Tiffany Summerville, 13. "I guess I'm still reacting, because we've never been in a shelter before."

Many homeless families miss out on such support, foregoing shelters because they fear having their children taken from them, said Sandra Wilson of the Arkansas Homeless Coalition.

Shelters in Arkansas are funded mostly through private donations, along with some federal money, said Julie Munsell of the state Department of Health and Human Services. There's no state funding, and backers of a bill to create a housing trust fund said they are not sure where the money would come from.

In Georgia, one challenge is serving homeless youth who are on their own.

"We need to make it safe for kids to ask for help," said Becca Orchard of StandUp for Kids in Atlanta. "The focus is on the homeless adults because we can see them, and they're a nuisance. We can't see the kids, so we don't think they're there."

New York was ranked 38th, worst of any northeastern state. According to New York City's Coalition for the Homeless, the number of families in municipal shelters reached a record high at the end of November - 9,720 families, the most since the city began reporting such data 25 years ago.

Among the families in shelters now are Galina and Mark Turner, and their 18-month-old son, Nareem. They were evicted two weeks ago from their apartment, unable to keep up with the rent.

"It's decent," Galina said of their city-run shelter. "The worst part is it feels like jail."

Mark, 27, is jobless, and thus able to take care of Nareem while Galina works as a security guard.

"We're trying to hold our heads up and be optimistic," Galina said.

The report said homeless children are far more likely than other children to experience hunger, suffer chronic health problems, repeat a grade in school and drop out of high school.

It stressed the long-term damage that can result from disruptions to friendships, health care and family routines.

"These factors combine to create a life-altering experience that inflicts profound and lasting scars," the report said.

It offered 19 recommendations for government action, including beefed-up federal spending on low-income housing, assistance to struggling renters and homeowners, and investment in child care for homeless children. It urged states to place homeless families directly into permanent housing rather than into motels.

Ending homelessness for all U.S. children within a decade is possible, despite the recession, said the report, which Bassuk's center issued to launch a campaign pursuing that goal.

"If we fail to act," the report said, "the consequences will play out for years to come as a generation of lost children grow to adulthood."

Associated Press writers Linda Stewart Ball in Dallas, Daniel Shea in Little Rock, Ark., and Dionne Walker in Atlanta contributed to this report.

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