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There are federal mandates and some stimulus funds, but not nearly enough to keep up with this heartbreaking problem.

By [Judy Lightfoot](#)

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According to a National Center on Family Homelessness (NCFH) [Fact Sheet](#) published in April 2008, there are more homeless women and children living in the U.S. than in any other industrialized nation. Even if you already knew that, it's still shocking to read in a *New York Times* story by Erik Eckholm, "[Surge in Homeless Children Strains School Districts.](#)" that in spring 2009 more than 1 million American children were homeless.

The number is going up. Estimates are that the count of homeless children has risen by 75 to 100 percent over the past two years as a result of family job losses and mortgage foreclosures, and will continue to rise at accelerated rates. This is bad news not just for parents and children but for school districts.

The stresses of homelessness tell not only on the children and their parents, but also on schools. School districts financially strapped by the economic downturn and other factors lack resources to help a child who couldn't do his homework before falling asleep alongside his parents in the family car the previous night, or who is continually shuttled from relatives' homes to a room in a motel to a campground tent.

Under the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, first voted into law in 2001, districts are required to take specific steps on behalf of children who become homeless. The purpose is to minimize interruptions of their schooling and cut red tape that could bar or delay their entrance into appropriate programs. McKinney-Vento has "closed destructive gaps in schooling," say the sources Eckholm cites. But even with some Congressional funding to aid compliance, school districts already financially strapped by the recession and other factors are finding it harder to meet needs specified in the federal mandate as the numbers of homeless children increase.

It's critical that schools be able to help these students. Homeless children are four times more likely than their more fortunate peers to be delayed in their development, says NCFH, adding: "Of children in grades 3-12 who are homeless and participated in state assessment tests, only 48 percent were proficient in reading and only 43 percent were proficient in math. 36 percent of homeless children repeat a grade."

The federal McKinney-Vento Act of 2002 specifies the steps that schools must take to give children some sense of continuity when family life has been shattered by homelessness. The

children are to be allowed to enroll in a school immediately, even if their academic and immunization records have gone missing. A special staff liaison must ensure that their educational opportunities (access to tutors, free meals, before- and after-school programs, gifted programs, emergency supplies of essential equipment for doing schoolwork) equal those offered other students.

To ensure that steps are taken to keep these children in school and doing as well as possible, McKinney-Vento specifies that a district liaison must be appointed. The liaison paves the way for homeless children to enroll in a school or its classes immediately even if an academic or immunization record has gone missing. Their educational opportunities must equal those offered other students at the school: All children must have the same access to tutors, free meals, before- and after-school programs, gifted programs, emergency supplies of essential equipment for doing schoolwork, etc.

And if a family has moved to another district, the cost of transportation to the children's school of origin from their new location must be covered so that disruptions of their lives can be lessened somewhat. Last winter two Nickelsville children, one an elementary school student and one a middle-schooler, were picked up by separate taxicabs in the University District every morning so that they could attend their schools on the Eastside, where their family had lived until they lost their housing.

President Obama allotted \$70 million of his stimulus package to help U.S. school districts cover the special costs of educating homeless students according to federal law, and in August Washington state was awarded \$1,298,061 in stimulus money for its 296 school districts. It's a rise in funding over what Congress gave the state last year.

But if *America's Youngest Outcasts: State Report Card on Child Homelessness* is accurate in [its count of 24,038 homeless children living in Washington](#), this funding works out to be an increase from \$36 per child to \$54 per child. That's if the number of homeless children stays steady (which it won't), and if 15-mile taxi rides between school and the family tent didn't blast huge holes in such calculations to begin with.

How can children learn, if they don't have a home where they can study, rest, keep a few favorite possessions safely nearby, and get a little comfort and encouragement from parents who have emotional reserves to draw on? In Eckholm's wrenching *Times* article the strain on homeless children is intense; for example, on the 9-year-old who falls asleep in class because worry keeps her awake all night. Online audio clips of exhausted parents talking about the distresses of unemployment and homelessness are linked to the article.

The problem is sad and overwhelming. One defense against despair and rage is to pitch in and try to make a small difference. Here are some ways to help. The Seattle/King County Coalition on Homelessness buys backpacks filled with school supplies for homeless children age 3-18. SKCCH also gives clothing, shoes, and hygiene kits to students in urgent need of these items. One can donate [here](#). Posted at Idealist.org is a notice that homeless children at Broadview Emergency Shelter [need tutors](#). So do homeless kids at [First Place School](#).

Judy Lightfoot, formerly a teacher and the Founding Head of Eastside Prep in Kirkland, is a Seattle writer. She is also a [Freestyle Volunteer](#), meeting at cafes each week with individuals who share our public spaces but are socially isolated by homelessness or mental illness.

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