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## Commentary: We shouldn't have homeless children in America

David A. Love | The Progressive Media Project

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One million schoolchildren are homeless in America. That's an intolerable number, and it's likely to rise unless we do something about it.

For homeless school-age children — with precarious living arrangements and the daily struggles to find food and shelter — attending school is an uphill battle. At least one-fifth do not attend school at all. Often, there is no transportation from shelters to school.

And for those homeless students who do attend, they have more academic problems, are suspended twice as often, and are more likely to repeat a grade. Their math and reading scores are 16 percent lower, and only one in four graduates from high school.

We are punishing these school-age kids for the sins of our economic and social policies.

Starting with President Reagan, the federal government has made one cut after another in the social safety net. President Clinton overturned our welfare policies. And Presidents Bush father and son both were unfriendly to the poor.

Today's hard times have only made things worse. The recession, brought on by reckless Wall Street gambling, has brought on an epidemic of foreclosures and layoffs.

With foreclosures and layoffs particularly high in communities of color, the black and Latino middle class are joining the burgeoning ranks of the homeless. In fact, children of color now constitute a majority of the homeless.

In 1996, 66 percent of homeless parents with children under 18 were white, 15 percent were black, 14 percent Hispanic, 1 percent American Indian and 4

percent other. But in 2006, 38 percent of homeless parents were white, 47 percent were black, 13 percent were Hispanic, 2 percent were American Indian, with 1 percent other. (All statistics in this article come from the National Center on Family Homelessness.)

The effects of homelessness on children are crippling.

Children who are homeless are in bad health twice as often as other children, and four times as often as children with a family annual income of more than \$35,000. They are four times as likely to have asthma, and they go hungry twice as often as other children.

Homeless children have delayed development at a rate four times the national average. More than one-fifth of homeless children between 3 and 6 years have emotional problems that require professional attention.

We can eliminate childhood homelessness if we have the will.

The federal government should invest \$10 billion over two years to building 100,000 rental homes, funding 400,000 new housing vouchers for \$3.6 billion, and investing \$3 billion for child care vouchers for homeless children.

Meanwhile, states and localities can make homelessness a priority, place families into permanent housing rather than motels and prevent the removal of children into foster care solely because of homelessness.

Critics of "big government" will say that America can't afford such an expense in a recession, that we simply don't have the money. But we have the money, somehow, to bail out Wall Street to the tune of trillions of dollars. We have the money, somehow, to wage two wars that are draining trillions more from our Treasury.

Critics of social spending on homelessness also believe that poverty is someone else's problem, the result of laziness, immorality or bad life choices. But the United States has never had enough good-paying jobs for all who need them. Besides, what choice does a child have about her family's income level?

In our Great Recession, many people are a paycheck, a mortgage payment or a hospital bill away from homelessness, a fate that is especially cruel to their children. It should not be too much to guarantee our nation's kids a roof over their heads.

## **ABOUT THE WRITER**

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