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HEADLINE: Number of Homeless Children in Florida Increasing, Advocates Say



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By Lisa J. Huriash

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Forced out of a Coral Springs apartment when his mom lost her waitress jobs and couldn't pay the rent, one teenager spent three months living with her in a friend's backyard tent before the two could find space in a shelter.

In Boca Raton, two brothers sleep on a cot in a church, writing poems and drawing pictures of houses for their mother to tape to the closet door she has instead of her own walls.

Both families with children. Both trying to work and struggling to survive. Both homeless and living in a shelter.

The plight of America's homeless children got national attention recently when President Barack Obama said he is "heartbroken that any child in America is homeless." He was referring to a recently released study by the National Center on Family Homelessness, which found one in 50 American children are homeless, and the economy is making the problem worse.

Florida has about 50,000 homeless children, according to the study, and advocates say their number, like the number of adults, is growing.

In Broward, about 1,600 homeless children are enrolled in the school system, said Dianne Lee Sepielli, the School Board's coordinator for homeless education.

Counting methods have changed over time, but she thinks the numbers are rising.

"The volume of what I'm dealing with has gone up dramatically," she said, referring to the "massive number of phone calls I am getting" from schools asking about transportation and resources.

Palm Beach County has 953 homeless children enrolled in the school system, said Claudia Tuck, division director for Palm Beach County Human Services.

Their families are either living in shelters, motels and cars, or doubling up with friends or relatives.

"We're working on all aspects of homelessness," Tuck said, including encouraging outreach teams that scour the streets for people to take to shelters.

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Sepielli's program helps children continue in the same school while their parents move around, assists parents in finding shelter and aids children in getting free meals and clothing.

"Many of these are families in transition and have never been in this situation before," Sepielli said.

"The older children are embarrassed and the parents are struggling to maintain some normalcy to their lives.

"The younger children seem more resilient and, as long as the families are together, they seem OK.

"All the children grow up too quickly and seem to try to help the parents in different ways, some taking over the parent role when the parent is trying to hold it all together," Sepielli said.

"Many of them know they are behind on bills or when the rent is due."

These children need extra attention, said Barbara Duffield, with the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth in Washington, D.C.

Studies indicate fewer than one in four graduate from high school, and homeless children worry more and get sick more often than other kids, she said.

"Homeless children have a hard time concentrating in the classroom due to the uncertainty of their housing situation and the fear about what will happen to themselves and their families," she said. The problems don't vanish as the children age.

"Kids who don't graduate from high school lose \$200,000 in lifetime income for each child," said Ellen Bassuk, president of the National Center on Family Homelessness.

"And if you don't graduate from high school, your life expectancy decreases by more than five years. ... It has to do with risk-taking behavior, knowledge how to use health care.

"These children are going to cost us a lot of money because if kids have more medical problems, more traumatic stress, more emotional problems, they are more likely to be dependent on the state and not be economically self-sufficient as adults."

At Northfork Elementary School in Fort Lauderdale, friends of Zykeith Elliard, 6, asked to go to his house to play. "You can't," he told them. "We live in a shelter."

Zykeith is the youngest of four children of single mother Gwendolyn Elliard, 34, who lives with her family in a Salvation Army facility off Broward Boulevard in Fort

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Lauderdale.

Word spread around school and Zykeith's sisters, Zykeria Mathis, 9, and Jeshema Tarver, 7, were teased.

The oldest, Koby Elliard, 10, set his siblings straight. "At least you have a roof over your head," he told them.

"My kids are understanding," said Gwendolyn Elliard, who earns \$7 an hour making sandwiches at Quiznos. "This is the first time I've ever been in a facility like this. I get by, by praying."

In Boca Raton, Grace Magri, 41, turns to her two sons, ages 11 and 5, for inspiration. The younger son draws her pictures of flowers and hearts and dream houses — "lots of love," she said.

"I don't have fear because my mother is always here" is a line from a poem her older son wrote.

During the day, the boys attend school while their mother spends time at the Family Promise resource center in Delray Beach looking for a job. At night they all sleep at Advent Lutheran Church in Boca Raton.

In January, Holly Wild, 45, moved with her son Evan, 14, from the friend's backyard tent to one room at Paul's Place Family Shelter in Fort Lauderdale.

Evan said he knows times are tough. Wild tells her son to think of their situation as "low-income housing, 'cause we do pay rent." The rent is \$75 a week.

She also tells Evan to be grateful for what he has. "You ate today," she tells him. "There are children who did not eat."

Evan said he knows his mom is trying.

"I know it's all going to pass and it's going to get better." At least, he said, "it's not as tough as when we were in the tent."

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