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HEADLINE: US Shelters See Spike in Families Left Out On Street

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Children leave the Family Gateway shelter in Dallas, Texas. Families make up as much as one-third of the US's homeless. John Moore / Getty Images / AFP

DALLAS, TEXAS // Jennifer Ross is the new face of homelessness in the United States.

Twenty-five years old, this African-American single mother of seven was unable to care for her kids and also make ends meet.

“I went from being all right to not having nothing, and having to face the fact that I was homeless,” she said.

Ms Ross secured a spot at the Family Gateway homeless shelter in Dallas for herself and five of her children. Two others live with their father in Florida.

The centre provides day care for her children while she works part time and attends school to become a medical assistant. She said she hopes to have a place of her own

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within the year.

Families make up as much as one-third of the country's homeless population, according to the National Center on Family Homelessness (NCFH).

Despite that rate – and experts say it is rising – most homeless shelters in the United States have been set up with the vagrant single male in mind – containing open bunkrooms with rows of beds and communal bathrooms.

“If you have children and become homeless, imagine trying to bring them into such an environment,” said Kelly Harris, the executive director of the Family Gateway, which provides families with private rooms and bathrooms. “It is a horrifying prospect.”

That was the outlook for Twaila Griffin, who was desperately trying to find a shelter for herself, her 12-year-old daughter and her 17-year-old son, who was too old to be considered a “child” in most Dallas shelters.

“It is so hard when you want to move forward in your life, but you can't,” she said, sobbing. “This is too crazy, when you are trying to find a place for your kids to sleep.”

Texas has the highest number of homeless families with children in the United States, and more than 50 per cent of those families are headed by single women. They are disproportionately African-American, in a country where 70 per cent of black babies are born out of wedlock.

President Barack Obama, who was abandoned by his father, made a series of statements before Father's Day, which was celebrated here yesterday, cajoling men – especially black men – not to be absent fathers.

Although there are no firm statistics for how many more families have become homeless as a result of the economic downturn, the family homelessness centre, using 2005-06 data, reported that over the course of the year before the economic downturn began 1.5 million children in the United States were homeless at some point.

That number appears to have shot up since the home foreclosure crisis pushed the country into a recession.

“We are hearing from all over the country that shelters are overflowing and families are staying longer than ever,” said Ellen Bassuk, the NCFH director. “We are seeing the emergence of the third world here.”

Shelter directors say they have seen a change in the kind of families turning up. While previously, they mainly saw families from a background of multigenerational poverty, they are now getting more intact couples who have just recently run into trouble.

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“We are seeing more people with [high school degrees] and we have even seen a college grad or two,” Ms Harris said. “We have seen people who had been steadily employed for six years and just recently got into trouble.”

That was the situation for Brian Morris, a laid-off construction worker, who recently moved into the Family Gateway with his wife, Julie, and their three daughters. Mr Morris lost his job with a roofing firm, and before long could not pay rent on the family’s two-bedroom apartment.

“It is extremely humbling for someone who is used to working and paying their own rent to have this happen,” he said. “We got evicted – a couple of times.”

They ended up moving into a Motel 6, a cheap hotel that charged \$40 (Dh147) a night. They lost all their belongings since they could not pay for storage, and Mr Morris struggled to earn enough doing day labour to pay the hotel bill.

“You do the math. It is \$1,300 a month for the hotel,” he said. “But to get into a new home we needed to pay a month’s deposit plus the first month’s rent. You can’t get ahead.”

Now Mr Morris has spent three weeks hunting for jobs and says he is optimistic now that he has some prospects lined up. His wife, meanwhile, is taking classes to become a professional cook.

Voicing the opinion of other families at the shelter, he worried how the experience of homelessness would affect his kids.

“It was an eye opener for me and my wife because we realised that our kids ... well, what are we bringing our kids through?” he said. “You have to think about school, and are they going to be able to go to school? The evictions, the Motel 6 – all that affects the kids. Thank God for this place because it will give us a chance to get back on our feet.”