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HEADLINE: Child Homelessness Rising in B.R.



## Child homelessness rising in B.R.

Updated: By Keitha Nelson

BATON ROUGE, LA (WAFB) - According to the National Center for Family Homelessness, Louisiana has the highest rate of child homelessness in the nation and nearly 2,000 students in the East Baton Rouge Parish School System are classified as homeless.

In a crowded East Baton Rouge middle school hallway, students shuffle around, hustling to get to their next class. However, some in the crowd has a lot more than just school work on their minds. They don't know where they'll lay their heads for the night, if they'll have another meal after lunch, will anyone be there to take care of them once they leave school grounds? "Do I end up in a shelter? Do I end up on the street? All of these questions are in their minds," said Carolyn Coleman. "And that's the population that we work with."

Coleman runs the homeless office for East Baton Rouge Parish schools. She says for the kids she calls "hers," school is the most stable place in their lives. After calling the shots for 17 years, she believes she's seen and heard it all. "If you want to be kept on your toes, stay around children and listen to what they say," she said. Not all of her kids live in shelters. Some simply move from one friend or family's home to another.

One young man lives in an apartment with his mother and two younger brothers. Their source of income is not steady and their current home is not guaranteed. "People like to judge you and stuff." His identity will be kept hidden, but for the purpose of this story, he'll be referred to as "Peter." Following Hurricane Katrina, Peter and his family had to pick up and move to Baton Rouge from New Orleans. He says they lived in a motel for several months. The rent was \$60 per week. "After that, we got our own place. It was a rental house, so we stayed there for a little while. Then, we moved again."

The constant pattern of moving from one place to the next is something Peter shares with many students classified as homeless. Another huge dilemma shared is getting a hot meal at night. With two younger brothers to look after when the food is scarce, Peter does without. "That means I have to look out for them," he explained. "So if I do get something to eat, I share it with them. So I don't really eat as much."

The latest figures show there are more than 1,800 students in the East Baton Rouge Parish School System classified as homeless and that number continues to rise. "I had no idea we had that much of a homeless population in our school system," said Dr. Stewart Gordon, the chief of pediatrics at the LSU Health Center. He is an advocate of rearing children from birth. He says a child's first few years of learning could set the path for

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their futures. "If you're on target being able to read well by third or fourth grade, that's a good marker for long term success."

With such a large number of children living in poverty in the state of Louisiana, it's difficult for many kids to stay on track. Gordon says some states use those literacy figures to predict the number of prison beds they'll need down the road. He says kids that struggle in school tend to be more delinquent and start dropping out. "In Louisiana, we incarcerate I believe nationally more kids per capita than any other state in the union. And a lot of that has to do with the fact that we have a high percentage of poverty," Dr. Gordon said.

Back at the homeless program office, Coleman shuffles through her binder pages, looking to the numerous tasks ahead. She reminds herself of the little things she'll have to pick up for her kids. They are things many people take for granted. "We're talking about toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, towels. We always remind them that where you are is not where you always will be," Coleman said.

Dr. Gordon believes it's not just a parent's obligation to rear a child from their early stages, but it is our responsibility as a society to invest heavily in the nurture and growth of kids during their first five years.

If you would like to donate to the EBR Homeless Program, email Carolyn Coleman at [ccoleman@ebschools.org](mailto:ccoleman@ebschools.org).

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