

ANOTHER VIEWPOINT

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When most of us recall the summer months of our childhood, we think of the thrill of that last day of school, an afternoon at a local pool or a nearby lake, riding bikes with the neighborhood kids, going to see fireworks, or enjoying picnics at a local park. But for many children, summer is a considerably more trying time of the year, one that may not include a roof overhead. For most of us, the image of homelessness is one of a solitary man, perhaps mentally ill, wandering the streets in the cold of winter. In reality, a significant percentage of the homeless population consists of families with children who are turned out onto the streets in the summer.

As juvenile and family court judges, you have the incredible responsibility of determining whether a child will live in a residential facility or a detention facility, move to a foster home, return home with one parent, or move on to a new home with another parent. But sadly, many of the children who come before your bench may not even know how to define the word “home” at all.

More than a million children experience homelessness each year, and there are plenty



By Shay Bilchik

but downright intolerable in the summer as temperatures rise and tempers flare. So while family members and friends may hesitate to turn people out into the cold, they may be more likely to issue an ultimatum in the summer. Landlords are also reluctant to evict families in the winter, and may wait for milder temperatures to allay any guilt they feel.

Many families also make big decisions and big changes when the school year comes to an end. Poor families are more willing to take risks and move to a new city in search of better job opportunities in the summer months. But often that big start in a new city lands a family in a shelter when the opportunity doesn't pan out. Sadly, mothers who are victims of domestic violence often remain at home and suffer for months, waiting until summer to leave with their children, who are no longer in school.

The importance of stable housing and economic security in a child's life can't be overstated. Children living in owned or affordably rented homes consistently fare better in terms of health, development, and academics when compared with those who don't have reliable housing. Studies show that homeownership reduces the transmission of intergenerational poverty, promotes educational attainment, and increases parental satisfaction, happiness, and well-being, which translate into clear benefits for children.

Meanwhile, the hundreds of thousands of American children who live in inadequate housing often suffer from disease, serious injuries, hunger, or educational failure. This is particularly alarming when viewed in light of the National Low Income Housing Coalition's annual report *Out of Reach 2003*, which reveals that America's affordable housing crisis is gaining momentum. In just

of reasons why many of them struggle during the summer months. An alarming number of poor families suffer in overcrowded situations year round, which make life uncomfortable in the winter,

one year, America's housing wage—the amount a full-time worker needs to earn per hour to afford an apartment at fair market rent—has grown by a mind-boggling 37%.

Too many families are torn apart by an inability to locate housing. Parents who can't meet their family's housing needs are often forced to surrender their children to foster care. In fact, even substance abuse isn't as important as income or housing in determining whether children will return to their families. Of the children served by the child welfare system, as many as 30% could be reunited with their parents if safe, affordable housing were available.

Recognizing the critical importance of housing assistance programs, the Child Welfare League of America has trained hundreds of child welfare workers to build partnerships with faith-based agencies, local nonprofit housing agencies, and public housing authorities to access housing subsidies for families and youth. But many of these important family programs have been neglected in the federal government's current focus on chronic homelessness.

As judges overseeing cases involving juveniles, the constituency of the NCJFCJ touches the lives of many of the most vulnerable children every day. I'm sure that most of you already realize the impact of place, and the notion that “home” can have on a child. Children without a home, without a community, will always have a more difficult time coping with the challenges that life throws their way. And as you go about the difficult task of determining the disposition of youths, assessing the safety of a home environment, and deciding whether to return a child home or place that child in a residential facility, remember that a child with a family but no true home is rarely better off than a child with a home but no family. It's true when the calendar says December and the mercury hovers near zero, but it's just as true in June, when the forecast is 80 degrees and nothing but sunshine.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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