

A Matter of Definition: Responding to Homelessness Among Families, Children, and Youth

The following is an abstract of a paper released in August 2005 by the Child Welfare League of America, the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, the National Health Care for the Homeless Council, the National Policy and Advocacy Council on Homelessness, and Volunteers of America.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the U.S. Department of Education (ED) employ different definitions of homelessness. The definition of homelessness used by HUD is limited to people living on the streets or in shelters; it excludes people living in doubled-up situations and those in motels. The definition of homelessness used by ED is broader, and specifically includes children and youth who are “sharing the housing of others *due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason.*” In addition, children and youth who “are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds *due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations*” are specifically included, along with other temporary living situations (emphasis added).

We believe that the HUD definition of homelessness should be amended to explicitly include two of the homeless situations referenced above (living doubled-up and in hotels or motels) that are included in the ED definition of homelessness. Consider the following:

- Ignoring the real need for housing and homeless assistance by using a limited definition of homelessness does nothing to assist policymakers, service providers, and others in making informed decisions about who is impacted by the affordable housing crisis in our communities and how to meet their needs. Only by acknowledging the full extent of homelessness, and by giving communities the flexibility to respond to it, can we begin to address the causes of and solutions to homelessness.
- Homeless families and youth often have no choice but to live doubled-up or in motels. The street is not an option for families with children, given the risks to children and potential child welfare involvement. Across the country, housing is unaffordable, and in many communities emergency shelters are full or non-existent.
- Families and youth in doubled-up and motel situations are among the most vulnerable segments of the homeless population. Homelessness directly contributes to physical, mental and emotional harm to children and youth. In addition, there is evidence that experiencing homelessness as a child is associated with experiencing deep poverty and homelessness as an adult. Doubled-up and motel living situations can be less safe and less stable than shelters, involving more uncertainty, frequent moves and disruptions known to be harmful to child development. Yet despite their desperate need for HUD funded housing and supportive services, these families and youth cannot access that assistance because HUD does not consider them to be homeless.
- Making HUD’s definition of homelessness more like the one used by ED will result in better coordination between programs and services funded by the two agencies. This can be expected to result in improved services for homeless children, youth, and families. It will also facilitate data collection and data sharing.
- Housing and homeless assistance are not entitlements; therefore expansion in eligibility for HUD homeless assistance programs will not lead to automatic increases in federal costs. But broadening the HUD definition of homelessness will give communities the flexibility to serve families and youth who are extremely vulnerable and who they now cannot serve.