

**Guest Perspective:**  
**“Current Federal Homelessness Policy: A Failure of Imagination”**

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The failure to reckon with family and youth homelessness, like so many failures of social policy, is ultimately a failure of imagination.

Imagine that you’ve just lost your housing. You’ve been evicted. You’re fleeing domestic violence. You don’t have money to rent an apartment or buy a house.

Imagine also that you have several children with you. You call the local shelter, but it’s full, and the waiting list is long. Perhaps you look for a family shelter, but you find none in your community. Maybe you do find a shelter, but the shelter’s policy would require you to leave one child – your adolescent son – somewhere else.

What would you do? Where would you go? Would you take your children to live on the street?

Probably not. Most likely, you’d seek an arrangement that allowed you to keep your children with you, as safe as possible. You might stay with a friend or family member temporarily, hoping that their good will, space, and resources will last as long as your housing crisis. If you had some money, you might stay in a motel, at least for as long as you could afford it. You’d watch your children struggle with loss of privacy and possessions, the disruption of health and development, and the emotional upheavals that accompany constant moving and deprivation.

Recognizing your crisis for what it is, the U.S. Department of Education, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the U.S. Department of Justice would consider you eligible for a number of homeless assistance programs.

In contrast, your inability to gain admittance to a homeless shelter, your desire to keep your family together, and your unwillingness to subject your children to the street would render you ineligible for homeless assistance through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

Recently, U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (ICH) Director Philip Mangano argued that HUD’s definition of homelessness should not be expanded to include families like yours - people who are not in shelters or living on the street, but are staying in motels or with others temporarily because they have nowhere else to go – in part because such an expansion would dilute the effectiveness of the “chronic homelessness initiative.”

A “chronically” homeless person is defined as “an unaccompanied homeless individual with a disabling condition who has either been continuously homeless for a year or more, or has had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years.” The idea behind the chronic homelessness initiative is that targeting resources to chronically homeless people, who are more expensive to serve, will “free up” resources to serve other homeless populations. Eventually.

In practice, this “trickle down” feature of the initiative has not worked. Neither ICH nor HUD has produced any evidence that any savings that might have materialized from the initiative have been passed on to other homeless populations. Moreover, there is no plan in place to ensure that any savings that might materialize in the future would be directed to families, youth on their own, or other “non-chronic” populations.

Nor does targeting existing homeless assistance resources to chronically homeless adults do anything to solve the housing, health, and income issues that cause adults with disabilities to become homeless in the first place. Thus, while some of today’s chronically homeless adults may receive supportive housing through the chronic homelessness initiative, there will be a new population falling through the cracks to replace the old. Indeed, if children, families, and unaccompanied youth have to wait until resources are “freed up” by the chronic homelessness initiative, they will have to wait a very, very long time. Perhaps until they become “chronically homeless” themselves.

While these flaws are troubling, the fundamental morality of the proposition is even more disturbing: in what other area of social policy do we allow ourselves to say: “Let’s take care of the adults first – the kids can wait.”

What happens to the children while we wait?

We know that homelessness compromises the very foundation of child development. Infants and toddlers who are homeless are at extreme risk of developmental delays and health complications. School-age children experiencing homelessness are diagnosed with learning disabilities and chronic and acute health conditions at much higher rates than other children. They struggle academically, and many fall behind in school. Youth on their own face similar challenges and also are at high risk of victimization. According to the federally-funded National Runaway Switchboard, 5,000 unaccompanied youth die each year from assault, illness, or suicide.

The academic architect of the chronic homelessness initiative, Dr. Dennis Culhane, recently stated in its defense, “We can’t do everything at once. We can’t get distracted. Be patient.”

How many of us would be patient while our own children suffer? How can we be patient when 1.35 million children each year contend with devastating living conditions that jeopardize their life, health, and futures?

In the words of renowned educator and author Jonathan Kozol, “Patience is only a virtue to those not in pain.”

Not only is it unethical to suggest that we “be patient” with family and youth homelessness, it is also an ineffective strategy to end homelessness. There is a significant correlation between the experience of homelessness as a child or youth, and homelessness in adulthood. Twenty-one percent of homeless adults experienced homelessness as a child, 33% ran away from home, and 22% were forced to leave their homes. Simply put, when we ignore child and youth homelessness, we perpetuate adult homelessness.

It's time to call HUD and ICH policies what they are – anti-child, anti-youth, and anti-family. We must reject the current paradigm, challenge its supporters, and call for new leadership and vision. Chronically homeless adults are very vulnerable, and they deserve our assistance, attention, and compassion – but so do other populations.

We can do better. We must craft a federal homelessness policy that addresses the unique needs of all homeless populations. We can, and we must, imagine a world where every life is valued equally, and homelessness is tolerated for no one. To do less is to resign ourselves to a failure we can ill afford.