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HEADLINE: Recession Increasing Interest in Homelessness



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This week the homeless population of the United States received a profile boost. On Tuesday, during President Obama's primetime press conference, a reporter from *Ebony* magazine asked about the rise of tent cities across the country and a new study showing that every fiftieth American child is homeless.

"Part of the change in attitudes that I want to see here in Washington and all across the country," the president said in response, "is a belief that it is not acceptable for children and families to be without a roof over their heads in a country as wealthy as ours."

A change in attitudes may be underway. While the recession has exacerbated homelessness, it has not created a new phenomenon. Take it from Obama: "The homeless problem was bad even when the economy was good," he told the *Ebony* reporter.

The headlines about shantytowns and homeless children may reflect more of an increase in interest in homelessness than the impact of the recession. Those tent-dwellers [sunk their stakes before this recession started](#), and the [child homelessness study](#) is based on

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data from three years ago. The tents and the homeless kids are indicative not of the current economy, but of a long-standing problem.

That's not to say the recession has no effect. "This problem's been around ... but we know historically that during times of economic recession that the number of families on the street increases quite dramatically," says Ellen Bassuk, president of the National Center on Family Homelessness, the group behind the child homelessness study. Bassuk says family homelessness didn't become a problem in this country until the mid-eighties. Since then the rate of family homelessness has increased steadily, to the point where families now make up 34 percent of the overall homeless population.

Before hard numbers illustrating the current recession's impact on that population become available, Bassuk and other advocates say they're seeing an explosion of interest from the public and the media. Bassuk's study broke down the numbers of homeless kids state-by-state, generating intense coverage from local outlets across the country.

Barbara Duffield, policy director for the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, says she's fielding lots of calls from media outlets looking to profile newly homeless people and homeless families.

"With the economic downturn, people who have not been poor before are now facing the situation," says Duffield, whose organization released a study in December showing that public schools across the country reported dramatic increases in the number of homeless students between the 2007 and 2008 school years. "Homelessness is becoming more of a middle-class issue."

Michael Stoops, director of the National Coalition for the Homeless, says the change in attitudes is indeed afoot. "Everyone's now admitting there's an increase in homelessness, especially for families and children."