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HEADLINE: Why Don't We Talk About Homeless Children?

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Why Don't We Talk About Homeless Children?

I read Arianna Huffington's post in September on the surge of homeless schoolchildren caused by the epidemic of home foreclosures. I guess this is the bright side of the recession - people are actually talking about homeless children. I'm not sure when the stereotypical picture of homelessness will change, but the alcohol-addicted man with the cardboard sign panhandling on the streets does not represent the vast majority of homeless people in America. In fact, families - most of them led by a single mother with 2-3 children - are the fastest growing segment of the homeless population. According to the National Center on Family Homelessness, one out of every 50 children in this country face homelessness each year. That's correct, one out of every 50.

There are over 290,000 children without a home in California. Some - the luckier ones - live in shelters or motels; others in cars; and some - the not-so-lucky - live on the streets or campgrounds or riverbanks. They have been there a long time. Does it matter that these children are homeless because of the foreclosure crisis or the unemployment crisis or the health care crisis? Does it matter that they are homeless because of their parent's addictions or mental illness or domestic violence?

There is not one child in America who wants to be homeless. Kids want a home; they want stability and safety; they want to go to school every day; they want to learn. For many of these kids, being homeless means not only having no home, but also having no school, their second home. They move from school to school, drop behind in their studies, lose friends, maybe even lose themselves.

We know education is the key to our country's future and that education is basic for any child to have hope and a chance for success. The homeless child is no exception. At least 20% of homeless children do not even attend school. This happens for two primary reasons: first, families who are not in shelters fear that authorities who discover this fact will place their children in foster care. Second, families living on the streets or in their cars expect to be moving around and therefore delay re-enrolling their children in school until they can achieve some sort of stability.

As important as it is to get homeless kids into school, that alone is not enough: even once they're there, the educational system has a hard time doing its job. Their family's constant moves from shelter to shelter (more than six on average) require moves to new schools; they miss more time during the transfer processes; they must learn to navigate new teachers, books, routines and more; they may be sent home for lacking a uniform; they

didn't sleep well the night before; they don't have supplies to work in class - the list goes on. Small wonder they quickly fall far below their grade levels. Homeless children are on average four grade levels below their housed peers, and nine times more likely to drop out altogether. They are also statistically likely to repeat this lifestyle with their own children.

These kids urgently need help in getting the education they need to overcome the odds that are stacked so strongly against them. At a time when their family's focus is on basic needs like shelter and food, it can be difficult to pay attention to things that don't seem to ensure survival - like their education and future. That's where organizations such as School on Wheels come in, helping these children understand that keeping up with their education is one of the most important things they can do, that it is their sole job at this time in their lives.

I am continually astounded by the strength and courage of these children. We meet thousands of students who find the power within themselves to continue each day, to study and to keep focused on learning. Who among us would be so brave?

Let's keep talking about homeless children.