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HEADLINE: Homeless Children in Our Midst



## Homeless children in our midst

**Our counties are dealing with more and more children who are homeless or on the brink of homelessness.**

TROY MOON • TMOON@PNJ.COM • JUNE 28, 2009

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They wander, mostly.

One night, they might stay in a cheap motel with a parent. The next, it's off to another motel if they're lucky.

Or they sleep in church office buildings and Sunday school rooms. Or they spend a few nights at a shelter. Or they bunk with neighbors and friends.

They're homeless children.

"When most people think of homeless people, they think of adults standing on the side of the road with signs," said the Rev. Lon Roberts, coordinator of Project REACH, an organization that serves homeless children in Escambia and Santa Rosa counties and works to prevent others from becoming homeless.

"But so many of our homeless are children who have done nothing themselves to get in that situation. And they're everywhere. Pick any school. They won't be the best-dressed students, but they could be any other child in the room."

A report released this year by the National Center on Family Homelessness estimates 1.5 million homeless children nationwide, including some 50,000 in Florida.

The center's report, titled "America's Youngest Outcasts: State Report Card on Child Homelessness," is based on data from 2005-06, the most recent available during the preparation of the report.

The report acknowledges that it's impossible to know the exact number of homeless children from birth to 18 years old because it changes day to day, children and their families are difficult to find as they move from place to place, and various agencies have different counting criteria.

Still, it's clear that hundreds of homeless children are in our midst locally.

The Florida Department of Education reported 1,036 homeless students in Escambia County schools in 2008-09, up from 924 during the 2007-08 school year.

It reported 927 homeless students in Santa Rosa, down from 1,017 the previous year.

Whatever the "official" numbers, Roberts says he's dealing with more and more children either homeless or on the brink of homelessness. And he's positive that not every homeless child has been identified.

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People who always have lived on their own, and in their own homes, are scrambling to provide food and shelter for their children as economic turmoil and job layoffs compound the problems of people already living on the margin, he said.

During the 2007-08 school year, REACH offered services to 1,348 children in Escambia and Santa Rosa counties. During the 2001-02 school year, it helped 447 children.

"Some are living with aunts or friends," Roberts said. "Some have sadly just slipped through the cracks. We've got to find them. But it's not easy. And even when you find them, helping them isn't always easy either."

### **Helping hands**

Escambia and Santa Rosa have several groups, programs and individuals dedicated to tackling homelessness.

Roberts, who also is an associate pastor of Brownsville Baptist Church, is the go-to guy for homeless students in the two counties. REACH is funded by the Escambia County School District.

A former assistant principal, teacher and social worker, Roberts retired from the district six years ago. He became the district's homeless advocate soon afterward, contracted to work 17 hours a week.

"But they get about 30 to 35 hours a week from me," he said. "I love what I do."

Homeless children have more problems than a lack of a roof over their little heads, Roberts said.

Many are hungry. Many are sick due to lack of health care. Many have problems getting to and from school, so they may not go at all. Many change schools as their families move around. Some act up in classes, a result of turmoil and uncertainty in their lives.

Roberts visits area homeless shelters and schools each week to check on the needs of students and help families locate resources and assistance.

One day, he's driving to Oakcrest Elementary to head off a problem with two siblings facing potential homelessness — he's working with the children's grandfather to get a utility bill paid.

The next day, he's meeting with a Northview High senior who recently had to move in with a friend because her sister — with whom she was living — remarried.

"We're not only homeless assistance; we're homeless prevention," Roberts said. "We tell them where they can get assistance, or where they can find resources to help out."

But too often, Roberts is dealing face to face with homeless children.

"I've been in abandoned buildings and sat on the floor with families," he said. "I visited a family in a campground. They had a truck with a camper — Mom and Dad on the bottom and three kids on the top."

Roberts went to the School District to make sure a school bus would pick the children up at the campsite.

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"The principal said she never had a student with a problem like that," Roberts said. "She told her faculty and they passed the hat for the family. She came back with a trunk full of clothes and cash and groceries for the family."

Rick Humphreys, founder and executive director of Loaves & Fishes, the major facility for homeless people in Escambia, paints a slightly less bleak picture of homeless numbers.

The number of families seeking shelter at the downtown complex has dropped in recent years, and the current economic downturn has had little effect on the number of people served, he said.

"Most are typically families in a domestic violence situation," he said. "I think the people who are being laid off now are coming out of a background where they're going to have some kind of family support system to help them out."

### **Church network**

Santa Rosa County has no homeless shelters, so Family Promise of Santa Rosa County, a nonprofit that works to help homeless people, deals with a network of churches.

Family Promise offers a day center for homeless families so they can check e-mail, search for jobs, and generally have a place to go during the day. The organization also works with the Interfaith Hospitality Network — a network of local churches that take turns housing homeless families. The network can provide shelter for as many as five families, or a total of 14 individuals, at a time.

"We're staying full and having to turn away families," said Debbie Laird, Family Promise director. "It's heartbreaking. For the ones who don't get in, there really aren't a lot of other options."

In Carol Calfee's role as director of federal programs for Santa Rosa schools, she serves as homeless liaison. She, too, said Family Promise deals with more homeless children than can be accommodated.

"Most are doubled up with friends and relatives, and some lose everything they own when they're forced to move, including their pets," she said.

She said she's also heard of children living in cars, renovated buses and even tents.

"It's pretty serious," she said. "You don't have to go to South America to find children in need."

Homeless children work hard at not standing out, Roberts said.

"They want to be invisible, and we certainly understand that," he said. "But we have to let people know about the problem. So we want them to be invisible on their own and visible collectively."