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HEADLINE: Ranks of homeless children on the rise

Liset Marquez, Staff Writer Posted: 04/10/2009 04:09:57 PM PDT

Deborah was 11 years old when she, her mother and three siblings ended up homeless in Pomona, living in the homes of friends and squeezing into hotel rooms.

But money started running out and soon, the family car became their home.

"Not knowing or having a place to stay or something to eat, that was scary," said Deborah, now 14.

And according to a recent report, stories like hers are on the rise.

Cases of *child homelessness* are on the way up, says a study from the National Center on Family Homelessness, "America's Youngest Outcasts: State Report Card on Child Homelessness."

It provides a look at *child homelessness* in America, where one child out of every 50 is homeless.

The center, which conducted the last study in 1999, ranks California 40th among the states in services provided to homeless children.

The report also said the state does not have a 10-year plan to end homelessness.

Children who are homeless or who have experienced homelessness lack social skills and a steady source of food. They also have low self-esteem and are behind in their academics, said Joann Mim Mack, a social worker at Foothill Family Shelter.

The Upland-based shelter provides transitional and permanent housing and other services for struggling families.

Addressing *child homelessness* is essential because it can have a lifelong impact, Mim Mack said.

Aside from offering housing, the shelter also offers individual counseling for children and parents.

"It's very amazing to see their progress," Mim Mack said. "When the fear, the uncertainty in their life is taken away, they just blossom."

There are cases in which kids are removed from families because of the instability in their lives, she said.

More could be done on the government level to help eliminate child homelessness, said Brenda Dowdy, homeless-education program specialist for the San Bernardino County Superintendent of Schools Office.

In San Bernardino County schools, there are 12,768 homeless children. The number is based on the definition of homelessness in the McKinney-Vento Act, which is what many schools use to identify and assist children in their districts, she said.

Children who are considered homeless in the county under that act might live in a motel, which is not considered an adequate living condition because the family members all live in one room and might not have running water or electricity, Dowdy said.

There are also families who must share an apartment because of financial hardships. While they may have a roof over them, this is not considered adequate conditions for children, Dowdy said.

The law is essential because it helps expedite the registration process to get children into school, she said.

"Every day of school that they miss because they are homeless, they are getting further and further behind," Dowdy said.

That was the case for Deborah, said her mother, Tonya. While they were trying to figure out their living situation, her four children missed a lot of class time.

Dowdy said she still has to train staff every school year on the rights that parents have to enroll their children, even if they have no home.

Under the act, San Bernardino County annually receives anywhere from \$30 to \$40 per child attending school, Dowdy said.

However, that could change with President Barack Obama's stimulus plan, which will direct money to tackle homelessness.

That funding could help to secure assistance for programs already offered in the county such as providing free meals or additional after-school programs.

Both the shelter and the county also direct their efforts toward helping parents. From parenting skills to helping them get their high school diplomas, the goal is provide positive role models for the children so they don't find themselves in a similar situation in the future, Dowdy said.

There are other programs to help end the problem such as the county's 10-year homelessness plan.

"We're working on a plan, it's just getting enough people to buy into it," said Dowdy, a member of the county committee creating the plan.

Besides more money, there needs to be discussion on a regional level of initiatives like providing more low-income housing, Dowdy said.

For Tonya, the hardest part was not being able to provide the stability the children had known all their lives.

"It's hard when your child tells you they're hungry and you can't feed them," said Tonya, who is now receiving aid from the Foothill Family Shelter.

Many times homeless children are forgotten, and Tonya said there needs to be increased efforts to create awareness.

"Our kids are our future. If we don't dedicate efforts today, where are we going to be tomorrow?" Dowdy asked.

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