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HEADLINE: Number of babies in homeless shelters increasing

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By Mike Clary South Florida Sun-Sentinel

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At 5 weeks old, with a crown of dark hair and big blue eyes, Anastasia Garcia is one of the newest faces of the economic crisis. She was born homeless.

"When we are lucky enough to be settled, we will tell her that things were not always as easy as you may think," said Angela Garcia, 26, laying the infant down in a crib crammed into the corner of a small room at the Broward Outreach Center in [Pompano Beach](#) she shares with her husband David Henson and their two older daughters, ages 2 and 6.

In [Fort Lauderdale](#), Demali Staple's youngest child, 4-month-old Jabari, is another recession baby, entering a world gripped by the worst economy in more than a generation. When Staple finishes work as a landscaper for the city of Oakland Park, she picks up her infant son and his brother Alvash, 3, at a day care center and they return to a room at Covenant House, a shelter for runaways and homeless youth.

"There are days when I want to give up," said Staple, 21, a single mother. "But I don't want my boys to go through what I went through. So I push myself."

Throughout South Florida, social service agencies report sharp increases in the number of infants and very young children being sheltered in homeless facilities.

In Palm Beach County, Center for Family Services Executive Director Dorla Leslie said her nonprofit organization has been "deluged over the past several months, and a majority are single mothers with young children, some with infants."

All 18 rooms of a West Palm Beach apartment complex the center runs are full, with about 65 people, said Leslie, while another half-dozen families are being housed in motels.

At Covenant House, Executive Director Jim Gress said, "Moms and babies have been the largest proportion of our population lately."

The reasons for a surge in homeless infants and young children may be no more complicated than the sagging economy. As jobs disappear, intact families and single

moms who were once able to provide for their children no longer can.

A recent study by the National Center on Family Homelessness found that 1 in 50 American children is homeless. Florida's population of homeless children is estimated to be 50,000.

For pregnant women and newborns, health concerns are magnified by poverty and homelessness. Studies show that homeless children are more likely than other children to have asthma and ear infections, and suffer from emotional and behavior problems.

"It is not ideal in any way, shape or form to have baby in a shelter," said Patricia Mantis of the [Broward County](#)'s Coalition to End Homelessness.

Priscilla Garrett, 25, lived with her mother in [Delray Beach](#) until family problems led her to the Broward Outreach Center four months ago. On June 18 she gave birth to an 8-pound, 2-ounce girl, and she and her daughter returned to the shelter this week.

"I see myself as going through a transitional phase right now," said Garrett, whose last job was as a Family Dollar store clerk. Years from now, she said, she would explain to her child her personal history: "You were born in a place where friends were, with people who helped you and me."

For struggling parents such as Garcia and Henson, shelter living with an infant means access to free diapers, some clothing and even a stroller. They also benefit from counsel supplied their Broward Outreach Center caseworker Shirley Favali.

Less than ideal are extremely tight quarters, sharing a bathroom with dozens of others, and none of the extended family support that many young parents rely on.

During weekdays, Alisa, 6, goes to camp while Garcia stays in the shelter's family wing with her baby and Alexis, irrepressibly active. If Garcia can find day care for Alexis and the baby in the next few days, she plans to begin looking for a job.

"We never thought this would happen," said Henson, 31, of the couple's spiral into homelessness that accelerated when he lost his construction job in January. "Really, I am shocked that I let us get this far down."

Together for seven years, Garcia and Henson grew up in Hollywood and lived there in a rented apartment. When they could no longer afford it, they moved in with Garcia's mother. He worked day jobs through labor pools.

After a fruitless bus trip to find work in Texas, where Garcia's father lives, the couple returned to Broward County this spring, completely broke.

Henson recently found a job in a [Home Depot](#) warehouse, and Favali said the couple are on track to qualify for a move to transitional housing, where they can stay rent-free for up

to 18 months. "I think they are really trying," said Favali. "They are motivated."

Staple is also trying. Born in Jamaica, she attended Piper High School in Sunrise until she became pregnant with Alvash. She was taking technical school courses and staying with her father until earlier this year.

Her second child was born after she found a space at Covenant House, a private Christian ministry that operates youth shelters in several U.S. cities.

"I am saving all the money I can," said Staple, who catches a 7 a.m. bus so she can drop the kids off at day care before and get to work by 8.

With the baby in her arms, and Alvash bouncing on a couch, Staple looked around a lounge-like play room in the former motel that Covenant House runs as a family center. "This is not the life I imagined, being in this position," she said. "I'd still like to be a nurse, or get my GED and go into the military.

"But, look, I'm here now."

Mike Clary can be reached at [mclary@SunSentinel.com](mailto:mclary@SunSentinel.com) or at 305-810-5007.

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