

## Appendix 1: Systems that Identify Homeless Children

### A. How Are Homeless Children Counted?

#### 1. Federal Definitions

Determining the extent of child homelessness is critical for planning programs and shaping policies. Depending on the definition used, the numbers may vary considerably. Currently, there is a lack of consensus among government agencies about the definition of homelessness. Such discrepancies challenge researchers and policy makers and may result in limited services being available to homeless children.

The most restrictive federal definition is the one used by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). HUD limits its definition of homelessness to people/households that lack a fixed, regular address and are living in shelters, on the streets, or in public or private places that are not designated for regular sleeping accommodations. It excludes people who have nowhere to go and might be “doubled-up” with others in temporary situations or staying in hotels/motels because they lack other alternatives.

The HUD definition does not align with other federal definitions of homelessness, particularly those federal programs serving families and children. For example, the definition contained in the education subtitle of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act includes children in motels and those who share housing temporarily because of loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reasons. Many families living in doubled-up situations often move repeatedly, sometimes on a daily or weekly basis. These living situations are often overcrowded, unstable, and sometimes unsafe for children. The Violence Against Women Act (January 2006); Head Start Act (December 2007); Child Nutrition Act (2004); Higher Education Act (August 2008); and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (December 2004) also use the “McKinney-Vento” definition of homelessness and are therefore more responsive to the special needs of homeless children.

Homeless assistance programs run by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), such as the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act, Health Care for the Homeless, and the Treatment for Homeless Programs have also adopted regulations that define homelessness more broadly than the HUD definition. Similarly, the U.S. Department of Labor that oversees the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program (HVRP) has adopted a broad definition of homelessness that reflects the reality that some veterans live transiently and move frequently before becoming literally homeless.

#### 2. Definitions Used in this Report Card

This Report Card describes homeless children, birth to 18 years old, who are accompanied by one or more parent(s) or caregivers. By definition, they comprise a homeless family. The counts and descriptions in the Report Card do not include unaccompanied children and youth (e.g., runaway, throwaway, or homeless youth).

This Report Card uses the broader definition of homelessness as contained in the education subtitle of the McKinney-Vento Act, Title X, Part C, of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and includes those who are living in motels and those who share living situations temporarily because of loss of housing, economic hardship, or similar reasons. This definition more accurately reflects the reality of family homelessness by defining “homeless children and youth’ as individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.” The term includes children and youth who are:<sup>1</sup>

- Sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason (sometimes referred to as *doubled-up*);
- Living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to lack of alternative accommodations;
- Living in emergency or transitional shelters;
- Abandoned in hospitals;
- Awaiting foster care placement;
- Using a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings;
- Living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and
- Migratory children who qualify as homeless because they are living in circumstances described above.

## B. Systems that Identify Homeless Children

### 1. McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, Title X, Part C, of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act requires that states ensure that homeless children have access to a free, appropriate public education and that school districts provide data to the federal government. The U.S. Department of Education requires that all State Education Agencies and or Local Education Agencies (LEAs, more commonly referred to as school districts) collect and submit information about the numbers of homeless children who were *identified as homeless and enrolled* in all local school districts in the state over the course of an academic year.<sup>2</sup> The Report Card is based on data collected during the 2005-2006 school year. During that year, an estimated 77% of LEA's submitted data. These LEA's are of widely varying size, resources, and capacity. School-age children who were not identified as homeless or who were not enrolled in school are not represented. For information on how children under age six were counted in the Report Card, please see Appendix 2: Methodology and Limitations.

The U.S. Department of Education data on homelessness are critical because public schools are the *only* universal institutions existing in all communities that are legally responsible for identifying and serving homeless children. These data are benchmarks as schools continue to improve their awareness, outreach, identification, and data collection efforts. However, the McKinney-Vento education data have various limitations. For more information, see Appendix 2: Methodology and Limitations.

### 2. HUD Data Systems

HUD collects prevalence data from homelessness agencies using two mechanisms: 1) Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS); and 2) Continuum of Care Point-in-Time counts. HUD's Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) then documents and analyzes unduplicated HMIS data from a nationally representative sample of communities and supplements these data with Continuum of Care Point-in-Time counts<sup>3</sup>. Each data system has various limitations. Because this approach excludes many children and families who are homeless, it was not used in this Report Card. For more information, see Appendix 2: Methodology and Limitations.

#### *Homeless Management Information System (HMIS)*

HUD requires homeless service programs to implement a Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) in order to receive HUD McKinney-Vento funding. The HMIS is a web-based data collection system for homeless service providers to record and store individual-level data on clients' characteristics and service needs. It is intended to help federal, state, and local stakeholders better understand the extent and nature of homelessness over time<sup>4</sup>. HMIS provides an unduplicated count of people who are homeless; insight into patterns of service use; and a measure of effectiveness of homeless programs.<sup>5</sup> Data are collected on men; women; families; children; and unaccompanied youth. A typical HMIS tracks demographics; basic needs; bed utilization; service use; and service gaps. HUD has developed and implemented national baseline standards to ensure effective data collection, participation, privacy, and security.<sup>6</sup>

While the HMIS represents a significant advance in HUD data collection strategies, HMIS has limitations as a tool for counting homeless people.<sup>7</sup>

1. HMIS data collection is governed by HUD's definition of homelessness, which excludes people who are sharing housing with others due to economic hardship. It only accounts for people who are literally homeless (e.g., living in shelters, transitional housing, cars, parks, streets, abandoned buildings, etc).
2. Homeless service programs that operate without HUD McKinney-Vento funding would not be required to participate in HMIS. Thus, the data do not include individuals and families who access housing or service programs (e.g., food pantries or mental health agencies) funded by other resources.
3. The HMIS data do not represent all of the sample communities. Consequently, the reported HMIS estimates have large confidence intervals or sampling errors.<sup>8</sup>

*Continuum of Care Data*

HUD compiles information from individual Continuums of Care (CoC) on the number of persons in households with and without children who are homeless and unsheltered, or sheltered in emergency shelters or transitional housing. This information has been aggregated, so it is available by state. However, various limitations in using this data make it difficult to develop state estimates of the number of homeless children.

1. These data come from a Point-in-Time (PIT) count and therefore do not tell us how many people are homeless in a given year, but only those counted on a given night.
2. These data only include homeless individuals who are sheltered at programs that receive CoC funds or who voluntarily participate in the CoC process.
3. These data only include people who meet HUD's definition of homelessness.
4. The data available by state do not separately enumerate the number of children. They only report the number of persons living in households with children.
5. Communities vary in how they conduct point-in-time counts. For example, some communities count people more than once. Others provide estimates that include people who are doubled-up, contrary to guidance provided by HUD.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Subtitle B of Title VII of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (Title X, Part C, of the No Child Left Behind Act).

<sup>2</sup> National Center for Homeless Education. (2007). Education for homeless children and youth program, Title VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001: Analysis of 2005-2006 federal data collection and three-year comparison.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). (2007). The annual homeless assessment report to Congress. Office of Community Planning and Development, Washington, DC. Retrieved October 19, 2008, from <http://www.huduser.org/Publications/pdf/ahar.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. (n.d.). About HMIS. Website. Retrieved October 19, 2008, from

<http://www.hmis.info/About.aspx?AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1>

<sup>5</sup> Abt Associates. (2006). Introduction to Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS). PowerPoint Presentation. Retrieved October 19, 2008, from <http://www.hmis.info/Resources/741/Introduction-to-HMIS.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> Abt Associates, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> HUD, 2007; HUD. (2008). The third annual homelessness assessment report to Congress. Office of Community Planning and Development. Washington, DC.

<sup>8</sup> HUD, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> HUD, 2007.

