

Shattered Lives

FAMILY HOMELESSNESS IN MASSACHUSETTS

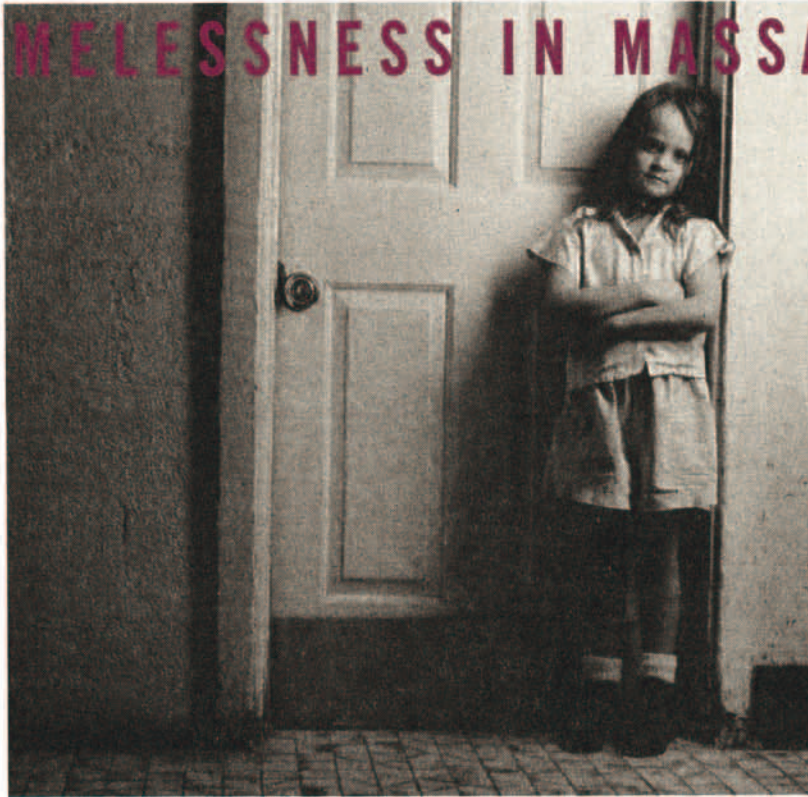
By Cathy Elcik

They are working mothers with two kids, and women who fled abusive husbands carrying nothing but their children. They are families doubled up in cramped apartments to make rents reasonable. They are broken families whose children live with relatives so that they won't know life in a shelter.

They are homeless families.

In Massachusetts and across the United States, homeless families are the fastest growing segment of the homeless population. Up to 40 percent of homeless people in this country are members of families that are homeless.

And yet, accurately counting the number of homeless people in the United States is difficult, says Ellen Bassuk, president of The Better Homes Fund, a Newton-based, non-profit organization dedicated to finding solutions to family homelessness. Strict definitions of homelessness – those that count people as



homeless only when they are in shelters or on the street – actually miss a significant population. People who choose to stay in vehi-

cles – or campgrounds or crowded apartments – are also homeless.

A 1994 survey published in the *American Journal of Public Health*,

found that 13.5 million adults nationwide had been homeless at some point in their lives. Based on information from public schools, the Better Homes Fund estimates that 1.2 million children are homeless today.

In Massachusetts, the numbers are climbing. Every December, the Emergency Shelter Commission in the Boston Mayor's Office conducts a homeless census in which volunteers gather information from Boston-area shelters and count the homeless on the street. The 1999 count found:

- 5,820 homeless men, women and children – a 10 percent increase from 1998 and a 52 percent increase from 1989.

- 1,171 homeless children – a 110 percent increase over the 556 homeless children counted in 1989.

- 33 percent of the homeless population were homeless families.

Statewide, 5,000 families were homeless in 1990, says Nicole Witherbee, director of policy at The

How Did We Get Here?

Family homelessness is a relatively recent phenomenon. When the federal budget dollars used to assist needy families declined in the 1980s, family homelessness emerged for the first time since the Great Depression, Bassuk says.

There is no one cause, but several factors contributed to this crisis:

- **Reduced Welfare Benefits** – In Massachusetts, cash assistance from Temporary Assistance for Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC) is limited to 24 months in a 60-month period for able-bodied families whose youngest child is not under 2 years old.

Richard Powers, a spokesman for the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, says 74 percent of the state's caseload is exempt from the time limit. But the Better Homes Fund argues that even families who receive welfare benefits and food stamps remain in poverty.

- **Weakened Earning Power** – Without affordable child care and dependable transportation it's difficult for homeless parents to keep steady employment. As manufacturing jobs are phased out, service jobs that pay little more than minimum wage and offer no benefits are increasingly the only employment available to the poor.

- **Climbing Housing Costs** – To pay rent for the average two-bedroom home in Massachusetts, a single parent earning minimum wage must work 119 hours a week, according to The Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless. And Boston's soaring housing market means that as more people choose renting over buying a home, there are fewer rental vacancies available.

Meantime, rents are climbing at twice the general inflation rate, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. And there's a record shortage of 4.4 million low-cost housing units, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

Even the Section 8 program, which provides

vouchers to tenants for housing at 40 percent of their income, is struggling. "In the city, landlords no longer want to take Section 8 vouchers because they can get more money for their apartments on market rates," says Lyndia Downie, president and executive director of the Pine Street Inn homeless shelter in Boston.

But slow progress is being made. In January 1999, Boston Mayor Thomas Menino declared housing a top priority for the city. He had 2,000 housing units started by the end of 1999, saved 13,000 apartments that would have gone to market rate, and committed \$30 million in city funds toward housing issues, although the Boston City Council has not yet released the money.

Menino also launched a three-year housing work plan called "Leading the Way." The program calls for 7,500 new units of housing – roughly 2,900 of which would be set aside for low-income housing – preservation of existing developments and a commitment to having no vacant public housing units.

– CATHY ELCIK

Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless (MCH). "In 1997, there were 10,000," she says. That's a 100 percent increase during an economic boom, and it may not necessarily account for all of the homeless families at that time.

Worse, there isn't enough shelter space for these families. Witherbee says that the Emergency Assistance Program has roughly 875 units throughout Massachusetts, which accounts for 95 percent of the shelter space available for families.

Along with the daily struggle to find permanent housing, homeless families must also cope with the effects of enormous stress on their lives, including physical and emotional health problems and academic difficulties. They are also parenting their children in front of other homeless families and staff in a shelter.

A Family Torn Apart

Brenda Farrell never thought she and her two young daughters would be homeless. In 1989, she left a husband who she says was abusive and rented a two-bedroom apartment in Natick. When child support stopped coming, she fell behind in her rent, even while working two jobs.

She went to the Department of Public Welfare (now the Department of Transitional Assistance) for help in paying the back rent. But when she fell behind again, she received an eviction notice for nonpayment. Knowing that she was fighting a losing battle financially, she moved in with friends.

One-third of all female-headed families live below the federally established poverty level, according to the Better Homes Fund. For many of these families, the difference between poverty and homelessness can be a divorce, a death or an illness or injury that puts a family member out of work.

Farrell applied for welfare but was denied because she "rendered herself homeless" by not waiting for an officer to escort her from her home. She appealed the Department of Transitional Assistance's decision and was finally awarded a spot in a shelter in April 1990.

"I was appalled by the system," Farrell says. "I felt abandoned by society. When an individual becomes homeless, they have no questions asked. If a family with

children becomes homeless, they have a barrage of questions on income and eligibility in order to gain access to a system that doesn't really help them."

Farrell now works to fight homelessness and increase awareness. She is currently the director of a transitional home for homeless families in the Worcester area.

Public Parenting

The daily struggles that homeless families face are things that most of us can't even imagine. Parenting is difficult enough, but homeless parents in a shelter must raise their kids under the scrutiny of other families and staff members in that shelter.

Talk one-on-one with a homeless person as two parents and learn to see the world through their eyes. It's a subtle thing but it's extremely important. It's about respect and dignity.

*Donna Haig Friedman
Director of the McCormack
Institute's Center for Social Policy
Boston*

"There's no privacy," Farrell says. "There are staff 24 hours a day that mandate curfews and tell you what time to put the kids to bed, what time to get them up, when to feed them and what to feed them. There is no flexibility for the individual child."

Donna Haig Friedman, director of the Center for Social Policy at the McCormack Institute at the University of Massachusetts in Boston, agrees. "Homeless families feel like they have no control over themselves, their kids or their environment," says Haig Friedman, who wrote *Parenting in Public; Family Shelter and Public Assistance* — a book on the challenges of parenting while homeless. "They don't own the shelter space, and the rules that come with a shelter environment are part of the loss of control they feel."

Furthermore, homeless parents are often subjected to parental evaluations by the state Department of Social Services. "They think that because you can't pay rent, that automatically means you're a bad parent," Farrell says. "It makes you feel like a failure. It's difficult not to feel like that."

Stumbling at School

When Farrell's daughters became homeless, their grades plummeted and their social lives stalled. They couldn't invite friends to play at the shelter, and they couldn't go to sleepovers because they had to be in the shelter by curfew or risk losing the space.

"Academically, my kids fell off the edge because it wasn't my first need," Farrell says. "My priority was finding housing and making sure my kids were safe."

A drop in academic performance is typical of homeless students. The Better Homes Fund reports that 75 percent of homeless children are below grade level in reading, 72 percent are below in spelling and 54 percent are below grade level in math.

But it's difficult for homeless children to keep up with schoolwork when they often can't be in the classroom. According to the U.S. Department of Education:

- homeless kids are almost three times as likely to miss three weeks of school in a three-month period when compared with poor but housed children;
- 21 percent repeat a grade due to frequent absences;
- 41 percent attend two different schools in an academic year and
- 28 percent attend three or more schools during a school year.

Barbara Duffield, director of education for the National Coalition for the Homeless, says school can be a stabilizing force for a homeless child. In 1987, Congress passed the McKinney Act, which mandated that all children have the right to go to school. School districts are responsible for revising their policies to make sure that homeless students are served, Duffield says.

"The biggest problem is lack of awareness that homeless children are in our schools," she says. "People can't serve people if they don't know they're there."

Get Involved

Family homelessness is a huge problem but every bit of assistance counts. Here's how school-aged children can make a difference:

- **Adopt a shelter.** Give shelters a steady donation by setting up a box at school and collecting for a different need each month (food, toiletries, etc.).
- **Cook a meal.** Many shelters allow groups to help prepare a meal.
- **Share toys.** Play at a shelter with homeless children and leave toys behind when you leave.
- **Be a shelter buddy.** Once a month, organize a game day or teach a craft.
- **Plan a children's shelter party.** Bring enough food and games for everyone.
- **Plan a fund-raiser.** Raise money with a car wash, pancake breakfast or raffle. Donate all of the profits to a local shelter.
- **Read.** Go to a shelter and read aloud to kids, or tape stories for homeless children.
- **Create a service-learning project.** Persuade your school to allow credit for volunteer time at a shelter.

— Courtesy of The Better Homes Fund

A Toll on Physical and Emotional Health

Homeless children are sick twice as often as other children and four times as often as kids in families earning more than \$35,000 in a year. The Better Homes Fund reports that almost 70 percent of homeless infants and toddlers suffer from chronic illnesses, such as ear infections and asthma, and 20 percent of homeless children do not receive regular medical care.

Homeless families also weather enormous emotional stress. Between 1992 and 1995, the Better Homes Fund interviewed 220 homeless women in shelters and 216 low-income female heads of household. When asked about their children's worries, 75 percent said their children worried that the family wouldn't have a place to live and 87 percent said they worried that something bad would happen to their family.

For Farrell, a sense of malaise lingered even after the family moved into permanent housing.

"There's an assumption that once you get out of shelter and into an apartment, you're OK, but that's

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when you really start feeling the devastation of what happened," she says. "The children were constantly worried that every little hurdle would threaten our housing. When my daughters were in high school, I got divorced a second time and their first reaction was, 'Are we going to become homeless again?' That was in 1998 - eight years later - and their first thought was whether it would affect their housing."

How You Can Help

Family homelessness can seem overwhelming, but there are plenty of ways you can help.

- **Give what is needed.** Call a shelter and listen to what they say when you ask how your family can help. Work to find a project they *really* need your help with.

- **Become an advocate at any age.** Good advocacy can mean simply supporting and defending a cause. When school-age children are asked to write a paper for school, have

them consider writing about the needs of homeless families.

Farrell recommends carefully voting in elections and monitoring what politicians do *after* they're elected. The entire family can write to state and federal legislators and local council members to ask that they support the rights and needs of homeless families.

- **Support housing initiatives.** Historically, this has been a thorny issue in suburban areas where many residents are unaware of the existence of family homelessness among their neighbors. When developers are interested in building affordable housing in your town, Downie says, look seriously at supporting such proposals.

- **Increase awareness.** Take your children to help out at a homeless shelter where they can see firsthand that homeless kids are kids - just like them. Parents can learn the same les-

RESOURCES

BOOKS

- **Homeless**, by Bernard Wolf, Orchard Books, 1995. A children's book with photos of a family living in temporary housing.

- **Where's Home?**, by Jonathan London, Penguin Books USA Inc., 1995. A novel for school-age children about a father and son in a homeless shelter.

- **54 Ways You Can Help the Homeless**, by Rabbi Charles A. Kroloff, Hugh Lauter Levin Associates, Inc. and Behrman House, Inc., 1993. Practical suggestions on helping homeless people.

ORGANIZATIONS

- **The Better Homes Fund**, Newton; 617-964-3834; www.thebetterhomesfund.org. Nonprofit organization dedi-

icated to long-term solutions to family homelessness.

- **Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless**, Boston; 737-3508; www.mahomeless.org. Serves as a voice for the homeless.

- **The Emergency Shelter Coalition**, City of Boston Mayor's Office, 1 City Hall Plaza, Room 716, Boston; 635-4507. Call to volunteer for the Dec. 11 census.

ONLINE

- **Volunteer Solutions**, www.volunteersolutions.org. This database lists volunteer opportunities.

Family homelessness is on the rise in Massachusetts and across the nation. While the problem may seem overwhelming, every bit of assistance can help alleviate this crisis.

son. "Talk one-on-one with a homeless person as two parents, and learn to see the world through their eyes," Haig Friedman says. "It's a subtle thing, but it's extremely important. It's about respect and dignity."

Homeless families are disconnected from outside relationships and marginalized from society. To help them, we all need to be more acutely aware of their presence and their needs.

"The most important thing in fighting homelessness is for everyone to fully participate in community life," Bassuk says. "It would be a very big deal if a lot of people did that. You have to believe that if you care about something that you can do something about it." ■

Cathy Elcik is the assistant editor of The Boston Parents' Paper.



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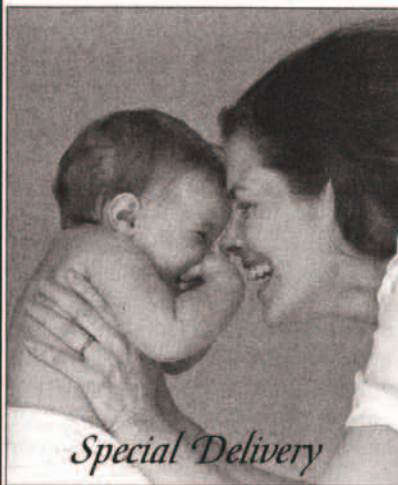
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