

# Every child deserves a warm, safe place to sleep



*A report on child and family homelessness produced by the Faith and  
Advocacy Coalition to End Hunger and Homelessness*

January 2025

## Executive Summary

Over 16,000 children experienced homelessness in Utah during the most recent year for which we have a comprehensive estimate. The experience of homelessness has serious impacts on children's physical, mental and emotional wellbeing and can hurt their chances of graduating from high school and becoming self sufficient as adults. Homeless parents tend to be younger than other low-income parents and to be in deeper poverty. They also face challenges that arise from the responsibility of being parents that other homeless adults do not face.

This report contains more detail about our research findings about child and family homelessness and ends with faith-based reflections on our shared responsibility to ensure that every child has a safe and warm place to sleep. Specific ideas for ways policymakers in Utah can reduce child and family homelessness discussed in this report include:

- Congresspersons and Senators who represent Utah in Congress can reduce child poverty and child homelessness by supporting enhancements to the federal child tax credit.
- State legislators can dramatically reduce unsheltered child and family homelessness by supporting Governor Cox's budget recommendation for funding the operations at a new family shelter in South Salt Lake City. State legislators can further impact child homelessness by supporting Representative Tyler Clancy's appropriations request to place \$2 million in the state budget to spurt the production of supportive housing for families coming out of homelessness headed by parents with disabilities.
- The Utah Homeless Services Board can increase the wellbeing of children and parents living in Palmer Court by supporting a proposal to redesign that facility so that families with children are kept separate from childless adults.
- City and county leaders can be part of efforts to reduce child and family homelessness by supporting the development of adequate, affordable housing that meets the needs of families in their communities and by becoming engaged with efforts to create job opportunities for low-income parents.

## Introduction

Too often discussions about homelessness ignore the prevalence of child and family homelessness and the unique factors that distinguish homeless children and families from other homeless subpopulations. This neglect is tragic because thousands of children experience homelessness in Utah every year and our collective failure to see these children creates major, long-term costs for our state and our community. This experience will have long term negative effects on those children's physical, mental and emotional well-being. The experience of homelessness can also lead to children being held back one or two grades in school and make some children less likely to complete high school.

2025 can be the year where Utah makes dramatic improvements in efforts to address child and family homelessness, but to do so we will need leadership at every level of government. The people who represent Utah in Congress will have opportunities to vote in favor of the restoration of an expanded child tax credit that reduced child poverty by more than one third in 2021. They will also have the chance to support the production of more housing that meets the needs of families at risk of becoming homeless by supporting improvement to the Low Income Housing Tax Credit. Unfortunately, they will also have opportunities to support or oppose proposals to cut funding for Medicaid, SNAP and job training programs that are crucial to any efforts to reduce child and family homelessness.

State leaders have an opportunity to eliminate unsheltered homelessness for families with children by supporting Governor Cox's budget recommendation to fund the operations of a new family shelter in South Salt Lake City. This new family shelter has been needed since 2023 when the need for family shelter surged beyond what could be met by existing shelters in Utah. State leaders can take long term action toward decreasing family homelessness by supporting a budget request to place \$2 million into Utah's Olene Walker Housing Loan Fund dedicated to spurring the production of affordable housing geared toward the specific needs of families coming out of homelessness. Local leaders can be part of efforts to reduce child and family homelessness by supporting the development of adequate, affordable housing that meets the needs of families in their communities and by becoming engaged with efforts to create job opportunities for low-income parents.

FACE Hunger and Homelessness was created in 1995 under the name "the Coalition of Religious Communities" to give members and congregations that donate food and clothing to support Crossroads Urban Center's food pantries and thrift store a way to collectively have a voice on policy issues that cause hunger and poverty in Utah. In 2023 the coalition was renamed the Faith and Advocacy Coalition to End Hunger and Homelessness, or FACE Hunger and Homelessness, to highlight our focus on the issues of hunger and homelessness in Utah and to make clear that we welcome people from all religious and ethical backgrounds to engage in our work— not just members of specific congregations.

Members of FACE Hunger and Homelessness began to focus our collective advocacy efforts on the issue of child and family homelessness in 2017, when families were removed from the old homeless shelter in downtown Salt Lake City and placed into a different shelter with fewer beds. There were many other changes being made to the homeless services system at that time and so the changes to the system for families were largely being ignored. In the years since we began focusing on child and family homelessness we have worked to increase awareness of child homelessness within congregations by organizing "Child Homelessness Sabbaths" and diaper drives for homeless children. To deepen our understanding of policies that would reduce child and family homelessness we have organized meetings with policymakers and service providers and shared what we have learned with elected officials.

To prepare this report we have gathered available data, reviewed existing research, interviewed homeless parents from different parts of the state and reflected on what our different faith and ethical traditions teach about how we must respond to the things we have learned. We hope this report will spur greater public attention to child and family homelessness in Utah and be helpful to policymakers at all levels of government as they consider how best to respond to this critical problem.

## **How Many Families With Children Experience Homelessness in Utah?**

The data available on child and family homelessness is not adequate to give a definitive answer as to how many children in Utah experience homelessness. What we do know is that on a specific day in January, 2024, a statewide Point in Time count in Utah found 946 homeless people who were members of a family that included at least one child<sup>1</sup>. 572 of those people were children younger than 18 years old. 53 were youth aged 18 to 24. The Point in Time Count includes individuals living in emergency shelters, transitional housing and in places unfit for human habitation.

The number of homeless families and children on any specific night is going to be a small portion of the total for a year. A report from Utah's Homeless Management Information System ("HMIS") that was submitted to the federal government for federal fiscal year 2023 shows that the average time it takes a family with children to exit homelessness is 98 days. Even though that is 28 days shorter than the time it takes adult-only households to exit homelessness it is long enough to have lasting impacts on children's well-being. This becomes a major problem when you consider that the HMIS report for FY 2023 shows that 6,502 people from 2,103 families with children received help from a homeless service provider that year.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Annual Homelessness Assessment Report, 2024 Continuum of Care Homeless Assistance Programs Homeless Populations and Subpopulations" U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development

It should not be surprising that the number of children who have spent a night at a homeless shelter is smaller than the number of children who are identified by the public school system as not having a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. In the school year 2022-2023 educators in Utah identified 13,049 children who were homeless<sup>2</sup>. Schoolhouse Connection estimates that 3,185 infants and toddlers in Utah were homeless during the 2021-2022 school year<sup>3</sup>. Can we afford to ignore that over 16,000 children in Utah experienced homelessness during the most recent year in which data is available?

## How does homelessness impact children?

Preventing child homelessness will reduce costs for Utah's healthcare and education systems. Research shows that homelessness has many negative, long-term impacts on children and that the longer the experience of homelessness the more extreme some of those impacts become.

The time of life a person in the United States is most likely to spend a night in a homeless shelter is infancy<sup>4</sup> and the impacts of homelessness on childhood health and development begin before a child is born. Homelessness during pregnancy increases the odds that a baby will be born early and need to spend time in a Newborn Intensive Care Unit<sup>5</sup>. Homeless infants are more likely to visit an Emergency Room and to be hospitalized than other infants during the first year of life<sup>6</sup>. Health conditions homeless infants are more likely to be treated for include, respiratory infections, fever, asthma and developmental disorders<sup>7</sup>.

Unfortunately, the increased utilization of emergency department services during infancy by homeless infants has been found to continue in a statistically significant way for six years following infancy<sup>8</sup>. Research shows that the increase in need for medical services is more severe for young children with extended experience of homelessness. Infants and other young children who experience homelessness for six or more months are more likely to experience developmental delays, poor health and hospitalization than children with shorter experiences of homelessness<sup>9</sup>. In short,

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<sup>2</sup> "Student Homelessness in America: School Years 2020-21 to 2022-23" National Center for Homeless Education.

<sup>3</sup> "Infant & Toddler Homelessness Across 50 States: 2021-2022" Schoolhouse Connection.

<sup>4</sup> "Early Childhood Homelessness: An Overview" Schoolhouse Connection (February 2020)

<sup>5</sup> "Homelessness in pregnancy: perinatal outcomes" HHS Public Access (September 2023)

<sup>6</sup> "Infants Exposed To Homelessness: Health, Health Care Use, And Health Spending From Birth To Age Six" Health Affairs (March 1, 2019)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> "Compounding Stress: The Timing and Duration Effects of Homelessness on Children's Health" Insights from Housing Policy Research (June 2015)

preventing child homelessness, and reducing the length of time children remain homeless, would eliminate the need for major expenditures on healthcare in our state.

Reducing the number of nights children spend sleeping in homeless shelters would also improve educational outcomes for vulnerable children in Utah. 45 percent of students in Utah who experienced homelessness during the 2022-23 school year also experience chronic absenteeism<sup>10</sup>. In addition to causing children to miss class, the experience of homelessness can also impact the ability of children to focus while in class. Twenty months after staying in an emergency homeless shelter children continue to have higher rates of hyperactivity and conduct problems than students who have not experienced homelessness<sup>11</sup>.

National data shows that only 68.2 percent of children who experience homelessness will graduate from high school. This is much lower than the general graduation rate of 86.6 percent. Focusing on the prevention of family homelessness has the potential to be one of the most effective ways we can improve the overall performance of schools in our state.

## How does homelessness impact parents?

In the interviews we conducted with homeless parents as part of our research for this report it is clear that homeless parents want better options for their children than what they are able to provide at this time. One interviewee summed up the frustration by repeating one phrase several times, "We don't want to be here."

Research shows that homeless parents tend to be younger and to have younger children than other low-income parents<sup>12</sup>. Being younger than other low-income parents means that homeless parents often have lower levels of work experience and are more poor than other low-income parents. This makes them less likely to be able to afford to pay the rent in a time like now when the past few years of inflation have particularly impacted the cost of rent. One parent we interviewed summed up the struggle to pay rent with limited income this way, "My experience with my husband was that he had gotten a job, he was getting paid \$16 an hour and it still wasn't enough. We were living paycheck to paycheck. We were trying to save up for rent, but it was impossible. We were paying \$1,600 for a two bedroom— and that's with utilities included. So, it was really hard, and it was really hard for me at the time because I was pregnant."

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<sup>10</sup> "Student Homelessness in America: School Years 2020-21 to 2022-23" National Center for Homeless Education

<sup>11</sup> "Well-being of Young Children After Experiencing Homelessness" OPRE Report (January 2017)

<sup>12</sup> "Family Options Study: Short Term Impacts of Housing and Services Interventions for Homeless Families" U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development (July 2015)

Having younger children than other low-income parents makes life hard in several ways. The anxiety of not having a stable place to sleep for a newborn child is hard to quantify but easy to understand. One parent explained how this can lead to choosing to live in substandard housing. "The place that we were at was \$1750 a month for two bedrooms. It's never had a coat of paint. I mean, it barely even had plumbing. The electricity was hanging on by a thread. Most of the outlets were so worn out, that they wouldn't even hold the plugs. We had to tape it in."

A parent cannot leave an infant or toddler unattended and so a day without childcare arrangements is a day a homeless parent cannot go to work. Unfortunately, childcare is not always available during the hours many jobs require people to work. This problem is compounded when you add in the time it takes a person without a car to get to and from some places of employment using public transportation. Traveling via public transportation can involve multiple transfers with varying wait times. This can add hours to the time a parent needs a child care provider to be open in order for them to be able to go to a job.

One major contributing factor to family homelessness that we did not anticipate prior to our interviews was health. Multiple women we talked to were pregnant and had been told by a doctor to reduce work hours. Other parents reported having disabling conditions that made them unable to work or explained how a serious battle with illness had been the factor that led to their family becoming homeless. A sick child cannot be dropped off at daycare. If a child is in the hospital, a parent needs to stay at the hospital to reassure the child and consent to necessary medical procedures. Lost income from one or two weeks of work can be all it takes for a family to become homeless.

Being able to pay the rent is not always enough to keep a family in a home. Multiple parents we spoke to told stories of being able to pay the rent with their current income but getting behind on utility payments and eventually being evicted when the power was shut off. For these families a small, one-time payment at the right time would have prevented them from becoming homeless.

## **Policies For Reducing Child and Family Homelessness**

Elected officials who represent Utah in Congress will have an opportunity to reduce child poverty and child homelessness in 2025 by supporting legislation to expand the federal child tax credit. A temporary expansion of the child tax credit reduced child poverty by more than one third in 2021, so we know this policy can work. Representative Blake Moore from Utah Congressional District 1, has declared that he intends to champion the inclusion of an enhanced child tax credit and has a bill to do that called the "Family First Act" that includes a new benefit for pregnant mothers.

Based on our research and our interviews with homeless parents we have a couple suggestions for making this program work better. Several homeless parents we spoke to would not have become

homeless if they had access to a relatively small amount of money at the right time. The 2021 child tax credit expansion included the option of receiving monthly "prepayment" checks. Receiving assistance on a monthly basis, instead of an annual basis at tax time, increases the chance that someone will have extra money available at the time they need to pay for car repairs or make a utility bill payment. This would increase the impact of the child tax credit in reducing child and family homelessness.

Another improvement that would increase the impact the child tax credit would have in reducing child and family homelessness would be to allow families headed by parents with disabilities to receive the credit. The child tax credit is only available to people with employment income and excludes people whose income comes from disability programs like SSI, SSDI and Veterans disability benefits. Several of the homeless parents we spoke to told us that they did not receive the enhanced child tax credit in 2021 because of this problem. It is difficult to imagine a group of families who need assistance paying for the cost of raising children more than families headed by parents with disabilities.

State leaders do not have any proposals before them that have as much potential for preventing child and family homelessness as an expansion of the child tax credit but they do have a chance to eliminate the experience of unsheltered homeless for families with children in Utah. In 2022 a surge in family homelessness led to a waiting list being imposed at the family shelter in Utah for the first time in many years. State leaders responded to this crisis by appropriating money to purchase an old hotel and convert it into a second family shelter in Salt Lake County. That facility has been purchased and is almost ready to open but only has money for staff and operations through June, 2025. Governor Cox's has proposed that the state budget for coming fiscal year include \$5.8 million in ongoing funding to open this facility. In August of last year, the operators of the family shelter in Midvale reported that they had been forced to turn away 834 families in the past year because that facility was full<sup>13</sup>. Every child deserves a safe and warm place to sleep so members of the Utah Legislature should adopt the Governor's funding recommendation.

Another way state legislators can help reduce the impacts of child and family homelessness in Utah is by supporting an appropriation request made by Representative Tyler Clancy to place \$2 million into the Olene Walker loan fund with intent language that funding priority will be given to mixed income projects that include housing for families moving out of homelessness. Research shows that children in poverty do better as adults when they are allowed to move into lower poverty neighborhoods. Unfortunately, at this time permanent supportive housing for families with children is not located in mixed income projects but is instead based in projects that included many childless adults with serious mental illness. Supportive housing for families must be designed to meet unique needs of families attempting to permanently move out of homelessness.

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<sup>13</sup> "South Salt Lake officials express frustration, but recognize need for proposed family shelter" KSL (August 22, 2024)



The Utah Homeless Services Board has an opportunity to help create a more safe and healing environment for about 50 families who are living in a facility that also includes units for about 200 childless adults with a history of chronic homelessness. Palmer Court was one of the first permanent supportive housing projects created in Utah and is the one of the only facilities that combines units for childless adults and families with children. The operators of Palmer Court are seeking federal funding to redesign that facility so that families will be in a separate building that childless adults would not be able access. The Homeless Services Board has funding that would leverage other federal funds needed for the project. It is imperative that they award this funding soon so that children living in Palmer Court in the future will have less interaction with unfamiliar adults battling serious mental illness and will be living in an environment that is tailored to support their journey to thriving adulthood.

City and county leaders can be part of efforts to reduce child and family homelessness by supporting the development of adequate, affordable housing that meets the needs of families in their communities and by becoming engaged with efforts to create job opportunities for low-income parents.

## **Faith Perspectives on Family Homelessness**

**Matthew Weinstein, Social Action Chair of Congregation Kol Ami:**

The Hebrew prophet Isaiah calls on us to “take the poor into your homes.” (Isaiah 58:7) In modern times we understand this exhortation to require that we come together as a community to pool our resources through taxes and charitable donations to ensure that no one is living on the streets of our cities.

**Rev. Brent Gundlah, Holladay United Church of Christ**

Congregations and members of the United Church of Christ throughout the U.S. strive to create a better world for all through ministry, mission, and witness. As a denomination, the UCC has a long history of advocating for housing justice — action that is grounded in the belief that adequate housing is a basic human right. At Holladay UCC, we covenant with one another to embody God’s extravagant love and to seek justice for the oppressed and vulnerable, and one of the ways we live into this commitment to compassionate action is by working alongside local organizations here in the Salt Lake Valley in their multifaceted efforts to end child and family homelessness.

**Linda Smith, Board Member, First Unitarian Church:**

As Unitarians, one of our core Values is:

Equity. We declare that every person is inherently worthy and has the right to flourish with dignity, love, and compassion.

Accordingly as Unitarians

We covenant to use our time, wisdom, attention, and money to build and sustain fully accessible and inclusive communities.

We believe this Value and its related Covenant calls us to end family homelessness.

### **Rev. Kimal James, Minister First United Methodist Church of Ogden**

First United Methodist Church of Ogden, like other congregations of our United Methodist denomination, cares deeply about the needs of all children, and especially those who are affected by housing insecurity and homelessness. In the early 1700s, our founder John Wesley led the earliest Methodists to care for children in orphanages, believing that our faith in Jesus Christ calls us to care for the least among us. Ever since then, Methodist people have supported ministries that protect children from, and help them overcome, childhood trauma.

In 2024, the United Methodist Church revised its Social Principles to be more inclusive of United Methodists around the world where children often suffer unimaginably from wars and human trafficking. But, even here in Utah, these words are quite important:

“As a church, we will work to . . . reform the structures of society to ensure that every human being can thrive. . . . Basic rights and freedoms include the right to . . . food and shelter. . . Governments must be held responsible for guaranteeing human rights and liberties . . . We call on church and society to support and advocate for the well-being of all children.” (2024 UM Social Principles, section on Basic Rights and Freedoms).

### **Rev. Lora Young (she/her/hers), Minister, South Valley Unitarian Universalist Society**

As Unitarian Universalists we uphold the worth and dignity of all people which includes the right to safe, affordable and accessible housing. We are all connected and thus as called to love and serve each other as we build the beloved community. Our congregation has made ending homelessness for all people a major priority for nearly 2 decades. We continue to have hope that together we can solve homelessness in Utah through collaborative, innovative solutions rooted in best practices and a clear vision for justice and equity for all.

### **Rev. Nathan Sautter, Pastor, Cottonwood Presbyterian Church**

The Presbyterian Church (USA) is committed to eradicating systemic poverty and evaluating the forces that push people into poverty and keep them there. At Cottonwood Presbyterian Church we actively support several organizations that help people who are homeless, including organizations that specifically help homeless families with children. The impacts of homelessness on children can

be devastating and so we join our voices in challenging our state to find ways to prevent family homelessness and move families that become homeless into stable housing as fast as possible.

**Stephanie Wilson and Deb Elstad, Mt. Tabor Lutheran Church:**

Outrage over the plight of people living in poverty is a theme throughout the Bible. The poor are those who live precariously between subsistence and utter deprivation. It is not poor people themselves who are the problem, but their lack of access to the basic necessities of life. *(ELCA Social Statement on Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All)*

Lutherans believe that Grace compels believers to actively work for justice in the world by loving their neighbors and advocating for the marginalized. Some of the most vulnerable being homeless children and their families.

**Bill Tibbitts, Director, FACE Hunger and Homelessness:**

As a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints I believe the most important starting point for talking about child homelessness is to recognize that every person I meet is a child of God with divine potential. If I behave in a way that rejects my kinship with another person or denies their worth then I am falling into a pride cycle and falling short of my obligation to help fragile and vulnerable people in our community like infants and children.

## About the Faith and Advocacy Coalition to End Hunger and Homelessness

The Faith and Advocacy Coalition to End Hunger and Homelessness, FACE Hunger and Homelessness, brings people together to learn about the causes of hunger and homelessness in Utah and to support policies that would reduce those forms of unnecessary suffering.

FACE Hunger and Homelessness is a project of  
Crossroads Urban Center  
[www.crossroadsurbancenter.org](http://www.crossroadsurbancenter.org)

