

Child Homelessness in Salt Lake County

2020 Report

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Introduction and Summary

This has been a challenging year for homeless children in Salt Lake County. The COVID-19 pandemic led to the County's only family shelter being temporarily closed due to quarantine. Fear of contracting a potentially fatal illness made many families unwilling to go to a shelter for help. This fear of going to a shelter almost certainly contributed to the surge in domestic violence incidents that has occurred during the pandemic.

The pandemic has also disrupted two school years. This disruption has particularly impacted homeless schoolchildren and others who lack consistent access to the internet necessary to participate in remote learning. Given the fact that homeless children are already more likely to be held back for one or more grades, there will be a need for sustained efforts to help children who are homeless this year to catch up on what they have missed if they are going to have any chance of graduating from high school.

This report is not focused on how to respond to COVID-19 because the pandemic is an unprecedented situation and so there is not data from similar events to analyze. Instead, we are focusing on ways the homeless services system in Salt Lake County can better stabilize homeless families with children. The long term needs of homeless children impacted by COVID-19 will be significantly harder to mitigate if their housing situation is not stabilized.

Key findings in this report:

- Too many families with children become homeless in Salt Lake County.
- Many of the children who become homeless in Salt Lake County are very young, aged six or younger.
- Too many families with children have extended or repeated experiences of homelessness.
- Many homeless children have been exposed to domestic violence and other forms of trauma.
- Homelessness impacts children's performance in school.

Recommendations for improving outcomes for children experiencing homelessness:

- Produce 150 new units of supportive housing for families with extended or repeated experiences of homelessness.
- Create a Salt Lake County Housing Affordability Commission specifically charged with identifying housing needed to reduce child homelessness and opportunities to produce and preserve that housing.
- Capitalize on full Medicaid expansion by connecting all parents and children who become homeless with a medical home that can help them transition out of homelessness.
- Reduce the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic by continuing pandemic rental assistance programs and being vigilant about identifying and assisting children who have fallen behind in school due to homelessness.

Too many families with children become homeless in Salt Lake County

- 4,719 people from families with children received homeless services in Salt Lake County in 2019.¹
- 9,082 people from families with children received homeless services during the three-year period of 2017-2019.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has made many people afraid to use homeless services. However, during the first six months of 2020 there were still 3,075 people from families with children who received homeless services in Salt Lake County.
- Research shows that homelessness is a traumatic event that can have long-term impacts in children's mental and physical health.²

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Many of the children who become homeless in Salt Lake County are very young, aged six or younger

- 1,402 young children aged six years old or younger received homeless services in Salt Lake County during 2019. During the first six months of 2020, 936 children aged six and under received homeless services.

The most common time for a person in the United States to be homeless is during the first year of life.

- 2,780 young children aged six and younger received homeless services in Salt Lake County during the three-year period of 2017-2019.
- Research shows that the most common time for a person in the United States to be homeless is during the first year of life and that the second-most common time is between the ages of one to six.³
- Research also shows that many of the negative impacts of homelessness are particularly severe for infants and young children.⁴

Too many families with children have extended or repeated experiences of homelessness

- 119 people in families with children in Salt Lake County were homeless for six months or longer during 2019. 31 of those people were children aged six or younger.
- 486 people in families with children in Salt Lake County were homeless for six months or longer during the three-year period of 2017-2019. 105 of those people were children aged six or younger.
- 215 people in families with children who were homeless during 2019 had been homeless four or more times during the past three years.
- Research shows that the negative impacts of homelessness on infants and children are likely to become worse as the length of time they are homeless increases.⁵ Children are resilient and can recover from trauma and crisis, but they cannot heal while the crisis is ongoing.

During the years 2017-2019, 486 people in families with children in Salt Lake County were homeless for

six months or longer.

Many homeless children have been exposed to domestic violence and other forms of trauma

- On the night of the 2020 Point in Time Count of all homeless people in Salt Lake County, 157 children were living in a shelter for survivors of domestic violence.⁶
- 66 percent of the mothers with an experience of homelessness who we interviewed for a 2017 survey in Salt Lake County had also experienced domestic violence.⁷
- Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Salt Lake County prosecutors have seen a 21 percent increase in domestic violence cases and 911 dispatchers have handled a 31 percent increase in domestic violence calls.⁸
- Research shows that homelessness itself is traumatic for children and that it exposes children to other forms of trauma.⁹

Homelessness impacts children's performance in school

- Schools use a more comprehensive definition of homelessness and so they identify 277 percent more homeless children than those served by Utah's homeless service providers. Federal officials estimate there were an average of 13,838 homeless school children in Utah during the years 2017 and 2018¹⁰. During those same years, an average of 4,998 Utah children aged zero to seventeen received the homeless services tracked by the state.
- Research shows that children with an experience of homelessness are up to nine times more likely to be held back in school for at least one grade.¹¹ Disruption of two school years by the COVID-19 pandemic increases the chances children who are homeless this year will not graduate from high school.

Recommendations for improving outcomes for children experiencing homelessness in Salt Lake County

- Produce 150 new units of supportive housing for families with extended or repeated experiences of homelessness.** During the past three years 388 people in families with children had a shelter stay that lasted at least six months and 486 people were part of families that have become homeless four or more times. Parents and children with extensive histories of homelessness need a stable, child-centered, place to recover from the trauma they have endured. Salt Lake County can spearhead efforts to produce housing that is safe for children with on-site, age-appropriate, physical and mental health services, childcare services and a strong connection to local schools.
- Create a Salt Lake County Housing Affordability Commission specifically charged with identifying housing needed to reduce child homelessness and opportunities to produce and preserve that housing.** In 2018, the Utah Legislature created a state housing affordability commission to study ways state policy and funding can address housing affordability. Salt Lake County needs a similar body tasked with identifying opportunities for the County to address housing affordability and homelessness. A first task for this commission should be identifying unused properties owned by local government entities that can be used to spur the creation of targeted affordable housing-- such as supportive housing for families with children with repeated or extended histories of homelessness.
- Capitalize on full Medicaid expansion by connecting all parents and children who become homeless with medical services they need to move forward with their lives.** Our state opting into full Medicaid expansion at the beginning of this year provides an opportunity to connect families that have become homeless with ongoing services that can help them avoid future instances of homelessness. Salt Lake County should set the goal of enrolling all parents and children who become homeless in Medicaid, or another healthcare plan, and facilitating an initial meeting with a social worker from a family's managed care network who can refer parents and children to needed services. County leaders should also work with state officials and Utah's Medicaid managed care providers to identify services that would reduce child homelessness that should be added to Utah's Medicaid state plan.
- Reduce impact of the COVID-19 pandemic by continuing pandemic rental assistance programs and being vigilant about identifying and assisting children who have fallen behind in school due to homelessness.** Remote learning is impossible for students who do not have wi-fi or a computer/tablet to participate. Not all parents have the technical expertise to help their children access remote learning. We need to identify children who are falling behind and make plans to help them catch up.

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- ¹ Unless indicated otherwise, all state data in this report was obtained from the Utah Homelessness Dashboard that is hosted on the Utah Department of Workforce Services website.
- ² "Caring for the Health and Wellness of Children Experiencing Homelessness" National Center on Early Childhood Health and Wellness.
- ³ "Policy Statement on Meeting the Needs of Families with Young Children Experiencing and At Risk of Homelessness" U.S. Department of Health and Human Services U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development U.S. Department of Education, October 31, 2016
- ⁴ "Infants Exposed To Homelessness: Health, Health Care Use, And Health Spending From Birth To Age Six" Health Affairs, May, 2019.
- ⁵ "Timing and Duration of Pre- and Postnatal Homelessness and the Health of Young Children" Pediatrics, October, 2018.
- ⁶ State of Utah Annual Report on HOMELESSNESS 2020, Utah's Department of Workforce Services, Division of Housing and Community Development.
- ⁷ "More Help For Our Kids: Mothers Experiencing Homelessness Speak Out" Crossroads Urban Center, December, 2017.
- ⁸ "Salt Lake County sends federal relief money to nonprofits combating rise in domestic violence" Deseret News, August 26, 2020.
- ⁹ "Homelessness & Adverse Childhood Experiences: The health and behavioral health consequences of childhood trauma" National Health Care for the Homeless Council, February, 2019.
- ¹⁰ "Federal Data Summary School Years 2015-16 Through 2017-18" National Center For Homeless Education, January 2020.
- ¹¹ "Ending Family Homelessness, Improving Outcomes for Children" U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2016.