

Child Homelessness in Utah

2020 Report

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Introduction and Summary

This has been an extraordinarily challenging year for homeless children in Utah. The COVID-19 pandemic has made many homeless families unwilling to go to a shelter for fear of being infected with a potentially life threatening illness. This fear to get help has led to people staying in less safe situations and contributed to a surge in domestic violence.

The pandemic has also disrupted two school years. This disruption has particularly impacted homeless schoolchildren, and others, who lack the consistent internet access 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 catch up on what they have missed if they are going to graduate from high school.

This report is not focused on how to respond to COVID-19 because this pandemic is unprecedented and so there is not data from similar events to analyze. Instead, we are focusing on ways homeless services in Utah can better stabilize homeless families with children. The long term needs of children who are homeless this year will be significantly harder to mitigate in future years if their housing situation is not stabilized.

Key findings in this report:

- Thousands of people in families with children become homeless in Utah each year.
- Thousands of the children who become homeless in Utah 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 200 units of supportive housing for families with extended or repeated experiences 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.
- Reduce the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic by continuing pandemic rental assistance programs and helping school districts to identify and assist children who have fallen behind in school due to homelessness.
- Work with Utah's congressional delegation to increase federal funding for housing for low income families and vouchers to help families at risk of becoming homeless.

Thousands of families with children become homeless in Utah each year

- 6,698 people from families with children received homeless services in Utah in 2019¹.

14,002 people
in families with children
received homeless
services in Utah
during the years
2017-2019.

- 14,402 people from families with children received homeless services in Utah during the three-year period of 2017-2019.

- The COVID-19 pandemic has made some people afraid to use homeless services but, during the first six months of 2020, there were 4,212 people from families with children who received homeless services in Utah.

- Research shows that homelessness is a traumatic event that can have long-term impacts in children's mental and physical health².

Thousands of the children who become homeless in Utah are very young, aged six or younger

- 2,030 young children aged six years old or younger received homeless services in Utah during 2019. During the first six months of 2020, there were 1,268 children aged six and under who received homeless services.

- 4,254 young children aged six and younger received homeless services in Utah 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 one and six³.

- Research also shows that many of the negative impacts of homelessness are particularly severe for infants and young children⁴.

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

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

- 136 people in families with children in Utah were homeless for six months or longer during 2019. 420 were homeless for a period of six months or longer during the years 2017-2019.
- 239 people in families with children who were homeless in Utah 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 increases⁵. Children are resilient and can recover from trauma and crisis but they cannot heal while the crisis is ongoing.

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 Utah, there were 331 children who were living in a shelter for survivors of domestic violence⁶.
- Since the beginning of the COVID 19 Pandemic, police departments across the state and country have seen increased reports of domestic violence⁷.
- Research shows that homelessness itself is traumatic for children and that it exposes children to other forms of trauma⁸.

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 2018⁹. 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 a grade¹⁰. Disruption of two school years by the COVID 19 pandemic increase the chances children who are homeless this year will not graduate from high school.

Recommendations for improving outcomes for children experiencing homelessness in Utah

- **Produce 200 units of supportive housing for families with extended or repeated experiences of homelessness.** Parents and children with extensive histories of homelessness need a stable, child-centered, place to recover from the trauma they have endured. State officials can help fund and otherwise support local 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.
- **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.** Utah 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. The state 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. State officials should also work to identify services that would help reduce child homelessness that can be added to Utah's state Medicaid plan and apply for permission from the federal government to do so.
- **Reduce the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic by continuing pandemic rental assistance programs and helping school districts to identify and assist 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.
- **Work with Utah's congressional delegation to increase federal funding for housing for low income families and vouchers to help families at risk of becoming homeless.** Federal funding plays a key role in the production of most affordable housing produced in Utah. Federal housing vouchers help many formerly homeless families to stay in stable homes and are a key funding source for the ongoing operations of supportive housing projects. There are proposals before Congress to increase funding for these things that are likely to be raised for consideration again next year. State officials should play a critical role in helping Utah's congressional delegation to understand how these proposals would augment our state's efforts to reduce child homelessness.

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- ¹ Unless indicated otherwise, all state data in this report was obtained from the Utah Homelessness Dashboard that is
- 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, and 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 “Uptick in Utah domestic violence cases tests a system stretched by the coronavirus” Deseret News, April 30, 2020.
- ⁸ “Homelessness & Adverse Childhood Experiences: The health and behavioral health consequences of childhood trauma” National Health Care for the Homeless Council, February, 2019.
- ⁹ “Federal Data Summary School Years 2015-16 Through 2017-18” National Center For Homeless Education, January 2020.
- ¹⁰ “Ending Family Homelessness, Improving Outcomes for Children” U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2016.