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Donna Haig Friedman

University of Massachusetts Boston, donna.friedman@umb.edu

Katherine Calano

Marija Bingulac

Christine Miller

Alisa Zeligier

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Children and Homelessness in Massachusetts

Donna Haig Friedman with the assistance of Katherine Calano, Marija Bingulac, Christine Miller, and Alisa Zeliger

In Massachusetts, more than half a million children (15% of all children) live in poverty, 30% of all children live with parents who lack secure employment, and 41% live in households with high housing cost burdens. This article examines the root causes of poverty and its links to child homelessness in the state. Though the state has a long-standing progressive political legacy, the well-being of low-income families with children continues to decline. The article offers evidence about the extent of child homelessness and its profound effects on Massachusetts children and youth. The interconnectedness of what are usually thought of as separate policy domains—poverty, hunger, homelessness, low-wage work, and low-income families’ access to public work supports—are examined, as is the efficacy of homelessness-prevention interventions. Particular focus is placed on policy solutions for alleviating the root causes of child and family homelessness in Massachusetts.

When children are without a safe and nurturing place to live, they face hardships that have long-lasting consequences—for themselves, their families, and the community. That 1.6 million children each year could be without the security of a home—in our wealthy nation—is a national disgrace.¹ The persistent growth in child homelessness is one of the clearest consequences of our collective failure to halt increases in poverty and income inequality in our nation.

For over three decades, solving family homelessness has been a central objective for policy makers, philanthropies, community coalitions, municipalities, and families themselves. Complexly related, structural root causes of family homelessness, such as unaffordable housing, low wages, and low-wage work conditions, exacerbate the problem and are central precipitants for an unending flood of families seeking emergency shelter and other public and private emergency assistance.

Until 2008, state laws and regulations focused primarily on an emergency response: developing emergency shelter programs that provided a temporary roof over families’ heads and priority access to housing assistance. Since 2008, however, Massachusetts has taken a prevention-based approach to family homelessness, as outlined in its Commission to End Homelessness blueprint.² Indeed, Massachusetts is highly ranked for its national leadership in having a plan for reducing child homelessness.³

Nonetheless, the numbers of families seeking shelter has not decreased significantly in the past 5 years. Now is the time to direct public-policy makers’ attention to addressing the proximate causes of family homelessness (e.g., evictions, rent arrearages) and its root causes.

Donna Haig Friedman is the director of the Center for Social Policy, J. W. McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies, and a research associate professor in the Department of Public Policy and Public Affairs, University of Massachusetts Boston.

This article focuses on the extent of child and family homelessness in Massachusetts, its causes, and the families most at risk. We highlight Massachusetts' current blueprint for addressing family homelessness and make recommendations based on an evaluation of prevention measures.

Extent of the Problem

On any given night in 2011 in Massachusetts, 17,501 persons were homeless, and 38% of them were children.⁴ The number of homeless children in the state during 2010 was estimated to be 22,569, a dramatic increase since 2006.⁵ This increase was attributed largely to the recession that began in 2007 and the associated increase in risk factors for homelessness, such as foreclosures and persistent poverty.

In 2010, 13% of Massachusetts children lived in poverty for an average of 5 years, and the state was ranked twenty-ninth in foreclosure rates. Despite the addition of more than fifteen thousand housing units through the federally funded, recession-related Homeless Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program (HPRP), the risks of low-income families' becoming homeless have worsened.⁶ Although the recession has caused higher rates of homelessness, the extent of the problem can be slowed only if prevention programs are not cut further and root causes are addressed.

Definition

The federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act defines homeless children with the following criteria:

- Sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing or economic hardship, where they would not be guaranteed or allowed to stay for more than 14 days
- Living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds, emergency or transitional shelters
- Abandoned in hospitals or awaiting foster care placement
- Living in cars, parks, public spaces, or migratory situations⁷

Facts on Family Homelessness in the United States

In the public view, lone individuals living on the street are assumed to be the “face of homelessness,” but 38% of the homeless in the United States (at one point in 2011) were family members and 59% of family members were children.⁸

Family homelessness is invisible to the public eye. When families lose their housing, they commonly move in temporarily with friends or relatives. These arrangements are rarely stable or permanent. At times, they lead to families' splitting up and children's losing friends and educational ground.⁹ Understanding these facts is a first step toward solution development and policy action.

In 2010, the National Center on Family Homelessness updated its state-by-state report card titled “America's Youngest Outcasts.” They found that in the United States:

- 1.6 million American children—1 in 45—are homeless in a year, equaling 30,000 children each week and more than 4,400 each day. These numbers are likely underestimates.
- Children experiencing homelessness suffer from hunger, poor physical and emotional health, and missed educational opportunities.

- Sixteen U.S. states have done no planning related to child homelessness, and only seven states have extensive plans.
- States in the North and Northeast tend to have the lowest percentages of homeless children because of their lower poverty levels and stronger publicly funded safety nets. This geographic distinction is consistent on a composite ranking, using four data points: extent of child homelessness, child well-being, risk of child homelessness, and state policy and planning efforts.¹⁰

How Does Massachusetts Compare?

In the 2010 National Center on Family Homelessness report, Massachusetts ranked eighth in the nation based on these composite criteria.¹¹ This performance highlights the state's commitment to addressing homelessness. Massachusetts has made the following changes and improvements in these four domains:

- **Extent of child homelessness.** Massachusetts' rank improved from 30th in 2007 to 21st in 2010.
- **Child well-being.** Massachusetts' rank improved from 16th in 2007 to 12th in 2010. All other New England states scored worse than Massachusetts in 2010.
- **Risk of child homelessness.** Massachusetts' rank improved from 19th in 2007 to 16th in 2010. Compared with Massachusetts, however, all other New England States, except Connecticut, showed a lower risk of homelessness in 2010.
- **State policy and planning efforts.** Massachusetts has continued to show commitment to policy and planning efforts, ranking 2nd after Maine in 2010. Massachusetts was ranked 1st in these efforts in 2007.

Homelessness and Student Mobility

Student mobility, caused by housing instability, has serious negative consequences for children in their educational progress. Student mobility is most prevalent in the state's thirty-five lowest-performing schools, concentrated in only nine school districts, which saw 45,914 students change schools at least once in 2008–9. High mobility is most common in urban school districts, because low-income, Hispanic, black, and special education students are disproportionately more mobile:

- Low-income students comprise 31% of the total student body in Massachusetts and 53% of all mobile students.
- Hispanic students comprise 14% of the student body and 29% of all mobile students.
- Black students comprise 8% of the student body and 16% mobile students.
- Special education students comprise 17% of the student body and 24% of all mobile students.

Eleven school districts in Massachusetts' "Gateway Cities" (Brockton, Fitchburg, Haverhill, Holyoke, Springfield, and Worcester) represent 35% of all mobile students statewide. Once thriving industrial towns, these cities are now facing troubling economic and social problems and yet are perceived as "gateways" for diverse, foreign-born residents to pursue the American Dream.¹²

In addition, emerging data on youth homelessness in the city of Worcester speaks to the alarming state of homelessness for young people and indicates the need for more prevention-focused resources. Findings show that homeless youth

- experience greater rates of family violence;
- become parents four times more often than youth who have homes, thereby creating a “new generation of housing instability”; and
- have an exceptionally difficult time accessing needed support services. (Forty percent of youth who tried to get help were unable to because of several barriers: placement on waiting lists, lack of transportation, never hearing back from providers, failure to qualify, and not knowing where to go for help.)¹³

Root Causes of Child Homelessness

Barriers to Ensuring Basic Needs for Children

Unless family incomes are adequate enough to meet families’ basic needs, housing instability and its consequences will be a reality for parents with low wages and for Massachusetts communities. In addition to higher wages and a greater supply of low-income housing, effective packaging of wages and public work supports has the potential to bridge the gaps between income and expenses for greater numbers of these families. In reality, however, Massachusetts public work supports—while commendable—are inaccessible for an overwhelming number of low-wage earners in the state because of a hardship gap, an eligibility gap, and a coverage gap.

Hardship Gap Families who combine earnings and obtain public work supports are still without enough income to cover the basic costs of living. Nearly 25% of Massachusetts families with a wage earner fall into this gap regardless of their income source.¹⁴ One reason for the hardship gap is that too many jobs pay too little, affecting housing stability. Consistent with U.S. statistics overall, more than 50% of Massachusetts renter households spend more than one-third of their income on rent.¹⁵ Also, the housing affordability standards set by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) are unrealistic. In no part of the United States can a full-time minimum wage worker pay for private market housing with just 30% of his or her income. Even more affected are persons of color, elders, sole women with children, and renters.¹⁶

Eligibility Gap When families make too much to qualify for public work supports but have too little income to pay all their bills, they are in trouble. Something as simple as lack of information about how to access services or rules of eligibility can put families through struggles that exacerbate emotional and financial stress, contributing to housing instability. Nearly 37% of all people in families with earners who cannot meet their family’s basic needs are also ineligible for any work support programs in Massachusetts. Also, program rules are complex and uncoordinated, with varying definitions of eligibility across programs. The programs with highest eligibility gaps are the Temporary Assistance to Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC), Section 8 housing assistance, and child care assistance.¹⁷

Coverage Gap Earners with low wages are eligible for public work supports but do not receive them. The reasons for the coverage gap vary as much as the programs themselves, and the

programs' rules vary. One problem is that an administrative burden deters families from confirming their eligibility status. Furthermore, the need for public work supports far exceeds the amount of funding provided to cover those who are eligible. As workers' earnings increase, co-payments for child and health care increase and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), previously known as food stamps, benefits decrease or families suddenly become ineligible for assistance. Thus, abrupt or precipitous changes in assistance levels are disincentives for workers' career advancement. For example, workers offered a promotion and higher wages may be better off financially if they turn down promotions and keep their hold on housing assistance or lower child care bills.¹⁸

The following list of wages and public works supports shows the difference, as of 2007, between the percentage who are eligible for public work supports in Massachusetts and the percentage who receive these supports:

- TAFDC (4% eligible; 1% receive)
- Section 8 housing assistance (11% eligible; 3% receive)
- Earned income tax credit (EITC) tax filers (12% eligible; 10% receive)
- Child care for children aged 13 and younger (16% eligible; 6% receive)
- SNAP (17% eligible; 6% receive)
- MassHealth for individuals (19% eligible; 12% receive)¹⁹

Low Family Wages

Monetary resources and low-wage work conditions are important indicators for child and youth well-being, even beyond the provision of basic needs.²⁰ Low-wage jobs are the least likely to provide employer benefits, such as paid time off for illness, though they are increasingly the most readily available form of employment in the current recession.

Low family wages put children at risk of developmental, educational, and health disparities. These disparities have a greater effect on the children of single parents, parents of color, and immigrant parents than on the children of white, married citizens.

Access to a protective and nurturing adult presence, as well as to books, extra-curricular lessons, and recreational equipment, all contribute to positive youth development. But parents with low incomes experience a time crunch, which can reduce their opportunities to offer these resources to their children. In addition, they do not have the financial resources to pay for time-saving amenities, such as "nannies" or healthful prepared food.

The stress of financial instability, which is connected to housing instability, has a negative effect on children's educational achievement and increases the likelihood of their dropping out of school. Furthermore, low-income employment, especially that of single mothers, affects the health of their children. Negative outcomes include:

- Obesity
- Malnutrition
- Lack of physical activity
- Forced self-care by the child
- "Adultification" roles for older children who need to take care of younger siblings
- Early childbearing, associated with perpetuating a young person's educational, employment, and developmental difficulties

Housing Instability and Homelessness

Housing insecurity and instability are known risk factors for homelessness. Housing instability is more prevalent than homelessness, though less apparent. In a nationwide sample of over 22,000 low-income families, only 52% were stably housed. Housing insecurity is characterized by multiple moves (5% of the sample) and overcrowding and doubling up with another family for economic reasons (41% of the sample).

The 2012 HealthWatch survey of 6,000 Boston families with children under the age of 4 found that only 43% were securely housed, while 21% lived in crowded places, 8% were homeless, 4% were frequently mobile, and 24% were behind on rent.²¹

The implications of housing insecurity on family well-being, according to the survey, are severe, yet varied. The effects on older children include poor school performance, mental health issues, and behavioral issues. Younger mobile children are more likely, however, to be food insecure, in fair or poor health, at risk for developmental delays, and seriously underweight.

Stable housing reduces negative outcomes on a wide range of issues, including energy insecurity, household food insecurity, child food insecurity, and child access to health care. Increased state investments in stable housing through programs such as the Massachusetts Rental Voucher Program (MRVP) improve health for unstably housed children.

According to Children's HealthWatch, families who cannot make rental payments, compared with those who can, are

- three and a half times more likely to be energy insecure in their home,
- five and a half times more prone to household food insecurity,
- six times more prone to child food insecurity, and
- two times more likely to forego health care for their children.²²

When a family's housing insecurity crosses the line into homelessness, the consequences are magnified. A 2007 evaluation of programs by HUD determined that dislocation of a family into shelters or transitional housing can result in stress, discontinuity of educational experience, and a sense of social exclusion for children. Childhood homelessness is also a risk factor for continued homelessness in adulthood.²³

Family homelessness can also put strains on an under-resourced system of care. Challenges arise among shelter staff in the form of help-giving fatigue, and families may in turn feel that seeking shelter is less desirable than living on the street, in a car, in a train station, or in a tent city. Shelter life can create challenges and stresses on families that perpetuate the sense of being "unseen." But shelters that follow alternative models by providing safe, respectable, supportive, and predictable environments have the potential to reverse the damage sustained by parents and their children on their traumatizing homelessness journeys.

Housing Mobility and Educational Achievement

Educational achievement is related to housing mobility. Homeless children, compared with those who are not homeless, are

- eight times more likely to be asked to repeat a grade,
- three times more likely to be put in special education classes, and
- twice as likely to score low on standardized tests.²⁴

For example, as a 2011 report by the Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy points out, mobile students in Massachusetts scored 24 percentage points lower than other students on Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System English language arts and math tests.²⁵ These scores reflect the struggles mobile students go through every day to adjust to emotional and behavioral health challenges, new classroom communities, and inadequate housing, food, and health care. Educators also face the challenge of adjusting to the mobility of their students. Furthermore, for families sheltered outside of their home communities, transportation costs for children to attend school in their home districts are high.

Massachusetts' commitment to ensuring that all students are college and career-ready creates a strain on educators who are also expected to serve the needs of mobile students. Mobile students may arrive behind academically or without any academic records.

In urban schools where classrooms may already be crowded, intake requirements and the tailoring of educational needs could create even larger challenges. Rural and suburban schools may have the resources to meet these needs, but student mobility is densely concentrated in urban areas. Thus, as the Rennie Center report points out, we see unequal test scores and unequal college- and career-readiness across geographic boundaries.

Evidence on Solutions

The Importance of Housing Assistance and Increasing Affordable Housing Options

Housing vouchers help improve housing mobility, education and training, child well-being, and family income.²⁶ The 2007 evaluation of programs by HUD showed a reduction in the overall number of moves. A follow-up evaluation indicated that the families relocated to better areas, which were characterized by lower poverty rates, higher employment rates, and lower welfare concentrations.

Subsidized housing reduces housing instability and protects children's health, growth, and development. In addition, as the 2012 HealthWatch survey concludes, because people who devote the majority of their income to housing cannot afford other basic needs, combining housing subsidies with WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children) or SNAP support would help close the coverage gap. Funding levels for the state's voucher programs have been on the rise since FY2004. For FY2014, Governor Deval Patrick proposed an 11% increase from FY2013 for the MRVP.²⁷

Increasing the supply of housing that is affordable to families with low incomes is another important tool for addressing family homelessness. The state's housing trust fund, the Massachusetts Affordable Housing Trust Fund, promotes rehabilitation, construction, preservation, acquisition, and supportive housing to special populations.²⁸ The fund is supported by public revenue, such as real estate transfer taxes. Money from this fund can also be put toward transitional housing and emergency rental assistance, but a focus on improving state-held resources can support the housing trust fund in its ability to fulfill the needs of these programs.

The Efficacy and Limitations of Homelessness Prevention Interventions

Over the past 10 years, researchers have evaluated several comprehensive prevention models that are based on an understanding of risk factors. One is the Homelessness Prevention Initiative,

funded by the Boston Foundation/Starr Foundation, the Ludcke Foundation, Tufts Health Plan, Massachusetts Medical Society, and Alliance Charitable Foundation. These agencies pooled resources in 2004 for a 3-year investment to learn from a range of promising homelessness prevention interventions across the state.

A comparative analysis published by the Boston Foundation and the Center for Social Policy at the University of Massachusetts Boston in 2007 outlines these models and how they have been implemented.²⁹ In the 3 years of the initiative, 4,830 families and 2,417 individuals were served, at an average cost of \$1,436 per household. Successes, defined as housing stability for families 12 months after initial intervention, were associated with

- families' access to cash assistance, flexibly provided, in concert with case management supports;
- income maximization strategies (obtaining all the public work supports for which families were eligible); and
- effective regional and local collaborations among organizations for leveraging resources families needed.

A Sample of Other Promising Approaches A study of a model in western Massachusetts suggests that implementing a preventive counseling program and redirecting the community's resources from crisis management to education and economic development leads to better results in maintaining housing stability. The following paragraphs offer a sample of other promising programs in the state.

Early Warning System. In 2007 utility companies and the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) began a collaboration, the purpose of which is to inform DTA-assisted families of the resources available, particularly the state's utility discount program. In 1 year, an estimated 60,000 low-income Massachusetts households were automatically enrolled in the program because of this broadening of access.

First Stop Initiative. The Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless places caseworkers in health centers and public schools to help identify and assist people who are at risk of becoming homeless. These preventative interventions are focused on helping people maximize their incomes by accessing public work supports for which they are eligible, as well as helping them navigate available support services for the purposes of stabilizing their housing circumstances.³⁰

Boston Housing Access Collaborative. FamilyAid Boston started this collaborative as a pilot program in 2009. Because of its success, it became a permanent program. Through a mix of services that include case management, workforce development, literacy training, and other support services, the program has helped 65 families move to permanent housing from being homeless.

Victory Programs, Inc. This program works with targeted clients, including people with substance abuse, chronic diseases such as HIV/AIDS, and issues of domestic violence, and helps them overcome personal obstacles and reach stable housing. The Boston Housing Access Collaborative and Victory Programs, Inc., together contributed to a 21.5% decrease in the number of families in transitional housing between 2010 to 2011.³¹

Dudley Diversion Pilot Project. In a 2008 effort to alleviate the rapid increase in the number of homeless families in 2007 in the Dudley area of Boston, project collaborators, the City of Boston, Massachusetts DTA, and nine other major service providers in Boston, worked with 69 families on the brink of homelessness to find viable alternatives to secure housing.³²

Results of this project showed that 42% of all families were diverted from DTA shelters. Of these, 86% had not entered a shelter after 7 weeks. The program invested \$50,000 in a flexible way. For example, 6 families received 1-year housing subsidies averaging \$7,564, considerably less expensive than a 1-year of shelter stay for a family that averages \$33,600.

Tenancy Preservation Program (TPP). This homelessness prevention program mediates between landlords and tenants who face eviction because of issues related to a disability, such as mental illness, substance abuse, and old-age impairments. TPP works with landlords, encouraging them to accommodate disabilities and avoid eviction. Also, every year TPP works with 500 households, preventing evictions—and subsequent homelessness—in 80% of all cases.³³

Recent Sobering Findings Twelve to 18 months after receiving financial assistance and other housing relocation and stabilization services through HPRP, very few Massachusetts families see their income rise. For these persistently low-income families, housing assistance and other resources need to be available for long periods. Additionally, unless family incomes increase substantially through earnings, the risk of homelessness will remain high for low-income families without a housing subsidy.³⁴

In an evaluation of homelessness prevention models being implemented by three Boston organizations, cash assistance to families on the brink of homelessness provided a financial cushion that enabled them to remain housed 12 months after the last case assistance payment. Persistent unemployment, very low incomes, and an expensive rental market, however, continue to pose serious hardships that threaten their long-term housing stability and well-being.³⁵

Recent State Changes: Addressing Family and Child Homelessness

Massachusetts is a leader in addressing child homelessness. The state is ranked second in the country for policy and planning efforts, and it has a 5-year plan that focuses on prevention and intervention policies for addressing child homelessness.

As recommended in the Commission to End Homelessness blueprint, radical changes to the state's approach to addressing family homelessness have been implemented in the past several years, characterized by a shift to a "Housing First" model. As a result, homeless families—who in previous years would have been accepted into one of the state's emergency shelters—are no longer eligible for shelter.

Eligibility criteria have been tightened to allow shelter entry to only those families whose homelessness is due to domestic violence, a natural disaster, eviction caused by loss of income or disability, or—for the first time in the state's history—to their living in a place not meant for human habitation. Between September 2012 and March 2013, at least 162 families with children were allowed into shelter after they had stayed in a place not meant for human habitation, including emergency rooms, train stations, and cars.³⁶ The consequences for these children, who have witnessed their families being turned away from shelter when they have no other place to stay, are likely to be profoundly severe.

Homeless families denied shelter are offered other supports, ranging from a one-time cash assistance award of four thousand dollars to multi-year cash assistance with lesser amounts awarded each year.³⁷ These changes have coincided with the current recession, a time in which many low-income families have lost their jobs or have been affected by the foreclosure crisis.

Governor Patrick has proposed significant increased funding in FY2014 for state housing voucher programs, which would assist some, but not all, families at risk of homelessness. Before the current recession, nearly 200,000 Massachusetts households eligible for Section 8 housing assistance were not receiving this assistance. On average, families eligible to receive a Section 8 Housing Voucher experienced a 2.5-year wait for the voucher. These waits are now even longer.³⁸

In addition, the supply of affordable subsidized housing is far below what is needed to meet the demand of those eligible for vouchers, and the demand for affordable housing for families with low incomes is way beyond what is currently being planned for the state's blueprint to end homelessness.³⁹

Massachusetts and other surrounding states have bills, laws, and initiatives already on the table to address child homelessness. These initiatives are often related to educational opportunity. For example, the Act Establishing an Alternative Education Grant Program, passed in 2004, calls for the creation of programs and services within the schools to deal with the educational and psychosocial needs of children, particularly those who are currently "suffering from the traumatic effects of exposure to violence," one example of which is child homelessness.⁴⁰

The Act Relative to Children's Mental Health, passed in 2008, calls for the creation of a task force to ensure that all children in the state of Massachusetts have "access to clinically, linguistically, and culturally-appropriate behavioral health services . . . especially for children transitioning to school from other placements, hospitalization, or homelessness."⁴¹

A report by this task force states: "By 2017 all schools in the Commonwealth will implement the Behavioral Health and Public Schools Framework to create safe, healthy, and supportive school environments with collaborative services so that all students—including those with behavioral health challenges—are successful in school. The Commonwealth will provide the infrastructure and supports at the state and district levels to enable schools to create these environments."⁴² One of the action steps recommended to schools is to better recognize the early warning signs of students who might be distressed or traumatized because of violence, including child homelessness.

Examples of legislation under consideration in the state, relevant for addressing the root and proximate causes of risks of child and youth homelessness, include those that, if passed, would provide housing and support services to unaccompanied homeless youths, focus homelessness prevention efforts on recipients of transitional assistance, provide a refundable rent credit for low-income taxpayers, establish earned paid sick time, and increase the state's minimum wage.

Other states are currently considering bills that Massachusetts could consider in its homelessness prevention efforts. For example, in Rhode Island, proposed legislation would allow families initially eligible for child care assistance to remain eligible as long as their income does not exceed 225% of the federal poverty level and child care is necessary to maintain employment. RI Bill 2284 would prevent the interruption in benefits for parents receiving child care subsidies whose income fluctuates between 180% and 225% of the federal poverty level.

Recommendations: Connecting the Dots

With local communities mobilizing to address family homelessness, state support is required to address the root causes of persistent poverty and sustain effective preventative measures.

Next Steps for Policy Makers

The sources cited earlier in this article provide grounding for the following recommendations:

- First, do no harm: Eliminate the draconian eligibility criterion for shelter that requires a family with children to show evidence of having spent a night in a place not meant for human habitation.
- Modify unpredictability of prevention services by securing adequate and steady funding. Insure prevention initiatives in locations across the state and expand access.
- Invest state resources in ensuring that workers with low wages in Massachusetts can access public work supports for which they are eligible as a way of supplementing their family incomes.
- Increase the state's minimum wage and promote all workers' access to paid sick leave.
- Replicate, expand, and sustain promising models of prevention that show signs of stabilization.
- Invest in long-term evaluations of program innovations by investigating what is happening with families who are diverted from shelter and receiving time-limited cash assistance.
- Facilitate a cross-sector planning process and peer learning among agencies and initiatives already taking action.

No Single Solution: A Need for Multipronged Strategies

Finding a single solution for child and family homelessness would be impossible. What are needed are multi-layered and sustained cross-policy approaches that focus on the interrelated structural issues of high housing costs, low wages, limited prevention resources, and hurdles to accessing public work supports that put low-income families and their children at risk for homelessness. Massachusetts can show its commitment to closing our children's persistent educational achievement gaps and reducing the number of families seeking shelter by first acknowledging and overcoming the challenges outlined in this article.

In schools, enforcing a mechanism for sharing practices around student intake and assessment, family outreach, and specialized curriculum would advance progress. Allowing for more flexibility in addressing homelessness across state agencies could promote interagency collaboration at the regional and local levels. The Massachusetts Child and Youth Readiness Cabinet, according to the Rennie Center report, is well poised to prioritize and expand such streamlining efforts.

Imbalances between long-term solutions and emergency interventions jeopardize children's well-being as well. When funding favors emergency interventions, money for long-term, sustainable preventative solutions is spread too thin. When the emergency safety net is too thin, children and families without a stable housing are harmed. It is imperative that we achieve a balance between long-term and emergency fixes for child homelessness, and that progress on ameliorating the root causes be effectively sustained.

Notes

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¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ All data in this section are drawn from Lisa Dodson and Randy Albelda, *How Youth Are Put at Risk by Parents’ Low-Wage Jobs* (Boston: Center for Social Policy, University of Massachusetts, 2012), http://cdn.umb.edu/images/centers_institutes/center_social_policy/Youth_at_RiskParents_Low_Wage_Jobs_Fall_12_1.pdf.

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²² Children’s HealthWatch, *Safe, Stable Homes*.

²³ For further discussion of the consequences of homelessness, see Friedman, *Under a Watchful Eye*.

²⁴ Bassuk et al., *America's Youngest Outcasts 2010*.

²⁵ Rennie Center, *Revolving Door*.

²⁶ Abt Associates, *Effects of Housing Vouchers on Welfare Families* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research, 2013), http://www.huduser.org/Publications/pdf/hsgvouchers_1_2011.pdf.

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³⁹ Friedman et al., *Preventing Homelessness*; Children's HealthWatch, *Safe, Stable Homes*.

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