

Thrive From the Start

A Policy Agenda for Solving Infant and Toddler Homelessness

We know approximately 450,000 infants and toddlers experience homelessness in the U.S., and nearly 70,000 babies are born to parents who experienced homelessness during pregnancy.¹ One in ten children under five in rental housing face the threat of eviction.² In its most recent estimate of homelessness in America, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) reported that the number of families with children experiencing homelessness saw the largest single-year increase in need, climbing 39% between 2023 and 2024. That came after a 16% increase in homelessness for families with children in 2023.³

Homelessness during pregnancy or in the first three years of a child's life has lifelong consequences and can lead to developmental delays, physical and mental health issues, and lasting effects on well-being.^{4,5} These stressful, even traumatic, experiences occur during the most rapid period of brain development, when foundations are laid for all later learning. Yet families with infants and toddlers and expectant parents face barriers accessing homeless assistance, affordable housing, health care, and high-quality early childhood development programs.

To ensure that infants and toddlers thrive from the start, significant policy changes are needed. The recommendations outlined here are designed to help policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels examine existing policies with a holistic approach and reduce cost-burdens in the future.⁶ Policies must address the housing, early childhood development, and health needs of infants, toddlers, and their families. Stabilizing these families will have long-term benefits for communities, the economy, and our nation.

Defining "Homelessness"

Throughout this document, "homelessness" refers to a lack of fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. Families experiencing homelessness include those who are:

- Sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason;
- Living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations;
- Living in emergency or transitional shelters;
- Have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings;
- Or living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings.

¹ SchoolHouse Connection, [Infant and Toddler Homelessness Across 50 States: 2022-23](#), (April 2025).

² Nick Graetz, Carl Gershenson, Peter Hepburn, and Matthew Desmond, (October 3, 2023). [Who is Evicted in America](#). The Eviction Lab.

³ The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Community Planning and Development. (December 2023) [The 2023 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report \(AHAR\) to Congress Part I: Point-In-Time Estimates Of Homelessness](#)

⁴ David DH, Gelberg L, Suchman NE. [Implications Of Homelessness For Parenting Young Children: A Preliminary Review From A Developmental Attachment Perspective](#). *Infant Ment Health J.* 2012 Jan;33(1):1-9. doi: 10.1002/imhj.20333. Epub 2012 Jan 23. PMID: 22685362; PMCID: PMC3370681.

⁵ McGovern ME, Treglia D, Eliason EL, Spishak-Thomas A, Cantor JC. [Homelessness and Maternal and Infant Health](#). *JAMA Netw Open.* 2024;7(11):e2442596. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.42596

⁶ Saahoon Hong, Kristy Piescher. The role of supportive housing in homeless children's well-being: An investigation of child welfare and educational outcomes, *Children and Youth Services Review*, Volume 34, Issue 8, 2012, Pages 1440-1447, ISSN 0190-7409, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2012.03.025>.

Policy Recommendations

Expand Access to Shelter and Permanent Housing Prioritization. Prevention. Connection.

Infants, toddlers, and expectant parents and their families experiencing homelessness face barriers to accessing shelter and affordable housing. Many communities lack shelters, and many of the shelters that exist do not accept children or are not equipped to meet the needs of infants and toddlers. In addition, many families with infants and toddlers do not qualify for HUD-funded housing support because they do not meet HUD's narrow definition of homelessness. Families also confront a broader lack of affordable housing and resources to prevent eviction. Policymakers can address these challenges by:

- Providing more resources for emergency and transitional shelters and permanent housing with developmentally-appropriate settings and services. This includes extending time that expectant families and those with young children can spend in emergency or transitional shelters.
- Reviewing and revising eligibility and entry policies to remove barriers for families with infants and toddlers.
- Increasing investments in the supply of affordable housing that is targeted to families with infants and toddlers, including targeted housing vouchers and other rental subsidies.
- Using tax credits and other incentives to increase the supply of affordable housing, and provide direct cash assistance to families to support their housing needs.
- Supporting policies and funding that incentivize collaboration between housing agencies, early childhood development programs, and health agencies to provide more options for support.
- Supporting policies that prevent and respond to evictions by connecting families and expectant parents to resources and legal services. Further, include educating landlords on the needs and supports available to these families.

A Disconnect in Defining Homelessness

Federally funded early childhood and education programs are required to use a broader definition of homelessness that includes families who stay temporarily with others in precarious, often unsafe situations, and families in motels.

The definition of homelessness used by housing programs is limited to those who are in shelters or in unsheltered locations. This creates barriers to access for many infants, toddlers and their families.

Increase Access to Early Childhood Development Programs and Additional Support Services Prioritization. Coordination. Elimination of Barriers.

Infants, toddlers, expectant parents and their families experiencing homelessness often face challenges in accessing early childhood programs that can help mitigate the impact of homelessness and connect them to housing and other support. In addition to the stressors that stem from homelessness, they must find ways to complete complicated forms and paperwork and navigate complex, disconnected systems. Other barriers include a lack of funding to meet the needs of all vulnerable families, including families experiencing homelessness. Policymakers can address these challenges by:

- Supporting greater investments in early childhood development programs that serve families experiencing homelessness.
- Supporting policies that prioritize families experiencing homelessness, eliminate barriers that limit access to needed services, and improve coordination across agencies and programs.
- Supporting implementation of existing policy requirements on homelessness in federal early childhood programs, including Early Head Start, child care, home visiting, and early intervention, through updated guidance and training.
- Funding navigators and other supports to help families access needed services.

Integrate Health Care Services and Housing Services ***Connection. Education. Support.***

When parents are experiencing homelessness and moving from place to place, they often lose access to a medical home for their children and themselves. Affordable and easily-accessed physical and mental health care supports are needed to ensure that pre- and post-natal check-ups take place, and that infants and toddlers are meeting developmental milestones and have access to immunizations to stay healthy. Policymakers can address these challenges by:

- Investing in case management services paired with shelter and housing to help families enroll in Medicaid, obtain healthcare services, as well as other health and developmental services and supports.
- Supporting policies that ensure families have an assigned medical home, and provide community-based treatment and support services in coordination with other providers.
- Ensuring that expectant families and families with infants and toddlers are included in presumptive eligibility definitions for Medicaid and have continuous eligibility for services.
- Convening private health insurers to educate and inform them about resources to support expectant families and families with infants and toddlers experiencing housing instability.

Improve Data Collection, Analysis, Use, and Coordination ***Consistency. Comprehensiveness. Disaggregation.***

Infants, toddlers, expectant parents and their families experiencing homelessness are often left out of critical services because they are hidden from public view – most stay with others temporarily (“doubled-up”) or in hotels/motels, and therefore do not meet HUD’s narrow definition of “homeless.”⁷ Not only are these families excluded from HUD homelessness programs, they are also left out of needs assessments and data collection. Policymakers can address these challenges by:

- Adopting a common, consistent definition of homelessness based on the definition in the education subtitle of the McKinney-Vento Act.
- Collecting and reporting information for those served by HUD’s homelessness assistance programs, and disaggregate that data by participant demographics.
- Making available the child care agency homelessness data from the Administration for Children & Families’ Office of Child Care.

A Note on Broader Economic Security

This policy agenda focuses on the intersection of homelessness, housing, and early childhood development. However, families experiencing homelessness and housing instability also would benefit from broader policies that provide economic security, such as paid leave, living wages, stable schedules, flexible work arrangements to accommodate care responsibilities, access to affordable health care and medical homes for their children, food and nutrition benefits, and safe neighborhoods. These families also need access to supports that consider their language and literacy needs. The recommendations in this document should be considered in addition to those resources for families.

Conclusion

With the right strategies and resources, we can ensure a strong foundation for all infants and toddlers, and strengthen our economy and our nation. It’s time to unite the early childhood, housing, and homelessness sectors to build a coordinated, holistic support system so that every child thrives from the start.

⁷ Molly K. Richard, Julie Dworkin, Katherine Grace Rule, Suniya Farooqui, Zachary Glendening & Sam Carlson (2022): Quantifying Doubled-Up Homelessness: Presenting a New Measure Using U.S. Census Microdata, Housing Policy Debate, DOI:10.1080/10511482.2021.1981976