

Briefing Paper

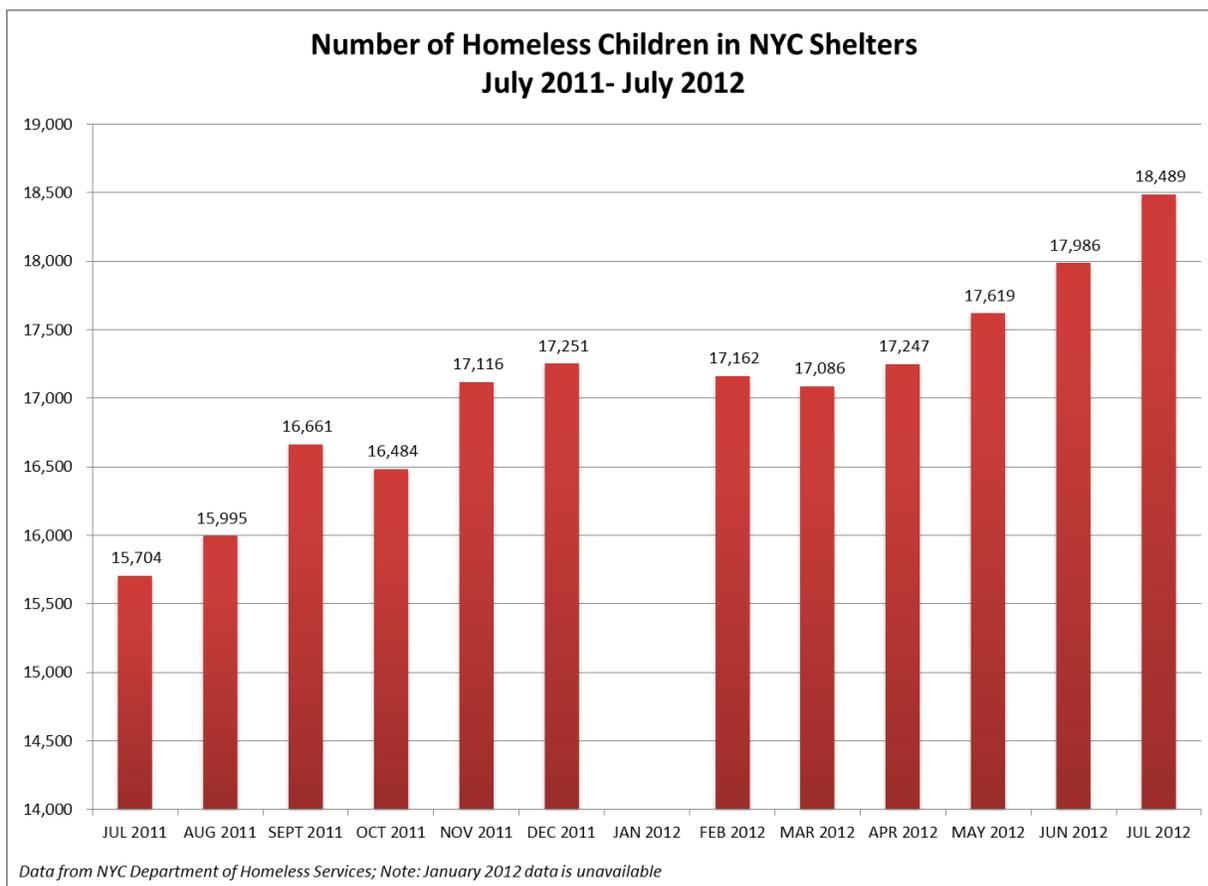
Voiceless Victims: The Impact of Record Homelessness on Children

September 25, 2012

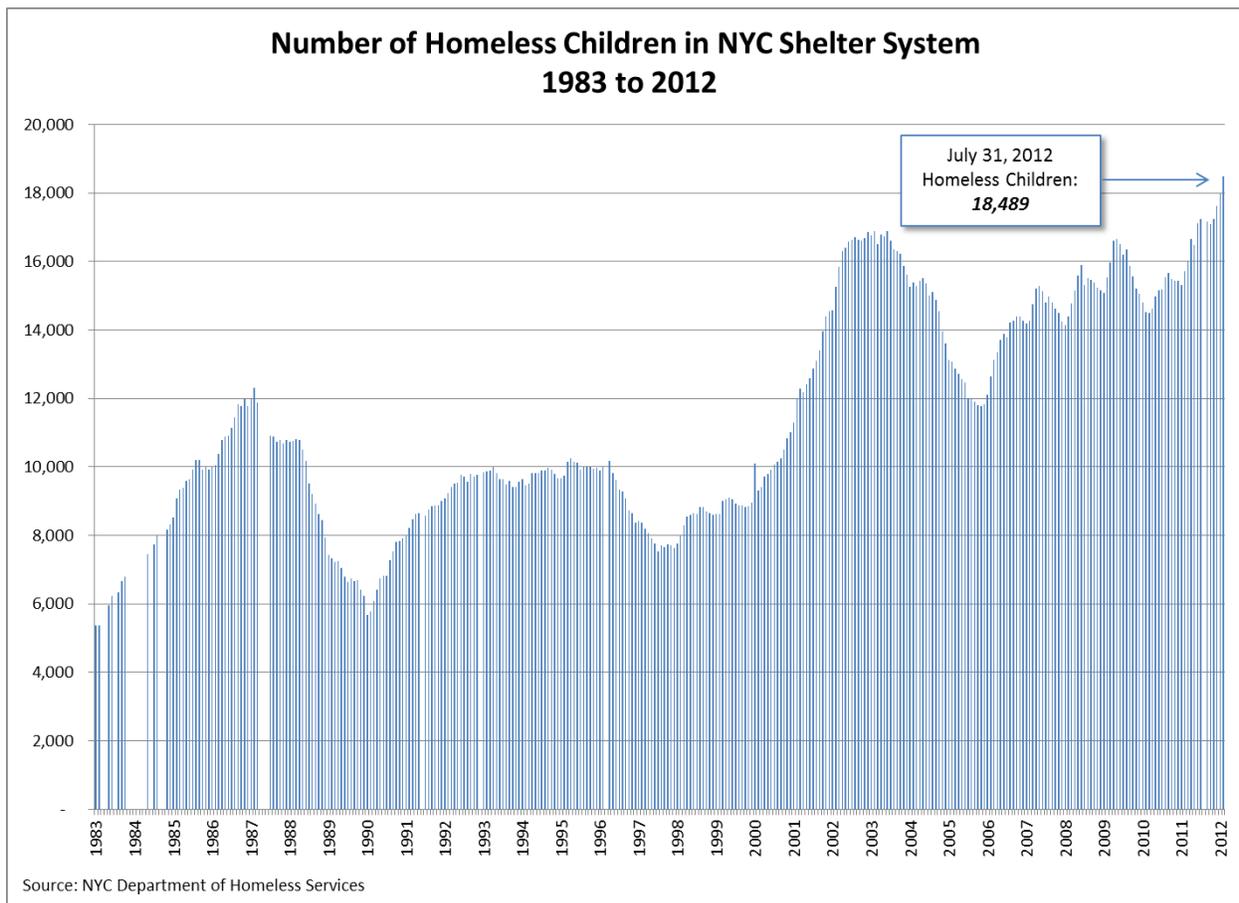
By Giselle Routhier, Policy Analyst, Coalition for the Homeless

For the first time ever, the number of children sleeping in New York City homeless shelters is poised to reach 20,000 kids per night. As of July, an average of nearly 18,500 children slept each night in municipal shelters—an increase of 18 percent over the previous year. And the most recent snapshot data from the New York City Department of Homeless Services, dated September 24, 2012, puts the number of homeless children over 19,500—an all-time record high.

Behind these astonishing numbers lie the policy failures of Mayor Bloomberg and his administration. For the past year and a half, the City has had no programs in place to help move families from shelter to permanent housing – a historic break from the policies of previous New York City mayors. During this time, the total homeless shelter population has soared nearly 15 percent and the number of homeless children in shelters by nearly 20 percent.



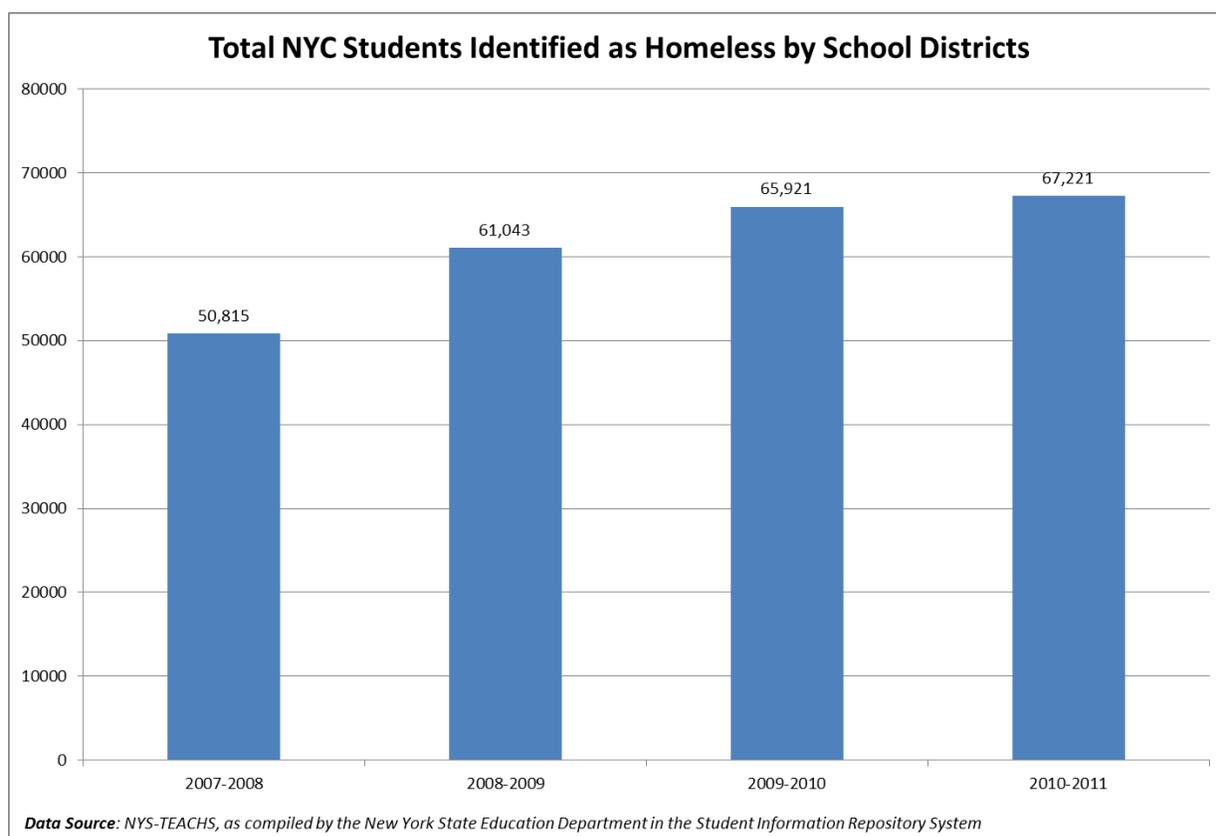
But there is a solution available. The New York City Council and Speaker Christine Quinn have proposed a plan that would once again allow homeless families to access federally-funded housing programs, including public housing and rental vouchers. In 2005, Mayor Bloomberg cut off homeless families from receiving priority access to these resources – resources that had successfully reduced New York City’s shelter population in past years. The City Council plan also calls for the creation of a new local rent subsidy based on the effective Federal voucher program. An independent budget analysis found that the City Council plan would not only reduce the number of homeless families and children – it would also cost the City and its taxpayers less in shelter expenditures.¹ Nevertheless, to date the Bloomberg administration has refused to act.



In the meantime, an ever-increasing number of homeless children, many of whom are school-aged, are crowding New York City shelters. Moreover, in addition to so many homeless children in shelters, a significant number of kids are forced to endure in other non-permanent locations, such as doubled-up in apartments or hotels. Based upon data collected by the school districts on the number of homeless students – which includes both children in shelters as well as those in unstable living conditions -- the number of homeless students in New York City is estimated to be 67,000.

While poverty by itself places great stress on young students, the instability of homelessness adds even more obstacles to a successful education. A wealth of research has documented the

difficulties homeless children face, from school disruption to emotional trauma and health problems.



Given the current crisis of record homelessness, particularly among children, the Coalition for the Homeless calls on Mayor Bloomberg to follow the lead of the New York City Council and Speaker Quinn by reversing course from the current disastrous policies and enacting the following:

- 1. Return to using federal housing resources, such as public housing and Section 8, to help homeless New Yorkers move from shelter to permanent housing;**
- 2. Create a new local rental assistance program modeled on the successful Section 8 voucher program;**
- 3. In coming years, set aside a significant percentage of City-assisted apartments - apartments created or preserved by the NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) - for homeless families and individuals.**

The Earliest Studies

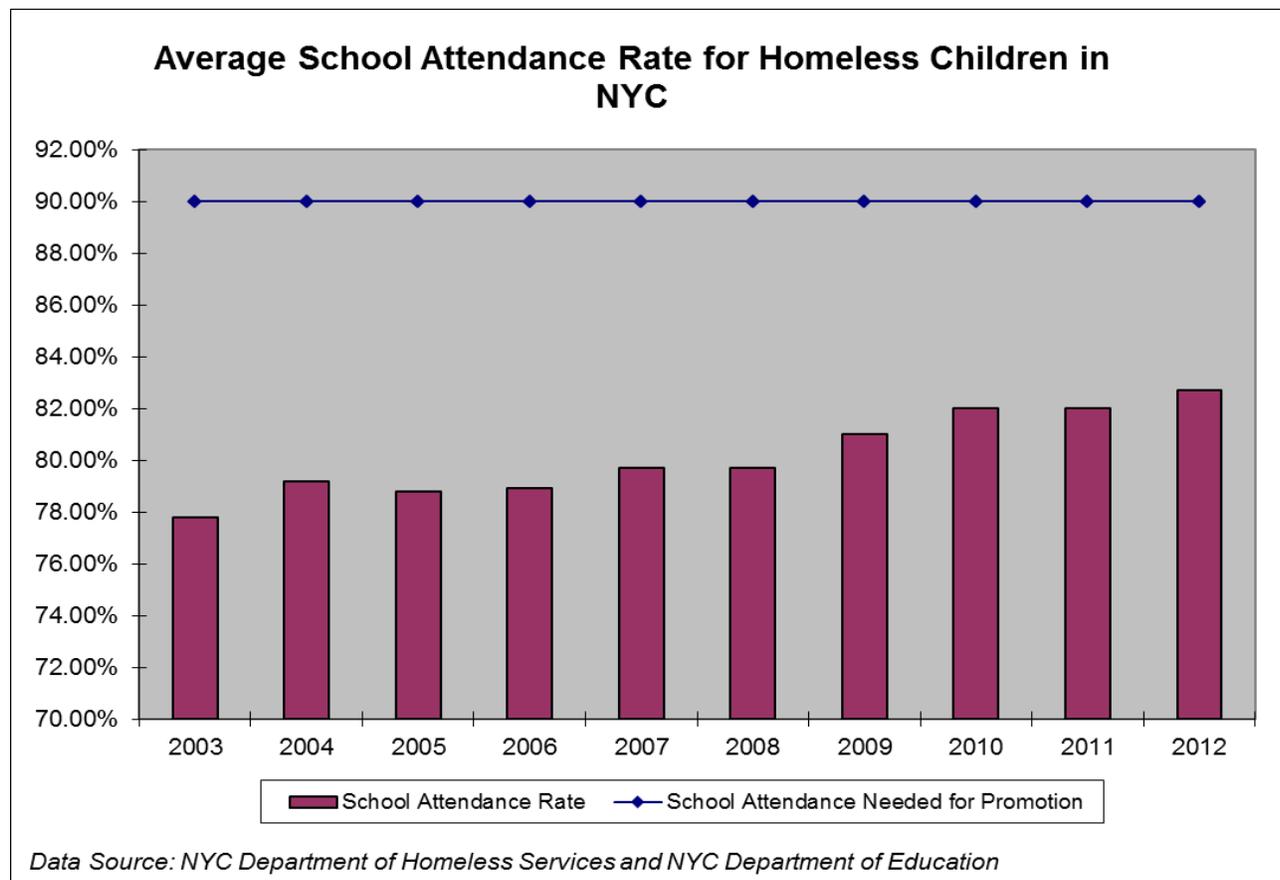
Scholarly research over the last three decades has shown the deeply harmful effects of homelessness on children, particularly children's educational outcomes.

One of the earliest literature reviews, conducted in 1991, detailed research findings showing that homeless children experience an array of problems in their health, development, behavior, and schooling.² Academic researchers Yvonne Rafferty and Marybeth Shinn reported that homeless children were more likely to experience acute and chronic health problems, including respiratory infections, ear disorders, and gastrointestinal disorders. Additional health problems were attributed to hunger and poor nutrition among homeless children.

Homeless children were also found to have greater instances of developmental delays, likely due to disruptions in child care and instability in shelter placements. Levels of clinical depression, anxiety, and behavior problems were also found to be higher among homeless children than their poor housed peers.

Not surprisingly, many of these negative factors also contribute to underachievement in school for many homeless children, who have been found to miss more school days, perform lower on tests, and be more likely to repeat grades.

Current City data echo these earlier findings and illustrate the challenges homeless students continue to face just getting to school. In 2012, homeless students in New York City shelters missed an average of 31 days of school, putting their average school attendance rate at 82.7 percent. And although school attendance has risen slightly over the past nine years, it still remains well below the 90 percent required to advance to the next grade.³



Recent Studies Confirm Earlier Findings

In 2004, Rafferty and Shinn conducted a follow-up study focusing solely on academic achievement among homeless adolescents. The study found that homeless students changed schools more frequently, repeated grades more often, and reported worse school experiences than their housed peers. Additionally, homeless children “scored approximately six percentile points worse than housed children on both reading and mathematics achievement, controlling for earlier achievement” prior to their shelter stay.⁴ Overall,

Findings are consistent with other recent studies of homeless school-age children, which suggest an underlying continuum of risk, with homeless children experiencing greater risk than their never homeless peers.

A 2008 literature review examined updated research on the effects of homelessness on children and the results were nearly identical to what had been published before.⁵ In almost all studies, homeless children performed worse on measures of academic achievement than their poor but housed peers. And again, health and developmental problems showed up more frequently among homeless children.

The overall pattern of findings across these studies suggests that more often than not, children’s exposure to homelessness increases their risk of adverse outcomes.

Overlooked Consequences of Homelessness on Children

Both the 2004 and 2008 studies also addressed an additional concern for homeless children: separation from their mothers and/or caregivers. In 2004, Rafferty *et al.* found that 44 percent of the homeless mother participants had become separated from one or more of their children during their time of homelessness. Five years later, 79 percent of the children were still separated from their mothers at the follow-up interview.

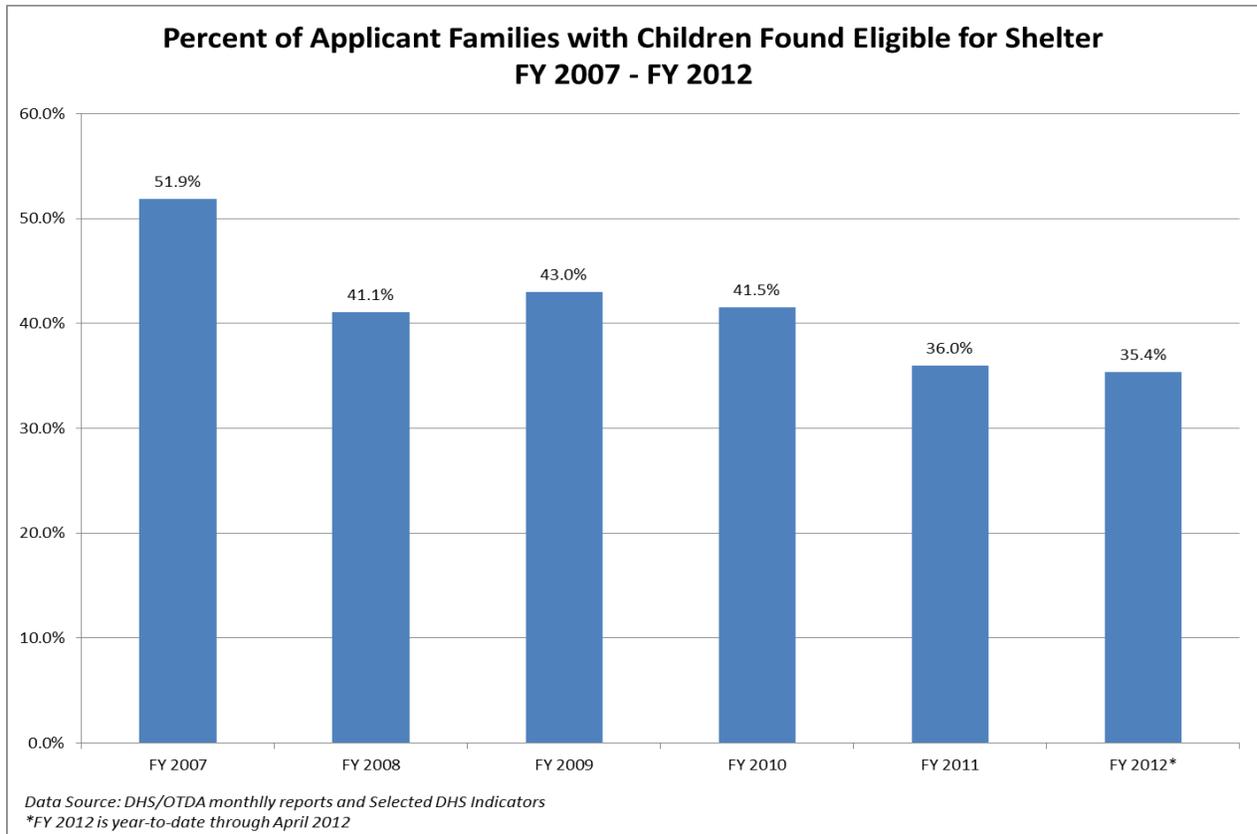
A 2002 study looked at the issue of mother-child separation more closely.⁶ It was found that homeless mothers experienced separation from their children at a vastly higher rate than housed mothers – 44 percent versus eight percent. Other factors such as domestic violence, maternal drug dependence and institutionalization predicted mother-child separations, but no predictor was as strong as homelessness, which was almost double the other risk factors.

In a 2009 study detailing women’s own explanations of child separation, housing loss was mentioned frequently as a precursor, among other factors including domestic abuse, substance abuse, and institutionalization.⁷

The most important takeaway from these studies is their implication for past and future research – highlighting the fact that studies on homeless children may grossly underestimate negative consequences if they exclude separated children.

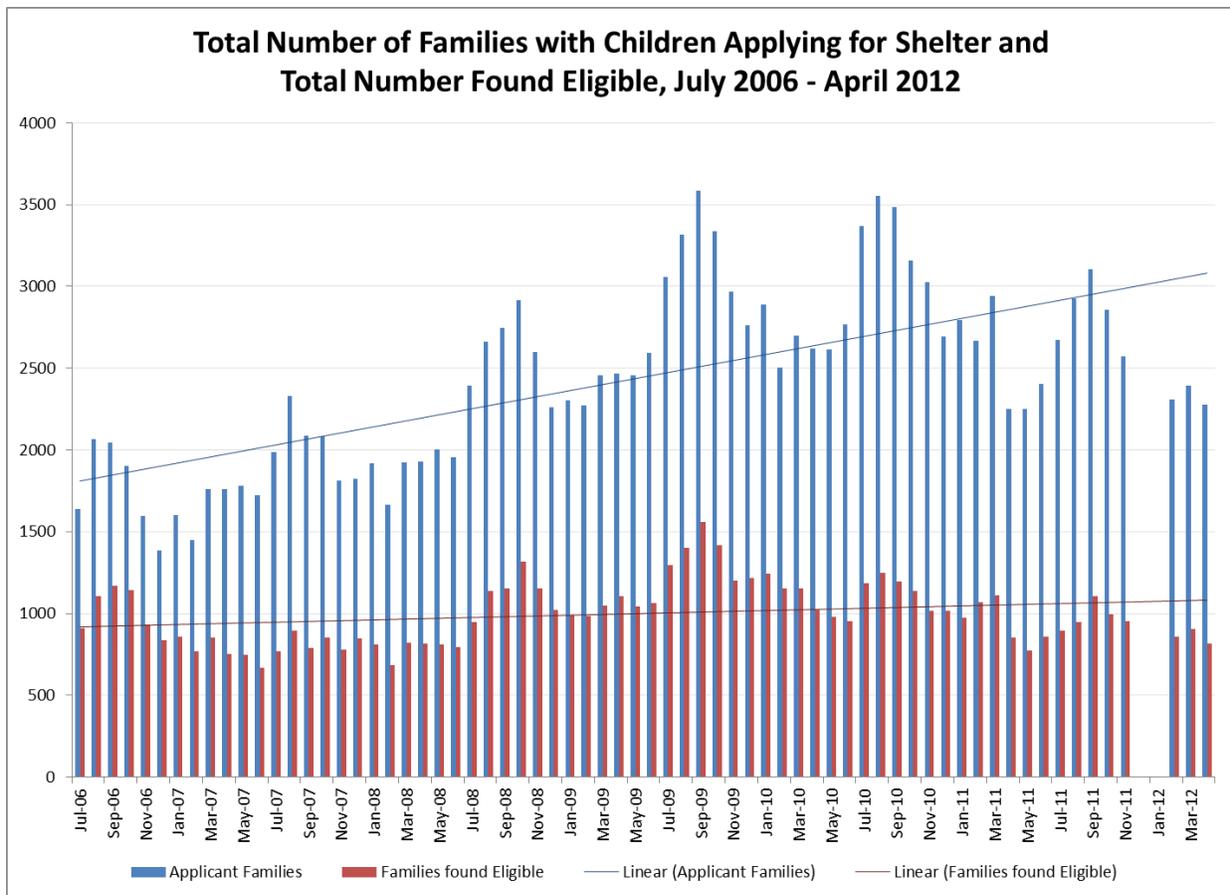
Homeless Children Denied Shelter

Even with a record and rising family shelter population, the true scale of New York City's homelessness crisis is even greater when one takes into account the number of homeless children and families who are wrongfully denied shelter every day. Over the past six years, the percentage of families found eligible for shelter has continued to drop, even in the face of record applications. Between 2007 and 2011, the number of applications for shelter increased 67 percent. But the number of families found eligible increased only 16 percent. In 2012, only 35 percent of all applicant families were found eligible for shelter, compared with over 50 percent in 2007.



At the central intake centers, homeless families are frequently denied shelter on the grounds that they can live somewhere else, even when this other residence is truly unavailable to them. Families are routinely denied shelter and told they can live with a relative or friend in a public housing or Section 8 apartment, when housing subsidy rules specifically prohibit such unauthorized tenants in these units. Families are also routinely told to return to overcrowded apartments and unsafe living situations.

These facts suggest that the current record figure of 19,000 homeless kids in shelter would indeed be higher if one accounted for families in crisis who are systemically denied shelter by the City.



Conclusion and Recommendations

The devastating impact of homelessness on children has become starkly clear from decades of study. While poverty alone creates health, developmental, behavioral, and educational problems for children, homelessness compounds these problems by adding additional stress and instability to children’s lives.

The good news is that children who experience homelessness can rebound fully from these challenges with a return to stable and permanent housing. Rafferty’s 2008 study showed that declines in educational achievement among homeless children did not continue upon their return to permanent housing. At the follow-up interviews, these formerly-homeless families were just as stable as families that had been consistently housed. It is important to note, however, that most homeless families in the study received permanent affordable housing such as public housing or Federal housing vouchers. They did not leave shelter on their own or receive a time-limited subsidy like New York City’s recently discontinued Advantage program.

Following this wealth of research, and particularly in response to the record numbers of homeless children currently in shelter, it is imperative that Mayor Bloomberg change course from his failed approach to homelessness. In 2005, his administration shortsightedly cut off homeless families from receiving priority for Federal housing assistance, including public housing and rental vouchers. As a result, homeless families’ access to these resources has been severely limited. In fiscal year 2010, at a time of then-record homelessness, homeless

families received only 2 percent of the 5,500 available public housing apartments and only 3 percent of 7,500 Section 8 vouchers.

Since 2005 the City has experimented with time-limited rental subsidies that have failed to provide the permanent housing assistance critical to stabilizing homeless families and children. Instead, these subsidies have created a revolving door back to shelter for thousands of formerly homeless families.⁸ Disturbingly, it remains unknown what effects multiple episodes of homelessness have on children's educational and health outcomes.

The Coalition for the Homeless calls on Mayor Bloomberg to follow the lead of the New York City Council and Speaker Quinn by reversing course from current disastrous policies and enacting the following:

1. Return to using federal housing resources, such as public housing and Section 8 to help homeless New Yorkers move from shelter to permanent housing

- This can be swiftly accomplished by using the existing priority system for both the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) public housing and voucher waiting lists, which makes households referred by the NYC Department of Homeless Services the highest priority applicants.

2. Create a new local rental assistance program modeled on the successful Section 8 voucher program

- In her *State of the City* address, Council Speaker Christine Quinn stated: "Working together we can create a brand new rental assistance program to help families cover rent in private buildings.... By the way, this isn't just the right thing to do, it's the fiscally responsible thing to do. The average cost of a rental subsidy for a family of four is \$800 a month. To house that same family in a shelter? \$3,000."

3. In coming years, the City should set aside a significant percentage of City-assisted apartments - apartments created or preserved by the NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) - for homeless families and individuals.

- This policy would build on the success of Mayor Koch's ten-year "Housing New York" program which allocated 15,000 affordable apartments – 10 percent of all housing units created or preserved under the program – for homeless New Yorkers.
- Currently Mayor Bloomberg's "New Housing Marketplace" plan allocates only around 4 percent of all City-assisted apartments to homeless people, even at a time of much worse homelessness.
- The City should also allocate a significant share of HPD-administered Federal housing vouchers to help homeless New Yorkers.

For more information, please visit: www.coalitionforthehomeless.org.

¹ The City of New York Independent Budget Office. (2012). [online]

<http://www.ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/dhspriorityletter61412.pdf>

² Rafferty, Y. Shinn, M. The Impact of Homelessness on Children. (1991). *American Psychologist*, Vol. 46, No. 11.

³ Data from Department of Homeless Services "Critical Activities Reports" and Department of Education.

⁴ Rafferty, Y. Shinn, M. Weitzman, B. Academic achievement among formerly homeless adolescents and their continuously housed peers. (2004). *Journal of School Psychology* 42.

⁵ Buckner, J. Understanding the impact of homelessness on children. (2008). *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 51, No. 6

⁶ Cowal, K. Shinn, M. Weitzman, B. et al. (2002). Mother-child separations among homeless and housed families receiving public assistance in New York City. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, Vol. 30, No. 5.

⁷ Barrow, S. Lawinsky, T. Contexts of Mother-Child Separations in Homeless Families. (2009). *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, Vol. 00, No. 00

⁸ Routhier, Giselle. Homeless Again: Former Advantage Tenants Adding to Already Record Homelessness in New York City. (2012). [online] <http://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/pages/homeless-again-former-advantage-tenants-adding-to-already-record-homelessne>