



BRIEFING PAPER

While More New York City Families and Children Seek Shelter, the City Turns Away More Families Than Ever

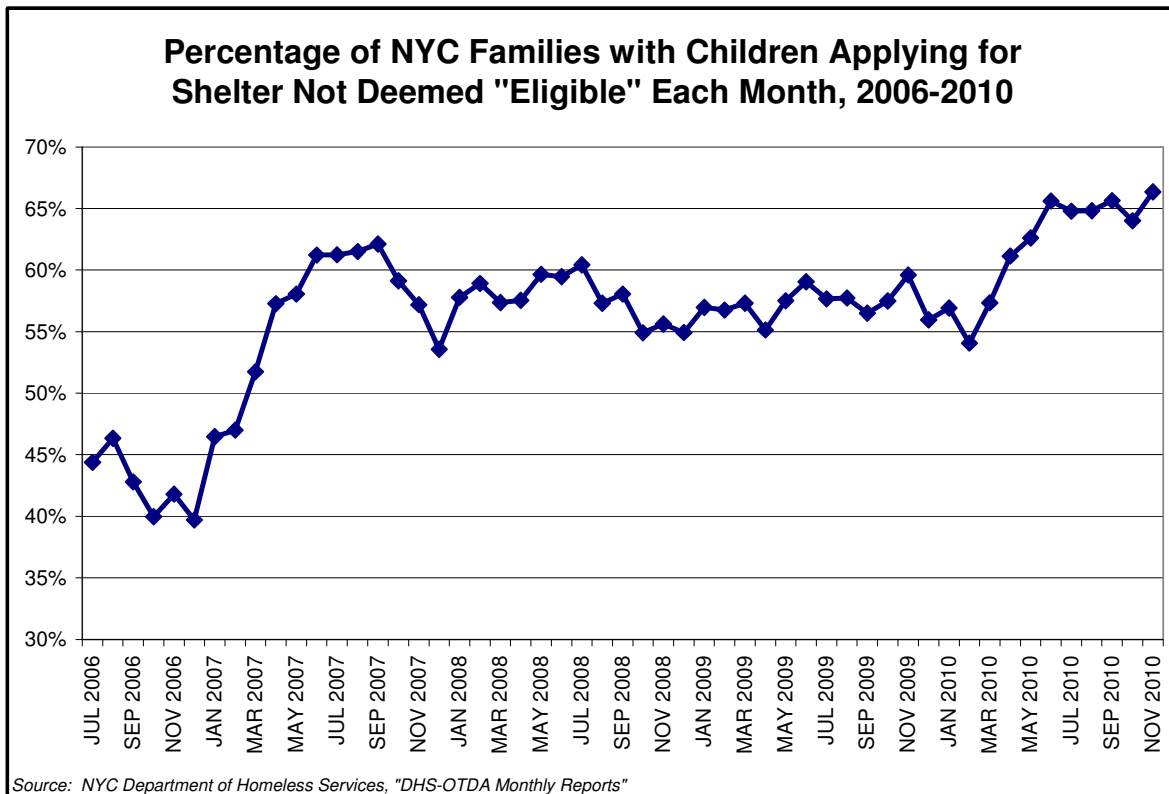
May 2, 2011

By Patrick Markee, Senior Policy Analyst

Amidst high unemployment and the loss of affordable housing, **a record number of New Yorkers sought help at municipal homeless shelters last year.** However, the Bloomberg administration's response was to **turn away a record number of families and children at the shelter door.**

As Coalition for the Homeless noted in our recent "State of the Homeless 2011" report, City data show that a **record 113,553 homeless people slept in municipal shelters in FY 2010, an 8 percent increase from the previous year and a 37 percent increase from FY 2002 when Mayor Bloomberg took office.** This includes a **record 28,977 homeless families, a 10 percent increase from the previous year and a remarkable 81 percent more than when the Mayor took office.** And by the end of February of this year, **the nightly census of homeless adults and children in the municipal shelter system – 39,553 people – reached the highest point ever recorded.**

In addition, last year an **all-time record number of New York City families applied for shelter.** In 2010 the number of families with children applying for shelter each month was **6 percent higher than the previous year and 61 percent higher than four years ago.**

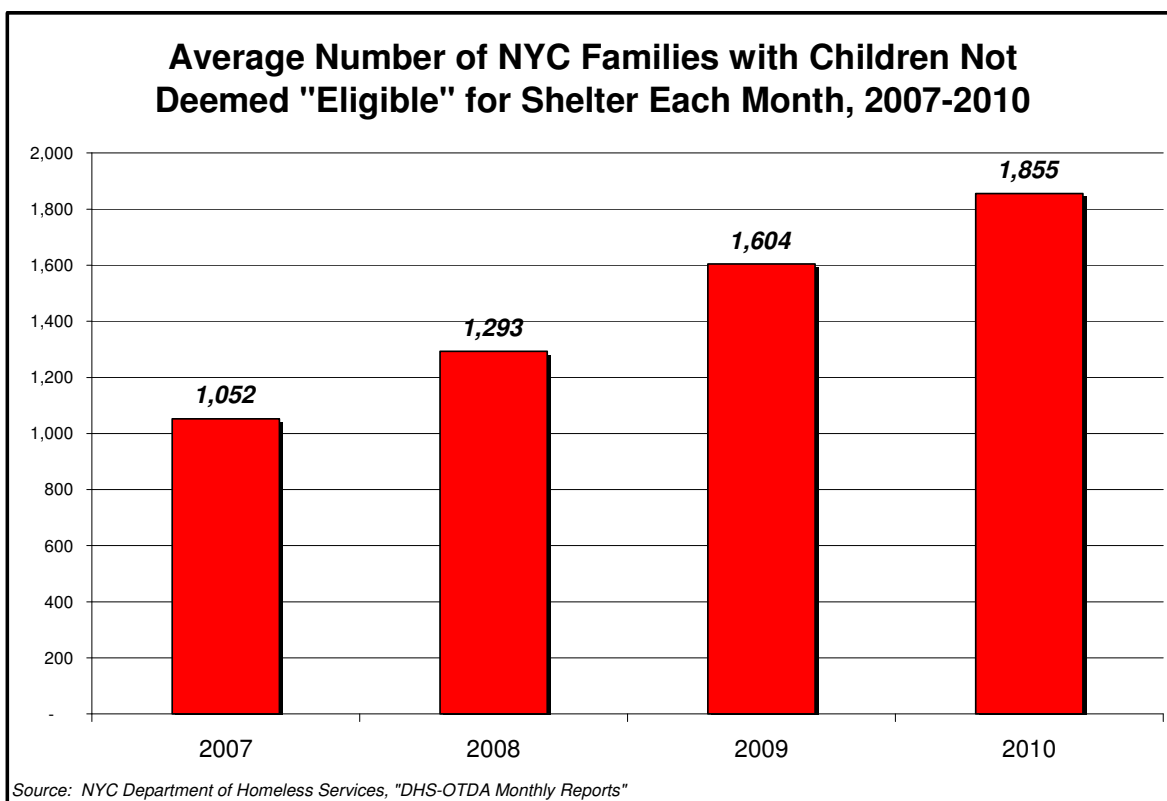


However, at the same time that a record number of New York City families and children were seeking shelter, City data shows that the New York City Department of Homeless Services is turning away more families than ever. ***In 2010 the City denied shelter to 16 percent more families with children than the previous year, and 76 percent more families with children than four years ago.***

Therefore, in the midst of high unemployment and the lingering effects of the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, the Bloomberg administration is turning away a record number of children and families seeking help in the homeless shelter system.

This month, the City will open a new intake facility for homeless families in the Bronx, a welcome improvement over the notorious old center. However, ***a new "state-of-the-art" facility will do little to help homeless children and families if the Bloomberg administration fails to address systematic errors that block vulnerable families from securing shelter and vital services.***

The following paper analyzes City data showing the alarming rise in the number of children and families turned away from shelter, and outlines sensible reforms to eliminate systematic City errors in the handling of family applications for shelter.



The Rising Number of New York City Families and Children Turned Away from Homeless Shelters

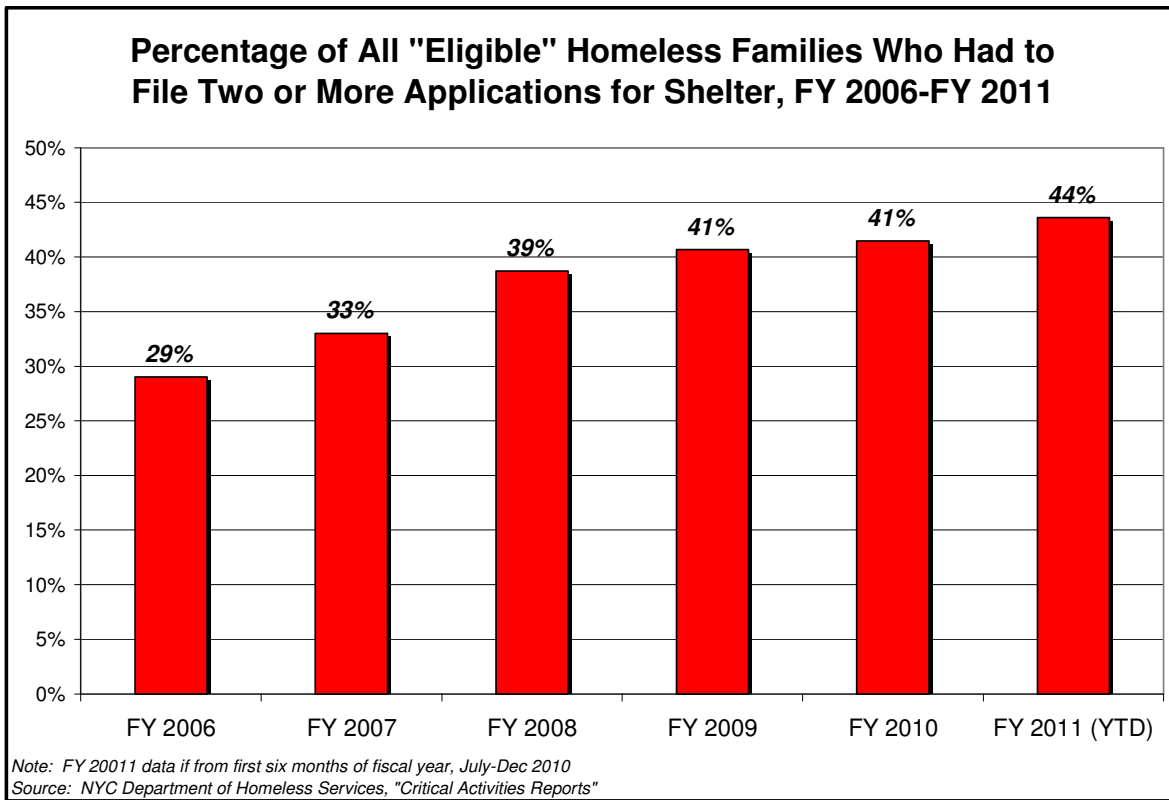
During the past year, the Bloomberg administration has turned away more children and families from the municipal shelter system than at any time since the City began keeping records. In the City's own terminology, ***last year the City deemed fewer applicant families "eligible" for shelter than at any time before.***

City data shows a dramatic increase both in the number of families with children who were not deemed "eligible" for shelter by the City of New York, and in the rate of such non-eligibility determinations:

- ***In 2010 an all-time record number of families with children applied for shelter.*** Last year ***an average of 2,972 families with children applied for shelter each month*** at the NYC Department of Homeless Services' family intake office, ***a 6 percent increase over 2009 and a remarkable 61 percent increase compared to 2006.***
- At the same time, the NYC Department of Homeless Services ***turned away more families with children than at any point since the City has kept records.***
- ***In 2010 an average of 1,855 families with children were not deemed "eligible" for shelter each month*** by the NYC Department of Homeless Services, ***a 16 percent increase over 2009.***
- The number of families with children not deemed "eligible" for shelter each month in 2010 was a remarkable ***76 percent higher than in 2006.***
- While the number of families with children turned away from shelter has reached record levels, ***the percentage of families not deemed "eligible" has also increased at an even faster pace.***
- In November 2010 (the most recent month for which the City has released detailed data), ***66 percent of all families with children seeking shelter was not deemed "eligible" for shelter.*** This is a dramatically higher rate than in November 2009, when 60 percent of families with children was not deemed "eligible" for shelter, and November 2006 – before the economic recession – when only 43 percent of families with children was not deemed "eligible" for shelter.
- Over the past year, the ***number of families with children turned away from shelter grew at a much faster pace than the number of families seeking shelter.***

MORE NYC FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN SEEKING SHELTER AND NOT DEEMED "ELIGIBLE" FOR SHELTER			
	Average Number of Families Applying for Shelter Each Month	Average Number of Families Not Deemed "Eligible" Each Month	Non-eligibility Rate
2007	1,850	1,052	56%
2008	2,248	1,293	58%
2009	2,798	1,604	57%
2010*	2,972	1,855	62%
Change 2007-2010	61%	76%	
Change 2009-2010	6%	16%	
*Data through November 2010 Source: NYC Department of Homeless Services, "DHS-OTDA Monthly Reports"			

- Between 2009 and 2010, *the average number of families with children applying for shelter each month grew by 6 percent while the number of families with children not deemed “eligible” for shelter grew by 16 percent.*



Why the City Turns Away More Families from Shelter: Systematic Errors and Deterrence Policies

For many years, Coalition for the Homeless, the Legal Aid Society, and others have documented the persistence of ***systematic errors in the City’s handling of applications for shelter by families.***

News reports, court papers, and the affected families themselves have also described the hardships endured by families wrongly denied shelter. When the City fails to deem a family “eligible” for shelter, many families are forced to re-apply and endure weeks, sometimes months, of continued bureaucratic stonewalling. Most of these families are ***moved from one shelter placement to another, often to different placements each night, causing particular hardships for children and adults with health problems.*** Children miss school, parents miss days of work, and many families find themselves in a sort of bureaucratic limbo. Sadly, many families give up and return to unsafe living arrangements. ***And for some families – under a 2005 policy proposed by the Bloomberg administration and approved by State officials under the Pataki administration – the City denies any shelter placements whatsoever, forcing many of these families to sleep in parks, on subway trains, or in other public spaces.***

State courts, legal experts, the New York State Legislature, and the New York City Council have all examined systematic errors in the City’s handling of family applications for shelter. Most recently, an October 2010 New York City Council hearing uncovered the ***failure of the NYC Department of Homeless Services to coordinate with the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) in cases where subsidized housing program rules prohibit homeless families from residing with unwilling relatives and friends.***

However, recent City data shows that, if anything, a bad situation has gotten worse and the rate of error has increased.

- During the first half of the current City fiscal year, **44 percent of all homeless families with children who were ultimately deemed eligible for shelter had to file two or more applications for shelter.**
- In FY 2010, **41 percent of all homeless families with children deemed eligible for shelter had to file two or more applications.** In comparison, in FY 2006, **only 29 percent of homeless families deemed eligible for shelter had to file two or more applications.**
- At the October 2010 City Council hearing, NYC Department of Homeless Services officials testified that they **routinely deem families “ineligible” for shelter claiming that the families can live with friends or relatives in NYCHA-administered public housing or Section 8 apartments – housing programs with strict Federal rules on occupancy.** The homeless services officials said that they require families seeking shelter to produce a NYCHA denial document in order to prove that they cannot live with relatives and friends in subsidized housing.
- However, **at the same hearing NYCHA officials testified that they will not process such requests from families seeking shelter – only from residents of NYCHA-administered housing.** And additional testimony showed that, in many cases, relatives and friends of families seeking shelter fear eviction and reprisals from NYCHA if they submit such requests – thus leaving homeless families caught between two City bureaucracies with different requirements.
- All in all, **the City places the burden on homeless families to prove their homelessness.** For instance, the City frequently find families ineligible for shelter **solely based on the fact that they have not provided enough detailed documentation about their past housing histories – whether or not this documentation is available to them – and even when no alternative housing options have been identified.**

How to Protect Homeless Children and Families from Wrongful Denial of Shelter

To date Bloomberg administration officials have provided no explanation for why, in the midst of high unemployment and rising poverty, the City is denying shelter to more children and families than ever. However, a series of **sensible reforms of the City’s family application review policies would reduce systematic errors and ensure that vulnerable homeless children and families secure the shelter and help they need.**

As the City prepares to open its new homeless family intake center in the Bronx, the Bloomberg administration should implement the following reforms:

1. The NYC Department of Homeless Services should **re-investigate the alleged housing options of families it deems “ineligible” for shelter to ensure that the housing is both actually available and suitable to the needs of the applicant family.**
2. The City should **reform its eligibility review rules involving cases where an alleged housing option is in subsidized housing administered by the New York City Housing Authority or other public agencies.** This includes eliminating the requirement that applicant families produce NYCHA denial forms which they are, under NYCHA’s own rules, unable to obtain.
3. Reform eligibility review rules to **prevent families from being found ineligible solely because they were not able to provide detailed documentation of their housing history.**

4. Finally, in those relatively small number of cases where a dispute still exists over the alleged housing option of a family seeking shelter, ***the City should have a trained worker escort the applicant family to the alleged housing and assess firsthand whether the housing is truly available and suitable, and whether the owner or primary tenant will actually allow the applicant family to stay there.***

For more information please visit our website:

www.coalitionforthehomeless.org.