

California has a crisis of homelessness. Here's why it's worse than you think.

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We are facing a homelessness tsunami in our future.

Sacramento County's most recent Point in Time (PIT) count revealed that [5,570 people are experiencing homelessness](#), an increase of 19 percent over 2017. But the reality is even worse than that number reveals. The way we count people leaves out a significant number of homeless women and children.

We know, because we work with those families.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) mandates that all communities receiving HUD funding complete a count of the homeless population a minimum of every two years. HUD uses a [narrow and unrealistic definition](#) to identify homeless families in this biennial count.

The agency does not consider a family that is “couch surfing” or sleeping in a friend's garage to be homeless. Also excluded are families paying for their own motel rooms without government vouchers. Thus, PIT counts, locally and nationally, underestimate the extent of the problem.

OPINION

At [Saint John's Program for Real Change](#), the region's largest program for single-mother-led families struggling with addiction, domestic violence, mental illness and homelessness, over 50 percent of the women and children served do not meet HUD's homeless family definition.

Homeless households led by single mothers are less visible than other homeless demographics. These families are doing all they can to find a couch or floor to sleep because, not only are the streets unsafe for them, mothers risk losing custody of their children if they are found there.

Using the U.S. Department of Education's more sensible definition of a homeless family, [the numbers](#) evoke a frightening reality: In the 2016-17 school year, over 42,000 more California children were experiencing homelessness than in the 2010-11 school year, a 19 percent increase over the previous six years.

The 2017-18 data is not yet available, but the preliminary figures suggest the numbers will continue to increase. In Sacramento County alone, an additional 351 children were homeless last year as measured against the previous school year.

The Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved [found that homeless adults](#) in Santa Clara County reported severely traumatic childhoods:

- 78 percent grew up in a household with a person with drug or alcohol dependence
- 64.6 percent endured psychological abuse as a child
- 37.5 percent experienced homelessness as children.

At Saint John's, we see the same trends. Typical Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) scores for our children and women range from four to six, but many are as high as nine. A score over four drastically increases the risk of chronic health problems, teen pregnancy, criminality, mental illness, injection drug use, alcoholism and attempted suicide.

Consider the following: By the time a homeless child is 8 years old, [one in three](#) has a major mental disorder. They also have twice the rate of learning disabilities and three times the rate of emotional and behavioral problems of children who are not homeless.

These disadvantages make them twice as likely to repeat a grade compared to non-homeless children. Homeless children perform worse academically than children categorized as low income. A [study in Washington state](#) found that homeless children scored 10 percentage points lower on math and English tests than low-income students who were not homeless.

Homeless children are sick at twice the rate of other children, while half of homeless children experience anxiety, depression or withdrawal and are more likely to [display delinquent or aggressive behavior](#).

Traumatized adults will continue to repeat unacceptable behavior if their trauma goes unaddressed, and traumatized children become traumatized adults when their problems are not addressed.

While elected officials need to focus on how to address the increasing numbers of the “street homeless,” they also need to address how to stop the cycle. Greater attention needs to be paid to how we turn off the burgeoning spigot of generational homelessness. We need to help these women and children who go uncounted.

Thankfully, the city of Sacramento has recognized that homeless families and children have unique and critical needs, setting aside [\\$1 million](#) of their 2019-20 homelessness [budget](#) specifically for them. Saint John’s is committed to working with other public agencies at federal, state and local levels to encourage them to follow the city’s lead in preventing the retraumatization of abused women, ensuring the safety and well-being of their children.

At Saint John’s, 78 percent of mothers are struggling with addiction, 70 percent are struggling with domestic violence, 60 percent are struggling with mental illness and 60 percent of their children suffer from developmental and/or psycho-emotional problems. The support and services they need to address these issues surround them and, consequently, they begin to heal and develop new tools.

Two weeks ago, 15 women graduated from Saint John’s after years of living in the chaos of addiction and abuse. They are now employed, caring for their 29 children, maintaining a budget and making positive contributions to our community. They are living proof that with the right support, and with new tools, people can change. Housing by itself cannot fix dependency, mental illness and trauma – nor will it turn off the burgeoning spigot.

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