

2019 HOMELESSNESS POINT IN TIME COUNT: IT'S EVEN WORSE THAN REPORTED

By Michele Steeb and Gary Incaudo

Sacramento County's most recent Point in Time (PIT) count revealed that 5,750 people are experiencing homelessness, an increase of 19% over 2017. While this may not be surprising given the state of our streets and of the American River Parkway, there is more to this story than the number illustrates. And, unfortunately, even greater reason for concern.

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. Because of HUD's narrow and unrealistic definition used to identify homeless families in this biennial count, a significant number of homeless women and children are not included in the calculation.

For example, HUD 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.

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% of the women and children served are excluded from the PIT count because these families do not meet HUD's homeless family definition.**

Single-mother-led homelessness is often called the most invisible segment of the family homelessness demographic. These families are doing all they can to find a couch or floor to avoid being on the unsafe streets at night and to avoid losing custody of their children.

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, 42,197 California children were experiencing homelessness, a 19.1% increase over the previous six years previous. The 2017-18 data is not yet available, but the preliminary figures suggest the numbers continue to increase. In Sacramento County alone, an additional 351 children were homeless last year as measured against the previous school year.

Unless we turn this around, we are facing a homelessness tsunami in our future.

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% endured psychological abuse as a child;
- 37.5% experienced homelessness as children.

At Saint John's, we see the same trends. Typical Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) scores for our children and women are 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:

1) By the time a homeless child is eight years old, one in three has a major mental disorder.

2) Homeless children have twice the rate of learning disabilities and three times the rate of emotional and behavioral problems, which make homeless students twice as likely to repeat a grade compared to non-homeless children.

3) 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.

4) Homeless children are sick at twice the rate of other children, and half of homeless children experience anxiety, depression, aggressive behavior or withdrawal.

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 "street homeless," they also need to address how to stop the cycle, greater attention needs to be paid on how we turn off the burgeoning spigot of generational homelessness.

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 the Federal, State and local level to encourage them to follow the City so as not to risk the re-traumatization of abused women, nor the safety and well-being of their children.

At Saint John's, 78% of mothers are struggling with addiction; 70% are struggling with domestic violence; 60% are struggling with mental illness, and 60% 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.

Last week, 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 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.

Michele Steeb served 13 years as CEO of Saint John's Program for Real Change, an 18-month residential program that supports women and children struggling with addiction, mental illness, violence and homelessness to become self-sustaining. She now serves as a Consultant to, and Board member of, Saint John's.

Gary Incaudo, MD, a Board-Certified Pediatrician for 42 years., is a Co-founder of The Esplanade House, a family transitional homeless program in Chico, CA. He is spearheading a research effort at Saint John's to measure the effects of trauma on the women and children served.