

Bringing Child Homelessness



Internationally published photographer Craig Blankenhorn may be best known for his work photographing the stars of hit television shows such as Sex and the City and The Sopranos. Two years ago, however, Craig came across a very different subject—homeless children. It was then that he embarked on a personal journey to document the unseen and little-discussed phenomenon of family homelessness. Wanting to put a face to the devastating statistics he learned about the number of homeless children, and to shine a spotlight on this growing problem, Craig began spending his free time as a fly on the wall, chronicling the daily struggles of families trapped in the seemingly endless cycle of poverty and homelessness. Through this journey, Craig has learned about the experiences, determination, and struggles of homeless families. His aim is to chronicle, in every state across the country, the lives of families experiencing homelessness.

Craig continues his documentation of the crisis of child and family homelessness in America. The following photo essay is an expansion of a blog post featured on the Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness Web site, in which Craig shares his insights on the issues faced by homeless families. To learn more about his project, visit his Web site at www.ChildHomeless.org.

The tables are turned when photographer Craig Blankenhorn—shown here documenting the lives of a Las Vegas family experiencing homelessness—becomes the subject of a photograph. Blankenhorn follows consenting homeless families through typical days, snapping photographs that highlight the struggles they face, as part of a project that aims to draw attention to the plight of child homelessness. Photo courtesy of *Las Vegas Sun News*.

into Focus

A Photo Essay

By Craig Blankenhorn

There are 1.6 million homeless children in the United States.

That one statistic was all it took to change my life.

I began taking pictures of homeless families in January 2012, hoping to put a face to the often invisible and forgotten people combating this growing issue. By documenting their daily struggles, I try to show the real people and real suffering that make up the much broader issue of homelessness.

Over the past two years, I've gained a lot of respect for these families. Being homeless is far from easy; it's a 24/7 job that involves moving constantly from one shelter to another, looking for a job, and taking care of children.

There's also the stigma surrounding poverty. Many people would like to believe that the situations of these families are their own doing. The reality, however, is that bad things happen to all of us, be it a job loss, illness, etc. The difference I've seen is that those who become homeless don't have family or a social network to turn to for support when things go wrong. Many don't know how or where to find the resources that are available to them or have barriers in the way of options they do know of.

One of the issues I hear about most frequently from parents is the lack of affordable child care. You can't get a job with kids in tow, but you can't afford child care without a job, creating a Catch-22.

The result is tragic. The choice comes down to remaining unemployed and continuing a life of poverty and homelessness or leaving the children in the care of people they barely know, risking their safety in the process. I've been told stories of children who suffered physical and sexual abuse by the strangers taking care of them.

For the safety of these children, a lot of parents keep them holed up in motel rooms away from danger. Unfortunately, this tactic deprives children of necessary social interaction and mental stimulation.

The age before children even attend school is crucial in their development and future success, but oftentimes young homeless children are stunted in this development. How can children keep up with their peers academically when they face stressful living situations, have little parental involvement, and are continuously switching schools or missing days?

Homeless children are in need of positive role models in their lives. Many of these parents grew up poor or homeless themselves and are teaching their children the same behaviors and attitudes that kept them in poverty, continuing the cycle. One woman I met was never taught proper hygiene. She lost all of her teeth at a young age, adding to her difficulties in finding a job. How many other valuable lessons could she have learned with the right person to look up to?

Legislation to provide federal funding for universal pre-K has been introduced into Congress, following a plan touted by President Obama earlier in the year. (Although the legislation is currently stalled in Congress, the president recently proposed a budget for fiscal year 2015 that allocates \$750 million in funds to pre-K programs.) This seems to be the best and most immediate solution available for the benefit of homeless children across the country. The option to send children to pre-K provides safe child care for parents and offers positive role models, education, social interaction, and development opportunities at a critical age for children—especially the vulnerable population of homeless children who need it the most.

We have a moral obligation to take care of the poor. My primary concern is to bring awareness to the plight of child homelessness and to allow others to witness the pain these children are dealing with on a day-to-day basis as well as their perseverance. My ambition is to create a sociological chronicle of this devastating moment in history through this visual endeavor—and for the world to recognize the unimaginable grief of child homelessness.

The Gerstner Family Scottsdale, Arizona



Despite the stigma surrounding homelessness, the reality is that it can happen to anyone who faces the wrong set of circumstances. Many parents want to work and support their families, if only they can find a job that pays a living wage.

According to Family Promise, the shelter where Syri Gerstner, 41, and her two daughters, Kari, seven, and Kahlyn, eight, are currently staying, there is no city or county anywhere in the United States where a worker making the minimum wage can afford a fair market rate one-bedroom apartment.

Kari is shown here waking up at Family Promise on Christmas morning.

The family had been living in various shelters for two months when I met them. They had never been homeless before and were grateful for the help they received.

“I’m not asking for a handout, because I’m willing to scrub floors. But I shouldn’t have to, I’m educated, I’m very personable, I’m not a bad person, and I have some great qualities. Don’t just give me food stamps and say, ‘It’s going to be okay, just hold on to that.’ No. Assist me in getting whatever it is that the people who are hiring, want. Don’t leave me sitting here floundering, wondering why I feel that my country, the one I used to think was so wonderful and grand, doesn’t care about me at all.”

The Cariquitan Family Las Vegas, Nevada

Maria Martha Cariquitan, 35, is a single mother raising her ten-year-old daughter, Francesca, and her six-year-old son, Nathaniel, shown here walking to the Nevada State Welfare office along a notorious area of northern Las Vegas known as the “homeless corridor.” The neighborhood, officially called the Corridor of Hope, is home to several city shelters as well as high numbers of homeless people living on the street.

The family of three is applying for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps. As of 2012, two in five female-headed families, like the Cariquitan family, lived in poverty. Programs such as SNAP are essential to offset the impact of poverty for these families. Over 47 million people receive SNAP benefits to help them afford an adequate diet. If eligible, Nathaniel and Francesca will join the 22 million other children who rely on these benefits for their health and well-being.



The Coleman Family Janesville, Wisconsin

Ronald Coleman, 23, Jessica Rhodes, 24, who is seven months pregnant, and their son, Greyson, who is eight months old, received a voucher from a Wisconsin homeless coalition to stay at a motel when they became homeless. They are among thousands of families across the country crowding into motels as family homelessness skyrockets and the shelters fill up. Such a lifestyle is problematic, especially for a family with children at such a crucial stage in their development. Poor nutrition is a frequent result of motel living. The lack of a full kitchen severely limits a family's meal options, resulting in the stocking of nonperishable and nutritionally lacking foods such as those shown here or the purchase of inexpensive and unhealthy fast food. Amid the stress and chaos of such a living situation, intimate moments such as the one shown here between Ronald and Greyson are treasured, as they are in all families.



The Keys/Becker Family Livingston, New Jersey



Lack of access to affordable child care is often a major obstacle for families struggling to break out of the cycle of poverty. For Guy Keys, 48, one of approximately 8,000 homeless veterans living in New Jersey, and Amanda Becker, 24, who attend Drake College of Business to become a nurse's aide and a dental technician, respectively, the inability to pay for child care presents a challenge.

Their two daughters, Taneya, four, and Shyla, two, are not yet old enough to attend school, requiring either Guy or Amanda to look after the girls while the other attends class. The family's long day begins when they leave the shelter first thing in the morning with all of the day's meals packed. They then spend the day relying on several shuttles to get from place to place, taking classes, and walking around Newark, New Jersey, with the girls in tow.

Rachel's Family Tampa, Florida

Child care and other types of early education, such as the summer camp Tiffani, seven, shown here, is waiting to attend, offer numerous benefits to homeless children as well as their parents. Tiffani's mother, Rachel, 32, takes the opportunity to attend classes and search for work while her children are safely cared for. The shelter where she and her four children, Keegan, 12, Arianna, ten, Hunter, eight, and Tiffani have been staying has been "more of a family than my own family," according to Rachel.





The Edinger Family Kissimmee, Florida

William Edinger, 44, and Laura Manna, 35, had been living in a hotel room for about one year with their three children—Billy, 12, Jessica, ten, and Melissa, two—when I met them. The Edinger children are among the approximately 47,000 members of America’s “hotel generation.” With very limited safe space to play outdoors, the children have little choice but to stay in their hotel room with their parents. This can deprive children of much-needed mental stimulation and social interaction.

When a family of five shares one hotel room, it is nearly impossible for anyone to have a quiet moment or private conversation. Jessica Edinger, shown here, often uses the space behind the curtain as a temporary “room” to have a moment of privacy. She looks out the window to “imagine sea otters and ducks swimming” in the pond across from the hotel parking lot.