Ideas for Action

Research and Targeted Assistance

Addressing Accountability: Requests for Federal Data Collection

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and other federal agencies have long recognized that collecting and analyzing the right data is essential to developing effective homelessness-reduction strategies. In the pursuit of ending veteran and chronic homelessness by 2015, HUD released detailed data specific to those populations. Pairing this effort with dedicated funding, HUD is on track to end homelessness for these two groups. When HUD has collected and released data on homeless families, on the other hand, it has often been combined with data on individuals.

- Distinguish adults with custodial children from single adults for existing national homelessness data sources.

HUD asks Continua of Care around the country to provide information on the number of adults who access mainstream benefits, including Medicaid, SNAP, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and WIC but does not distinguish single adults from heads of family households.[20] Making this distinction is a critical step toward connecting homeless families with the larger system of social safety net benefits. Without knowing the share of homeless families receiving a particular benefit, it is impossible to know if communities are maximizing available resources to resolve a family's homelessness. HUD should mandate the collection and disclosure of such data so that technical assistance can be targeted to underperforming communities.

- Collect national data necessary to address family homelessness, such as reasons for becoming homeless and the frequency and duration of homeless episodes.

Federal policies have placed an emphasis on housing as a solution for homelessness, but the underlying causes of homelessness are too complex and multifaceted to be solved by housing alone. The U.S. Conference of Mayors' annual *Hunger and Homelessness* survey is the only source of regularly collected data examining why families and individuals become homeless. However, the data in the report are based on city officials' perceptions and only represent a handful of cities.[21] HUD already collects data through Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS) on living situations prior to a family entering shelter but not on the reasons why they have sought shelter.[22] Through HMIS, shelter staff should track reasons why families become homeless, such as whether they experienced an eviction, lost a housing subsidy or public benefits, lost employment due to domestic violence, or experienced physical or emotional health problems within a certain timeframe. In addition to the reasons why families enter shelter,

HMIS should also report the number of families who return to shelter by the type of housing intervention they received and the length of time that they were out of the homelessness system.

In addition, data collection for homeless families should respond to changing policy environments. For example, during the recent foreclosure crisis, it would have required minimal effort to add a question to HMIS about foreclosures, but few researchers or localities collected this information. Despite a few limited studies, the extent to which the crisis contributed to the rise in family homelessness is unknown.[23] HUD should require that HMIS be more adaptable so that questions can be added quickly. This would enable researchers, governments, and homelessness advocates to evaluate issues as they arise and develop appropriate policy responses.

For more information on the reasons why families become homeless, see *Issue 2: Macroeconomic Causes of Family Homelessness.* To learn more regarding the challenges that homeless parents and their children face, see *Issue 3: Effects of Homelessness on Families and Children.*

Align Federal Definitions of Homelessness

With the exception of HUD, all other federal agencies consider any child or youth who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence to be homeless. As dictated by the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act of 2009, HUD may only consider families living in shelters, places not meant for human habitation, or hotels/motels paid for by a governmental or charitable organization, as well as those losing their housing within 14 days to be homeless. The differing definitions lead to drastically different estimates of the homeless population. Notably, three-quarters (75.5%) of the 1.25 million homeless students identified during the 2012–13 school year would not be considered homeless based on HUD's definition.[24]

- Broaden HUD's definition of homelessness to align with the more inclusive definition used by all other relevant federal statutes.

The Homeless Children and Youth Act, introduced in both chambers of Congress with bipartisan support, would align the federal definitions of homelessness, thereby enabling much more effective planning and allocation of resources to support homeless families. The bill also allows communities to target HUD resources according to their prevailing needs, which can include serving homeless families with children.[25]

For more information on the conflicting federal definitions of homelessness, see *Issue 1: Definitions, Demographics, and Trends in Student and Family Homelessness.*

Dedicate Funding for Homeless Families

The increased focus on and earmarked funding for programs exclusively serving chronically homeless individuals has coincided with a 30.0% decrease in the population from 2007 to 2014. Mirroring the federal push to eliminate chronic homelessness, funding for homeless veterans tripled from $0.5 billion in FY09 to $1.5 billion in FY13 (**Figure 8** and **Table 1**). With the implementation of new targeted programs and services, the number of homeless veterans decreased by one-third (32.6%) between 2009 and 2014. Homeless parents and their children have not received the same level of fiscal support, and homelessness among families accessing shelters increased slightly (2.5%) from 2009 to 2014.[26]

- Dedicate federal funding and prioritize resources for homeless families with children as has been done for chronically homeless adults and veterans.

Little federal funding is currently dedicated to programs exclusively serving homeless children and their families. The only long-term federal program that singularly assists homeless families is the McKinney-Vento Act's Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program, which addresses the educational needs of homeless students. EHCY allocations remained stagnant at $62–65 million between FY05 and FY13 and represented only 1.5% of all targeted homelessness assistance across seven federal agencies in FY13.[27] Federal policymakers should consider the accomplishments of targeted programs and support a similar surge in funding for homeless families.

For more information about the increase in homeless families since 2007, see *Issue 1: Definitions, Demographics, and Trends in Student and Family Homelessness.* For details on the ways in which recent policies have not benefitted homeless children and their parents, see *Issue 5: Federal Homelessness Policy.*

Figure 8
Eligible Recipients of Federal Targeted Homelessness Programs
(by fiscal year)
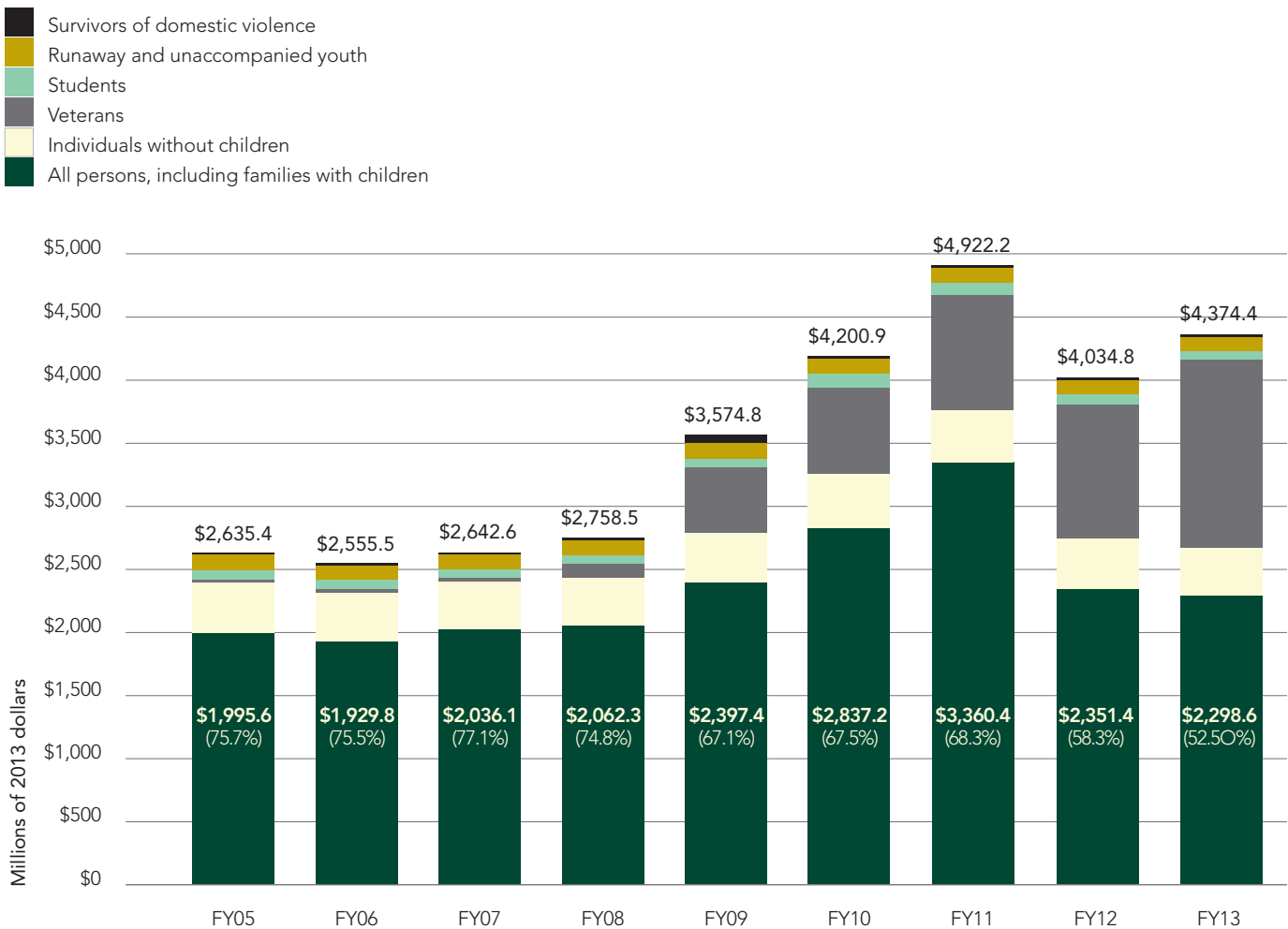
Source: The Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness, "Homeless Families Shortchanged in the Federal Budget," in *The American Almanac of Family Homelessness* (2013); U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, "CPD Allocations and Awards," https://www.hudexchange.info/grantees/cpd-allocations-awards; U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, *Budget Fact Sheet: Homelessness Assistance,* 2012–14; U.S. Office of Management and Budget, *Budget of the United States Government,* 2012–14.

Table 1
Budget Appropriations for Federal Targeted Homelessness Programs
(by fiscal year in millions of 2013 dollars)

Program (Managing Agency)	FY05	FY06	FY07	FY08	FY09	FY10	FY11	FY12	FY13
Transitional Housing Assistance Grants for Victims of Domestic Violence, Stalking, or Sexual Assault (Justice)	$14.7	$17.1	$14.5	$15.3	$15.5	$16.4	$16.6	$21.5	$20.1
Recovery Act	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	$46.3	$0.0	$0.0	n/a	n/a
Runaway and Homeless Youth Program (Health and Human Services [HHS])	$123.9	$118.8	$115.6	$122.6	$124.8	$123.6	$119.8	$116.9	$115.2
Basic Center Program	[$58.2]	[$55.8]	[$54.3]	[$57.2]	[$58.1]	[$57.4]	[$55.7]	[$54.3]	[$53.5]
Transitional Living Program	[$47.6]	[$45.7]	[$44.4]	[$46.8]	[$47.5]	[$47.0]	[$45.6]	[$44.4]	[$43.8]
Street Outreach Program	[$18.1]	[$17.4]	[$16.9]	[$18.6]	[$19.2]	[$19.2]	[$18.6]	[$18.2]	[$17.9]
Education for Homeless Children and Youth (Education)	$74.5	$71.5	$69.5	$69.3	$71.0	$69.9	$67.6	$66.2	$65.2
Recovery Act	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	$37.0	$27.1	$9.3	n/a
Veterans Affairs (VA) Homeless Programs	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	$408.3	$570.5	$827.7	$952.3	$1,400.0
Housing and Urban Development (HUD)–VA Supportive Housing	n/a	n/a	n/a	$81.1	$81.4	$80.1	$51.8	$76.1	$60.0
Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (Labor)	$24.8	$25.2	$24.5	$25.6	$28.6	$38.8	$37.6	$38.8	$38.4
Housing Opportunities for Persons with AIDS (HUD)	$336.4	$330.5	$321.3	$324.6	$336.6	$357.9	$346.2	$336.6	$315.5
Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness (HHS)	$65.4	$62.7	$61.0	$57.7	$64.8	$69.5	$67.4	$65.7	$61.4
Continuum of Care Program (HUD)	$1,409.5	$1,391.7	$1,491.6	$1,532.6	$1,692.6	$1,739.6	$1,734.0	$1,697.8	$1,702.3
Supportive Housing Program	[$1029.4]	[$1017.6]	[$1059.4]	[$1090.5]	[$1162.8]	[$1179.6]	[$1189.3]	n/a	n/a
Shelter Plus Care	[$362.3]	[$373.0]	[$430.4]	[$439.5]	[$529.7]	[$557.4]	[$541.4]	n/a	n/a
Section 8 Moderate Rehabilitation Assistance for Single-room Occupancy Dwelling	[$17.8]	[$1.1]	[$1.8]	[$2.6]	[$0.0]	[$2.6]	[$3.3]	n/a	n/a
Emergency Solutions Grant (HUD)	$190.9	$185.0	$179.8	$173.0	$173.7	$170.9	$258.9	$290.2	$215.0
Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-housing Program (HUD)–Recovery Act	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	$516.0	$1,020.9	n/a	n/a
Emergency Food and Shelter National Board Program (Homeland Security)	$215.3	$173.7	$174.8	$166.4	$219.8	$211.7	$123.0	$127.5	$132.8
Recovery Act	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	$108.6	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Health Care for the Homeless (HHS)	$179.9	$179.4	$190.0	$190.3	$202.7	$199.0	$223.5	$235.9	$248.5
Total	$2,635.4	$2,555.5	$2,642.6	$2,758.5	$3,574.8	$4,200.9	$4,922.2	$4,025.5	$4,374.4

Source: see Figure 8.