

The Dynamics of Family Homelessness in New York City

III. Family Dynamics



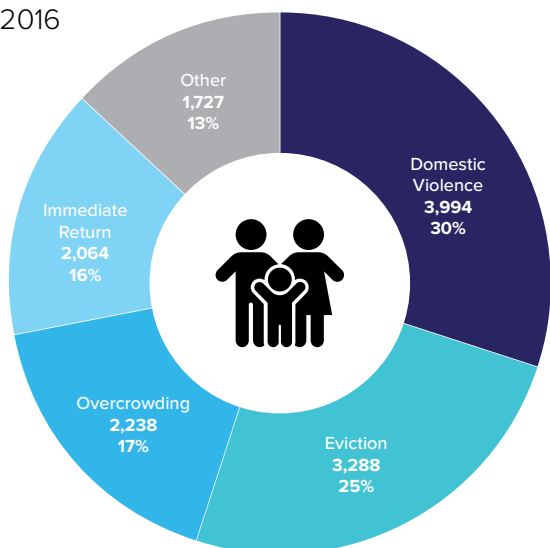
Family Dynamics in New York City

Families that experience homelessness face many common challenges that, intertwined with both their own unique experiences and external dynamics, affect their ability to maintain stable housing. Domestic violence, overcrowded doubled-up situations, unplanned pregnancy, and generational poverty are just some of the many reasons that families in New York City end up in shelter. Of course, these experiences do not occur in a vacuum—many sheltered families have experienced several if not all of these homelessness triggers. For many homeless parents, childhood trauma such as sexual abuse, parental substance abuse, and untreated mental illness have now impacted their emotional well-being and their ability to lift their families out of homelessness.

All of these reasons for family homelessness are deeply linked with shelter and neighborhood dynamics. Recognizing how these family, shelter, and neighborhood dynamics are connected, and targeting interventions with these patterns in mind, is key to understanding and reducing family homelessness.

Why Do Families Enter Shelter?

Domestic Violence Is the Most Common Reason Families Enter Shelter
FY 2016



Data from the New York City Department of Homeless Services (DHS) show that the top three reasons for families entering shelter are Domestic Violence (30%), Eviction (25%), and Overcrowding (17%).

While families in shelter are the most quantifiable expression of family homelessness and can certainly provide insight into some of the reasons that families enter shelter, the data on reasons for entry fall short in explaining the complicated dynamics at play behind family homelessness: What are the experiences of families who are homeless due to fleeing domestic violence? What events lead a family to lose their housing due to eviction? What does it mean for families to live overcrowded in temporary doubled-up arrangements?

Source: New York City Department of Homeless Services, unpublished data tabulated by the Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness, FY 2016.

Domestic Violence and Family Homelessness

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My mom and me, we were in the shelter because my father used to beat on her and then threw her down the stairs...and that's when she didn't have nowhere to go, and she left him, and we went into the shelter.

—Woman in family shelter

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He wasn't leaving and I wasn't leaving and it was just abusive...I was working but I wasn't making enough to get an apartment and I had to pay my mom to watch my daughter while I was at work because I didn't want to leave her in daycare. I was scared that he would find her if I put her in daycare.

—Homeless mother in shelter due to intimate partner violence

“

I started kindergarten, and that's when a lot of things started happening to us as kids and mom's solution was to move us...my little brothers, they were getting abused but not sexually, but me and my two sisters and my older brother, we were being, you know, [abused] like that.

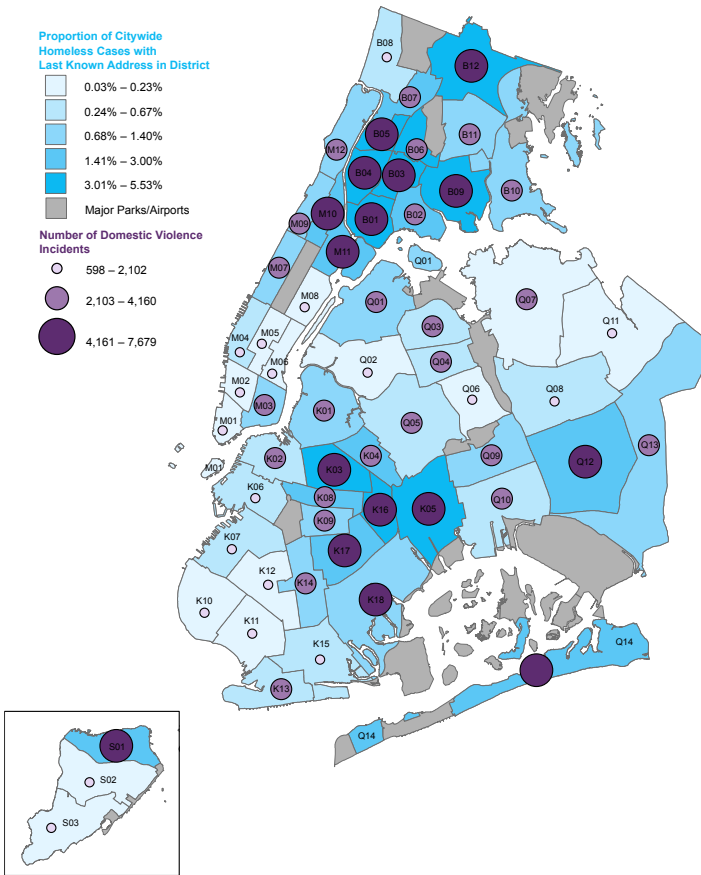
—Homeless mother who experienced abuse as a child

Parents fleeing domestic violence often have limited financial and social safety nets. Unfortunately for many survivors, fleeing an abusive partner leads to housing instability and homelessness. National estimates are that roughly 80% of homeless mothers with children have previously experienced domestic violence.

In New York City, almost 4,000 families entered a homeless shelter for domestic violence-related reasons. This number does not include families staying in Human Resources Administration (HRA) Domestic Violence Emergency Shelters. As recently as April 2019, 1,029 families were staying in Domestic Violence Shelters, including over 2,000 children. Alarming as they are, these numbers are an undercount and do not include the many families that flee an abuser and end up doubling up with others or living day-to-day in motels.

How Many Times Do Families Apply for Shelter?

Domestic Violence Incidents Reports and Homelessness by Community District



The neighborhood with the most cases entering the shelter system was **East New York (K05)**, with 1,221 cases of families, single adults, and adult families entering shelter from that community district. East New York also had one of the highest numbers of domestic violence incident reports in 2017.

Residents of **Jamaica/St. Albans** in Queens (Q12) had the highest number of domestic violence-related incidents. This neighborhood had the fourth-highest number of DHS cases in February 2017.

Note: Domestic violence incidents include both intimate partner and family violence incidents.

Source: Department of Homeless Services, unpublished data tabulated by the Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness, February 2017; Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence, *Community Board Snapshots*, 2017.

Doubling Up: Another Face of Parent and Child Homelessness

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We stayed with one of [my mom’s] aunts...it was all six of us and my mom and we slept in one small room with two twin beds...all that fit were the beds...there was obviously never any privacy.

—Homeless mother who lived doubled-up as a child

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I define me as being homeless because I didn’t really have a stable place to stay. I was basically jumping from grandma’s house to aunt’s house to uncle’s house to friend’s house.

—Homeless mother who lived doubled-up prior to entering shelter

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I was always very concerned and aware that these are not permanent homes. At any time, anything could come up and I could get the boot. That’s probably why I worked so much and tried to stay as clean as possible, or not be as noticed, so it won’t feel like I’m putting a burden on anyone in their house...I worried every place I’ve ever been that I could leave.

—Homeless mother who lived doubled-up prior to entering shelter

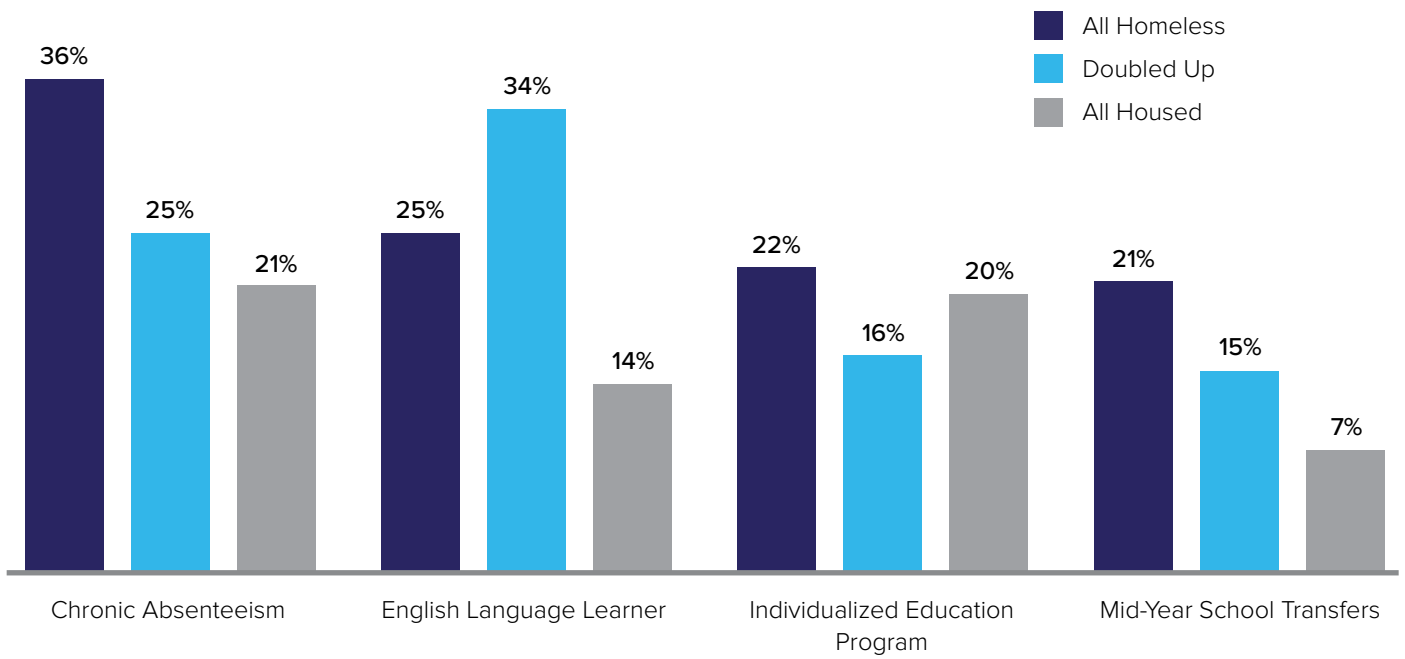
A family’s experience with housing instability often starts well before they enter the shelter system. Families might move from couch to couch, or stay in overcrowded or substandard doubled-up arrangements until they have exhausted all their social networks, or until they are found eligible for shelter.

Nationally, over one-third of adults in families with children were staying with families or friends prior to entering a homeless shelter. Furthermore, the majority of families staying in temporary doubled-up arrangements do not enter shelter, in some cases because they are not found eligible for services or do not meet the definition of homelessness.

In New York City, 17% of families that entered shelter were found eligible due to living in overcrowded situations. While there are no citywide estimates on the total number of homeless families who are living in doubled-up arrangements, Department of Education data on homeless students show that in SY 2016–17 nearly 64,000 children were identified as living doubled up—61% of all homeless students in NYC public schools.

School Instability and Barriers to Learning for Doubled-Up Students

SY 2016–17



Source: New York City Department of Education, unpublished data tabulated by the Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness, SY 2016–17.

Those living doubled up are more than twice as likely to be English Language Learners and to transfer schools mid-year as their housed peers. Doubled-up students are even less likely than other homeless students to receive an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), indicating an under-identification of IEPs among doubled-up homeless students.

Pregnancy & Housing Instability

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I was stressing and I didn't want to cause any stress being pregnant. So that's when I decided to go into shelter and take the steps to try to find my own housing.

—Previously doubled-up single mother now in shelter

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I am the only one who takes care of my daughter, I don't have anyone to rely on to pick her up from school, to watch her if one day out of the blue I have to do this, no one is going to take time to go take care of my daughter...I don't have that support system.

—Single mother in shelter

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I was 15 and I got in this relationship...I was only getting like \$9 an hour so nothing I was making was going to pay our rent, so we ended up losing that apartment...I stayed with my friend and I was with her for a while and that's when I met my daughter's father, and then we got together...I was 19.

—Young homeless mother

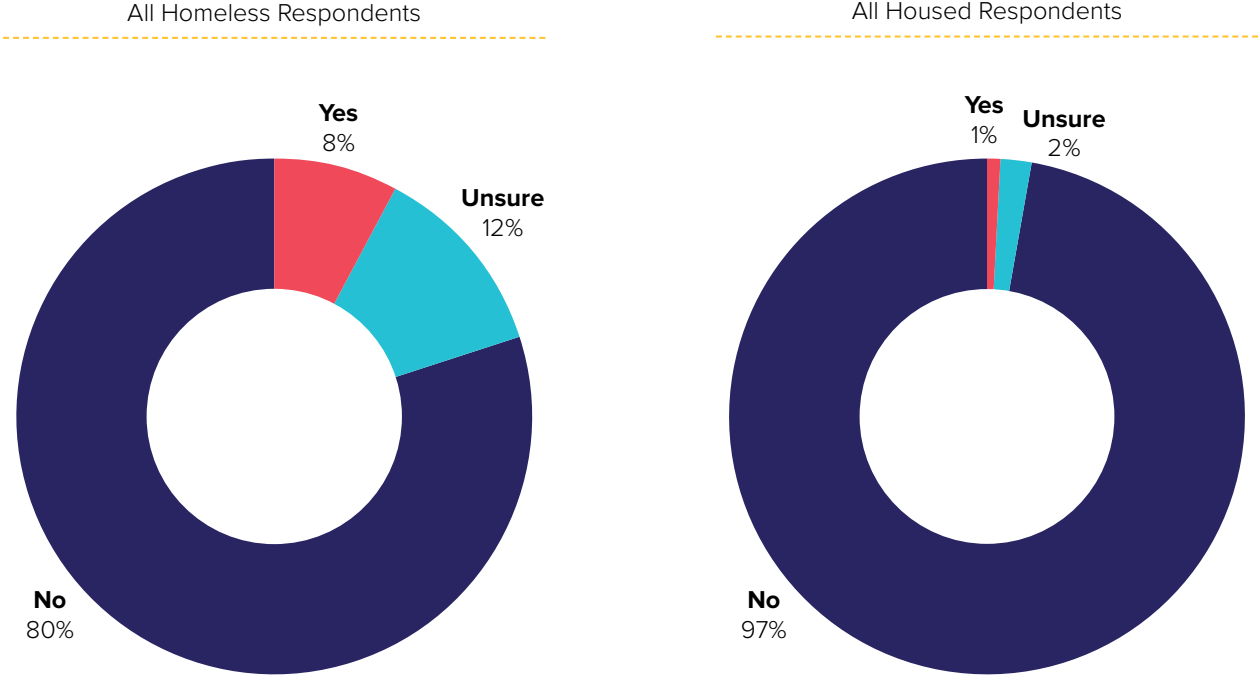
Young parents, with limited education, job experience, support networks, and childcare options, are the population most at risk of becoming homeless. In fact, approximately 1.1 million children in the U.S. had a young parent who experienced homelessness in the past year.

In New York City, 35% of families with a head of household under 25 live in poverty. In a recent New York Times profile on family homelessness, New York City's Department of Social Services Commissioner stated, "Infants are often 'the tipping point' for families on the verge of losing a permanent home." While the arrival of a newborn is not the root cause of a family's homelessness, it is a circumstance that pushes many impoverished families to seek shelter.

In 2017, 1,164 babies born in New York City were brought from the hospital to a shelter. This means that one out of every 100 children in New York City is born into homelessness. This is a conservative estimate, as this number does not account for babies brought from the hospital to overcrowded doubled-up conditions or other temporary situations.

For a young adult, the added cost and responsibility of a child makes it that much harder for them to rise out of poverty. New York City's 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Survey revealed that homeless high schoolers are at increased risk of being young parents.

“During the Past 12 Months, Have You Been Pregnant Or Gotten Someone Pregnant?”



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017 *Youth Risk Behavior Survey*, tabulated by the Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness.

According to the survey, 8% of homeless high schoolers reported either being pregnant or getting someone pregnant in the past year, compared with just 1% of their housed peers.

An additional 12% of homeless high schoolers were unsure whether they had been pregnant or gotten someone pregnant in the past year, compared with just 2.5% of housed students.

The Intergenerational Cycle of Family Homelessness

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Experiencing [homelessness] as a kid, I felt like it's a little bit more worries than experiencing it as an adult because no child should ever be in that particular predicament. They should have a stable place, a stable home, a good environment... as an adult, I think I can handle it better and I think I can understand.

—Homeless mother who was also homeless as a child

“

I kept running away but my social worker, she would always find me...When I was sixteen, she told me when you are seventeen, we are not looking for you anymore, and they didn't.

—Mother who aged out of foster care into homelessness

“

It was hard mostly on my mom...every night when she used to take us to the park, like at 8 or 9 at night and she would have us play and she would just sit there crying... She was trying to work hard, and it was hard to have us and find work and she would have to drag all six of us to wherever she was going to interviews.

—Homeless mother who also experienced homelessness as a child

Many homeless parents have experienced homelessness as children or were involved in the child welfare system. The trauma of these early experiences with instability can persist into adulthood.

Homelessness disproportionately affects young children—almost half of all children in New York City family shelters are under the age of 6—and experiences with housing and family instability hinders the development of basic cognitive, behavioral, and social skills needed for their future academic success. This in turn puts homeless children at an early disadvantage, impacting their ability to access the same educational and life opportunities than housed children. Indeed, one study found that 24% of unaccompanied youth also experienced housing instability as children.

There is also a close connection between the child welfare system and experiences with homelessness. Youth aging out of foster care are at high risk of experiencing homelessness—nationwide, over one-quarter of all youth who left foster care at 18, experienced homelessness within three years of aging out. Additionally, among homeless youth who had foster care involvement as children, 44% believed that their entrance into the foster care system marked the beginning of their experience with housing instability.

Early experiences with housing instability, whether it be with family or with the child welfare system, can have long-lasting effects on the ability of these children to gain self-sufficiency as adults.

“In life, something’s always gonna happen, it’s gonna knock you over, you’re gonna feel like you can’t continue to do what you’re trying to do, and maybe you just have to take a few steps back to go forward again.”

–Mother in shelter

| A special thank you to the homeless families who shared their stories with us.

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