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NEW  
SCHOOL

CENTER FOR  
NEW YORK  
CITY AFFAIRS

# ADRIFT IN NYC:

Family Homelessness and the Struggle to Stay Together



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The Center for New York City Affairs is dedicated to advancing innovative public policies that strengthen neighborhoods, support families and reduce urban poverty.

Our tools include rigorous analysis; journalistic research; candid public dialogue with stakeholders; and strategic planning with government officials, nonprofit practitioners and community residents.

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# Introduction and Recommendations

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FAMILY HOMELESSNESS in New York City continues to climb, setting new records with each passing year. Yet rarely considered is one of this crisis's most urgent effects on children: the complicated, myriad ways homelessness threatens to reconfigure—and actually does reconfigure—so many families.

The academic research on the subject is clear: homelessness and family breakup go hand in hand.<sup>1</sup> Partners separate from partners. Children separate from parents – both through informal arrangements with friends and relatives as well as through mandated foster care placements. And what begin as temporary arrangements often prove lasting. Family members who do stay together often do so against a relentless backdrop of fear that having lost their homes, they will next lose one another.

In theory, entering a shelter could serve to stabilize a family and stave off the threat of or need for family breakup. In reality, shelters too often miss opportunities to do just that. Instead, living in homeless shelters often isolates families from their support networks, subjects them to harsh scrutiny and surveillance, and intensifies underlying familial problems. Families in shelter have often left behind known communities and supports for unfamiliar neighborhoods with poor-performing schools and high rates of food insecurity and crime, further burdening both the families in crisis as well as the struggling communities.

Mayor Bill de Blasio acknowledged these shortcomings in February in his administration's report outlining its new plan for addressing homelessness. "Today, the experience of staying in a shelter is all too often a barrier to reestablishing a stable life and finding a path back to more permanent housing," the report stated. "We need shelters that can actually help people maintain stability and find their way back to the lives they had before homelessness."

To that end, the City is staffing family shelters with licensed social workers, and has vowed to create an array of new shelters that will provide the types of services and supports that some of the City's best shelters now manage to offer only by supplementing funds from their Department of Homeless Services (DHS) contracts with money from other sources. These new shelters, in the City's vision, will be "proactive and client-centered" with "adequate and appropriate social services." The City also plans to prioritize placing families in shelters closer to the communities where families are coming from, so they can stay connected to their jobs, child care supports, schools, doctors, neighbors, and places of worship. If implemented thoughtfully, these plans could have the additional benefit of helping more families who enter shelter to stay intact for the long haul.

Of course, preventing homelessness before it occurs is the preferable approach to reducing separations resulting from housing troubles. The City has aimed to do that through a variety of initiatives, including Homebase, a DHS community-based program, that provides supports such as emergency rental assistance. Other plans and proposals designed to prevent homelessness include: the recent pledge by Mayor de Blasio and City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito to grant free, universal legal representation for low-income tenants in Housing Court; State Assemblyman Andrew Hevesi's widely endorsed "Home Stability Support" proposal to overhaul and increase State housing subsidies for families receiving public assistance; and the de Blasio Administration's long-term commitment to building and preserving affordable housing. Nevertheless, the

City's recent homelessness plan does not expect to significantly reduce the number of homeless people in shelter. Its ambition is merely to stop the upward climb in shelter populations, and reduce this census by only 500 individuals per year.

For the nearly 23,000 kids who will call shelter their home tonight and will do so in the foreseeable future, the City has turned its attention to ameliorating the attendant effects of homelessness on them. This is important. As the City prepares to open new shelters, following are our recommendations for how to do so in ways that will help families leave shelters stronger. These recommendations are informed by interviews with teens and parents in shelters, social service providers, advocates, and a review of the academic research on homelessness and family separation.

### **Help families in shelters remain connected to their support networks.**

The causes of family homelessness run a broad gamut. Some families become homeless because of unexpected and short-term economic setbacks, which might include the birth of a child or a job loss. Such families may need little more than temporary shelter until they reestablish their equilibrium. Recent research, including an extensive national study, (see p. 13), has found that long-term housing vouchers can be key to keeping many such families intact.

For other families, homelessness is entwined with domestic violence, substance abuse, emotional and mental illness, or other debilitating problems; to achieve stability, these families will likely need a fuller array of social services and supports.

But for all families entering shelter, sustaining connections to healthy support systems while creating new ones is paramount to helping them get on their feet faster. DHS and the shelter operators it contracts with can encourage this by:

- **Placing families, when appropriate, in shelters in or near their home communities.** This practice, once common, has become increasingly less so in recent years.

A recent report from the City's Independent Budget Office (IBO), based on interviews with shelter residents, found "unanimous agreement that the temporary placement process should take into account families' own resources, including their knowledge of neighborhoods, how to travel, where to seek assistance, as well as their own contacts and relationships." Such knowledge and networks, the IBO report found, help families "in pursuing not just their children's educational success but also their own personal advancement."

The City's new homeless strategy commits to placing families in their home boroughs, while cautioning that it will take years to achieve this goal. For the purposes of family stability, every effort should be made to accelerate that process, and to take measures to place families not simply in their home boroughs (which are, after all, large in area), but in or near their home communities. Families who have special circumstances where being away from their communities would pose significant hardship—such as when a child has special medical needs and would benefit from being near their doctors, or when a family is receiving child welfare services, which are community-based—should be prioritized for community placement.

The City Council's new "fair share" proposal for siting public facilities aims, among other things, to reduce the concentration of shelters in low-income communities. This proposal is not inherently at odds with City Hall's desire to replace its reliance on shoddy cluster sites and hotels—nobody's idea of a neighborhood asset—with more supportive shelters. A billion dollar City shelter system that aims to do more than provide roofs over the heads of its clients should have options to both keep families in or near their neighborhoods while also enabling families to benefit from the opportunities—like better schools—of higher-income communities.

- **Revising the "no visitors" policy in homeless shelters.** This practice, which covers visitors from outside shelters as well as fellow shelter residents, both prevents families from creating new social networks while in shelters and also interrupts continued relationships with old friends and family

members. Social isolation, Stephanie Gendell of the Citizens' Committee for Children of New York recently testified to the City Council, is "the exact opposite of what we want for families struggling with the trauma and stress of homelessness."

While some shelters have rooms to accommodate visitors, these may be open for limited time slots each day and may not be conducive to private conversation or children's play. Surely a happy medium can be found that protects residents' safety in a shelter and encourages healthy ties to parents' support system and children's friends. For instance, HelpUSA has instituted an innovative policy that now makes it possible for residents to babysit for one another (see p. 14). DHS should encourage policies such as this that help families access and expand their support networks.

- **Making it easier for shelter residents to visit family members, including overnight stays for children with their grandparents and parents who do not live in the shelter.** DHS allows children and families in shelter to spend the night outside the shelter for reasons that can range from a parent's nocturnal work schedule to a parent's simply needing a break. However, shelter staff, who either approve or deny a family's request for overnight stays, often do not tell families that this is an option available to them, and generally do not encourage this practice. DHS should require shelters to develop transparent overnight visitation policies that encourage children and parents to remain connected to and to make use of their natural support systems, and that balance the City's desire to make sure a family in shelter truly needs that shelter with parents' need for respite care.

- **Providing funding and resources to train and support shelter staff in how to support parenting.** Working in shelters is often a high-stress, low-wage job, and yet shelter staff—from maintenance workers to security guards to case managers—help set the tone in a shelter. Too often, residents regard shelter staff not as a valuable resource who connect them to services in a respectful, nonjudgmental manner, but as the enforcers of restrictive rules as well as mandated reporters to the City's child welfare

agency, the Administration for Children's Services (ACS). Shelter staff should receive training on how they can reduce tensions for those who live and work in shelters, and help to create environments that are supportive of families. (See p. 14.)

### **Facilitate visits between children in foster care and homeless parents.**

When homeless parents reunify with children who have been removed to foster care, they can move as a family to a family shelter. However, Family Court typically requires parents to regularly host those children in their homes for overnight visits as a prelude to eventual reunification. A parent who is homeless and in a shelter for single adults, however, often has no suitable place for such visits. ACS and DHS should work together to create a policy to provide parents and children preparing to be reunified with adequate space for visits.

### **ACS and DHS should coordinate on shelter referrals and eligibility.**

When ACS determines inadequate housing to be a risk factor for a family, case workers often direct families to the Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing (PATH) intake center in the Bronx, where families apply for shelter from DHS. Once there, as attorneys at Brooklyn Defender Services explained in testimony to City Council, "families who have been told by one City agency, ACS, that they must enter shelter as a condition of keeping their children in their care, are often told by a different City agency, DHS, that they are ineligible for shelter because DHS does not believe that the family is really homeless. Sometimes DHS tells a family to return to the very same housing that ACS has already determined to be inadequate or unsafe for the family. In other cases, DHS rejects a family for failing to provide proof of prior residences, even in cases in which ACS has documentation of where the family previously lived.

"ACS and DHS should work together to ensure that ACS-involved families have streamlined and collaborative eligibility reviews, with relevant court orders and eligibility-related information possessed by ACS made available to DHS staff immediately." ❌

## KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ **The academic research shows that both here in New York City and nationwide family breakup and homelessness go hand in hand.**<sup>1</sup> (See “Living Apart,” p. 5.)
- ▶ **New York City’s longstanding “right to shelter” policy likely helps many newly homeless families avoid immediate, informal separation as well as foster care removals.** Nationwide, 10 percent of children in foster care were placed there in part due to housing issues such as homelessness. But in New York City, where there is a “right to shelter,” just five percent of children in foster care were placed due to housing issues. (See “Do Shelters Reduce the Need for Foster Care?” p. 18.)
- ▶ **Nonetheless, child welfare involvement is rampant among families in shelters.** About one in four New York City families in City shelters have cases open with the Administration for Children’s Services, with slightly more than half of those families receiving services designed to prevent foster care placement. The remaining families have children in foster care. (See “Do Shelters Reduce the Need for Foster Care?” p. 18.)
- ▶ **By subjecting parents to close scrutiny and surveillance, and isolating them from their support systems and neighborhood resources, shelters can push families to the breaking point.** (See “Living Apart,” p. 5.)
- ▶ **Almost half of families entering shelters are placed in unfamiliar neighborhoods, away from their schools, doctors, houses of worship and neighbors.** The percent of families placed near the schools attended by their youngest school-aged kids has decreased by over a third in the last five years. (See “Far From Home,” p. 16.)
- ▶ **Often these families move to shelters in overtaxed neighborhoods that have limited resources—something useful neither to the families in crisis nor the struggling communities where they are moved.** Our analysis found that close to 70 percent of family shelters are located in community districts identified as being the most “food insecure”; close to half are located in the highest crime precincts and in the lowest performing school districts. (See “Far From Home,” p. 16.)
- ▶ **The City has vowed to create shelters that are more “proactive and client-centered” with “adequate and appropriate social services.”** Our recommendations for how to do this include helping families stay connected to their former support systems while forming new ones. (See “Introduction and Recommendations,” p. 1.)
- ▶ **While improving shelters is crucial, a new study suggests that long-term rental vouchers are the most effective measure for reducing informal family separations and foster care placements.** (See “Long-term Vouchers Help Families Stay Together,” p. 13.)



# LIVING APART

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## Homelessness and the Loosening of Family Ties

TODAY IN SOME NEW YORK CITY NEIGHBORHOODS, eviction has become as common as rats in the subway; bouncing from one temporary home to another has become a way of life. When the goodwill in those temporary homes runs dry, parents begin to bargain. Sometimes a child ends up staying on with a grandma or another relative while her mother lives elsewhere and tries to get back on her feet. Other times, an entire family will turn to New York City homeless shelters.

A record number of around 23,000 children are living in City shelters,<sup>2</sup> with families spending an average of over 400 days in those shelters. Nearly half of these kids are under 6 years old. Most of the rest are of school age.<sup>3</sup> The Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness estimates that about one out of eight New York City public school students have been doubled up, in shelter, or without shelter sometime during the past five years, adding up to over 127,000 students.<sup>4</sup> Together these children represent a large swath of an entire generation of New York City children who are growing up homeless.

The policy conversation about how to help these kids typically focuses on education, on how to enroll the youngest kids in preschools and help the school-aged ones stay connected to familiar schools and miss fewer classes. But there's something that impacts kids in an even more urgent, visceral way: the strong connection between homelessness and family breakup.

Missing from the dialogue around homelessness has been a frank discussion of the complicated, myriad ways in which the experience of losing one's home threatens to reconfigure and actually does reconfigure so many families.

One study involving New York City moms receiving public assistance in the late 1980s and early 90s found that even when accounting for mothers' histories of mental health issues, substance abuse, domestic violence, and institutional placement, homelessness was by far the strongest predictor that a mother would be separated from her child.<sup>5</sup> While just 8 percent of non-homeless mothers in that study

just 8 percent of non-homeless mothers in that study were separated from their children, an alarming 44 percent of those who had requested shelter five years earlier were. “A homeless mother with [no] risk factors is as likely as a housed mother with both drug dependence and domestic violence to become separated from a child,” one paper marveled at these findings.<sup>6</sup>

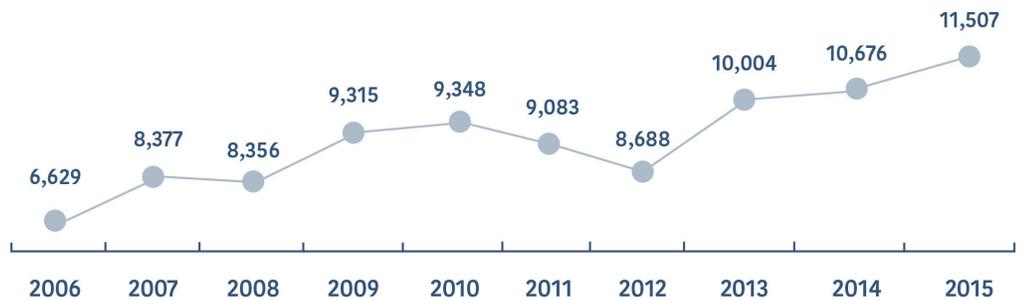
Sometimes such separations stemmed from an agonizing choice that a parent makes in the interest of a child—to shield a daughter from shelter living, for instance, or to keep her close to her school. Other times living apart from a child was imposed on a parent by relatives or the foster care system. Many separations proved sadly durable: Among the children who were ever separated from their mothers during a five-year period, more than three-quarters remained apart at the follow-up interview.

In the intervening years there have been changes in child welfare policy and certainly fewer children removed to foster care in New York City, yet more recent national research suggests that this pattern of family separations among homeless families persists. “Every study over the years that has looked, both in New York and elsewhere, has found an association between homelessness and family separations,” says Marybeth Shinn, a professor at Vanderbilt University and one of the authors of the study of New York City mothers on public assistance.

Arielle Russell, who lives in Queens and has had children in foster care, says that among her family and friends it’s common wisdom that homelessness and family breakup go hand in hand. “That’s the rules of the game,” she says. “The rules are, once you lose your apartment, ACS [the City’s child welfare agency] comes to your home, disrupting your home,

### CHILDREN UNDER 6 YEARS OLD IN CITY SHELTERS

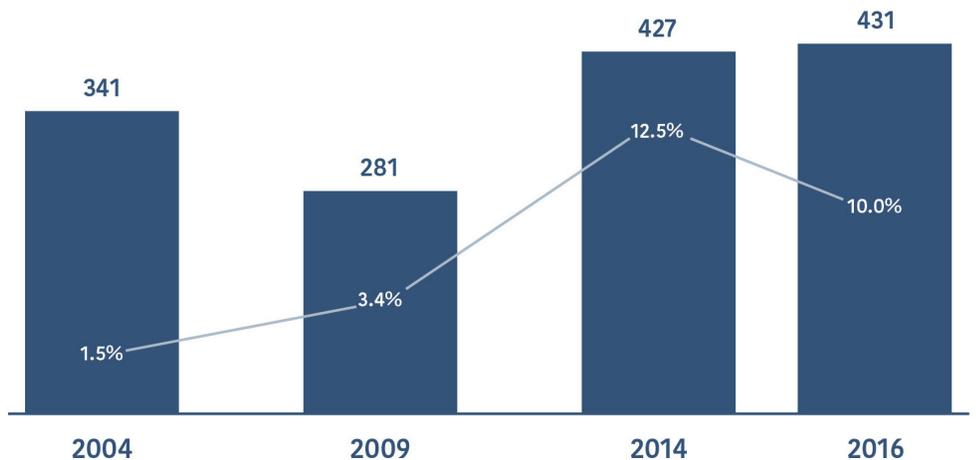
The number of children 5 years old or younger in homeless shelters has increased by close to 75 percent between 2006 and 2015. Figures are from March of each year.



### HOW LONG FAMILIES STAY IN SHELTERS, HOW FREQUENTLY THEY RETURN

Families with children now spend on average more than 14 months in city shelters. Years indicate Fiscal Years.

- Average length of stay in days for families with children
- Percentage of families with children who returned to shelter within one year of leaving\*



Sources: NYC DHS Dashboard, NYC Mayor’s Management Report, and data requests  
 \*Percentage represents a subset of families leaving shelter for what DHS considers “permanent housing.”

## New York City Child Homelessness in Fiscal Year 2016

Average number of families with children in shelters per day:  
**12,089 families**

Average length of stay for families with children:  
**431 days**

Percentage of families that were placed in shelter according to their youngest school-aged child's school address:  
**55%**

Percentage of families in shelters with active ACS cases in September 2014:  
**25%**

Sources: Department of Homeless Services, The Administration for Children's Services, NYC Mayor's Management Report

trying to take your kids away, saying that you don't have a place for your kids to live so you are an unfit mother.”

Russell's advice to those facing eviction? Keep ACS at bay by finding another family member to take the kids in. “If you get evicted and you have resources,” Russell says, “It's good to say, ‘Listen, I need you to do this just in case. I need you to take my child for me.’”

### ‘I Cared About Being with My Mom’

If you want to know what it feels like to grow up homeless in New York City, just ask Marlo Scott, now a wistful and soft-spoken 22-year-old who entered his first New York City shelter as a newborn with his mother. Scott's mother, now deceased, had three more children and the four of them have been in and out of so many shelters that Scott can't recall for sure the total, except that it was at least 15. But no matter, he says—from a kid's point of view, they're all the same. “They're all one big room with a bathroom and kitchenette and windows,” he says. “They just have different designs and different names.”

For Scott, shelter living, with its chronic moving and changing of schools and never really having the chance to make friends, was certainly not easy. He remembers always feeling “less fortunate” than the other kids at school, who had “way more

privileges,” like, “cable TV, multiple rooms in their homes, and didn't have to worry about the whole family being home by curfew.”

But that was nothing compared to the times he was apart from his mom, he says. Being in a shelter with her was a world of difference from, say, the times he spent in shelter with his father or uncle after his mother died when he was in the sixth grade. Those were the times he felt truly homeless.

“I didn't care about being in a shelter. I cared about being with my siblings and mom,” he says.

Scott remembers his mother basking in his accomplishments—bragging to other moms on the block about his report card, sitting down with him to teach him how to write a sentence, and then a paragraph.

She was, he says, a fierce, “mentally tough” woman, with more than her fair share of pain and secrets, which Scott knew had something to do with having a hard life, with having lost her own parents early on, and, like him, having grown up never quite having enough—not enough money, not enough help, not enough love. Sometimes he'd wake in his bunk to see her sitting alone at the shelter table crying in the early morning hours.

She struggled with addiction and cycled through rehab programs the same way she cycled with her kids through shelters. These programs never made space for kids, so sometimes child

welfare services would place Scott and his brother somewhere with a relative and his sisters elsewhere, while she worked to get clean. Other times Scott's mother would pre-empt that progression, sending Scott and his siblings away to various aunts and uncles, saying she needed to "get herself together," which sometimes meant relapse and other times rehab.

Those times he wasn't with his mother were what really hurt. "I didn't like being away from my mother. I knew where I came from when I was around her," he says. "It's like she identified me."

### The Fear of Losing Each Other

Research shows that for children, and especially young children, a caring, supportive parent holds the potential to buffer them from the traumas endemic to experiences like homelessness and poverty. It's a finding that Anna Freud first introduced with research showing that during the London Blitz of 1940, children who stayed with their parents even in the midst of war fared better than those who were sent out of harm's way to the countryside.

"What we know about trauma and toxic stress is that trusting relationships mitigates those traumas," says Nishanna Ramoutar, a clinical supervisor at the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services foster care prevention program. "If children live with a caregiver who they love and trust they will fare much better."

No one knows for sure how many New York City families have themselves seen no better alternative than to splinter apart due to housing troubles. Shelters do not routinely ask if clients have children living elsewhere, and that's information that parents rarely offer up freely with shelter staff. And in New York, as in many other states, homelessness by itself is not a justification for foster care removal. But in academic homelessness research and in our own interviews with parents and teens who have lived in shelters, a striking theme emerges—the relentless backdrop of fear in the lives of so many homeless families, the common fear that having already lost their homes, they will next lose each other.

*"If children live with a [parent] who they love and trust, they will fare much better."*

Marybeth Shinn, of Vanderbilt University, is one of the country's few researchers who has examined this hidden side effect of homelessness. She is currently involved in a large, national study of over 2,300 families at multiple shelters around the country that is funded by the U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development. Shinn found that among families who had spent at least a week in shelter, about 10 percent of parents were living apart from partners, depriving mothers of parenting help and also children of a parent.<sup>7</sup> Nearly a quarter of those families had one or more children under 18 years of age who was living elsewhere. Shinn and her co-authors predict that more separations are likely to occur as the families move through shelter, as research demonstrates that the likelihood of both having a child placed in foster care and informally separating from a child increases the longer a family stays in shelter.

One data match of New York City families from the late 1990s showed that a family's odds of child welfare involvement more than doubled during the first year of entering shelter.<sup>8</sup>

Today in New York City, you'd be hard-pressed to find a place where the threat of foster care looms larger than in homeless shelters, where about 25 percent of families have a case open with ACS, with just over half of those families receiving services designed to monitor children's safety while providing supports to their families.<sup>9</sup>

Academic research commonly offers three potential explanations for the high rates of child welfare involvement in shelters. One suggests that the strain of homelessness and shelter living has, as one paper published in *Child Welfare* put it, a "lasting, detrimental effect on family stability," exposing and magnifying fault lines that, under better circumstances, might otherwise lie dormant.<sup>10</sup>

Another hypothesis is that the particular pressures of shelter living may themselves be the cause of such fault lines, contributing to abuse and

Please be advised on this Date: 10/28/16

We have entered your unit for the following reason

ACS

Unit Inspection

Maintenance

Signed by: \_\_\_\_\_

*This pro forma document from one Manhattan shelter notifies residents when their shelter unit has been entered while they were away. “ACS” appears as the first reason for entry, more prominent than “unit inspection” and even “maintenance.”*

neglect by damaging relationships between parents and children and fueling bad parenting decisions.

Yet a third explanation is what researchers refer to as the “fishbowl effect”—that in shelters, families are, in essence, parenting in public, where every argument is overheard, every parenting decision witnessed, and where mandated reporters are on site 24-7. “Families are highly visible, both in shelter and afterwards to reporters who may come from different cultural backgrounds and value different parenting styles,” says Shinn.

Late last October, the New York City Council held a hearing examining what went wrong in the death of 6-year-old Zymere Perkins, allegedly killed by his mother’s boyfriend, who had spent some of his young life in a City shelter, and who had repeatedly come to the attention of child protective services. At the hearing, government officials vowed to increase the “contact” and “information sharing” between the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) shelter staff and ACS. They talked about providing more training to frontline shelter workers about how to spot and report child abuse and neglect—a plan that is now in place.

To some who were there, this sounded like a reasonable response to the City’s obligation to ensure that kids stay safe. One shelter administrator later commented that families may be less likely to have children removed when living in shelters—where ACS knew that their children are being monitored—

than if they are living independently. (See “Do Shelters Reduce the Need for Foster Care?” p. 18.)

But others heard this pledge as a call to intensify what they regard as the over-surveillance of homeless families. They worried that it would further empower shelter staff with no social work background to nonetheless act as a de facto extension of child protective services.

“It’s all about monitoring and catching things rather than solving the problem,” said one attorney about the hearing. “Nobody is asking why do 25 percent of families [in shelters] have open cases with ACS, and how to get that number down.”

### **Judgment and Isolation: A Toxic Combination**

Talk to families in shelter and you will hear how they already feel under constant watch, how surveillance and scrutiny feels woven into the fabric of shelter living. “Enter these buildings, and you are making a deal with the devil,” said one mother who lived for many months with her autistic adolescent son in a Manhattan shelter.

In interviews with parents and teens living in shelters, we heard story after story of staff at the shelters or, in one case, at the City’s homeless intake center, using the threat of a call to child welfare services as a way to get residents to comply with everything from putting coats on their kids, to getting their school-aged boys to stop roughhousing, to cleaning out their housing unit. For some families, the sense of being constantly

*“I started to get anxiety after a while. There were little things piling up and piling up where I wanted to burst and lash out at these people and say rude things.”*

monitored created a toxic combination of judgment and isolation, further burdening families’ stress loads and nudging them closer to the breaking point.

“Whether you have an ACS case or not, it was the same treatment,” remembers Eli Ramos, who spent the better part of his 19th year with his girlfriend and son, also named Eli, in a shelter.

At that well-kept shelter run in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn, shelter staff made nightly rounds to make sure all family members were home by curfew, and would also come into the unit at all times of day to do unit checks, often looking into Ramos’s refrigerator and questioning the 2-year-old Eli. “Instead of asking us, ‘How is your son doing, they’d ask him, ‘How are you doing?’ Or they’d ask, ‘Oh, is Mommy doing good?’” says Ramos. “That

would really bother us. We felt like they were trying to manipulate Eli. He was only 2 and was the type who would say yes to everything, and so we had to be very careful with them. We had to be super-perfect with everything we were doing, and that caused more stress on us.”

At that time, Ramos was working as a security guard at a nursing home, typically working 40-50 hour weeks, and often the night shift, for \$8.75 an hour. When he wasn’t working or sleeping, he was trying to keep up with the relentless stream of appointments required by the shelter to maintain public assistance and other benefits.

Once, Ramos lost his job for calling in late so that he could make these appointments. Other times, when he prioritized being on time for work over the appointments, there were weeks and even months when the family’s benefits would be on hold until he found time to trek to the public assistance office. This had consequences not just for the amount of food in the family’s cupboards, but also for how closely shelter staff scrutinized them. A nearly empty refrigerator never failed to arouse staff’s curiosity, he says, something that would not have bothered him so much if it had come with an offer of help. Instead,



**Eli Ramos, who spent nearly a year in a Brooklyn shelter with his partner and toddler son, says the stresses of shelter living pushed his family close to the breaking point.**

Ramos lived with the feeling that he and his partner alone were responsible for finding their way out of shelter, and that if they fell short on money for food or Pampers, it was best to hide it—something that did not benefit anyone.

“I started to get anxiety after a while,” he says. “There were little things piling up and piling up where I wanted to burst and lash out at these people and say rude things.”

Instead, he and his girlfriend began to turn on each other. “We were continuously arguing over little stuff, and our son used to watch it and that put a toll on him.”

### An Isolation that Felt Suffocating

Ramos saw his son turn from a happy-go-lucky toddler to a conflicted one—still content when he was at the playground, angry when it was time to return to long days alone with his mother in their one-room shelter unit. Visitors weren’t allowed in the units, so playdates, even with other kids in the shelter, were not even a possibility. The isolation felt suffocating.

Both of young Eli’s grandmothers wanted to help, but as with many families in shelter, Ramos’s shelter placement was far away from the family’s former neighborhood in the Bronx, where they used to live with Ramos’s mother, and where little Eli’s other grandmother also lived. For the grandmothers to visit, they had to travel over an hour by train, a trip made somewhat pointless by the shelter’s no-visitor policy that restricted them from entering the family’s unit once they got there. There was one room where all families could visit, Ramos remembers, but that was often noisy and sometimes filled with cursing and arguing—not a place where he wanted his mother and child to spend time together.

Leaving little Eli with them for a night here or there would have given the entire family a much-needed respite, but if there was a way for that to happen, no one told Ramos about it. Instead, Ramos was under the impression that overnight visits were forbidden by shelter rules. “That would have been an ACS case right there,” he says.

So for the year they spent in shelter, Ramos and his family lived deprived of what a recent report

by the New York City Independent Budget Office calls a family’s “networking and social capital resources”<sup>11</sup>—some of the most valuable resources available to struggling families.

When the City’s Department of Homeless Services (DHS) moves families away from the communities and then institutes “a ‘no visitor’ policy [in shelters],” said Stephanie Gendell of Citizens Committee for Children in testimony at the City Council hearing on the Perkins case, “families are unable to create a new social network in their new community. Combined with the curfew, it is nearly impossible for adults and children in shelter to maintain connections to their social supports and networks.”<sup>12</sup>

Social isolation, Gendell points out, is a well-documented risk factor for child abuse and neglect, and “the exact opposite of what we want for families struggling with the trauma and stress of homelessness.”

### Life in a Cloud of Fog

When Ramos thinks of his time in shelter, he remembers it like living in a cloud of fog, “like I wasn’t free.”

It felt that disconnected from everything that came before it and everything that would come after, an alternate universe where all his neighbors were people who had been evicted and, some mornings coming home from the night shift, he could feel and see their strain and hopelessness—the yelling through the walls, the babies crying, the sound of a toddler who wouldn’t come when called being dragged, the kids eating candy for breakfast.

Ramos understood why ACS felt like such a looming, threatening presence in the shelter life. Families needed help. But too often instead of a lifeline, parents received scrutiny and judgment.

The restrictive shelter rules and regulations only fueled the fire. TV screens could be no bigger than 19 inches. Decorations to make the shelter feel like home—even tiny figurines—weren’t permitted. Even the most intimate of living details felt under scrutiny. When Ramos and his girlfriend, who was pregnant with their second child, pulled together the two twin beds to make one bed for them together,

shelter staff told them that was not allowed. “It was like, ‘If you’re in our house then we can do whatever we want to you,’” remembers Ramos.

Over time it became too much. Ramos began to question why he was going through all this. The easier thing, he knew, was to just give up, break up the family. He could return to live with his mom in her one-bedroom apartment, and his partner and son could squeeze into her mother’s already overcrowded home. Maybe being apart was better than being together in shelter.

“It got to the point where I was saying, ‘I’ll go back to my mom and you go back to your mom’s house,’” he says of a path they ultimately didn’t take. “The stress load caused us to not feel for each other.”

### The Most Durable Effect of Homelessness

Families that splinter apart while homeless tend to view these separations, as they do their housing situation—as something temporary, the best in a parade of bad options. Some families who subsequently secure stable housing are indeed reunified, and long-term housing vouchers have been found to be especially effective at reducing separations. (See “Long-term Housing Vouchers Help Families Stay Together,” p. 13.) But other studies find separations to be one of the most enduring effects of time spent homeless.

Once kids and parents are split up, homelessness makes it hard to reunify. Parents who do not have full custody of their children are often ineligible for housing, public assistance, and other benefits, and so may be unable to create homes fit for their children to return to. For parents with children in foster care, homelessness makes it difficult to carry out prerequisites for reunification, such as having in-home visits before children can return home.

In New York City, homeless mothers with children in foster care can receive priority for public housing. But if they reunify with their children while living doubled up in a friend’s or family member’s home prior to receiving a housing placement, they lose their eligibility, forcing them to choose between living with their children or keeping their priority in the long line for public housing.<sup>13</sup>

But some researchers believe that the persistence of separations among homeless family members has even deeper roots. In the study of New York City mothers who had separated from children, a surprising 40 percent of those mothers began living apart from their children not during their time homeless, but after leaving the shelter system. These separations typically occurred not because child welfare authorities or a court mandated it, but because family members themselves decided it was best, lending more credence to the theory that something about shelter life itself—with its lack of privacy, isolation, intense scrutiny, and restrictive rules—can erode a parent’s authority and chip away at familial bonds.

*“I couldn’t tell how stressed out I was until I actually moved.”*

“I get in trouble every time my children act up in the lobby,” one single mother with young boys told us about shelter living. “They try to dismantle the family as a unit.”

### We Needed More Guidance

Ramos’s family narrowly avoided separating. They stayed together to see the birth of their second child—a girl, this time, one of the close to 2,000 babies born to families in shelters that year. Soon after that, the family was assigned public housing in East Harlem.

Now, almost three years and a third baby later, Ramos works as a family advocate at one of the City’s Mental Health Association Family Resource Centers, where he supports other families navigating their own crises. When Ramos thinks back to that time they spent homeless, he says, “I couldn’t tell how stressed out I was until I actually moved. We needed a little more help. We needed more guidance.”

He has no photos of the shelter that was his daughter’s first home; the year that his son was 2 remains largely undocumented. After all, that was the year that his young family endured so much stress they came close to splitting apart, and that, he says, is heartbreaking. It’s something he’d like to forget. ❌

# RESEARCH BRIEF:

## Long-Term Housing Vouchers Help Families Stay Together

By Monae Evans

HOUSING STABILITY—secured by long-term rental vouchers that permit formerly homeless families to live in market-rate apartments—dramatically reduces family separations, foster care placements, and stresses that often lead to future episodes of homelessness. That’s what researchers have concluded from analyzing an extensive Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Family Options Study.

The September 2010-January 2012 study included 2,282 families (with more than 5,000 children) living in emergency shelters for seven or more days in 12 communities representing a mix of geographic locations, sizes, and housing and labor market conditions. Its purpose: Assess a variety of housing and service interventions for their effects on housing stability, family preservation, self-sufficiency, and adult-child wellbeing. It looked at three interventions: “permanent” housing subsidies (Section 8 “housing choice” vouchers for as long as families met eligibility requirements); transitional housing for up to 24 months that included broad psycho-social services; and temporary rapid-re-housing subsidies with more limited housing and employment assistance. A fourth “usual care” group of families was expected to seek housing and services on their own.

Marybeth Shinn and Scott R. Brown of Vanderbilt University and Daniel Gubits of Abt Associates analyzed data from this study to determine the extent to which housing subsidies and other interventions reduce family separations (children from parents and adult partners from each other), and the predictors of such separations. They hypothesized that where family separations are caused by financial hardship and housing instability—which they determined using a scale that measures families’ abilities to pay rent and medical care among other necessities—housing

subsidies would ameliorate those problems and reduce separations. They also hypothesized that where separations are due to psychosocial challenges experienced by parents, transitional housing, which offers services directed toward these challenges, would reduce them, and that lower levels of alcohol dependence, drug abuse, and domestic violence would reduce separations.

Their findings, published in a December 2016 article in the *American Journal of Community Psychology*, “Can Housing and Service Interventions Reduce Family Separations for Families Who Experience Homelessness?” suggest that housing vouchers reduce child separations for all indicators except substance abuse. Permanent subsidies, in fact, appeared to have the most significant impact relative to other interventions in cutting rates of child separations and foster care placement; they also significantly reduced such precursors to child separations as subsequent episodes of homelessness and intimate partner violence.

As in previous studies of families experiencing homelessness, they found separations of parents from children and partners to be “rampant.” But for families receiving the housing voucher, the rate of child separations was sharply lowered (9.8% as opposed to 16.9% in the usual care group), and the rate of foster care placements dropped by more than two-thirds (1.4% in the permanent subsidy group versus 5% in the usual care group).

Transitional housing did not reduce rates of family separations, suggesting to the researchers that ending homelessness with housing vouchers was more important than providing services while families remained homeless. Housing stability provided by long-term vouchers often succeeds not only in preventing homelessness, but also in preventing child separations. However, no intervention reduced partner separations. ❌

# What Help Looks Like In Family Shelters

WITH HOMELESS FAMILIES spending an average of over a year in shelters, the City recognizes the urgency of creating shelters that better support parents and children. “A roof and a bed are not enough,” reads Mayor de Blasio’s February plan for addressing the homelessness crisis. “We need shelters that can actually help people maintain stability and find their way back to the lives they had before homelessness.” In the City’s new vision, shelters are “proactive and client-centered” with “adequate and appropriate social services.”

But what does that look like and how can it happen? Here are some up-and-running initiatives already helping families leave City shelters stronger.

## Trainings and Coaching that Sensitize Staff

“If we want to improve outcomes, we have to start with what we have the most control of, and that’s our staff,” says Raysa Rodriguez, vice president of policy and planning at Win (formerly Women in Need), one of the largest shelter providers for New York City’s homeless families.

Three years ago, Win piloted a program to train shelter case managers—many of whom are not licensed social workers—in social work evidence-based best practices. An example: the Trauma Informed Care approach to working with families, which recognizes that many homeless families have endured trauma, and teaches staff who work with them how to avoid inadvertently re-traumatizing families and also reduce tensions as they arise. For instance, if a parent is upset or aggressive, staff might recognize such behavior as a response to a difficult situation and de-escalate the moment instead of engaging in a power struggle.

After piloting the trainings, Rodriguez and other Win staff found it was not immediately translating into practice. So Win hired a staff member to supplement trainings with coaching and supervision—an approach that has proved effective, says Rodriguez.

*“If we want to improve outcomes, we have to start with what we have the most control of, and that’s our staff.”*

Also key: The trainings are no longer just for case managers. Now everyone working at the shelter receives the instruction. “If you want to change the culture of a site, you have to be more broad than training case managers, because if a family walks in at one in the morning, it’s not the case manager who greets them, it’s the security guard or janitor,” says Rodriguez.

## A Policy That Empowers Residents to Help Each Other

HELP USA, another large homeless service provider, also uses the Trauma Informed Care approach in its shelters. In what might be considered an extension of that model’s philosophy, in January shelter directors ditched the policy common throughout New York City family shelters that forbids residents from looking after each other’s children. Now, as long as a shelter resident does not have an active case with child welfare services and is keeping up with their independent living plan, she can be cleared to babysit another resident’s children. This makes it possible for parents to not only, say, work more hours than they might otherwise; it also makes short trips to the store for diapers or formula endlessly easier, reducing some of the strain in shelters that is particular to parents, and especially single parents.

Executive vice president of HELP USA George Nashak says he was initially skeptical of how the policy would play out, citing safety concerns, but has come to see its value not only as a practical form of help for parents, but as a learning tool. “We want to model [for parents in shelter] how to use community resources,” says Nashak.



## Support for First-Time Mothers

The Department of Homeless Services does not allow family shelters to specialize in serving particular populations, making it extremely difficult to target programming to, for example, young mothers. But Siena House, a small shelter in a former convent in the Bronx, has managed to do just that. At that shelter, volunteers and staff lead discussions with young first-time mothers on topics such as breastfeeding, baby massage, and how to create a soothing bedtime ritual. “The people who work here are very nurturing, and they kind of help the moms with understanding the value of nurturing and calming the baby,” says Sister Mary Doris, who founded the shelter over 25 years ago.

Doris’s vision for Siena House was always of a shelter that worked closely with young, first-time mothers, taking advantage of that window of opportunity just before and after a baby’s birth when parents are especially open to help. But Siena House’s success is also the product of a lucky logistical fluke. Though the City’s intake center for homeless families places them based on available shelter space, not on what particularly suits each family, the rooms in the former convent are so small they fit only a single bed and a crib, creating a de facto specialized shelter for new moms.

## A Parenting Program Proven to Reduce Child Welfare Placements

As part of a City Council initiative to bring evidenced-based programming into family shelters, the social services agency CAMBA recently brought the national home-visiting SafeCare program to one of its large Brooklyn shelters. Following this model, home visitors work with parents and their children in their shelter units, focusing on three key areas: home

safety, including childproofing homes; child health, including when to call 911 or visit the emergency room; and parent-child bonding.

The model was developed at the University of Georgia, and in several studies parents receiving SafeCare were involved in significantly fewer reports of child maltreatment than parents in a control group. CAMBA has for several years used the SafeCare model with hundreds of families enrolled in its foster care prevention program. Some of those families lived doubled-up or in homeless shelters, and SafeCare staff noticed that those who were not stably housed were typically the most difficult to engage. The hope was that bringing SafeCare directly to a homeless shelter would make it easier for families there to benefit from the program.

About 18 months in, that is happening. Among families at the shelter eligible to participate—those with children younger than 7—about 70 percent have joined, according to staff. Jacqueline Jones, a case manager supervisor at the shelter, says that for some families the program is keeping child welfare services at bay.

“I think the program is saving one of my families,” says Jones, referring to a young mother who kept her housing unit in such disarray that Jones worried they would need to call child welfare services. She started with SafeCare instead. SafeCare staff “created a schedule for the mom and are working with her step by step on, when do you clean dishes up and when does the floor need mopping and when are you going to put the baby in a playpen and why you should talk to him,” says Jones.

It’s an approach that works better than focusing primarily on safety, says Jones. “If they build the mom up, if they build the father up, it is going to be a better household.” ✖

# FAR FROM HOME

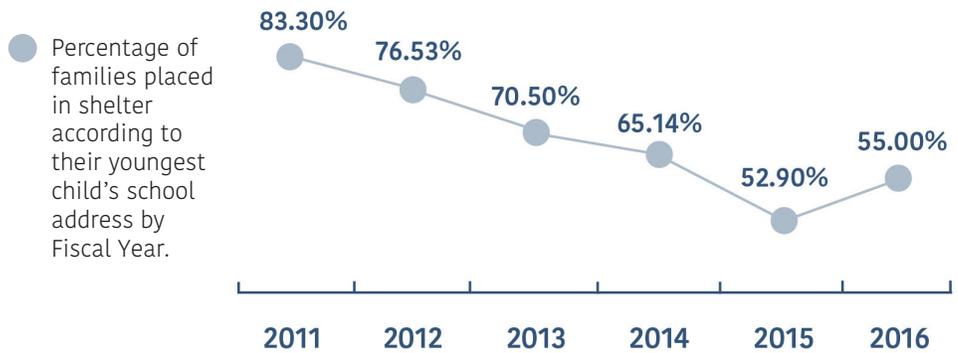
## Where Families in Shelter Are Placed

By Kobi Loehr

A large portion of families entering shelters are placed in unfamiliar neighborhoods, away from their schools, doctors, houses of worship, and neighbors. Often, they end up in overtaxed neighborhoods that have limited resources—something useful neither to families nor the communities where they are moved.

### FAMILIES PLACED IN THE SHELTER SYSTEM CLOSE TO HOME

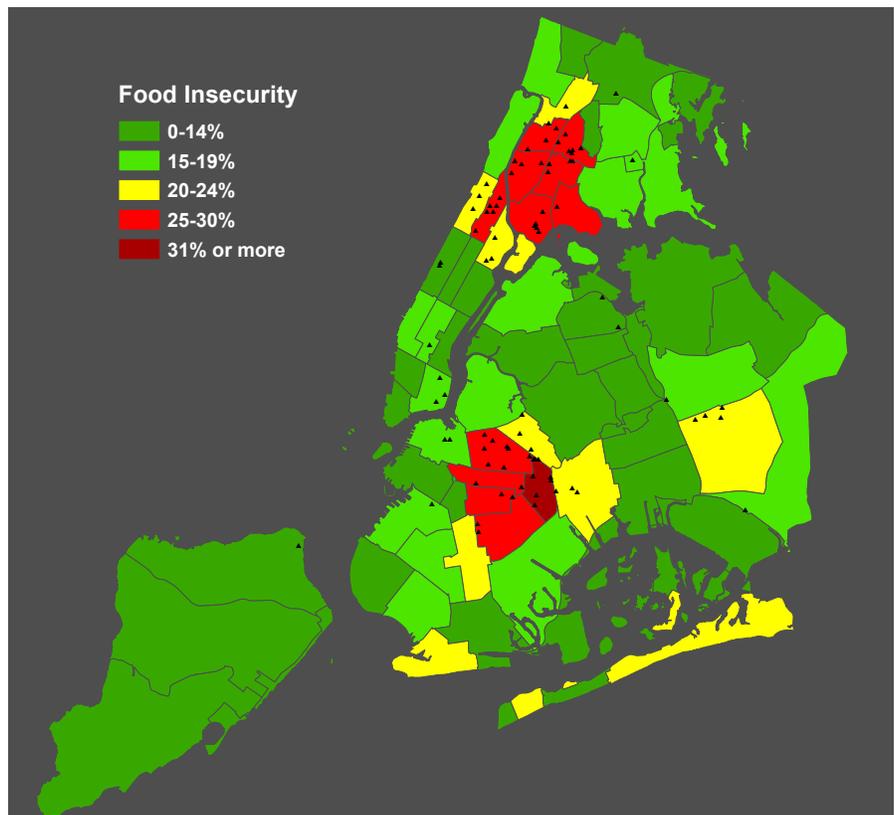
In Fiscal Year 2011, more than 83 percent of families in City homeless shelters were placed near the schools attended by their youngest school-aged kids. Five years later, that had declined to only 55 percent of families.

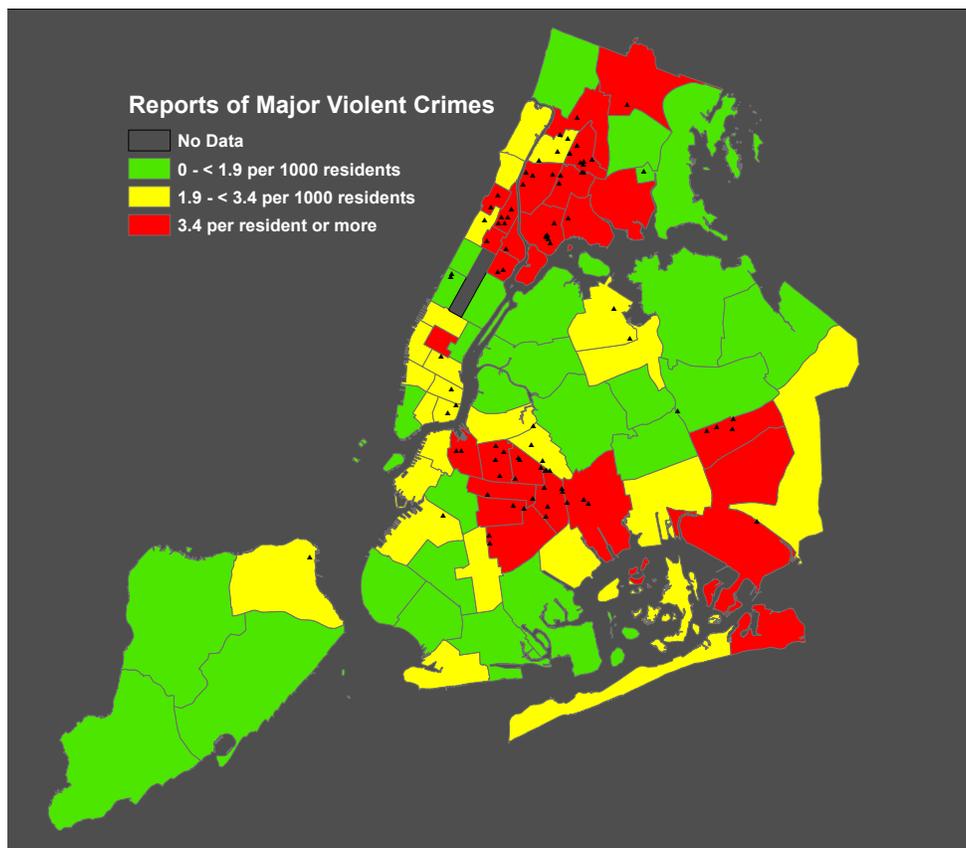


Source: NYC Mayor's Management Report and NYC DHS Data Dashboard

### FOOD INSECURITY

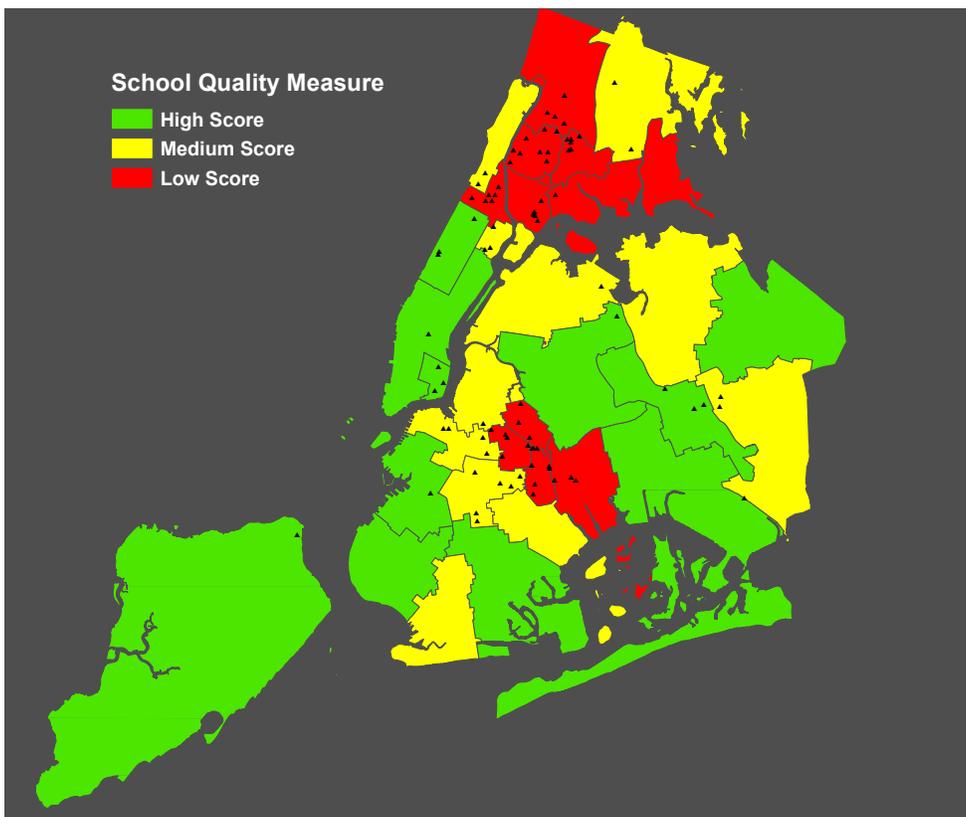
Close to 70 percent of family shelters are located in community districts identified as being the most “food insecure.” (Triangles represent family shelters.)





### REPORT OF MAJOR VIOLENT CRIMES

Nearly half of all family shelters are located in the highest crime police precincts. (Triangles represent family shelters.)



### SCHOOL QUALITY

Over half of all family shelters are located in the lowest performing school districts. (Triangles represent family shelters.)

Sources: 2014 NYC Open Data, Department of Homeless Services, Google Maps, Food Bank for New York City, Feeding America, New York City Police Department, New York City Department of Education.

To learn about methodology used, see p. 24.

# Do Shelters Reduce the Need for Foster Care?

IT'S WELL KNOWN that unstable housing and child welfare involvement—which includes foster care placements as well as services to prevent such placements—go hand and hand. But some argue that family shelters may actually work to reduce foster care placements among homeless families.

In the City's family homeless shelters, about 25 percent of families have open child welfare cases, with a little over half of those families receiving services that monitor children's safety while providing supports to their families,<sup>14</sup> and the rest with children who have been removed to foster care.

Some of this connection between homelessness and child welfare involvement is fueled by parents behaving in ways that may be truly harmful to kids; research has established a clear link between poverty and abuse and neglect as well as harsher parenting styles.<sup>15</sup>

Also significant, many parents who become homeless struggle with issues such as mental illness or substance abuse—issues that the stressors of homelessness and poverty no doubt exacerbate, and which have also been linked to abuse and neglect. As the adjacent chart from The Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness (ICPH) shows, among all New York City children in foster care, children who were taken from homeless families were nearly twice as likely to have parents who required support for issues such as mental illness compared to children who came from families where housing was not an issue.

At the same time, homeless parents are more likely than housed parents to come in contact with mandated reporters for suspected abuse and neglect, and research suggests may be judged more harshly. "Our clients in general live their lives so much in public and under so much surveillance, and living in shelter becomes just one more access point for their behavior to be noted and reported," says Emma Alpert, a parent attorney at Brooklyn Defender Services.

But George Nashak, executive vice president of HELP USA, one of the City's largest homeless service providers, cautions that frequent contact with mandated reporters may be a good thing for many families. When a family is in shelter, he says, child protective workers know the children are being monitored, something that "gives [child welfare services] a little bit of confidence that they can remain together," says Nashak. "I think paradoxically being in shelter helps families stay together."

Previously unpublished data analyzed by ICPH found that while nationwide, 10 percent of children in foster care were placed there in part due to housing issues such as homelessness, in New York City—where homeless families have a right to shelter—just 5 percent of children in foster care were placed there due to housing issues including homelessness.<sup>16</sup> This suggests that for some homeless families, living in a shelter may, indeed, help to stave off foster care removals. ❌

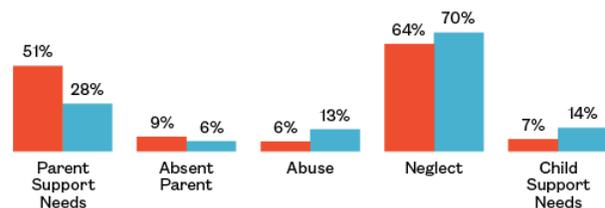
## Homeless Families Whose Children Were Placed in Foster Care Have Unique Support Needs

Compared to families who are not homeless, close to two times as many children who were taken away from homeless families had parents who needed support for physical and emotional illnesses/disabilities, alcohol abuse, or substance abuse (51% to 28%).

Reasons for Entering Foster Care

2014

Homeless (N=867) Not Homeless (N=16,767)



Source: Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness, Taken Away: The Prevalence of Homeless Children in Foster Care, February 2017



Photo Credit: Alessandra Celauro

# UNFIT PARENT? OR CASUALTY OF OVER-SURVEILLANCE?

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## A Homeless Mother's Fight to Clear Her Name

ON THE DAY OF HER PRE-TRIAL HEARING at the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS), Alison Taylor,\* blonde, blue-eyed, and—in her words—indestructible as a New York City cockroach, donned the type of dark suit she once wore daily in her former, pre-children and pre-recession life as a corporate investment analyst. She loaded a hefty cargo of binders and papers sporting bright sticky notes onto a luggage cart. These files were forever with her. Normally she pushed them around in a baby stroller, but understanding how strange that could look to the judge, today she opted for the cart instead.

Leaving them behind would be even better, she knew—to haul them around can look like hoarding, one of the many things of which a New York City child protective worker has accused Taylor. But to leave them in the family shelter that she and her two sons have called home for over 1,000 days was simply too risky, in Taylor's opinion. When she was away, shelter staff entered her home often and

without her permission—leaving behind tiny memos to announce their intrusions—and she trusted none of them.

Those papers and binders had become Taylor's lifeline. They comprised the case for why, contrary to what child welfare services had determined, she was, in fact, a fit mother. Headed for the OCFS office, she was ready to ask that her name to be expunged from its registry of abusive and neglectful parents.

Had someone told her four years ago that she'd one day be on such a list, Taylor says she would have laughed. After all, in New York City, there are two types of families—those who worry about the child protective services workers under the City's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) knocking on their door, and those who don't. When you're white and middle class—with a roof over your head, a manageable stress load and little involvement with the social welfare system, as Taylor then was—you're in the second group. But entering a homeless shelter would move Taylor squarely to the other camp,

\*Names have been changed.

one where her parenting decisions would come under steady scrutiny and where her hold on her children came to feel tenuous.



It started four years ago, when Taylor lost her job and the family's rent on their Upper West Side apartment skyrocketed. Soon after she gave birth to her second son, the family was evicted. Taylor's husband went to live with friends while Taylor, her newborn, and her 3-year-old son began rotating through the homes of friends and fellow church members. Eventually the family reunited in an apartment in a neighborhood in the Bronx where, Taylor says, the sounds of gunshots were routine. Stress combined with months of separation had taken its toll on the parents and tensions flared between them.

*“In New York City, there are two types of families – those who worry about child protective services knocking on their door, and those who don’t.”*

One day, Taylor asked if there was anything her husband still liked about her. He answered “no.” The marriage was over.

Taylor secured custody of the kids, but did not want to continue living in the Bronx neighborhood, so she, her infant, and son resumed couch surfing. Soon they found themselves on the 12th floor of a large family homeless shelter on the Upper West Side.

Life in the “high-rise campground,” as Taylor liked to call it, was riddled with difficulties. The heat year-round could be excruciating, yet fans were not allowed. The elevators broke routinely, adding to her chronic lateness for the parade of appointments required of shelter residents. And she resented the “independent living” courses she was required to attend—as though she had not spent her entire prior adult life living independently. Taylor quickly became known as a resident who disregarded shelter rules that did not suit her.

But she also felt cautiously hopeful about

this chance for a new beginning. Taylor got domestic violence counseling for herself and therapy for her oldest son. She enrolled him in kindergarten at a well-regarded neighborhood school. And though the shelter discouraged socializing among families in the building—sometimes warning them they might be living next door to a pedophile—Taylor cultivated a handful of friends who looked after her and she them.

Taylor knew that child protective services had a strong presence in the shelter—many families had cases with ACS. They warned her that once ACS was in your life, it was very hard to get them out. But she did not feel the fear of what that might mean until the evening when two ACS workers knocked on her door.

The family had been living in the shelter for about 2 ½ years. Taylor's friend Janice, was visiting. Taylor and her 6-year-old son, who was learning to cook, were at the stove stirring rice. The two workers told Janice to return to her unit. She hesitated. They said if she didn't comply they would report her for leaving her child alone. Janice's son was 16, old enough to be alone, but she didn't risk it.

Months later, Janice would still be haunted by the scene she left that night—Taylor sitting in a chair, sobbing, the two child protective workers hovering above her, questioning her, demanding answers, and, in the background, the two boys huddled together, both crying, no one offering them comfort.

A week later, when the 6-year-old spotted one of the workers at the shelter, he wet his pants.



Several months passed before Taylor learned exactly why her family was being investigated. A staffer from the shelter had reported her to the State Central Registry for suspected cases of child abuse or neglect, saying that Taylor had been heard by others through the shelter walls saying she wanted to kill herself. When the staff member knocked on the door, it took Taylor a long time to answer, and the staffer speculated during her report that it was because of clutter in the unit. (Taylor would later say she was simply getting dressed, adding that she is under no obligation to open the door just because someone is knocking.)

*“Increasingly isolated, she became suspicious of those trying to help her.”*

The staff member also had a more personal complaint: Taylor did not comply with the shelter’s rules, which required her to meet regularly with the staffer.

This allegation sparked a routine but intensive investigation to determine whether Taylor was fit to parent her children. Child protective workers interviewed her husband, a number of her family members, her psychiatrist, school staff, and others. As is commonly the case, there would be conflicting accounts—her husband would say she is unstable and unraveling, for instance; her therapist would insist she is a loving mother doing a remarkable parenting job under stressful circumstances. When talking with family, the investigators always asked if they would be willing and able to take the children.

As the investigation progressed, Taylor rarely called family and friends outside the shelter; she felt ashamed to talk about what was happening. Increasingly isolated, she also became more suspicious of those trying to help her. When shelter staff encouraged her to enroll her youngest in a program that was part of the City’s subsidized early education system, she refused because that system is also run by ACS.

Nor did she want her oldest son taking the school bus to school. Even though it meant he was chronically late, she wanted to be the one to see him safely to the school door each day.

In early spring, the child protective workers concluded their investigation: Taylor’s children could continue to live with her, but the allegations against her—“inadequate food, clothing, shelter” and “inadequate guardianship”—were determined to be grounded in fact. The reason: the “physical conditions of the home” were “hazardous to the safety of the child.”

The report cited clutter—used coffee mugs and boxes of books on the table as well as other things “packed on the floor.” Hanging from the walls, it said, were “bike parts,” a reference to the children’s scooters.

A play area filled with stuffed animals that Taylor had created on the top bunk was not considered a clever use of limited space, as Taylor regarded it, but a safety hazard—“toys could fall off the top of the bunk and hit the child.” A stroller in the entryway was deemed a fire hazard that blocked the doorway. Taylor’s cooking with her 6-year-old was “not appropriate...accidents can happen and child would have no place to run because of the condition of the home.”

Even the family’s sleeping arrangement was viewed as flawed. Though co-sleeping is considered dangerous when it involves infants, this investigation deemed it unsafe for Taylor, who is a slight woman, to do so with her 3-year-old son. “She could hurt her son by sleeping in the same bed,” the report read. “She could accidentally roll on the children.”

Taylor was on psychiatric medication and had not taken it the day the investigators visited, the report noted, failing to mention that the psychiatric medication was not for a mental health issue that could harm her parenting if untreated. Rather, it was for a learning disability—attention deficit disorder—and the prescription for Adderall, a drug that can be addictive, instructed her to take it not regularly, but as necessary.

The children, the report noted, appeared happy and loving.

Most cases like Taylor’s slip away unchallenged. Parents simply try to put ACS behind them. Those who do challenge the findings typically do so for employment reasons. An “indicated record” means that until the youngest child named in the report is 28 years old, the indication will show up on an employment background check for jobs that involve working with or near children. When parents do challenge an indicated case, about half succeed, “suggesting that countless innocent individuals are, at least for some period of time, mistakenly listed” in the State’s registry of abusive and neglectful parents, according to an article in the *New York University Journal of Legislation and Public Policy*.<sup>17</sup>

Taylor had her own reason for fighting the case: Family Court judges can access indicated

cases when making custody decisions, and Taylor's husband wanted a divorce. If he challenged her custody of their children, Taylor worried he was now likely to win it. Her worst fear was that he would send the children to live with his large, extended family in South America.

The pre-hearing meeting with the OCFS administrative judge was Taylor's first chance to present her side of the story to an official who was not from ACS. But it turned out to be disappointingly perfunctory and routine. Taylor brought an advocate from the Child Welfare Organizing Project, who explained to the judge that Taylor wanted the case expunged from the record. The judge, a stout man with thick-rimmed glasses, said that he did not have that power. He can only seal an indicated record, he explained, which meant it wouldn't show up in an employment background check, but its existence would remain in ACS' records. But that shouldn't matter to you, he shrugged to Taylor. If you don't work with kids, this isn't going to affect you.

Then he began to rattle off the details that her case had been whittled down to for the purposes of the hearing: that Taylor was a hoarder, for instance; that she took psychiatric medication; that she co-slept with her children.

"With all due respect," the CWOP advocate interrupted, "where's the maltreatment?"

And just like that, a date was set for the administrative trial, and the pre-hearing adjourned.

A few weeks later, spurred by a succession of deaths among children in families investigated by ACS, Taylor's shelter would start "crawling with child protective workers." ("Daisy-wilters," Taylor called them—a code name she used to warn her sons to be on extra good behavior because she has just spotted an ACS worker.)

Then Taylor would receive a foreboding call from her son's school. A new policy was in effect

requiring schools to be hypervigilant concerning children frequently absent or tardy also named in an indicated child welfare case during the previous year. The safe haven the school had been for Taylor's family would suddenly feel tenuous.

Not long after that, a faulty radiator in Taylor's apartment turned dangerous, roasting the floor around it. Taylor tried for days to have it addressed, finally bringing it to the attention of housing advocates. The day it was finally slated for repairs, Taylor was instructed to begin packing. She was being transferred out of the shelter.

Taylor stalled moving for weeks while her children spent most of their time with their father. She became panicked. Where would they move her? What if they made her return to the intake center for homeless families? Without a newborn, would she even be approved for shelter this time?

She began noticing that both of her kids no longer seemed to listen to her or take her seriously. "And why should they?" she'd say. "Why should they when you've brought in eight different officials who have told my children that I'm not in control?"

*"They've won. They've made me an unfit mother."*

Blinking back tears at a diner, she wondered out loud about what once had been unthinkable: If her children might be better off having a different life, with their family in a different country, even if it meant she was not part of it?

"They've won," she announced, her files and binders spread before her. "They've made me an unfit mother." ✖

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>3</sup> NYC DHS Data Dashboard, December 2015.
- <sup>4</sup> On the Map: The Atlas of Student Homelessness in New York City. (August 2016). Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness.
- <sup>5</sup> Cowal, et al. (2002).
- <sup>6</sup> Barrow, et al. (2009).
- <sup>7</sup> Shinn, et al. (In press).
- <sup>8</sup> Park, et al. (2004).
- <sup>9</sup> Center for New York City Affairs. (2015). In need of shelter: Protecting the city’s youngest children from the traumas of homelessness. *Child Welfare Watch* Vol. 24.
- <sup>10</sup> Park, et al. (2004).
- <sup>11</sup> Not Reaching the Door: Homeless Students Face Many Hurdles on the Way to School. (October 2016). Independent Budget Office, New York City.
- <sup>12</sup> Testimony of Stephanie Gendell, associate executive director, policy and advocacy, Citizen’s Committee for Children, before the New York City Council General Welfare Committee, Oversight: Child Abuse Cases and the Various City Touchpoints for Families. (October 31, 2015).
- <sup>13</sup> Testimony of Emma Alpert, attorney, and Lauren Shapiro, attorney-in-charge, Brooklyn Defender Services Family Defense Practice, before the New York City Council General Welfare Committee, Oversight: Conditions and Operations in the Department of Homeless Services Family Shelters. (February 27, 2014).
- <sup>14</sup> Administration for Children’s Services data for September 2014.
- <sup>15</sup> McLoyd, V. C. (1990). The impact of economic hardship on Black families and children: Psychological distress, parenting, and socioemotional development. *Child Development*, 61(2), 311-346.
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## METHODOLOGY FOR MAPS pp.18-19

**Food insecurity data** for the year 2014 uses U.S. Department of Agriculture food insecurity estimates that account for both food availability and accessibility of food at the household level. The low-to-high scale follows the county food insecurity rate scale created by Feeding America. The five categories, from low to high, are 0-14%, 15-19%, 20-24%, 25-29%, and 30% or more.

**Crime statistics** for the year 2014 reflect only reports of murder, rape and felony assault for each police precinct. To ascertain the number of violent crimes per 1000 residents in each police precinct, population data was obtained from NYC Open Data. Major, violent crime reports per 1000 people were reclassified by dividing the precincts into three roughly equal categories signifying low to high violent crime (26 precincts in the low category and 25 each in the medium and high categories). Low crime was designated as 1.9 crime reports per 1000 residents or fewer. Medium crime fell between 1.9 and 3.4 crime reports per 1000 residents and high crime was designated as 3.4 or more crime reports per 1000 residents.

**School quality data** from the New York City Department of Education, and is an index that includes ELA (English language arts) and math test scores, chronic absenteeism rates, and parental satisfaction scores for school districts from the year 2014. The data utilized covered these metrics for grades kindergarten through 8th grade. Proficient test scores were weighted most heavily, followed by chronic absenteeism, with parental satisfaction factored in as the least important of the three in determining quality.

Combined school quality scores were arranged into three roughly equal groups (11 school districts each in the low and medium categories and 10 school districts in the high quality category).

PROTECTIVE SERVICES	FY11	FY12	FY13	FY14	FY15	FY16	TREND
<b>REPORTS OF ABUSE AND NEGLECT:</b>	65,731	63,521	59,675	61,798	60,841	62,639	
State hotline reports rose since a recent low in FY13.							
<b>PERCENTAGE OF REPORTS SUBSTANTIATED:</b>	40.1	39.6	39.8	39.5	39.0	36.1	
Fewer of the reports of abuse or neglect were substantiated in FY16 than in recent years.							
<b>PENDING RATE:</b>	4.8	3.9	4.4	5.2	5.2	5.5	
The monthly average of new cases per child protective worker has continued to rise.							
<b>AVERAGE CHILD PROTECTIVE CASELOAD:</b>	9.4	8.7	8.2	9.8	10.5	10.6	
Caseloads have risen steadily since FY13.							
<b>ACS SUPERVISION ORDERED BY FAMILY COURT (PREVIOUS CALENDAR YEAR):</b>	4,913	5,180	5,009	5,712	6,158	6,427	
The total number of court-ordered supervisions as an outcome of Article 10 filings continues to rise.							
<b>CHILD FATALITIES IN CASES KNOWN TO ACS (PREVIOUS CALENDAR YEAR):</b>	46	43	50	44	58	43	
This includes deaths from natural causes.							
<b>PREVENTIVE SERVICES</b>							
<b>FAMILIES RECEIVING ACS-CONTRACTED PREVENTIVE SERVICES (ANNUAL, CUMULATIVE):</b>	21,535	19,172	20,853	21,039	22,280	22,147	
The number of families in preventive programs has risen only slightly in recent years even as the foster care population has dropped dramatically.							
<b>NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN PREVENTIVE CASES (ACTIVE, JUNE):</b>	23,294	22,952	25,762	25,172	26,123	24,459	
June 2016 saw fewer children in preventive programs than in each of the previous three years.							
<b>PERCENT OF PREVENTIVE CASES REFERRED BY ACS:</b>	71.0	72.0	72.0	68.1	72.0	74.6	
The majority of cases in preventive services continue to be referred by ACS Child Protective Services.							
<b>FOSTER CARE SERVICES</b>							
<b>NUMBER OF CHILDREN ADMITTED TO FOSTER CARE:</b>	6,313	5,698	4,779	4,501	4,104	3,702	
A record low in FY16.							
<b>NUMBER OF CHILDREN DISCHARGED FROM FOSTER CARE:</b>	7,055	6,453	5,416	4,969	4,250	4,421	
Nineteen percent more children were discharged than admitted.							
<b>TOTAL AVERAGE FOSTER CARE POPULATION:</b>	14,843	13,820	12,958	11,728	11,098	9,926	
The number of children in foster care is at a record low.							
<b>MEDIAN LENGTH OF STAY FOR CHILDREN BEFORE RETURN TO PARENTS (MONTHS):</b>	6.4	5.5	6.8	7.5	6.6	7.7	
Children entering foster care for the first time returned home in about 7 - 8 months in FY16.							
<b>PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN WITH REUNIFICATION GOAL (PREVIOUS CALENDAR YEAR):</b>	51.5	52.1	49.1	48.5	50.0	49.8	
About half of the children in foster care at any point in time are expected to return home.							
<b>PERCENTAGE OF SEPARATED SIBLINGS (PREVIOUS CALENDAR YEAR):</b>	47.4	47.1	44.7	44.7	45.6	42.4	
About 58 percent of siblings in foster care lived together in the most recent year.							
<b>RECIDIVISM RATE (%) (PREVIOUS CALENDAR YEAR):</b>	12.6	13.6	13.1	13.0	11.6	10.7	
The percentage of children returning to foster care within one year of discharge continued to decline.							
<b>PERCENTAGE OF FOSTER CHILDREN IN KINSHIP CARE:</b>	34.9	35.0	34.4	33.5	32.8	32.5	
Kinship care remains about one-third of the foster care system.							
<b>PERCENTAGE OF FOSTER PLACEMENTS IN BOROUGH OF ORIGIN:</b>	60.5	57.9	60.7	61.6	62.4	63.2	
This number includes residential care as well as foster boarding homes.							
<b>PERCENTAGE OF FOSTER PLACEMENTS IN CONTIGUOUS COMMUNITY DISTRICTS:</b>	35.4	33.5	33.5	33.3	36.8	36.0	
The number of children placed in foster homes close to home was over one-third of the system in FY16.							
<b>ADOPTION SERVICES</b>							
<b>PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN WITH ADOPTION AS A GOAL (PREVIOUS CALENDAR YEAR):</b>	31.1	30.7	32.4	31.5	29.8	29.8	
The percentage of children in care with a goal of adoption remains below one-third.							
<b>NUMBER OF FINALIZED ADOPTIONS:</b>	1,186	1,295	1,310	1,101	1,004	1,052	
The percentage of children discharged from foster care who were adopted rose to nearly a quarter in both FY15 and FY16.							
<b>AVERAGE TIME TO COMPLETE ADOPTIONS (YEARS):</b>	3.0	3.1	3.1	2.9	2.7	NA	
This is the time it takes to finalize once a child is considered appropriate for adoption.							

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