

Overcrowding and Frequent Moves Undermine Children's Health

Children need stability in their lives—whether it is in their daily routines, the adults that care for them, or their housing. Recent economic conditions are putting families at risk, not just of outright homelessness but of being housing insecure (frequent moves, overcrowding, or doubling up with another family for economic reasons).¹ While the negative impact of homelessness on children is well established, there has been much less research on this more prevalent but less apparent condition of family housing insecurity. In older children, multiple moves have been associated with poor school performance, mental health issues and behavioral concerns.^{2,3,4} The impact on infants and toddlers, however, has remained largely undocumented. Now, recent research by Children's HealthWatch shows that housing insecurity is associated with poor health outcomes in even the youngest children under age three.

> Housing Insecurity and Health

In our sample of over 22,000 low-income families with children under age three, Children's HealthWatch found that forty-one percent of the families had been doubled up with another family or crowded in the last year, while 5 percent had moved two or more times in the last 12 months. Two percent of children in our overall dataset were homeless at the time their families were interviewed.⁵

Housing Insecurity (also called "housing instability") occurs when families move frequently (two or more times in the last 12 months), are crowded (more than two people per bedroom), or double up with another family for financial reasons.

Food Insecurity occurs when families lack access to sufficient healthful food for all family members to enjoy active, healthy lives. Food insecure children are more likely to be hospitalized, have developmental delays, iron-deficiency anemia and/or be in fair or poor health.⁶

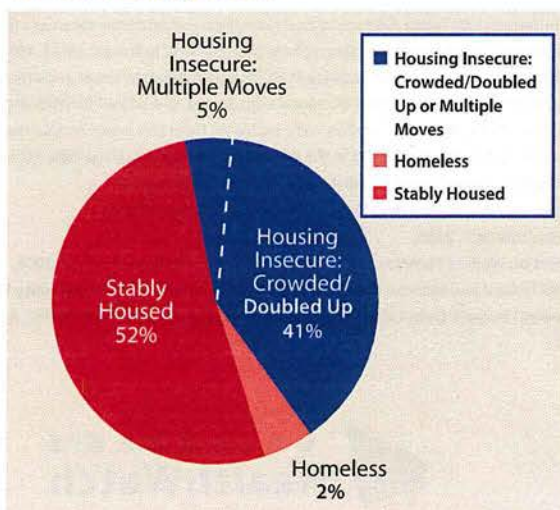
Child Food Insecurity (the most severe level of food insecurity) occurs when children experience reductions in the quality and/or quantity of meals because caregivers can no longer buffer them from inadequate household food resources.

When we compared young children making frequent moves with those in stable housing we found that young children in households that had moved two or more times in the past year were more likely to be:⁷

- food insecure
- in fair or poor health
- at risk for developmental delays
- seriously underweight

even after accounting for other possible factors, such as maternal education.

Figure 1: Nearly half of Children's HealthWatch families are housing insecure



Summary of Findings

1. Young children in families that are overcrowded or living with another family for economic reasons are more likely to be food insecure.
2. Young children who have moved two or more times in the past twelve months are not only at greater risk for food insecurity, but also have a greater likelihood of poor health and developmental delays, and are more likely to be underweight.

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Housing insecurity also appears to be closely related to families' struggle to remain food secure. We have found that young children in crowded or doubled up families were at increased risk of food insecurity. As shown in Figure 2, securely-housed families have the lowest rate of food insecurity and child food insecurity among the sample of families interviewed by Children's HealthWatch.⁷

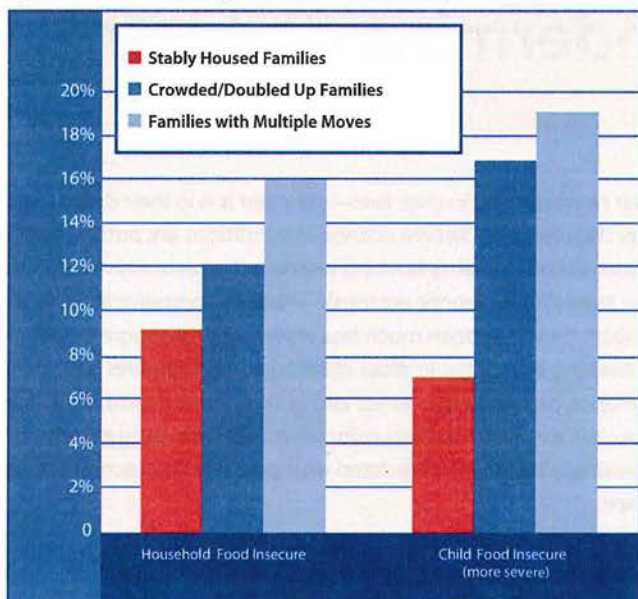
> Subsidized housing reduces housing insecurity

Subsidized housing has been shown to be effective in reducing housing insecurity and thus protecting children's health, growth, and preventing food insecurity.^{8,9} We have shown that:

- A housing subsidy, such as Section 8 or public housing, is the most effective single form of assistance for reducing housing insecurity. However, a housing subsidy in combination with WIC or SNAP (formerly food stamps) is even more effective.
- Children living in subsidized housing are less likely to be seriously underweight and more likely to be food secure and classified as "well" on a composite measure of child well-being.

Other research has shown that families receiving housing subsidies move less frequently and live in less crowded conditions than families without subsidies.¹⁰ Unfortunately, families can spend years on the wait list for a housing subsidy; only one out of four eligible U.S. households receives housing assistance due to limited public funding.¹¹ The future of these limited subsidies is uncertain, as federal funding cuts are being considered by Congress.¹²

Figure 2: Stable Housing Reduces Food Insecurity



Conclusion

The health of far too many children is compromised by the double danger of housing insecurity and food insecurity. Evidence shows a serious strategy of investment in affordable and subsidized housing would not only reduce housing insecurity and food insecurity but would improve the health and potential for school success of our nation's youngest children.

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¹ Sermons, MW, Witte, P. State of Homelessness in America. National Alliance to End Homelessness and Homelessness Research Institute. 2011

² Wood D, et al. Impact of family relocation on children's growth, development, school function and behavior. JAMA. 1993.

³ Gilman SE, et al. Socio-economic status, family disruption and residential stability in childhood: relation to onset, recurrence and remission of major depression. Psychol Med. 2003.

⁴ Simpson GA, Fowler MG. Geographic mobility and children's emotional/behavioral adjustment and school functioning. Pediatrics. 1994.

⁵ The sample for the housing insecurity analysis was 22069; homeless families were excluded from this analysis. Our overall sample size from the same period was 29856.

⁶ Cook, JT and Frank DA. Food Security, Poverty, and Human Development in the United States. Annals of the New York Acad of Sciences, 2008.

⁷ Cutts, DB et al. U.S. Housing Insecurity and the Health of Very Young Children. Am J of Pub Health. 2011.

⁸ Sandel, M, et al. Home Recipe: How Food and Housing Subsidies Affect Housing Insecurity. In preparation.

⁹ Rx for Hunger: Affordable Housing. Children's HealthWatch, 2009.

¹⁰ Abt Associates, et al. Effects of Housing Vouchers on Welfare Families. U.S. Dept of Housing and Urban Develop. 2006.

¹¹ Rice D, Sard B. Decade of neglect has weakened federal low-income housing programs. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2009.

¹² Memo to Members: The Weekly Newsletter. Federal Budget: Debt Deal Stipulates Appropriations Next Steps. NLIHC, August 5, 2011.