

Homeless Students On The Rise In Vermont



Three residents of the John Graham Homeless Shelter in Vergennes pause for a snack in the kitchen.
Credit Charlotte Albright / VPR

[A new report](#) from the federal government shows that the number of homeless children attending school in Vermont is rising sharply.

That's creating stresses in classrooms — and in families who have lost their homes. There is help available for them, both in shelters and schools, but resources are not growing as fast as the problem.

On a bone chilling afternoon, a few residents relax in the living room of an attractive frame house in Vergennes. It's comfy and warm, but it's not really their home. It's transitional housing for homeless people owned by the [John Graham Shelter](#).

Social stigma

One woman, the single mother of a 12 year old, takes methadone to fight a drug addiction. She says that carries a stigma so she asks that we not name her or her daughter. She tells her daughter she knows life has been tough for her.

"You can't tell your friends what you did this summer, you know, 'cause I went to jail and you went to the shelter. You can't have your friends come over 'cause we live in a shelter. You know, I think a lot of that comes with embarrassment, am I correct?" she says.

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Her daughter nods silently, then says most of her classmates have no idea where she lives. She's a good student, and says she will not experiment with drugs, as her mother did.

"You kind of just see — not trying to be mean or anything, what your parents have done and how it's turned out for them, and it's like, 'Wow, I don't really want to be like my mom.'"

Other parents have no addiction problems. Some have fled abusive households. Others just can't make rent. And more and more, the face of homelessness includes working parents with children who need to go to school every day. Elizabeth Ready, Director of the John Graham Shelter, says that's a priority.

"So, for example, we had a family of five. Those children didn't miss a single day."

Ready says more and more parents and children are showing up at the shelter door who have lost housing vouchers that had helped them make ends meet.

"It's exploded," she says.

Prioritizing education

Under federal law, children [defined as homeless](#) have the right to remain in the school where they started, even though the family may no longer live there.

"The district makes an arrangement for them to be transported," Ready says. "But then ultimately we work with people to get them re-housed in the town that they're from, the town where the children are in school, to the best of our ability to do that."

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Andy Snyder works for the Vermont Agency of Education. Along with many other duties, he administers the [federal funding](#) for homeless programs in schools. About 1,200 students were served in the 2011-12 school year, the most recent for which there are data. That's up a whopping 53 percent since 2009.

Snyder says too many families have been losing their homes without much warning.

“All of a sudden they're dealt a hand either by a natural disaster or by losing a job because some multinational has decided to downsize, and they're faced with things they never thought they'd be faced with before,” Snyder says.

Elusive numbers, elusive students

Snyder says statistics vastly underreport the problem. Homeless kids are hard to identify and count in a state where cold weather keeps them off the streets, and therefore out of sight.

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Each school district must have a liaison to that transient population. Snyder says those staffers personally reach out to students who need extra food, clothing and counseling.

“[These folks](#) are right there and it's fairly amazing,” Snyder says. “And sometimes, in order to track the student down, it's not just in their own town or district – they're going pretty far out of district and finding that a family is simply looking for shelter and where can that child be and what can they do to make sure that child's access to education continues?”

Vying for federal funding

Statewide, about 50 percent of homeless kids are proficient in math and reading. But how much help a homeless student gets depends very much on where he or she lives. Until recently, competitive federal grants to support extra assistance, such as liaison time, food, transportation, clothing, counseling and tutoring have gone to only four school districts. Last year the grantees were Winooski, Burlington, Rutland, Ludlow, and Hartford – places where there are already social services and shelters.

In Hartford, the White River Elementary School serves free breakfast and lunch to 23 homeless kids, about 12 percent of those enrolled. Principal Sheila Powers says the Upper Valley Haven, a nearby shelter, has a long waiting list, so some homeless families are living in motels at state expense. Some have jobs, other don't.

“There are issues around addiction. I am thinking of several of our families who have a parent who is incarcerated,” Powers says.

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Starting next year, schools will be able to tap a bigger pool of federal poverty funds for that transportation expense, and grants to help homeless kids will be available to all districts who apply.

But that will mean cutting an already small pie into even smaller pieces to help a rising population of students who bring their homework to places that may not feel much like home.