

Strategies to end family homelessness: Integrating research and policy for sustainable solutions

Housing and Child Welfare Policy Brief

INTRODUCTION

The National Research Agenda for a 21st Century Child and Family Well-Being System emphasizes the need for comprehensive, equity-driven strategies to address systemic challenges affecting children and families. Central to this effort is the alignment of research, policy, and practice to create effective, sustainable solutions. Applying this perspective to family homelessness means developing policies and interventions that address root causes, support resilience, and improve overall well-being.

Family homelessness is a pressing issue in the United States, affecting thousands of parents and children each year. **On a single night in January 2022, more than 131,000 people in families with children experienced homelessness**, underscoring the depth and urgency of this crisis. This brief, developed based on insights from the panel discussion, ***Families in Crisis: Research and Policy Solutions for Ending Family Homelessness***, outlines actionable policy recommendations. These strategies highlight the critical importance of expanding affordable housing, integrating supportive services, and fostering cross-sector collaboration. They are informed by current research, evidence-based practices, and successful housing models that address the underlying factors contributing to family homelessness.



THE URGENCY OF FAMILY HOMELESSNESS

Family homelessness remains an often-overlooked crisis in the United States. Unhoused families, often young mothers and their children, must navigate stressful shelter conditions and chronic uncertainty that can erode family cohesion. Over time, this instability contributes to adverse health, educational, and emotional outcomes for parents and children alike. Research consistently identifies the severe shortage of affordable housing as a primary driver, alongside systemic inequities that disproportionately affect communities of color, single-mother households, and low-income families.



Addressing family homelessness requires targeted interventions that consider the unique needs of families, including policies to support mothers and young children facing instability.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

• Expand access to affordable housing

Affordable housing is foundational to addressing family homelessness. Increasing the availability of affordable units through federal and state investments is critical, with a goal to address the shortage of affordable rental homes for extremely low-income households in the United States, as identified by the National Low Income Housing Coalition's report, *The Gap: A Shortage of Affordable Homes*. Public-private partnerships and utilizing existing housing infrastructure can expedite this process. Research also emphasizes that housing affordability is a key factor in mitigating family homelessness.

• Integrate supportive services with housing

Stable housing alone is insufficient when families face complex challenges, including mental health issues, substance use disorders, and employment barriers. Adopting a **Housing First** approach provides permanent housing as an immediate, unconditional step, accompanied by tailored supportive services such as counseling, job

training, and healthcare. **This evidence-based model** helps families achieve long-term stability and self-sufficiency.

• Enhance cross-sector collaboration

Addressing family homelessness comprehensively requires a wide range of stakeholders working together toward common goals. Housing authorities, social service agencies, healthcare providers, educational institutions, workforce development programs, and community-based organizations each contribute essential expertise and resources. Strengthening communication channels, establishing shared data systems, and developing clear, coordinated strategies can ensure that families receive timely, seamless support.

CONCLUSION

Addressing family homelessness requires a multi-pronged strategy that unites research, policy, and practice. By expanding affordable housing, integrating supportive services, and strengthening cross-sector collaboration, policymakers can reduce family homelessness and improve child and family well-being. Drawing on evidence-based models and real-world successes, these recommendations chart a path toward sustainable, equity-driven solutions.

Note: This brief was developed based on the insights shared during the panel discussion, *Families in Crisis: Research and Policy Solutions for Ending Family Homelessness*, featuring Dr. Ben Henwood, Professor at the Dworak-Peck University of Southern California School of Social Work; Samantha Batko, Senior Fellow at the Urban Institute’s Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center; Rhonda Jackson, Community Engagement Consultant and Senior Fellow with the Family Homelessness Coalition; and moderated by Mary McKay, Executive Vice Provost at Washington University in St. Louis. This webinar was sponsored by the **American Academy for Social Work and Social Welfare** with support from the **Annie E. Casey Foundation, Casey Family Programs, Clark-Fox Policy Institute, Congressional Research Institute for Social Work and Policy,** and the **William T. Grant Foundation.**

The Clark-Fox Policy Institute

The **Clark-Fox Policy Institute** is dedicated to child well-being through the development and dissemination of evidence-informed policy. Building on the foundation of scientific research, the institute layers empirical data with the lived experience of the impacted population. Science alone cannot drive the policymaking process, and the institute is committed to working with communities whose voices are often left unheard. To achieve this, the institute serves as a regional convener and a catalyst for addressing pressing social issues.

Suggested citation: Parker, G. and Andersen, S. (2025). *Strategies to end family homelessness: Integrating research and policy for sustainable solutions. A housing and child welfare policy brief.* St. Louis, MO: The Clark-Fox Policy Institute, Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis.

Contact info:

Clark-Fox Policy Institute
Gary Parker, PhD, Director
Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis
1 Brookings Drive, MSC 1196-251-46
St. Louis, MO 63130
314-935-8807
gary.parker@wustl.edu

clarkfoxpolicyinstitute.wustl.edu



BROWN SCHOOL AT WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY