

A close-up photograph of a woman with dark hair wearing a blue bucket hat, holding a young child with curly hair who is sleeping peacefully. The woman is looking down at the child with a gentle expression. The background is blurred, suggesting an outdoor setting.

win

# THE FORGOTTEN FACE OF HOMELESSNESS

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OCTOBER 20, 2016

# WORDS FROM OUR CEO/PRESIDENT

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As our city's homelessness crisis reaches epidemic proportions, consensus on how to stanch the flow of New Yorkers into the shelter system has remained elusive. Local opposition to the construction of new shelter facilities, combined with a persistent lack of affordable housing, has put unprecedented pressure on the resources we've set aside for our most vulnerable neighbors. As of this writing, 59,999 New Yorkers are experiencing homelessness.

The persistence of this problem never feels quite right in New York, a city whose compassion, togetherness, and commitment to social justice has prevailed no matter the crisis. Here at Win, we believe that incongruence comes from an incomplete understanding of just who those 59,999 New Yorkers are. Many of the policies currently in place to combat homelessness are designed to support single adults. Not coincidentally, that's the same population most commonly associated with homelessness in popular media. And while those individuals deserve all the help our city can provide them, we won't get far by serving them alone.

It's time to recognize the forgotten face of homelessness in New York City: families with children. They comprise 70% of the shelter population, and their numbers continue to swell. Twenty percent of homeless New Yorkers are under the age of five. Tackling the homelessness crisis in our city begins by remembering whom it really affects: our coworkers, neighbors, and children's classmates.

In the pages that follow, you'll find a set of forward-thinking policy proposals that: change the focus of intervention to the whole family, not just the parent; enhance our city's processes for addressing homelessness by developing a multiyear plan for construction of the necessary number of units and building the political will to get it done; prioritize long-term stability over moving homeless families out of shelter quickly, before they're ready to move; and provide support to meet the long-term needs of homeless families once they leave shelter.

By zeroing in on the most deeply affected and vulnerable populations in our city, we can design policies that break the cycle of homelessness once and for all. In a city as big-hearted as New York, we should hold ourselves to no lower standard.

Sincerely,



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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*On a given night, more than **23,600** children go to bed in a New York City homeless shelter. Approximately **70%** of homeless New Yorkers in the city's shelters are families with children. Despite these staggering numbers, most New Yorkers are not explicitly confronted with child and family homelessness. The more visible plight of single, homeless adults, and the media's focus on them, has skewed policy making and the narrative around this crisis, causing families with children to become the forgotten face of homelessness.*

The number of families with children in shelter has grown stubbornly under the traditional approach to homelessness. At its core, the current homeless services system carries the vestiges of an era that confronted homelessness as an issue of single adults in need of shelter while they quickly made other living arrangements. Although shelter is the necessary first step, a system born from this approach is not equipped to respond to the complex, underlying issues that cause and accompany homelessness, or to the increase in need. It focuses on numbers and not need, only perpetuating the cycle of homelessness. Neither does it fully respond to the uniqueness of families

made up of individuals that include children.

Homeless families are contending with two major economic forces that have been at play for years: wage stagnation and New York City's escalating affordable housing emergency. The average homeless family in a Win shelter is made up of a mom in her 30s and two children. Approximately 51% of moms in a Win shelter are employed and 91% have a history of employment. Real **wages have decreased** by an estimated 4.5% in low-wage industries in New York City,<sup>1</sup> including in occupations commonly held by Win moms, such as home

<sup>1</sup> New York City Independent Budget Office. (2016). *Analysis of the Mayor's Preliminary Budget for 2017*. IBO's Re-estimate of the Mayor's Preliminary Budget for 2014 and Financial Plan through 2020. New York, NY: Belkin, D. et. al. Retrieved: <http://www.ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/analysis-of-the-mayors-2017-preliminary-budget-and-financial-plan-through-2020.pdf>.



At its core, the current homeless services system carries the vestiges of an era that confronted homelessness as an issue of single adults in need of shelter while they quickly made other living arrangements.

health aide, fast food preparation, and retail cashiers. Full-time employment in these occupations leaves a family of three in New York City in the extremely low-income band. Win families are in the lowest defined income band, and the most common reason reported for becoming homeless is eviction.

Low-wage employment, even when combined with public benefits, is not enough to support a family of three in part because of the high cost of housing in New York City. New York City is in the midst of an escalating **affordable housing emergency**. Median rent increased in the City by 12% in real terms from 2007 to 2013,<sup>2</sup> while wages of low-income workers decreased in real terms by an estimated 4.5%.<sup>3</sup> The National Low Income Housing Coalition estimates that there are only 33 affordable apartments per 100 extremely low-income renters in the New York City Metropolitan Area in 2016.<sup>4</sup> Lacking affordable options, 80% of extremely low-income families carry a severe housing cost burden in New York City,<sup>5</sup> paying at least half of their income to rent. This severe housing cost burden exacerbates hardship for

families already struggling to make ends meet. These unsustainable conditions lead to precarious housing situations and homelessness.

For many homeless families, economic conditions are compounded by mental and behavioral health challenges that arise from **accumulated adverse life experiences of trauma**. For many homeless families, adverse life experiences include traumatic exposure to violence and victimization, system involvement, and severe economic hardship. Domestic violence is one of the most prevalent traumas among homeless families. An average of 803 families stayed each night in New York City's emergency domestic violence shelters in 2016<sup>i</sup> and a quarter of all families in New York City's homeless shelter system, or over 3,670 families in shelter each day, reported domestic violence to be the direct cause of their homelessness.<sup>ii</sup> Moreover, seminal research on risk factors for homelessness found that homeless mothers were much more likely than housed, low-income mothers to have experienced violence and abuse as children, as well as traumatic childhood

2 NYU Furman Center. (2014). *State on New York City's Housing and Neighborhoods in 2014*. New York, NY: Capperis, Sean, et. al. Retrieved: [http://furmancenter.org/files/sotc/NYUFurmanCenter\\_SOC2014\\_HighRes.pdf](http://furmancenter.org/files/sotc/NYUFurmanCenter_SOC2014_HighRes.pdf).

3 Please refer to footnote 2.

4 National Low Income Housing Coalition. (2016). *The Gap: The Affordable Housing Gap Analysis 2016*. Washington, D.C.: Aurand, Andrew, et. al. Retrieved : [http://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/Gap-Report\\_print.pdf](http://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/Gap-Report_print.pdf).

5 *Ibid.*


6 Win internal database.

involvement in systems such as foster care and homeless shelter.<sup>6</sup> For many, the cycle of homelessness begins in childhood.

To successfully address the situation and break the cycle of homelessness for families and children in our city, we need a fundamental shift in how we think about homelessness.

quality Tier II shelter; reduce excessive barriers to grant more families access to subsidized and supportive housing; and use data to inform service provision and after care to better support the transition from shelter once a family is ready to maintain housing stability.

If New York City is going to truly solve



**3,670** families in shelter each day reported domestic violence to be the direct cause of their homelessness.

Win has proposed a series of forward thinking policies designed to: shift the focus of intervention to the whole family, not just the parent; determining what number of shelter units are needed and pro-actively identify locations for adequate, high-

the homelessness crisis, we must focus on the forgotten face of homelessness, as a means of breaking the cycle and building the necessary community and political will to support policies that will help provide long-term, stable housing.

i The City of New York. (September 2016). Mayor's Management Report Fiscal 2016, Human Resources Administration, 171-181  
ii Navarri, Mireya. (2014, November 10). Domestic Violence Drives Up New York Shelter Population as Housing Options are Scarce. *The New York Times*.

*New York City has made important efforts to combat the growth in homelessness, including expanding proven strategies such as housing subsidies and preventive services.*

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#### HOMELESS FAMILIES IN NYC



Despite these efforts, more than 23,600 children went to bed in a New York City homeless shelter on a given night in September of 2016.<sup>1</sup> The number of families with children arriving at the doors and staying in a New York City homeless shelter increased in 2016, continuing the upward trend that has taken shape over the past five years.<sup>2</sup>

On average, approximately 70% of homeless New Yorkers in the city's shelters are families with children. Over 99% of homeless families with children are sheltered in New York,<sup>3</sup> in contrast to single homeless adults, of whom


an estimated 2,800 are chronically homeless and living on New York City streets on a winter night.<sup>4</sup> Though the majority of homeless people are families with children, New Yorkers are not explicitly confronted with child and family homelessness. The more visible plight of homeless adults and the media's focus on them has skewed the narrative, causing families with children to become the forgotten face of homelessness.

New York City cannot forget the face of homeless families with children if we are to effectively respond to the current crisis and mitigate future

homelessness. Forgetting homeless families risks neglecting the majority of the homeless population and perpetuating the cycle of homelessness across future generations. In contrast, recognizing the complex needs and unique circumstances of homeless families catalyzes action and solutions.

On a given night, approximately 10% of New York City's homeless families with children go to bed in a Win shelter. As the largest provider of shelter and services for homeless families with children in New York City, Win served

administered by the NYC Department of Homeless Services (DHS) and used by city agencies and homeless service providers. To protect client privacy and confidentiality, access is limited and service providers can only access information on the clients they serve. To ensure that CARES data on Win families is current and accurate, Win verifies key information with clients during intake and ongoing case management. For service and program performance management purposes, Win gathers additional information regarding income, employment, and education of



The more visible plight of homeless adults  
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nearly 2,900 families with children last year. Founded in 1983 as Women In Need to provide shelter for four homeless women and their six children, Win has grown and evolved in response to the ballooning need to serve homeless families. Across ten family shelters in four boroughs, Win provides families with the safe housing, critical services, and groundbreaking programs they need to succeed on their own.

The data in the following pages on Win families are from 2015 and 2016 and are drawn primarily from CARES, New York City's homeless management information system. CARES is a computerized case management system and database

families participating in Win's Income Building Program services. These data are housed in the Win IMPACT Network, Win's comprehensive intranet data warehouse and metrics system. The Win IMPACT Network tracks and reports client outcomes and organizational performance. Data presented on this sample are indicated as such.

Each night, Win provides shelter to approximately ten percent of New York City's homeless families. As such, the data presented about Win families can serve as a glimpse into the forgotten face of homelessness and is representative of the realities of homeless families.



# THE THE FORGOTTEN FACE OF HOMELESSNESS

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*The average family in a Win homeless shelter is made up of a mother in her 30s and two children. Approximately **92%** of Win families are headed by women. Approximately **51%** of Win moms are employed and in the lowest defined income band.<sup>5</sup> Win families are extremely low-income at a time in U.S. history of persistently high income and wealth inequality between men and women,<sup>6</sup> as well as between those at the top and those at the bottom of the income scale.<sup>7</sup> The most common reason Win families report for becoming homeless is eviction.*

Unlike the conspicuously homeless individuals New Yorkers encounter on the street, the average family who is homeless likely passes unrecognized. Whether it is a homeless mother on the elevator at work, a homeless child in a classroom, or a homeless mother and infant riding the subway, they are often indistinguishable from other New Yorkers. Yet the majority of homeless New Yorkers are these families. They are the forgotten face of homelessness. The key to making progress toward ending homelessness lies in realigning attention and resources to support families as they work toward a brighter future in stable housing.

Win families are contending with a

combination of various socioeconomic factors that create and perpetuate homelessness. Despite an increase in employment, homeless families remain in the extremely low-income band, where New York City's affordable housing emergency is felt most acutely. Accessing an appropriate, affordable apartment is nearly impossible for most extremely low-income families, further exacerbating economic hardship and leading to housing instability. Homeless families must overcome two major economic forces that have been at play for years: wage stagnation for workers near the bottom of the pay scale and New York City's escalating affordable housing emergency.



# THE AVERAGE HOMELESS PERSON IN WIN

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**92%** are women

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**51%** are employed

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These economic challenges are compounded by behavioral health challenges for many homeless families. Behavioral challenges arise from accumulated adverse life experiences, and/or from mental illness or substance use disorders. For many, adverse life experiences include traumatic exposure to violence and victimization, system involvement, and long-term, severe economic hardship. Families who have experienced prolonged or repeated exposure to these traumas often manifest crisis and other trauma

responses that can interfere with a person's ability to manage day-to-day tasks and responsibilities central to maintaining stable housing.

# ECONOMIC FORCES AT PLAY

## INCOME

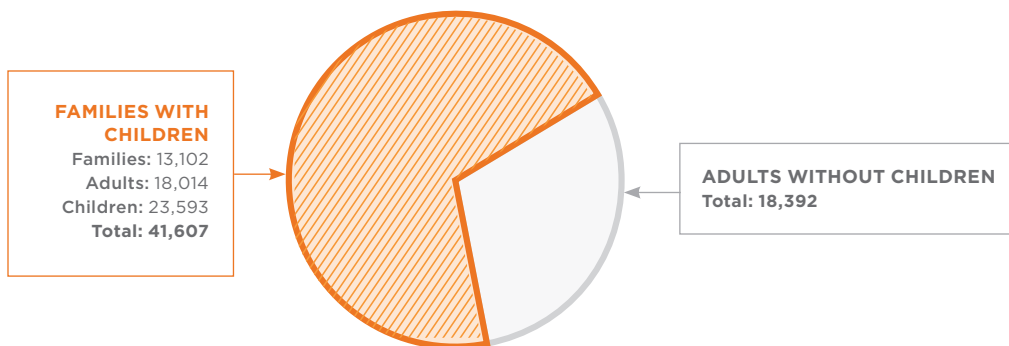
At any given moment, approximately **51%** of work-eligible moms in Win homeless shelters are employed, and **91%** have a history of employment. This represents a substantial increase over the previous five years. In 2011, **30.9%** of homeless parents in New York City were employed.<sup>8</sup>

## HOMELESS NEW YORKERS IN SHELTER

10/13/2016

### TOTAL

Adults: 36,406  
Children: 23,593  
Total: 59,999



Source: NYC Open Data. Dataset: DHS Daily Report. Available from: <https://nycopendata.socrata.com>. Data collected on 10/13/2016.

This increase reflects record-setting job growth in New York City, where well over 100,000 jobs were added each year in 2014 and 2015.<sup>9</sup> Typically, Win mothers work or hold a certification in industries that have seen substantial growth.<sup>10</sup> However, seven out of ten occupations experiencing growth in New York

City are low-wage and in industries where real wages have decreased by an estimated 4.5%.<sup>11</sup> Among the 91% of Win mothers who reported work experience, most worked in low-wage industries: retail (approximately 30%), food service (24%), cleaning/maintenance (24%), and clerical/computer (20%). In addition to work

TABLE 1.

**Median Annual Wages for Most Common Occupations held by Win Mothers**

INDUSTRY	OCCUPATIONAL TITLE	ANNUAL WAGE <sup>a</sup>	INCOME BAND <sup>b</sup>
Retail	Cashiers	\$22,000	Extremely Low Income
	Salesperson	\$27,150	Very Low Income
Food Services & Drinking Places	Combined food preparation & serving workers, incl. fast food	\$18,788	Extremely Low Income
Administrative & Support Services	Janitors & Cleaners	\$39,541	Low Income
	Office Clerks, General	\$26,946	Very Low Income
	Security Guards	\$27,368	Very Low Income
Ambulatory Health Care Services	Home Health Aide	\$20,490	Extremely low income

a. Source: NYS Department of Labor (2015) Significant Industries for NYC.

b. Source: Mayor’s Management Report. Definitions of Income Bands for a family of three in NYC: extremely low income is 0–30% of area median income (AMI) (\$23,300 or less), very low income is 31–50% of AMI (\$23,301–\$38,850); and, low income is 51–80% of AMI (\$38,851–\$62,150).

experience, approximately 60% of Win clients reported vocational training, most commonly Home Health Aide Certification (21%) and New York State Security Guard Licensing (15%). Because increase in employment has not resulted in increased income, the number of families experiencing homelessness in New York City has not decreased.

The average wage and corresponding income band for a family of three for each reported industry of employment

by Win moms is presented in Table 1.

Homeless moms are among the most severely impacted by wage stagnation. Not only are American households at the 10th percentile still poorer in real terms than they were in 1989,<sup>12</sup> real hourly wages have declined most sharply in the U.S. for women without a college degree.<sup>13</sup> Among Win moms, a high school diploma was the highest level of education completed by approximately 36.5%, and 49.3% had less than a high school diploma.



As extremely low-income working households, over **80%** of Win mothers would carry a severe housing cost burden.

## EDUCATION LEVEL AMONG WIN MOMS




Approximately 14% of Win mothers had more than a high school diploma. Nowhere is this loss of earning power felt more sharply than in New York City, where 55% of all adult residents have more than a high school diploma<sup>14</sup> and the earning and spending power corresponding with postsecondary education. In a city where wages of low-income workers have stagnated and the cost of living is driven by a relatively educated population, nearly 86% of Win mothers are raising a family with a high school diploma or less.

In addition to educational attainment, the potential earnings and job advancement of homeless moms may be limited by demands distinctive of low-wage occupations. Occupations typically held by homeless mothers are

characterized by unpredictable hours and rigid scheduling practices<sup>15</sup> that are often challenging to balance with parenting, especially single parents. These practices do not allow moms to plan for children's schooling, child care, or a second job, or to budget in advance. Additionally, unpredictable hours may make it difficult to fulfill work requirements tied to housing subsidies or other government benefits, limiting already scarce options available to families as they work to move out of homelessness.

Research has posited that work-parenting conflicts created by changing shifts from week to week or changing hours with little or no notice may contribute to both voluntary and involuntary employee turnover.<sup>16</sup> Being unable to sustain

... nearly **86%** of Win mothers are raising a family with a high school diploma or less.



Win families fall well below the threshold of extremely low income, defined as earning **30%** or less of the area median income, which is **\$24,500** for a family of three in New York City.

work-family scheduling conflicts can lead to frequent job changes and periods of unemployment, making it extremely difficult to gain the seniority and experience needed to qualify for jobs offering higher pay or more appropriate scheduling. Single moms struggling to make ends meet and juggle conflicting demands may find themselves stuck in one low-wage job after another.

In this earning climate, low-income families rely on public benefits and assistance programs to help make ends meet. Among homeless families in Win shelter, the most commonly relied on benefits are: the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, often referred to as food stamps (93.1%); Medicaid (82.4%); and public (cash) assistance (PA) (68.5%). On average, a family in a Win shelter who receives public benefits receives about \$829 per month. These programs may not

always fill the gap left by low-wage employment and the basic cost of living in New York City.

The average monthly income of a Win family is approximately \$1,300, or about \$15,600 a year, inclusive of employment, wages, and public benefits. Despite employment and public benefits, Win families fall well below the threshold of extremely low income, defined as earning 30% or less of the area median income, which is \$24,500 for a family of three in New York City.

# HOUSING AFFORDABILITY IN NYC

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*The high cost of housing in New York City is one of the major reasons that low-wage jobs and public benefits are not enough to meet the needs of a family of three. In New York City, median rent increased by **14.7%** in real terms between 2005 and 2014,<sup>17</sup> while median income barely grew and real wages of low-income workers decreased by as much as **4.5%**.<sup>18</sup> The increasingly acute affordability gap that has squeezed large segments of New York City has been felt most acutely by low and extremely low-income families. Historically affordable neighborhoods experienced an astonishing erosion of affordability with an average rent increase of **30.4%** from 2000 to 2010–2014,<sup>19</sup> and advocates estimate that only 33 affordable apartments are available per 100 extremely low-income renters in the New York City Metropolitan Area in 2016.<sup>20</sup>*

Only 5% of rental units that became available during a 12-month period were affordable to a low-income family.<sup>21</sup> The New York City area must add an estimated 609,731 apartments in order for there to be enough affordable housing for extremely low-income families.<sup>22</sup> In this housing market context, the majority of extremely low-income families find it nearly impossible to secure or maintain an adequate and affordable apartment. As housing options for extremely low-income families have dwindled, many

are left with two common precursors to homelessness: living in an apartment with an unsustainably high housing cost burden or living in an apartment that is untenably crowded.


As part of extremely low-income working households, over 80% of Win mothers would carry a severe housing cost burden, meaning that they would pay at least half of their income to rent. The implications of this level of burden are severe. In the U.S., severely cost-burdened,<sup>23</sup> extremely low-income

families spend 55% less on healthcare and 38% less on food than extremely low-income families living in affordable housing.<sup>24</sup> While facing these impossibly difficult trade-offs, families live at the precarious edge of their finances, vulnerable to destabilizing events such as an unexpected illness or reduction in work hours. In this context, it is not surprising that eviction is the most frequent reported reason for homelessness.

The prevalence of residential crowding and severe crowding — defined as housing units with more than one person and more than 1.5 persons per room, respectively — is linked to

households were extremely low income, and more than four out of five crowded households included a child.<sup>26</sup>

Living with a severe housing cost burden or in severe crowding is unsustainable and destabilizing, especially for children. Many Win families have experienced firsthand the documented link between crowding and homelessness.<sup>27</sup> Overcrowding was one of the top three reasons families entering Win shelter became homeless last year and approximately 57% of Win families had been living doubled-up with friends or family before becoming homeless. Combined, eviction and overcrowding account for the reason



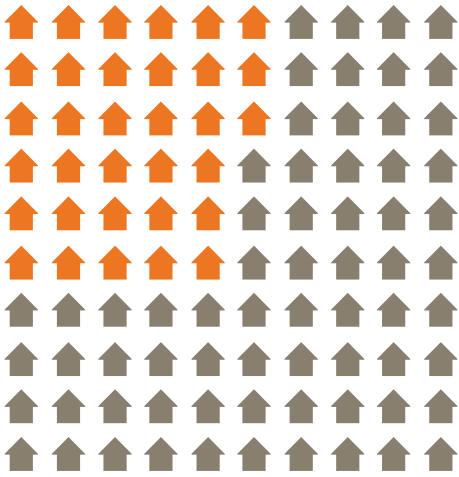
In New York City, median rent increased by **14.7%** in real terms between 2005 and 2014,<sup>17</sup> while median income barely grew and real wages of low-income workers decreased by as much as **4.5%**.<sup>18</sup>

existing conditions in New York City's rental housing market: the severe shortage of affordable housing and the high number of rent-burdened households. Overall crowding has increased by nearly 13% in New York City over the last decade, and severe crowding has increased by an astonishing 45%.<sup>25</sup> Although households of all incomes and compositions experience crowding in New York City, extremely low-income households that included at least one child (under age 18) accounted for a disproportionate number of crowded homes. Nearly 24% of crowded

nearly 47% of Win families became homeless last year.

The extraordinary economic and housing challenges faced by extremely low-income families in New York City are evident in the experience of homeless families working to secure permanent housing that is adequate, affordable, and available. Last year, Win helped over 800 families leave shelter for permanent housing. Approximately 55.6% were able to leave shelter with the help of a rental subsidy, a critical tool for compensating for stagnant wages and insufficient income. The





...advocates estimate that only **33** affordable apartments are available per **100** extremely low-income renters in the New York City Metropolitan Area in 2016.<sup>20</sup>

remainder of families who left Win shelter for permanent housing left to the home of a friend or family member (28.5%), or to a self-paid apartment in the rental market (15.9%).

Win data align with national research findings that subsidies are the most effective strategy for promoting housing stability.

Among families who returned to shelter after leaving a Win shelter for permanent housing in 2015, only 7% had achieved housing through a subsidy.

The majority of families who returned to shelter had left shelter for the home of a friend or family member (approximately 57% of families who returned to shelter), and nearly 36% of those who returned had left for a self-paid rental apartment. This suggests that without continued support, families again become vulnerable to the destabilizing effects of New York City's high housing cost burden and overcrowding.

... crowding has increased by nearly **13%** in New York City over the last decade, and severe crowding has increased by an astonishing **45%**.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the success of the nearly 450 families who left Win shelter with the help of a rental subsidy in 2016, it is estimated that over 3,000 New York City families continue to live in shelter despite having rent vouchers. This is largely attributable to a dire lack of availability of affordable apartments, even at the subsidized rate.

Economic factors play a significant role in causing homelessness, but are not the sole factors at play. Among the top four reasons reported by families entering Win shelter, domestic violence or household discord were

the direct causes of homelessness for approximately 40% of families entering Win shelter in 2016. Homeless families with children frequently need safety and support to heal from the debilitating and life-changing effects of trauma.

# TRAUMA & MENTAL HEALTH

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*Trauma is recognized to be experiences or situations that are distressing and overwhelm people's ability to cope, leaving a sense of powerlessness. The effects of trauma are insidious and can result in behavioral and mental health issues. Examples of trauma include exposure to violence, involvement in systems such as criminal justice and child welfare, and insecurity related to unmet basic needs. Homeless families disproportionately present histories of trauma.*

Domestic violence is one of the most prevalent traumas among homeless families. An average of 803 families stayed each night in New York City's emergency domestic violence shelters in 2016<sup>28</sup> and a quarter of all families in New York City's homeless shelter system, or over 3,670 families in shelter each day, reported domestic violence to be the direct cause of their homelessness.<sup>29</sup> In a city where nearly 8,000 reported felony assaults and 526 reported rapes were domestic violence related in 2016,<sup>30</sup> advocates for survivors believe that the prevalence of domestic violence, especially among families with limited resources, is not fully reported and its link to family homelessness not fully recognized. Advocates estimate that one-third of families in a New York City shelter are homeless as a result of domestic

violence.<sup>31</sup> National data supports the position of advocates, which estimates that nearly two-thirds of homeless mothers have been severely physically assaulted by an intimate partner<sup>32</sup> and that 80% have experienced domestic violence as adults.<sup>33</sup>

For many homeless moms, exposure to trauma began before adulthood. Seminal research on risk factors for homelessness found that homeless mothers were much more likely than housed, low-income mothers to have experienced trauma as children, including violence and childhood abuse.<sup>34</sup> Homeless mothers were also more likely to have experienced childhood involvement in systems such as foster care.<sup>35</sup> Among mothers in Win shelter, about 19.3% had been in a homeless shelter as children. Overall,

there is consensus in the existing body of research that homeless mothers had more and more severe adverse childhood experiences than their housed peers. The cycle of homelessness often begins with childhood trauma.

The over 42,000 children who stayed in a New York City homeless shelter last year<sup>36</sup> are themselves contending with adverse childhood experiences that amount to a history of trauma that has been linked to adult homelessness.

Homeless children have more commonly been exposed to interpersonal or community violence.<sup>37</sup> Each of the more than 6,000 children who stayed in a Win shelter last year experienced the adversity of economic hardship and insecurity

in relation to basic needs. They also experienced the sense of powerlessness and crisis that often accompanies involvement in systems such as homeless services and child welfare. Homeless children are also more likely to be exposed to household mental illness and substance abuse because homeless mothers suffer from mental health issues at three times the rate of the general female population and are more than twice as likely to abuse drugs.<sup>38</sup>


Homelessness is itself a severely adverse experience, especially during childhood, the most malleable phase of human development and the time during which much of the foundation for lifelong functioning is laid. For children, the loss of home often disrupts relationships, routines, and spaces that provide the sense of safety, comfort, nurturing, and continuity needed to grow and learn. For the 10% of families with children who left a New York City homeless shelter to return a year or less later,<sup>39</sup> repeated loss

and disruption can erode the protective factors children need not only for healthy development, but also to develop resilience as a response to adversity.

Strong, frequent, and/or prolonged adverse childhood

experiences amount to trauma. Trauma can have significant consequences throughout childhood and into adulthood. Trauma can disrupt healthy development, interfere with education outcomes, and cause mental and behavioral health issues.

In Win shelter alone, nearly 1,500 children under the age of five — a critical period for brain development — were homeless last year. Trauma can disrupt healthy brain development<sup>40</sup>



... **3,670** families in shelter each day, reported domestic violence to be the direct cause of their homelessness.<sup>29</sup>

and contribute to behavioral and mental health issues in children. A major national study found that 54% of homeless preschoolers had at least one major delay in language, motor skill, and/or social development, compared to 16% of their housed peers.<sup>41</sup> Clinical research has found that children who are homeless exhibit behavioral problems, such as withdrawal and aggression, at three times the rate of children in stable housing.<sup>42</sup>

The impact of homelessness and other trauma can also be toxic for school-aged children and can severely impair academic achievement. New York City public school students living in a homeless shelter were absent an average of 18 days more than other students,<sup>43</sup> meaning they missed almost an entire month more of school. Homeless students in grades three through eight score significantly lower on state tests measuring proficiency in reading, writing, and math. For example, only 10% of students in homeless shelter scored at the

proficient level in English Language Arts in 2014, compared to 30% of housed students. Homeless students also exhibit more behavior problems and are suspended at more than double the rate of housed students.<sup>44</sup> For many homeless youth, the adverse childhood experiences and trauma that are risk factors for homelessness are compounded by poor academic

outcomes. Without postsecondary educational prospects or strong educational and vocational alternatives, the economic factors of low wage employment and lack of affordable housing that played a role in their childhood can repeat itself in their adulthood.

National data supports ... estimates that nearly two-thirds of homeless mothers have been severely physically assaulted by an intimate partner and that 80% have experienced domestic violence as adults.

Homeless children and youth risk being caught in the cycle that perpetuates homelessness and other trauma across generations. Early on, homeless children and youth begin to accumulate the adverse experiences and trauma that are risk factors for adult homelessness. Without strong protective factors, trauma can have

important, lifelong consequences for learning, behavior, health, and adult functioning.<sup>45</sup> Trauma can increase the likelihood of adult mental health issues, substance abuse, and intimate partner violence.<sup>46</sup>

Luckily, risk is not certainty. The time families with children spend in

shelter can be used to address the economic, safety, and mental health factors that are at play in the cycle of homelessness. In order to make effective use of the time families spend with service providers, New York City must invest in what works to end the cycle of homelessness.



# SOLVING FAMILY HOMELESSNESS

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*The number of families with children in shelter has grown stubbornly under the traditional approach to homelessness. **At its core, the current homeless services system carries the vestiges of an era that confronted homelessness as an issue of single adults in need of shelter while they quickly made other living arrangements.** Although shelter is the necessary first step, a system born from this approach is not equipped to respond to the complex, underlying issues that cause and accompany homelessness, or to the increase in need. Neither does it fully respond to the uniqueness of families with children.*

New York City has made strides to revise homeless services to reflect what has been learned about the needs of families and effectiveness of strategies and interventions, but a deeper, expedited shift must be made. The core services traditionally available to homeless families with children in shelter — case management, child care, and housing guidance and coaching — focus on a family's present circumstances and are aimed at moving families quickly out of shelter. However, this approach does

not break the cycle of homelessness for all families, as evidenced by the fact that in 2016, almost 10% of all families who left shelter for permanent housing returned to shelter within one year.<sup>47</sup> **In order to break the cycle of homelessness, policy solutions are needed to create a system shift that focuses on long-term stability** by approaching families holistically, and exercising leadership, accountability, and collaboration for building housing solutions for extremely low-income families.

## Solve Homelessness by Embracing Whole Family Needs

Breaking the cycle of homelessness requires comprehensive services and a holistic approach to families. The current system limitation of providing services directly related to housing and targeted to housing relegates the needs of children and youth to secondary importance. It also fails to recognize the role of trauma and of economic disenfranchisement in homelessness.

Given research findings on the disruption homelessness can cause in the development, schooling, and socio-emotional and behavioral health of children and youth, a homeless services system that seeks to break the cycle of homelessness must provide comprehensive services for children and youth. Effective services for children and youth begin with holistic assessments that include developmental screenings and evaluation of academic, socio-emotional, and behavioral well-being. Clinicians and practitioners specialized in fostering healthy early childhood development, working with children experiencing mental and/or behavioral health issues, and in engaging youth in therapeutic recreational activities must be an active, on-site component of serving homeless families.

In addition to health and socio-emotional needs, direct educational supports are needed to ensure that students in shelter make academic progress. Expanded educational services at homeless shelters, such as tutoring, credit recovery, and college preparation, can mitigate the risk homelessness poses for the

educational attainment of children and youth. Additionally, providing academically enriched recreational activities at shelters during weekends and school breaks is an effective strategy for increasing school engagement and promoting healthy overall youth development.

Services that promote attachment to college or to the workforce are central to the future well-being of homeless youth who are facing the transition into adulthood from a shelter. Mentoring opportunities and training and apprenticeship programs that provide a pathway to a career can provide youth with needed support. Without educational and vocational supports, the current generation of homeless children may be the future generation of adults struggling to make ends meet.

For families with complex needs, permanent supportive housing, which combines permanent rental assistance and social services, is a proven formula to break the cycle of homelessness. Yet eligibility for this proven intervention excludes many families because qualifying need is based solely on the head of household. As such, a homeless family comprised of an extremely low-income parent struggling to maintain stable housing while meeting the mental or behavioral health needs of their child(ren) does not qualify for permanent housing. Expanding eligibility to be based on needs and conditions of children would provide a path out of homelessness.

A system that promotes long-term housing stability approaches families holistically by meeting the needs

of children and youth, as well as comprehensively to address needs of adults across domains. In order to meet the needs of families and support their work toward a brighter future, services must be accessible and tailored to each family.

Comprehensive services must begin with holistic assessment for each family member, including screening for medical and mental health needs, to develop complete, individualized service and goal plans. In addition, in order to engage families effectively, services must reduce barriers to access through on-site clinical expertise and provision of mental health services that are responsive to the needs of each family and family member.

Win strives to enhance its services for families by providing staff with training in evidence-based practices. Through Win Academy — Win's in-house training initiative — clinicians provide training and technical assistance for Win's frontline staff to implement strategies such as critical time intervention, trauma-informed care, motivational interviewing, and strengths-based case management. Additionally, Win's Children's Services staff participate in professional development in areas such as emotionally responsive practice and promoting healthy child development. Training and coaching in evidence-based best practices is a first step toward creating a homeless services system that mitigates trauma, and reduces the risk for repeated episodes of homelessness.

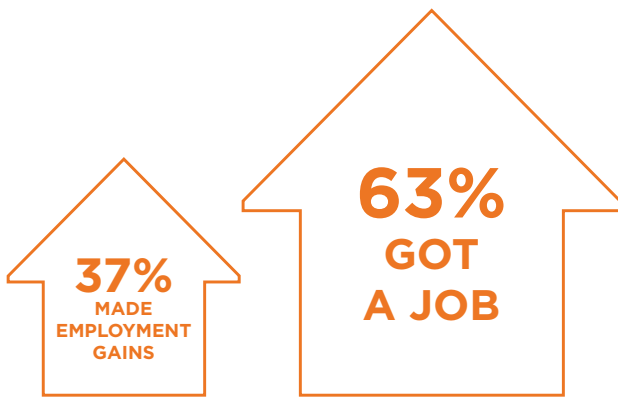
In addition to unmet mental health needs, homeless parents must

overcome economic forces to achieve long-term housing stability. Income-building programs that provide tools to secure or improve employment can mitigate economic disenfranchisement. To be successful, these programs begin with vocational guidance and coaching and take an individualized approach. Core services such as job search and resume writing help can make the difference between staying in a part-time job and finding full-time employment.

To respond to the unique needs of homeless moms contending with wage stagnation and gender-based income inequality, Win is pursuing income-building strategies that create pathways to employment in high-opportunity, non-traditional jobs for women. Strategies include building corporate partnerships with employers to provide apprenticeship and certification opportunities linked to subsequent employment in skilled trades (such as construction) and growth areas (such as culinary arts and technology).

Win's income-building program, which offers tools and support to adults across its ten family shelters, is showing that the right tools can enable homeless parents to maximize and reach their earning potential. Among work-eligible participants in Win's income-building program services in fiscal year 2016, on average, more than half made at least one income gain. Thirty-seven percent of gains represented improved work outcomes, including gaining wages and/or benefits or moving from part-time to full-time employment. The majority of gains represent moving





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### **Solve Family Homelessness by Expanding Housing Options & Supports**

Long-term stability is contingent on the delivery of critical services while families are in crisis. This requires housing families and providing services on-site at Tier II shelters. On-site services must include intensive case management, income building, housing help, child care, recreation, and mental health care. Cluster sites and commercial hotels present challenges to ensuring the quality of housing, hinder the ability of service providers to engage clients, and present challenges to clients seeking services. New York City has made an important commitment to end the use of cluster sites and commercial hotels to house homeless families and must also commit to developing shelters designed to meet the service and housing needs of families with children. Beyond shelter, embracing each family's future includes continued

provision of social services and/or rental assistance. Research has found vouchers and other rental assistance to be the most effective housing support for preventing a return to homelessness. For extremely low-income families, the economic barriers to achieving and maintaining stability in New York City's housing market can be overcome with rental vouchers. Since its introduction in 2014, thousands of families have been able to leave shelter with a New York City Living In Communities (LINC) voucher. In order to respond to the current homelessness crisis and prevent a future resurgence, the LINC program must be expanded and extended to reach more families and reflect the long-term financial reality of housing in New York City.

To mitigate the higher likelihood of return to homelessness faced by families who leave shelter without rental assistance, New York City must develop and implement a transition planning model that provides aftercare supports for a minimum of

six months. Such a model provides case management, home visits, and follow-up on connections to needed community-based services while families establish themselves and stabilize in their new homes. Ensuring that families remain connected to needed services, including income building, educational, health, and socio-emotional supports, is key to long-term housing stability and to ending the cycle of homelessness.

### **Political Leadership, Action, and Collaboration to Build the Housing Solutions to Family Homelessness**

Interventions that address economic forces and meet the needs of families hinge on the availability of housing — affordable, supportive, and shelter — that is appropriate based on a family’s needs. In New York City’s real estate market, ensuring an adequate housing supply for families in need requires political leadership, action, and collaboration across city, state, and federal agencies.

New York City and State have each launched ambitious efforts to expand the stock of affordable housing. In order to ensure this expansion effectively curbs homelessness and creates homes for families leaving shelter, development must be underwritten and subsidized to be affordable for extremely low-income families, those earning 30% or less of the area median income. Housing development that integrates supportive and affordable housing for various income levels and includes community services has shown early promise in offering a viable financial model. Additionally, the state and city must commit to a specific set-aside to

build housing for families with children. In order to preserve existing affordable units and implement an immediate solution, state legislation is needed to close loopholes that allow landlords to remove an apartment from rent regulation after renting to nonprofits as supportive housing.

Permanent supportive housing provides a path out of shelter and is a proven solution to chronic homelessness. It has changed the lives of thousands of families and is needed by thousands more. The continued viability of this effective intervention is threatened by funding levels that do not represent the true cost of housing in New York City. The city and state must collaborate with the federal department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to develop a Fair Market Rate payment formula that responds to the reality of New York City’s rental housing market.

In addition to permanent housing, New York City needs to build adequate shelter supply. Shelters that are designed and built to meet the housing and service needs of families with children are an effective strategy for ensuring safety and for engaging families in needed services. Expediting shelter construction will allow New York City to fulfill its commitment to end the use of low-quality cluster sites and reduce its reliance on commercial hotels.

In order to respond to the homelessness crisis and meet the urgent need for housing options for extremely low-income families, the Mayor must appoint a Housing Expert. The Housing Expert would be



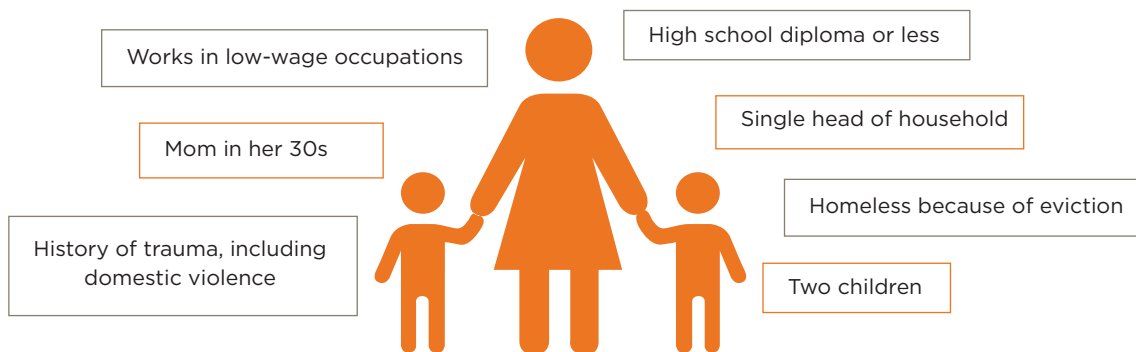
accountable for cross-agency efforts to realize the growth potential of New York City's affordable housing market. Among other duties, the Housing Expert would be responsible for expediting acquisition funds, identifying high potential development sites, and appropriately facilitating development.

Despite need, the current climate in New York City is not accepting of shelter or affordable housing development. The City must develop, articulate, and implement a comprehensive plan, with support from local elected officials, so that every New Yorker can have access to an adequate home.

# TAKING ACTION

*New York City is facing an unprecedented homelessness crisis, with more families cycling through the shelter system than ever before. To successfully address the situation and break the cycle of homelessness for families in our city, we need innovative policy solutions rooted in a fundamental shift in how we think about homelessness.*

## THE TYPICAL WIN FAMILY



Win proposes a series of policies designed to: shift the focus to the whole family; proactively identify locations for adequate, high-quality shelter; reduce excessive barriers to grant more families access to subsidized and supportive housing; and use data to inform service provision and aftercare to better support the transition from shelter.

### **We must take a holistic view of homelessness that:**

1. Focuses on families and children

2. Enhances our city's processes for addressing homelessness
3. Prioritizes long-term stability over moving homeless families out of shelter quickly, before they're ready
4. Provides support to meet the long-term needs of homeless families once they leave shelter

### **Focus on Families and Children, Instead of Individuals**

- Supportive housing would provide needed services and a proven path out of shelter for homeless families with children suffering from mental

health and behavioral challenges.

However, a family is not eligible for supportive housing based on a child's needs; the parent must have a qualifying condition, such as a diagnosed mental illness.

Modifying eligibility to include needs and conditions of children will better serve homeless families and ensure stable housing.

- Families often arrive at shelter with unrecognized needs that threaten housing stability if left unmet, yet the homeless service system is not equipped to assess or respond. The city funding for homeless services should provide for specialized shelter staff to provide holistic assessments and services for each family member in shelter, including mental health, medical, and developmental screenings, in order to develop and fulfill a complete and comprehensive service plan and increase access to onsite services.

### **Enhance Our City's Processes For Addressing Homelessness**

- The City must develop, articulate, and implement a comprehensive plan, with support from local elected officials, to build sufficient, adequate shelter for homeless families. Such a plan will maintain the City's commitment to phase out clusters and commercial hotels, expedite development of Tier II shelters, and include strategies for mitigating neighborhood opposition to shelter NYC's most vulnerable families.
- In response to the current homelessness crisis, the Mayor should appoint a temporary Housing Expert/

Czar to realize the growth potential of NYC's affordable housing market by expediting acquisition funds, identifying potential properties, and facilitating development.

- We should revive and update past efforts to implement case management technology that allows service providers access to families' service history records across all City agencies, similar to electronic medical records. This will allow easier identification of needs and coordination of care and support for homeless families.

### **Prioritize Long-Term Stability Over Moving Homeless Out Of Shelter Quickly**

- Scale successful youth development and workforce development programs that support academic attainment and workforce engagement through strategic business partnerships.
- Recognize time spent in foster care as "homelessness" for the purpose of meeting rental voucher eligibility requirements.

### **Provide Homeless Families With Stable Housing**

- Subsidize housing development at a high enough rate so that it is affordable to extremely low-income families (those earning 30% or less of AMI) with a specific set-aside for homeless families with children and other high-need families.
- The State and City should work with the federal Department of Housing



and Urban Development to revise the Fair Market Rent formula to enable supportive housing providers to better compete in the NYC housing market.

- Pass State legislation to close loopholes that allow landlords to remove units from rent regulation after renting to nonprofits as supportive housing units.

### **Providing Homeless Families Support When They Leave Shelter**

- To reduce the likelihood of families returning to shelter, the City should utilize best practices to develop a system-wide transitional planning model that provides aftercare support for a minimum of six months, targeting families who exit the system without a subsidy.
- Allocate City funds to create a rental voucher for undocumented homeless

families with children.

- Based on Mayor de Blasio's Living in Communities (LINC) initiatives, build on the success of subsidies by making rental vouchers permanent as long as families continue to qualify for assistance.
- Immediately increase the LINC voucher amount by 10% and fund subsequent annual inflation and cost of living increases.

Homeless services for families is where the interaction of myriad social issues — including income and gender inequality, childhood poverty, and violence — comes to rest as a visibly human problem. In order to break the cycle of homelessness, New York City must shift its approach to be responsive to the complexity and urgency of family homelessness.

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Breaking the Cycle of Homelessness  
for Women and their Children

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