

EDUCATION

'Couch surfing' children are Westchester's invisible homeless, lacking services, advocates say

At least 2,357 students in the county experienced homelessness during the 2019-20 school year — about 1.5% of all public school students.

Gary Stern Rockland/Westchester Journal News

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Story Highlights

92% of all homeless students in Westchester in 2019-20 were Black and Hispanic.

Fears that homelessness could spike in January when NY's eviction moratorium ends.

Nearly 12% of all Mount Vernon students were classified as homeless last year.

Homeless children are rarely seen on the streets of Westchester County.

And yet, growing numbers of kids have no stable home and are "couch surfing" in overcrowded and sometimes dangerous situations, according to a nonprofit tracking the numbers of homeless students. Many are the children of the working poor in a county with little affordable housing.

"Children may have a roof over their heads but still be unsafe, maybe in an aunt's basement or doubled or tripled up in an apartment," said Allison Lake, executive director of the Westchester Children's Association. "How do you succeed in school when you don't know where you may be sleeping next?"

The WCA, a century-old nonprofit, has made it a mission to expose Westchester's "invisible" homeless youth, who may not qualify for government services because they haven't stayed in homeless shelters and are not part of the system.

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According to the organization, at least 2,357 students in the county experienced homelessness during the 2019-20 school year — about 1.5% of all public school students — while only 608 of those children received housing or other services through Westchester County.

The WCA and other advocates suspect that the real number of students with no permanent address is much higher.

To draw attention to this problem, the WCA has posted a new dashboard that shows the best-known numbers of homeless students in each Westchester school district between 2014-15 and 2019-20.

Advocates say the numbers are striking for two main reasons: 92% of all homeless students in Westchester in 2019-20 were Black and Hispanic, while those groups make up only 48% of the public school population; and all types of homelessness could soar when New York State's eviction moratorium ends in January.

"That is a shameful racial disparity that shouldn't exist in Westchester," said Karl Bertrand, who co-chairs a public-private agency that coordinates homeless-related services in Westchester that get funds from HUD, the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development.

"These numbers show it's not about personal choices, but that there is something racial going on in the Westchester housing market," Bertrand said. "When people think of the stereotypical homeless person, it's an alcoholic white male, but the typical homeless person in Westchester is an African American child. People should imprint that image on their souls."

'We had to leave'

Princess Gill, a single mother with two kids in the Mount Vernon public schools, is among those who are not officially homeless but do not have a permanent place to live.

She said her family had an apartment without stable heat and had to move out before winter set in. They're currently staying with friends and therefore don't qualify for public assistance and services they might get if staying in a homeless shelter.

"Apartments are so expensive around here," she said. "Anything that is affordable isn't decent housing."

Gill said she has a bachelor's degree and was assistant manager of a group home for the elderly disabled but left before the COVID-19 pandemic because of medical issues. Group homes then went on lockdown. Now she's thankful to have a place to stay while looking for a job and an apartment.

She stayed in a homeless shelter long ago after a fire and doesn't want that for her kids, who are in the first and seventh grades. She said they're coping fine in school despite their lack of a permanent home.

"We had to leave where we were because it was cold," Gill said. "It's hard to discuss all that with them."

Such situations are all too common in Mount Vernon, said Lillian Reynolds, one of the school district's two official liaisons to homeless students and their families. Mount Vernon has long had Westchester's largest number of homeless students. In 2019-20, according to the WCA's definition, 924 students were homeless, or 11.8% of all Mount Vernon students.

"Students in this situation normally don't tell anyone; they're ashamed," Reynolds said. "We learn to recognize when they don't have clean clothes or don't smell right because they are not bathing regularly. These are things I deal with daily. We're trained to have our eyes and ears open."

The federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 requires school districts to screen children and families about their living situation in order to spot homelessness. Every district must have a liaison who leads this effort.

Westchester school districts with the high counts of homeless students in 2019-20 were: Yonkers, 412 (1.6% of students); Tarrytowns, 245 (8.8%); White Plains, 186 (2.5%); Peekskill, 128 (3.6%); Port Chester, 112 (2.2%); and New Rochelle, 111 (1%).

Reynolds said she works with children living in attics and basements, including a family living recently in a flooded basement.

"These people need assistance; we need a system that is friendly to children and youth," Reynolds said. "Instead, we have problems responding to homelessness because we can't even define it."

Families avoid shelters

Most government services for homelessness, in Westchester and across the country, are funded by HUD.

But HUD does not recognize people who are overcrowded into apartments or couch-surfing as homeless. HUD bases its funding on a "point-in-time" count of homeless people in communities across the nation on a single night in January, including those in shelters and on the street.

Advocates say that a primary goal of most families that couch-surf is to avoid shelters, which are often dangerous.

"Families don't want to be in a shelter; they're afraid," said Maria McGinty, who has worked with many homeless families as coordinator since 2001 of Southern Westchester BOCES' Homeless Student Program. "We have so many working poor here — working two or three jobs to earn a living — and they don't want shelters. They want affordable housing, which we don't have."

Further complicating things is that the U.S. Department of Education does recognize doubled-up students as homeless, but doesn't control the purse strings.

This discrepancy has drawn the ire of the Westchester Children's Association and other advocates. They want improvements to a convoluted system for serving the homeless that involves federal, state and county governments, many nonprofits, and dozens of services and programs.

"Westchester's current efforts on homelessness are inadequate for many of its youngest residents because the County does not have an accurate count of this demographic and cannot appropriately tailor its efforts to their needs across systems," said a WCA report about student homelessness, "Making the Invisible Visible."

Getting people off the streets

In Westchester, housing and other services for the homeless are overseen by the county Department of Social Services and a consortium of government and private agencies, which is required by HUD, called the Westchester County Continuum of Care Partnership to End Homelessness.

The consortium budgets HUD funding — \$19.5 million last year for housing and services to the homeless — while the county distributes other federal, state and county dollars.

The county operates 11 shelters, seven for individuals and four for families, and has over 200 units of emergency housing.

Leonard Townes, who was appointed Westchester's commissioner of social services in February, said he understands the Westchester Children's Association's interest in the safety and stability of children who have temporary living situations. But he said the county focuses on those who are homeless in the traditional sense.

"We're looking to make sure people are not on the streets," he said. "We consider people homeless who come and look for help. People who choose to double up we don't count."

Bertrand, co-chair of the consortium, said that agencies that assist the homeless don't have good mechanisms to assess whether doubled-up families are doing well or are in unsafe or overcrowded situations.

The Westchester Children's Association notes that Westchester County has made concerted and successful efforts to reduce homelessness among veterans and to better serve victims of domestic violence and should do the same for homeless students.

"These are deep problems," Lake said. "We want the public knowing where things stand so we can advocate for change. We want to push the county to give more services to kids."

HUD, in a statement to The Journal News/lohud, said that families and youth who are couch surfing or doubled up are eligible for help through emergency grants provided by the federal CARES Act from 2020. Westchester County was awarded over \$5.2 million in these funds.

Some families could also be eligible for housing vouchers through the American Rescue Plan, HUD said.

Advocates are fearful that the number of couch-surfing students may soar when New York State's moratorium on evictions ends in January.

"Everyone is worried about what will happen in January," McGinty said. "It's going to be tough to house all these families and to provide some stability for students."

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