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A dubious distinction: Massachusetts ranks first in growth of family homelessness

Even as fewer families are becoming homeless across the country, more and more become homeless here.

By [Zoe Greenberg](#) Globe Staff, Updated January 28, 2020, 4:43 a.m.



Jeniffer Renderos lives in a homeless shelter with her daughters, Kathleen, 9 (left) and Tatiana, 8, despite making more than \$15 an hour. John Tlumacki/Globe Staff/The Boston Globe

Every year, thousands of Massachusetts children and their families tumble into homelessness. The state is a dismal national leader, in fact, with the highest percentage increase in family homelessness in any state since 2007, according to [new federal data](#). Even as fewer families are becoming homeless across the country, more and more become homeless here.

For those not caught up in the crisis, it is easy to look away. Unlike some cities on the West Coast, such as Seattle or Los Angeles, where thousands of people live on the streets, the vast majority of homeless people in Massachusetts are sheltered. That can mask the extraordinary scope of the problem, experts say, because parents and children in desperate conditions aren't in public view.

"We can't believe that we'd let kids be homeless, and we don't see kids on the street," says Annissa Essaibi George, a Boston city councilor who has proposed [creating a commission](#) to end family homelessness in the city of Boston.

Massachusetts has such high sheltered rates in part because it is the only state in the country with a right to shelter, which means if families can prove they are homeless for an eligible reason, such as a no-fault eviction or a natural disaster, the state is required to provide shelter

to them. (New York City is another right to shelter jurisdiction.) On any given night, there are roughly 3,400 families (equaling about 12,000 people) without homes across the state.

“It’s a crisis,” says Larry Seamans, the president of FamilyAid Boston, a non-profit dedicated to ending family homelessness in Greater Boston. The toll of homelessness in the state falls unequally: while about 30 percent of state residents are people of color, they make up nearly 50 percent of the total homeless population, according to the latest federal numbers.

Some homeless advocates say that the right to shelter skews the state’s family homelessness numbers, making them seem higher than other states because people know there are resources available, and therefore come forward and are counted, while they may remain out of sight elsewhere.

But even if that’s true, Massachusetts has a perfect storm of conditions to hurt families who are already living on the brink.

“There’s many reasons why people experience homelessness, but the common denominator is the high cost of housing and the dearth of housing subsidies,” says Kelly Turley, the associate director at the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless.

Massachusetts notched the unfortunate ranking of third most expensive state nationwide for renters in a recent report from the [National Low Income Housing Coalition](#). In order to afford a two-bedroom apartment anywhere in the state without paying more than 30 percent of income on housing, a person needs to make \$33.81 per hour, almost triple the state’s current minimum wage. In Greater Boston, that number is even higher.

That’s an inconceivable wage for many workers, like Jeniffer Renderos, who make \$15 an hour as a cleaner.

“I have two kids. So even though I work full time, I can’t afford regular rent,” says Renderos, 25. After she was kicked out of the apartment she shared with her mother in Brighton, she could not afford one of her own. So she packed two bags of clothing for each of her daughters ([the maximum allowed](#) in a shelter) and applied to emergency shelter. Almost half of families who apply are deemed ineligible and turned away, according to [state numbers](#); those families often end up doubling up with family or friends in a precarious housing situation not included in most homelessness counts.

But Renderos’s family was eligible. The state assigned them to a furnished two-bedroom shelter apartment in Mattapan run by FamilyAid where they live with another homeless family.

Some landlords are making immense profits from the housing crunch. In an attempt to redirect some of those profits, city officials have pushed for a tax of up to [two percent](#) on big real estate transactions, with the money raised going to support city housing programs.

“The cost of basic services for families have also gone up,” Seamans said, citing in particular the tremendous cost of childcare. Families “basically have to be working 3.5 full-time jobs to make ends meet at minimum wage in the city of Boston.”

Policy conversations about “affordable housing” — and city and state laws mandating that a percentage of new units be affordable — miss the mark for extremely low-income people, experts said.

“Just because something is below market does not mean it’s affordable,” says Chris Norris, the executive director of Metro Housing Boston. Statewide, there are roughly 49 affordable and available units for every 100 extremely low-income households, according to a report last year from the [New England Public Policy Center](#).

When a family is evicted or otherwise kicked out of an apartment in Massachusetts, they have few options. They can sign up for a federal housing voucher; the list Metro Housing Boston maintains has 35,000 families on it and a 10-year wait, according to Norris. Or they can sign up for public housing, administered by local Housing Authorities, which often have long waitlists as well.

Some can avoid homelessness by using [RAFT](#), a statewide program that offers eligible applicants up to \$4,000 to pay back rent and stabilize their housing or pay the upfront costs of moving. If that doesn’t work, they can apply for emergency shelter, as Renderos did. Families in shelter can then qualify for housing vouchers specifically targeted to families in the most desperate situations.

But even though there are a range of programs, Massachusetts lacks a cohesive system to coordinate state, local, and private efforts aimed at helping families out of homelessness, Seamans says. Some advocates have turned to Connecticut as a model; its Coalition to End Homelessness brings together more than 100 members and manages a statewide information system. Connecticut is not a right to shelter state, but its model of coordination is similar to what Essaibi-George has proposed in Boston.

If Massachusetts wants to catch up with the rest of the country in decreasing family homelessness, experts say, a commission to end family homelessness would be the first step. In addition, the state must increase rental assistance and the number of vouchers available, build more housing that people with extremely low incomes can afford, re-invest in public housing, and put money into programs like RAFT that prevent families from becoming homeless in the first place (Governor Charlie Baker expanded that program this year). State funding for vouchers has risen by [nearly 75 percent since 2014](#) — but much of that money is going to sustain existing vouchers, not to create new ones.

Renderos, who has been living in emergency shelter for five months, is now interviewing to see if she is eligible for a federal voucher that specifically helps homeless families in Boston move into permanent homes. If it comes through, Renderos has plans for how to decorate her family’s apartment: a little table with a TV on it in the living room; red or lilac curtains for the windows; pink walls with unicorn stickers and flowers in the girls’ room. Her daughters are restless for a place of their own.

“If I have a house can I bring my computer?” her eldest asked after school one day. And then, the question Renderos isn’t sure how to answer: “When are we going to get a house?”

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