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Affordable Housing Shortage Threatens Children's Health



A new study, *There's No Place Like Home: How America's Housing Crisis Threatens Our Children*, has found that numerous children's health problems are related to the lack of safe, affordable housing for low-income families. The study was released by The Doc4Kids Project, a group of pediatricians concerned about the link between inadequate housing and child health, and Housing America, a housing advocacy group. The study found that:

America's housing shortage continues to worsen.

- Nationwide, over 12.5 million persons, one-third of them children, live in households with "worst-case" housing needs. These households live in severely substandard housing or pay more than one-half of their income for rent.
- In the past two years, nearly 1.5 million affordable housing units have been lost nationwide. These include unsubsidized units where rents have increased, privately owned housing where owners have opted out of federal subsidy programs, and public housing that has been demolished but not replaced.

Substandard housing places children at risk for disease and injury.

- Children living in housing with cockroaches and other pests, dust mites, or mold are at increased risk of asthma. 10,000 children ages four to nine are hospitalized each year for asthma attacks because of cockroach infestation in the home.
- Children living in older, deteriorating housing are at higher risk of lead poisoning from paint, soil and water. Lead poisoning can cause illness, brain damage and other organ damage. Nationwide, 14 million children ages six and under live in housing with lead paint, and 1 million suffer from lead poisoning.
- Children in substandard housing are at higher risk of burns and other injuries. Each year, 1,485 children seek medical attention for burns from exposed radiators and 187 children die in house fires attributable to faulty heating and electrical equipment.

High housing costs force families to choose between rent and food, leading to increased child malnutrition.

- Children on waiting lists for subsidized housing are six times more likely to have stunted growth than children living in subsidized housing. An estimated 21,000 children have stunted growth attributable to their lack of affordable housing.
- Children whose families do not receive housing assistance are 50 percent more likely to be iron deficient than children in subsidized housing. Over 120,000 children suffer from anemia attributable to their families' inability to afford both rent and food.

Homeless children face special risks to their physical and mental health.

- Homeless children suffer almost twice the respiratory infections and five times the diarrheal infections as housed children.
- Homeless children also experience seven times the iron deficiency, twice as many hospitalizations, and significantly worse overall health status compared to housed children.
- Homeless children suffer increased psychological problems. Half of all children in shelters show signs of anxiety and depression.

The study recommends that Congress increase the affordable housing supply by:

- Increasing the number of Section 8 vouchers, which allow low-income families to obtain housing in the private market.
- Protecting the existing affordable housing stock by providing funds to preserve federally subsidized housing.
- Increasing the availability of the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit, which provides tax incentives for private investment in affordable rental housing.
- Providing special rental subsidies for safe housing for low-income families whose children suffer from severe asthma or other chronic diseases.
- Eliminating the cap on deductions of shelter costs from food stamp allotments so that families in areas with high rents will receive a full allotment of food stamps.

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