

Introduction

Housing plays an integral part in a child's overall well being. The home - the place where a child eats, sleeps, and plays everyday - is their most basic physical need. Unfortunately, many children face problematic housing situations every day while others have no home at all. Everyone wants to live in safe, quality affordable housing, yet, high housing costs force many families to make choices based on affordability, quality, and location. However, low-income and poor families have limited choices. Consequently, children of low-income and poor families tend to suffer disproportionately from housing related health issues as a result of these choices.

Housing as a Determinant in Child Well-Being

Housing is usually most family's single largest expense. Of the 1.7 million working households in Louisiana, 67.4% are homeowners and 32% are renters, who face a greater housing affordability challenge. More than 28% of homeowners and 52% of renters face a housing cost burden – meaning these Louisiana households spend more than 30% of their income on housing costs and utilities, having little left over to meet basic needs (Figure 1). In 2010-2011, Louisiana had a 24% increase in poor renter households with a severe housing burden, compared to the national average of 6%. A household with a severe housing burden pays more than 50% of their total monthly income for housing expenses.

Figure 1: Housing Cost Burden
(Source: 2008-2012 ACS Selected Housing Characteristics)

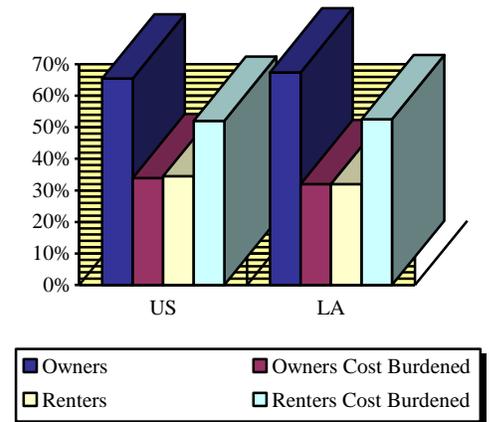
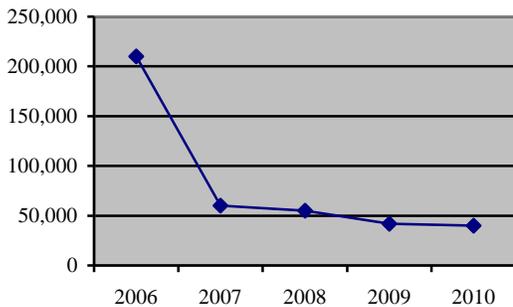


Figure 2: Child Homelessness in Louisiana, 2010



Homelessness. Homelessness is probably the most serious housing problem anyone could face. Children who experience homelessness experience high levels of stress and symptoms of anxiety and depression. In 2010, Louisiana had 43,488 homeless children; 26% of children in Louisiana live in poverty; Louisiana ranked 48 (50 = worst) of the extent of child homelessness (Figure 2).

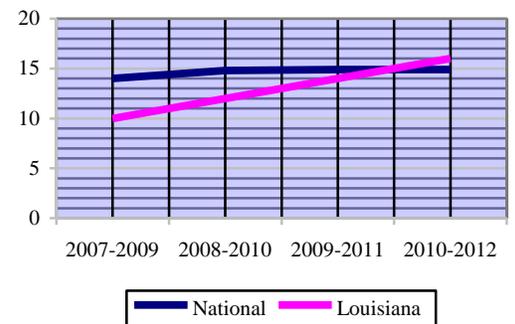
Housing Affordability. In Louisiana, there is a shortage of more than 106,000 available and affordable housing units. A consequence of the lack of affordable homes is that low-income families are forced to live in overcrowded substandard homes that are unhealthy and unsafe for children.

Housing Insecurity. Little is known about children living in housing insecure families – those who do not live in shelters or on the streets but who move frequently and live with other families. Lack of affordable housing has forced many families, whose incomes may be limited because of a job loss, to double up with other families. These families usually move frequently and live in overcrowded substandard housing, which negatively affects school performance showing lower reading and math test scores on standardized tests related to high rates of absenteeism and school changes because the children move multiple times within a year.

Food Insecurity (Figure 3). Lack of affordable housing has been linked to poor nutrition and malnutrition in children. Food insecure families lack enough money to buy food at some point in the year because most low-income families spend a majority of their income on housing payments, leaving less to spend on food. 1 in 6 Louisiana households with school-aged children under the age of 18 struggle with hunger. Food insecurity is worse in Louisiana than it is nationally (15.7% vs 14.7%).

Figure 3: Prevalence of Food Insecurity in Louisiana since 2007

Louisiana level of food insecurity (by household) has surpassed the national level since the Great Depression. (Source: US Department of Agriculture, Louisiana Budget Project)



Housing Quality Affects Children's Health

The quality of housing, specifically the physical condition, significantly affects a child's health. Overcrowded, old, damp, cold, moldy, and inadequate ventilation, along with structural defects, are all conditions associated with housing related health issues in children. Lead poisoning and asthma are the most common health consequences associated with housing-related health issues. In the United States lead poisoning is the most common environmental disease in children while asthma is the most common long-term childhood disease which 40% of diagnoses are related to residential exposures.

Louisiana's lead prevalence level of 1.2% has surpassed national level of 0.60%

73,770 children tested for lead in 2010

823 of those Louisiana children had elevated lead levels

all children are tested for lead when they are 12 and 24 months old. Of the 73,770 children under the age of 6 tested for lead in Louisiana in 2010, 823, or 1.2%, had elevated blood levels compared the national average of 0.60%.

Asthma. Asthma is another childhood health consequence associated with substandard housing. Asthma is a chronic airway disorder in which the airway is obstructed and the person has trouble breathing. Overcrowded, damp, cold, moldy, and inadequately ventilated housing has been associated with asthma and other related respiratory viruses. Additionally, damp housing provides a nurturing environment for pest infestations. Cockroaches and mice infestations act as asthma and allergy triggers in children. Consequently, structural defects in substandard housing permit entry of cockroaches and rodents, which lead to these health issues in children. Asthma prevalence increased from 2001-2010 and is now at its highest. Asthma prevalence was higher for groups with lower income-to poverty level ratios. As Figure 4 indicates, children in Louisiana between the ages of 0-11 had higher asthma prevalence than the national average children in that same age group.

Lead. Lead paint, though banned since 1978, is the most frequent cause of lead poisoning in children and is a serious health hazard for a considerable number of children. Children, especially toddlers, may eat paint chips and breathe in dust from lead pain. Low-level lead poisoning affects the child's brain and nerves and can cause learning, physical, and behavioral problems such as low IQ, short attention spans, hearing loss, hyperactivity, stunted growth, and problems with coordination. High levels of lead exposure can cause comas, seizures, and can even lead to death.

National data has shown that children who live in old homes where lead is more prevalent are at greater risk for lead poisoning than children who live in new homes. In Louisiana, there are over 248,686 housing units built prior to 1950. Louisiana law requires that

Figure 4: Asthma Prevalence in Louisiana
(Source: Child Asthma Prevalence by Age, NSCH, 2007)

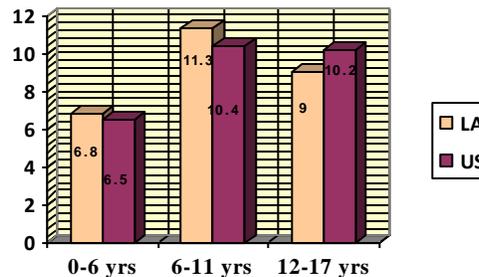
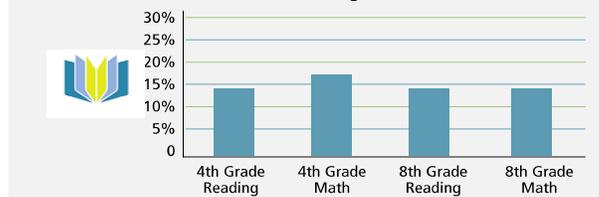


Figure 5: Louisiana Reading and Math Proficiency Scores, 2010
Education Proficiency: Reading and Math
(NAEP 4th & 8th Grade/Children Eligible for School Lunch)



associated with sleep deprivation and psychological stress in children, which also affects school performance. As Figure 5 highlights, less than 15% of low-income Louisiana 4th grade students are proficient in reading and less than 15% of Louisiana 8th grade students are proficient in reading and math.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

- Policymakers need to pay careful attention to the relationship between housing and children's health and consider the financial and social costs.
- Increase the number of affordable and quality housing units by increasing investments in affordable housing with a housing trust fund.
- Reduce local barriers that impede the development of affordable housing units.
- Create greater partnership between local affordable housing programs

KEY FINDINGS FOR LOUISIANA

- More than 28% of homeowners and 52% of renters in Louisiana face a housing cost burden
- In 2010-2011, Louisiana had a 24% increase in poor renter households with a severe housing burden, compared to the national average of 6%
- 26% of children in Louisiana live in poverty
- In Louisiana, there is a shortage of more than 106,000 available and affordable housing units
- 1 in 6 Louisiana households with school-aged children under the age of 18 struggle with hunger
- Asthmatics in LA face a higher risk of death from asthma than fellow asthmatics nationwide
- Louisiana falls within the top 25% of states for asthma related deaths
- 97,069 children under the age of 18 have asthma in LA compared to 7 million children under the age of 18 in the US
- Louisiana children between the ages of 0-11 had higher child asthma prevalence than those children of the same age in the United States
- Almost 110,000 homes located in New Orleans were built before 1950 where lead is more prevalent – children who live in old homes are at greater risk for lead poisoning than children who live in newer homes

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