

Briefing Paper

Family Homelessness in NYC

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City and State Must Meet Unprecedented Scale of Crisis with Proven Solutions

By Giselle Routhier, Policy Director, Coalition for the Homeless

Summary

In November 2016, nearly 16,000 families, consisting of more than 48,000 people, were sleeping in New York City homeless shelters each night. The number of adults and children in the family shelter system increased by 14 percent since January 2014 – despite Mayor de Blasio’s efforts to reverse the growing census by both significantly increasing resources for homelessness prevention and providing more permanent housing.

While the City’s efforts to date – including a welcome return to reliance on Federal resources like NYCHA public housing and Section 8, and its introduction of a series of new rent subsidy programs – helped over 10,000 families move out of homelessness into stable housing since 2014, the underlying causes of mass homelessness in NYC continue to drive the shelter census upward. In other words, even though more people are *exiting* the family shelter system to *stable housing* than at any time since 2004, a significantly greater number are falling victim to the severe dearth of affordable housing, rising unemployment, and domestic violence – and have been left with nowhere to turn but homeless shelters.

This brief examines the factors that contribute to the present crisis and recommends solutions that can reduce the number of people utilizing New York City homeless shelters.

Findings:

- In FY 2013, only 2 percent of family exits from shelters to housing were to long-term stable placements, but with the recent restoration of public housing preferences and long-term rent subsidies, the rate of placements into stable homes increased to 30 percent in FY 2015 and to 40 percent in FY 2016.

- The City is now placing more homeless families into stable homes than at any time since 2004: The City made roughly 10,000 stable housing placements for families in the first two-and-a-half years of Mayor de Blasio’s administration (compared with the fewer than 1,300 made by Mayor Bloomberg in his last four years in office).
- An increase in stable housing initiatives has decreased the number of families returning to shelters, while the number of newly homeless families entering the shelters continues to fuel the ongoing crisis.
- The dominant drivers of family homelessness continue to be eviction, overcrowding, and domestic violence.
- The recent increase in homelessness was likely fed by higher unemployment. While the city’s labor market is stronger than it was during the Great Recession, there was a reduction in the number of people employed of about 129,000 between March and August of 2016, with a corresponding increase of 35,198 in the number receiving unemployment between June and October.
- The number of family applicants found eligible for shelter has increased since 2014, owing to reforms in the shelter application process that made it marginally less onerous for the truly needy.
- During the “Lost Decade” from the end of FY 2005 to FY 2014, when the City cut off access to NYCHA public housing and Section 8 for homeless families, the City denied access to nearly 32,000 households who could have otherwise been permanently housed.

In order to address this record crisis, solutions matching the scale of need must be immediately implemented.

The City must:

- **Immediately increase the number of public housing placements for homeless families from 1,500 per year to at least 3,000 and the number of Section 8 and HPD resources to at least 2,500 placements, for a minimum of 5,500 annual placements to begin to recoup the nearly 32,000 placements denied to homeless families during the “Lost Decade”;**
- **Continue to place at least 3,000 families through City-funded rent subsidy programs each year;**
- **Implement more aggressive homelessness prevention policies, such as establishing a right to legal counsel in housing court for low-income tenants; and**
- **Aggressively enforce the source-of-income anti-discrimination law with landlords who illegally reject families who attempt to utilize housing vouchers.**

The State must:

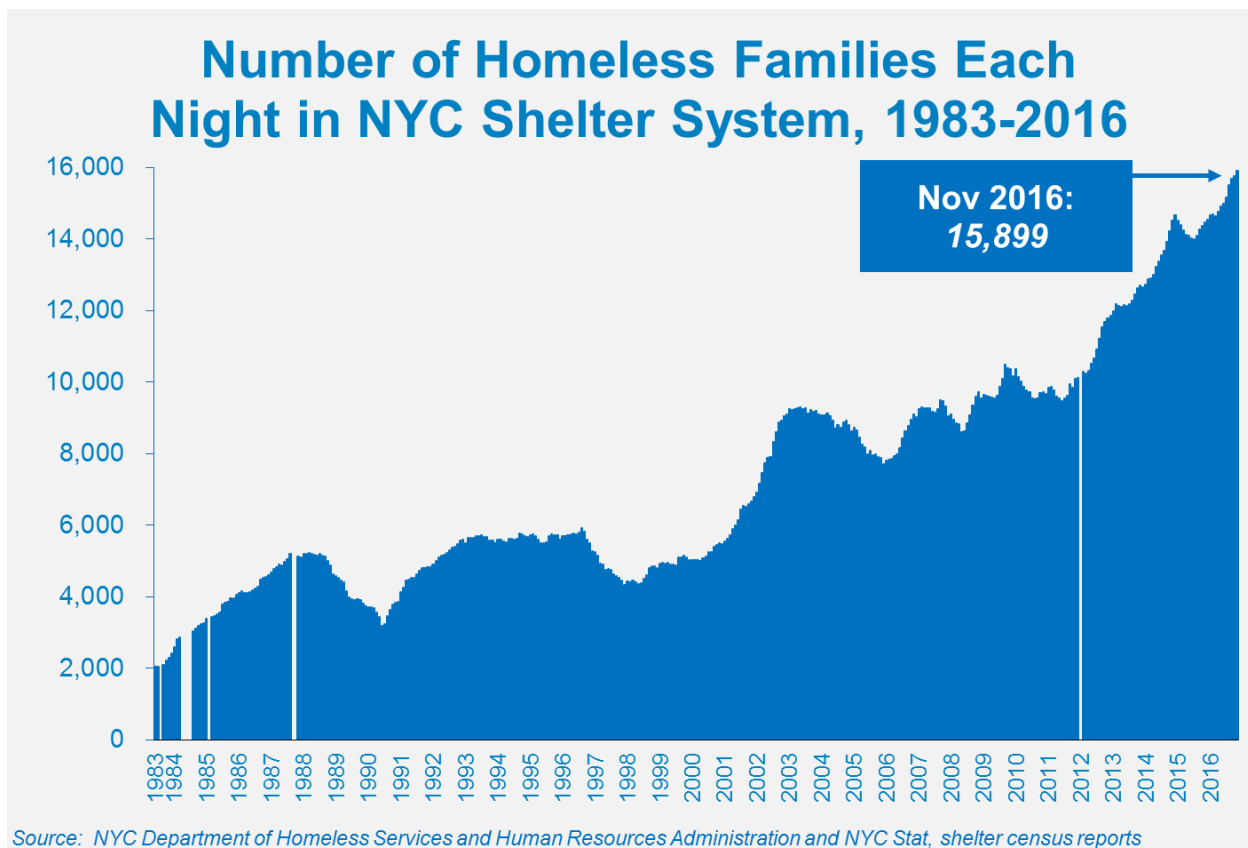
- **Immediately release the nearly \$2 billion for affordable and supportive housing funds appropriated in 2016 and currently stalled due to inaction by the Governor and Legislative leaders; and**
- **Implement Assembly Member Hevesi’s proposal to create a State- and Federally-funded long-term rent subsidy program, known as Home Stability Support.**

Introduction

Family homelessness in New York City has reached yet a new record: In November 2016, there were 15,899 families sleeping in shelters each night. Individual family members comprise more than three-quarters of the 62,840 people in homeless shelters. Nearly 40 percent (24,000) are children. The root cause of family homelessness continues to be the ongoing and severe housing affordability crisis in New York City, which is exacerbated by the lingering consequences of failed policies that eliminated or underutilized stable housing resources for homeless families over the past 20 years.

In order for the shelter system to function as a temporary refuge without perpetually growing, more households must leave each year than enter. New programs initiated by the de Blasio administration to increase eviction prevention (reducing the inflow) and to move sheltered families into permanent housing (increasing the exits) have mitigated the growth in the shelter census, and so far appear to be reducing the vexing phenomenon of formerly homeless families *returning* to shelters. However, even with a laudable increase in stable housing placements in Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 (to 5,437 in total, up from 227 in FY 2013), 950 more families came into the shelters than moved out in FY 2016.

The primary forces underlying the growing shelter census continue to be the severe lack affordable housing in New York City, rising unemployment, and an increase in the number of families fleeing domestic violence.



Part I: Explaining Recent Trends in Family Homelessness

Housing Market

The serious lack of affordable housing in New York City continues to be the primary driver of homelessness among families. The most recent data available show that in 2014, the vacancy rate for the city's rental housing inventory was 3.45 percent. However, for low-rent units, it was just 1.8 percent.¹ An extreme dearth of available housing, particularly at the lowest end of the income scale, has increased housing instability and overcrowding. Seventy-three percent of low-income households in New York City were severely rent-burdened in 2014 (paying more than half of their income for rent), compared with 71 percent in 2006. Among households with moderate incomes, the proportion of households with severe rent burdens increased from 37 percent in 2006 to 45 percent in 2014.² Meanwhile, severe crowding among renters rose by 44.8 percent between 2005 and 2013.³

These recent trends are reflected in the reasons for homelessness cited by families during the shelter intake process. Eviction and overcrowding remain among the top five reasons families with children and adult families (without minor children) enter shelters: In the first 11 months of FY 2016, there were 5,621 families who became homeless for these two reasons, accounting for 42 percent of 13,361 shelter entries. Domestic violence remained the top reason families with children moved into shelters in 2016, rising to 30 percent of all families with children entering temporary housing. The inter-related impacts of housing instability and domestic violence should not be underestimated in any analysis of why families become homeless: There is a strong association (after controlling for risk factor differences like poverty, race, and marital status) between housing instability (including not having a home of one's own) and domestic violence.⁴

While the number of families entering shelters due to overcrowding (2,195 families in total) is almost exactly what it was a decade ago, the number did dip to less than half the current level (898) in FY 2012 before rising again by 125 percent to the present level. Overcrowding is the only reason cited by families that has fluctuated so dramatically in the past decade. The decline coincides with the rapid decrease in the eligibility rate that took place between FY 2008 and 2012 as discussed below.⁵

The impact of new City initiatives is evident in the reasons families cite for homelessness. A substantial increase in City eviction prevention funds has kept thousands of families in their homes and, as a result, eviction is no longer the leading cause of homelessness among all families combined. In fact, the proportion of adult families (families without minor children) listing eviction as the reason for their homelessness decreased by six percentage points between FY 2015 and FY 2016. The City also stepped up outreach efforts in 2016 to help homeless individuals and couples staying on the streets move into shelters. These efforts parallel a significant increase in the number and percentage of adult families entering shelters from the streets between FY 2015 and FY 2016.

Top Five Reasons for Homelessness: Families with Children
FY 2016 (through May)

	Number	Percent	Percentage Point Change from FY 15**
Domestic Violence	3,618	30%	+2.92
Eviction	3,002	25%	-0.27
Overcrowding	2,021	17%	-0.94
Immediate Return	1,760	15%	-2.30
ACS-Related	342	3%	-0.97
Other*	1,279	11%	+1.56

Top Five Reasons for Homelessness: Adult Families
FY 2016 (through May)

	Number	Percent	Percentage Point Change from FY 15**
Eviction	424	32%	-6.21
Living on Street	206	15%	+3.86
Immediate Return	204	15%	-1.69
Overcrowding	174	13%	-0.99
Domestic Violence	92	7%	+0.10
Other*	239	18%	+2.94

*Note: Other includes up to 14 additional categories. Examples include discord, prison release, and lockout

**FY 15 through May for comparability.

Source: NYC Department of Homeless Services

Unemployment

Recent unemployment data signal another source of economic stress among low-income families. According to one study, “becoming unemployed nearly triples the probability of moving in with others.”⁶ Between November 2015 and November 2016, the unemployment rate in New York City rose from 5.2 percent to 5.7 percent, bucking the trend elsewhere in the state, where unemployment fell and is now just 4.6 percent.⁷ As the table below shows, there was a sudden reduction in the number of employed New Yorkers of 129,000 between March 2016 and August of 2016, and a related impact on unemployment: There were 35,198 more people receiving unemployment benefits in October 2016 than in June 2016 – a striking increase that has likely impacted the demand for shelter. Indeed, the August unemployment rate in the Bronx, where family homelessness is concentrated more than in any other borough, hit an alarming 7.8 percent – up dramatically from its low of 6.1 percent last May.⁸ In late 2016 there were signs that the unemployment increase may have leveled off, although seasonal jobs may make it difficult to assess whether or not this is true for a few months.

New York City Seasonally Adjusted Unemployment Rate					
Year	Month	Labor Force (000's)	Employed (000's)	Unemployed (000's)	Unemployment Rate
2015	November	4,208.9	3,991.8	217.1	5.2
2015	December	4,215.0	3,996.1	218.9	5.2
2016	January	4,229.2	4,004.6	224.6	5.3
2016	February	4,240.8	4,013.8	227.0	5.4
2016	March	4,253.2	4,020.2	233.0	5.5
2016	April	4,238.1	4,008.9	229.2	5.4
2016	May	4,208.7	3,992.9	215.8	5.1
2016	June	4,172.4	3,962.2	210.2	5.0
2016	July	4,135.1	3,921.5	213.6	5.2
2016	August	4,114.3	3,891.2	223.2	5.4
2016	September	4,132.1	3,893.3	238.8	5.8
2016	October	4,146.3	3,900.9	245.4	5.9
2016	November	4,154.0	3,916.6	237.5	5.7

Source: NYS Department of Labor

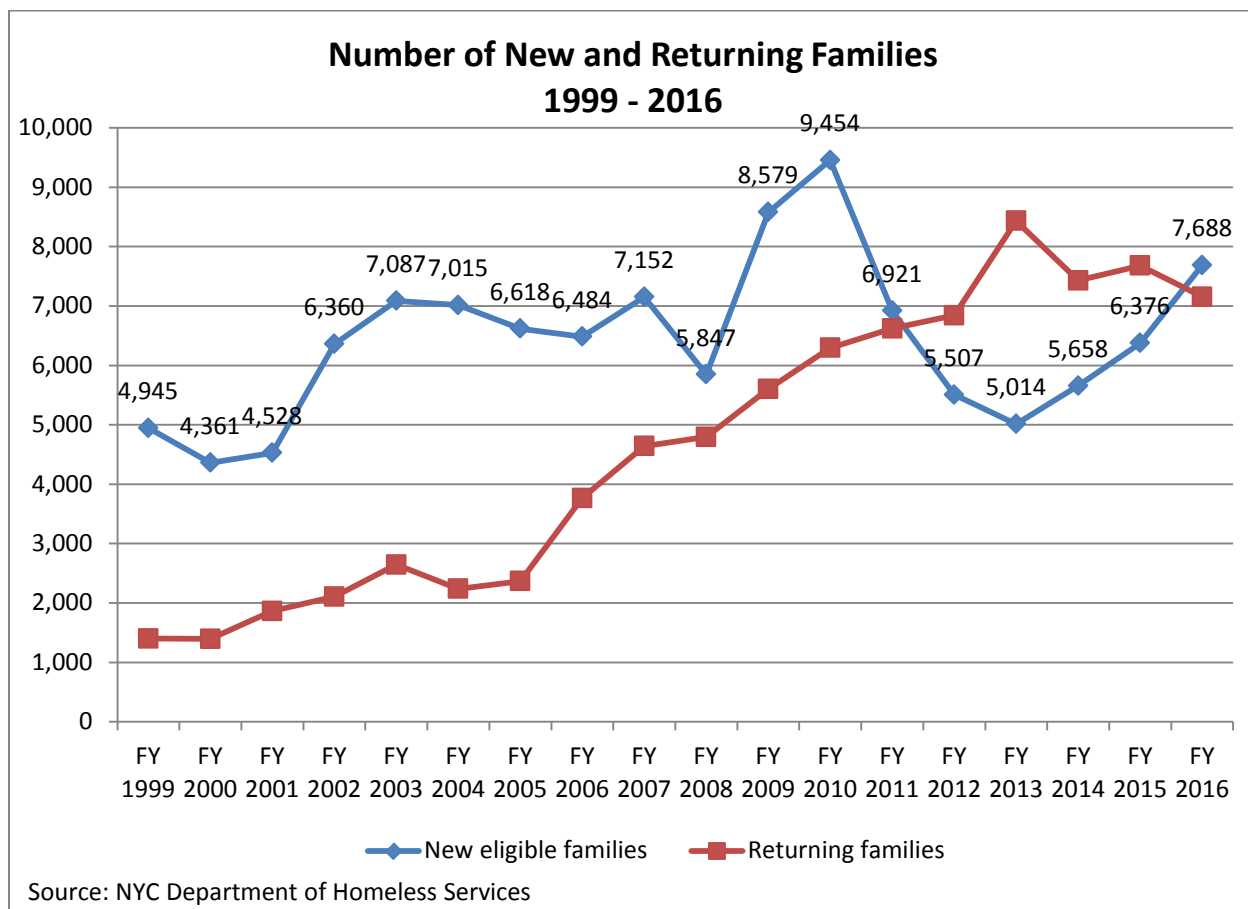
Conditions in both the housing and job markets continue to place tens of thousands of low-income families at risk of losing their homes. The adage that most are only a paycheck away from homelessness was recently documented by the Association for Neighborhood & Housing Development in a report showing that 60 percent of New Yorkers do not have savings sufficient to cover three months of living expenses (a condition shared by 75 percent of Bronx households). This level of economic insecurity can be counted as yet another symptom of the widening disparity between stagnant (or falling) incomes and rapidly increasing rents.⁹

Shelter Demand and Failed Policy Legacies

In order for the shelter system to function as a temporary place of safety without perpetually growing, more households must exit the system than enter. The number of families entering NYC shelters peaked at 15,748 in FY 2010. In FY 2016, the number of family entries was 14,842, down from the high in FY 2010, but up 786 from FY 2015. Since FY 2012, a sustained increase in the family shelter census has occurred because there have been more entries than exits. This increase was fed in large part by the failed policies of the Bloomberg administration, which cut off long-term housing resources (such as NYCHA public housing and Section 8 vouchers) for homeless families and replaced them with temporary subsidies (the last of which was called Advantage). This lack of permanent housing resources resulted in dramatically fewer families moving out of shelters and more families returning after the short-term rent subsidies ended. Roughly *half* (49.4 percent) of all Advantage families returned to shelters after exiting with the subsidy: The Bloomberg legacy for the 30,723 men, women, and children who returned by August of 2013 (and countless others following them) was another unwanted and unnecessary trip through the shelter system – but this time with no way to leave it.¹⁰ The City is still dealing with the fallout of these disastrous policies today.

Since 2013, the number of formerly homeless families *returning* to the shelter system has decreased by 15 percent, while the number of *newly* homeless families has increased by 42 percent. The reduction in the number of families returning is a direct result of the de Blasio administration's emphasis on longer-term housing programs – such as public housing and Section 8 vouchers – as well as the new City-

funded rent subsidies, including LINC, SEPS, and CityFEPS.¹ While it is too early to fully evaluate the long-term efficacy of these newer rent subsidy programs, initial indications are that they have been effective in helping thousands of families to keep their homes or move out of the shelters since their inception. Another encouraging sign is that homeless families are not staying in shelters for as long as they had been in recent years: The average length of stay has dropped 40 days (9.2 percent) between December 2015 and November 2016, to 396 days.

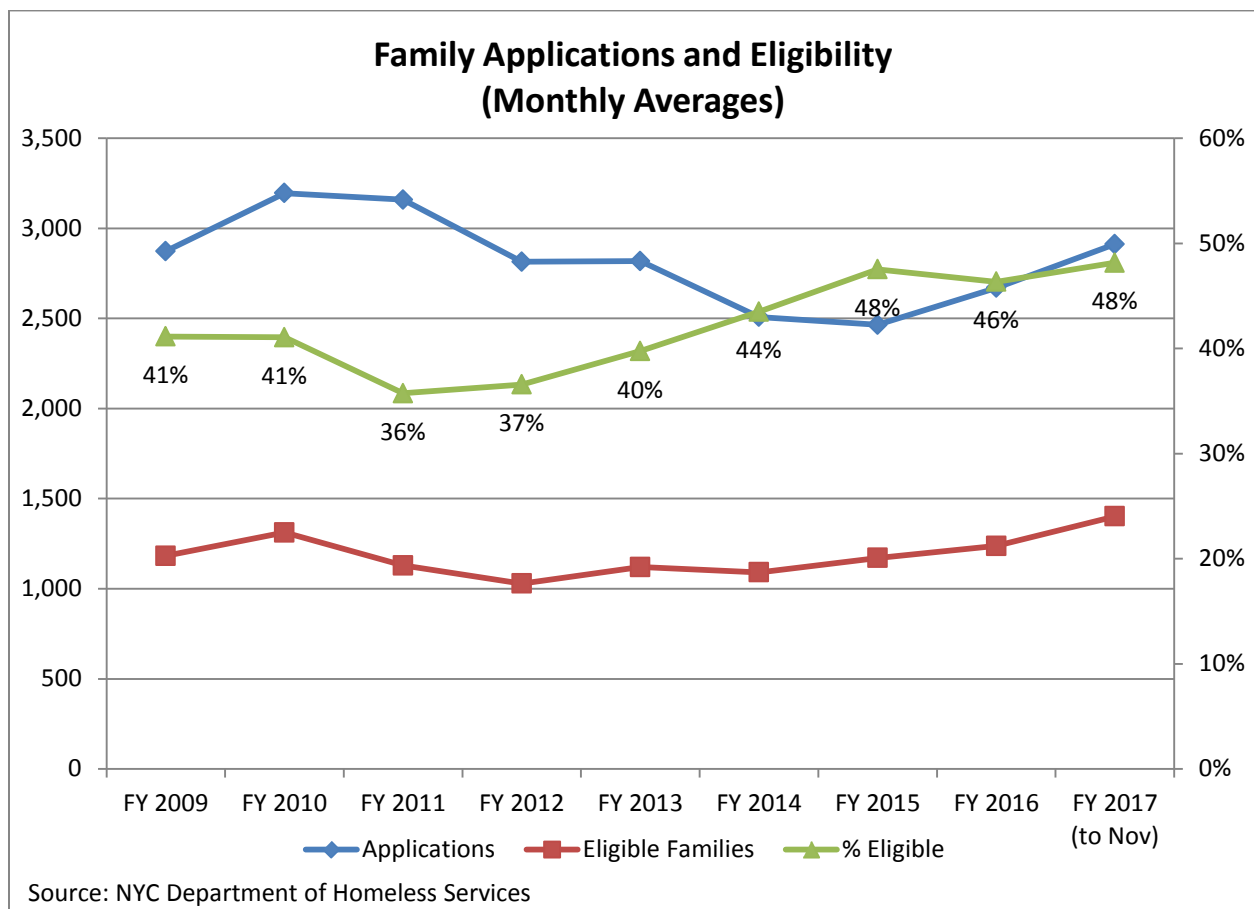


The steep increase in the number of *newly* homeless families is cause for great concern, and can be explained in part by a growing number of families fleeing domestic violence, coming in off the streets, or finding themselves without sufficient income to afford an apartment in New York City. Another factor affecting the number of families in shelters involves eligibility and admission policies. In 2015, the State changed certain shelter admission policies in order to remove unnecessary and overly bureaucratic barriers that had previously resulted in eligible families being turned away rather than placed in shelters. These Pataki-era policies had prevented countless families who were truly homeless from accessing life-saving shelter by referring them back to housing that was either unavailable or unsafe. In 2011, *only 36 percent of family applicants were admitted to shelters.*

¹ LINC: Living in Communities Rental Assistance Program; SEPS: Special Exit and Prevention Supplement; CityFEPS: City Family Eviction Prevention Supplement. For more information about individual City subsidy programs, see: <http://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/get-help/im-in-need-of-housing/>

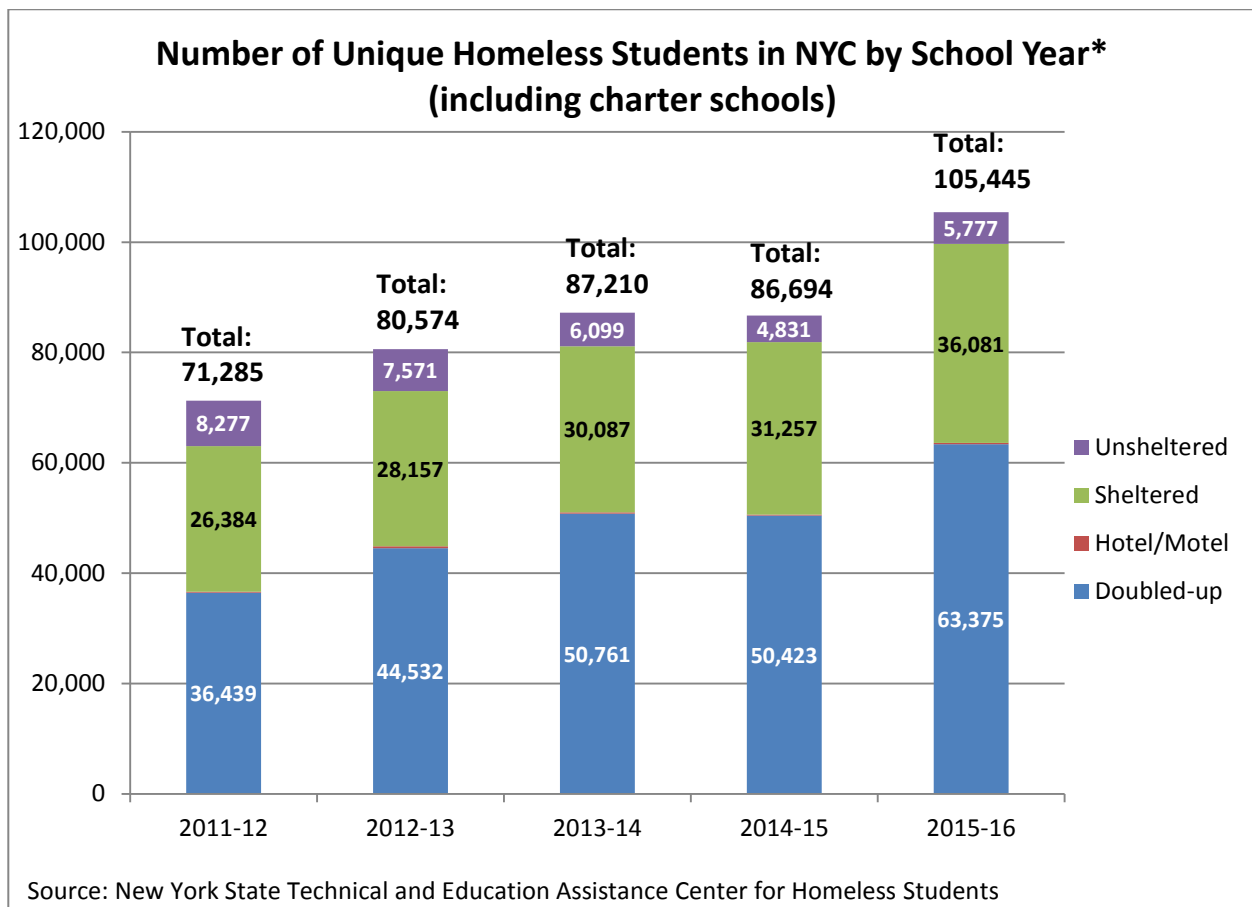
The 2015 change in policy resulted in a decrease in the percentage of families denied shelter, and now close to half (48 percent) of all homeless applicant families are determined eligible. This improvement in the approval rate for applications has obviously contributed to the rising number of genuinely needy families entering shelters and, importantly, it has also improved the experience for families in crisis who have no other option but to ask the City for a safe place to stay. However, it is important to note that the process for accessing shelters is still a rigorous one, and any family thought to have an alternative place to stay is not granted access – indeed, over half of all applicants are still denied. Notably, the average number of families found eligible between FY 2002 and 2007 was 46 percent, which then fell to an average of 39 percent in the following five years as the City repeatedly turned away eligible families as a matter of policy.¹¹

Moreover, in November of 2016 the State and City unexpectedly changed the eligibility policies again in an effort to divert families who are suspected of having other viable housing options to require that they avail themselves of those options. This requirement has been paired with an offer of additional financial aid from the City, but the impact of this approach has yet to be determined, and has initially resulted in a number of families being turned away in error.



Child and Student Homelessness: Indicators of the Hidden Crisis

The number of children spending at least one night in a shelter over the course of the year remains at record levels. In FY 2016, 45,692 children stayed in a shelter for at least one night – roughly the same as in FY 2015. However, the number of school-aged children who spent at least one night in City shelters in the 2015-16 school year increased by 15 percent compared with the year prior – to 36,081. This statistic includes children in all types of shelters, not only those under the auspices of the Department of Homeless Services. Alarming, the number of school-aged children living in doubled-up households – and therefore at risk of entering shelters – rose dramatically (by over 25 percent) from 50,423 in school year 2014-15 to 63,375 in 2015-16.¹² This highlights the growing problem of families suffering housing instability and economic insecurity discussed above.



*Note: Families in hotels/motels used as shelters in NYC are included in the shelter figures by the source data unless families accessed them without the assistance of the NYC Department of Homeless Services.

Part II: Permanent Housing Placements: Signs of Progress, but More Are Needed

Despite the ongoing economic and housing conditions fueling record homelessness in New York, the City has made some notable progress in helping homeless families move from shelters into permanent, stable, and affordable homes. The new housing initiatives have unquestionably stemmed the precipitous increase in the shelter census that began in 2011.¹³ Research has shown time and again

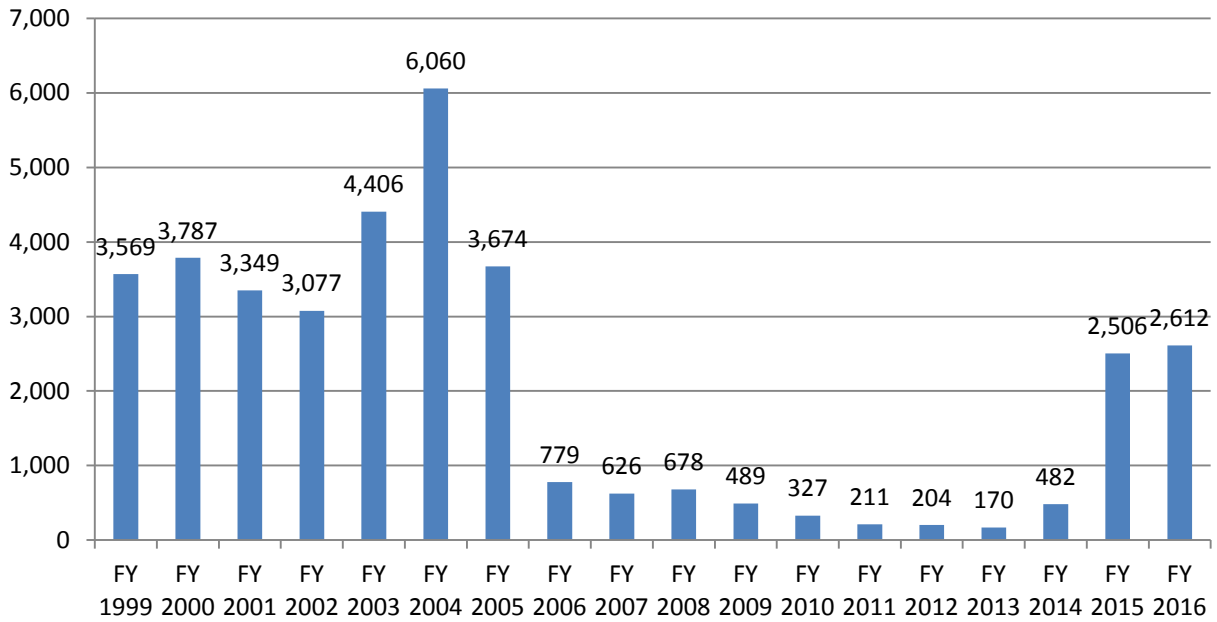
that deep, long-term subsidies and permanently affordable housing placements are the most effective ways to help families move out of shelters and keep them stably housed.¹⁴ This initial success was achieved by reversing a near decade-long policy of denying homeless families priority access to public housing and Section 8 – instead placing an average of 1,500 families in public housing and 1,500 families with Section 8 in each Fiscal Year 2015 and 2016. This is a marked increase from the paltry 170 total NYCHA and Section 8 placements made under Mayor Bloomberg in FY 2013. Still, the number of these placements has yet to reach the levels of FY 2003-2005, when the City experienced the only multi-year decrease in the family shelter census in nearly two decades.

Indeed, the City has accrued a significant deficit in the proportion of Federal housing resources allocated to homeless families. From FY 1999 to FY 2005, the City provided an average of 3,989 Federal housing placements for homeless families each year. From FY 2006 to FY 2014, only a few hundred units per year were provided, and on average, 3,548 fewer homeless families received stable housing placements over these nine years. The accumulated deficit is 31,935 fewer federal housing placements made over the nine-year period of the Bloomberg policy that withheld these vital housing resources from homeless families – a veritable lost decade.

The de Blasio administration's new rent subsidies are a welcome effort to help thousands of families who had been left in shelters with no way to leave them to finally move into their own apartments. In FY 2015, over 1,450 families moved out of shelters with LINC and CityFEPS. In FY 2016, over 2,600 placements were made with a combination of LINC, CityFEPS, SEPS, and HOME TBRA.² Initial data from the first four months of FY 2017 suggest placement levels will be similar to those in FY 2016, assuming the City's commitment remains consistent. Taking these new resources into account, the number of stable placements for homeless families and the percentage of stable placements over all shelter exits have reached the highest levels since FY 2004. Continuing this policy of providing more permanent housing resources for homeless families constitutes the only proven way to reduce the family shelter census and at the same time reduce the number of formerly homeless families returning to the shelter system.

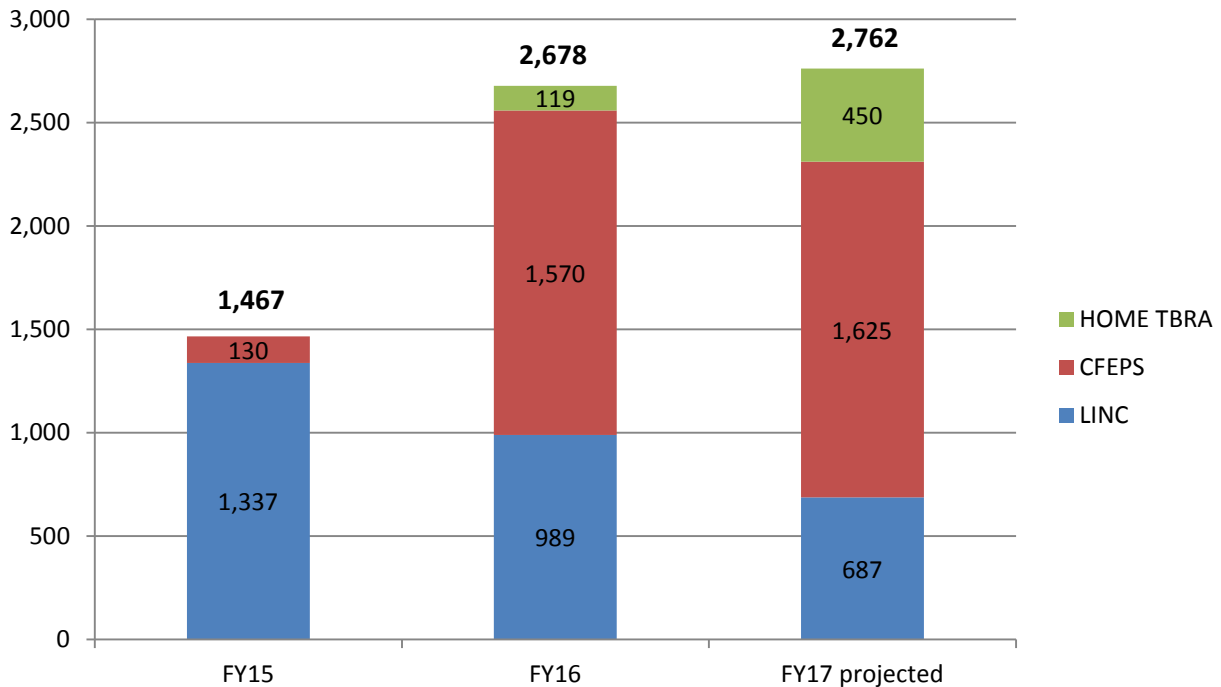
² LINC: Living in Communities Rental Assistance Program; SEPS: Special Exit and Prevention Supplement; CityFEPS: City Family Eviction Prevention Supplement; HOME TBRA: Home Tenant Based Rental Assistance; For more information about individual City subsidy programs, see: <http://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/get-help/im-in-need-of-housing/>

Total Number of Homeless Families Placed in Federal Housing (Public Housing and Section 8) FY 1999 - FY 2016



Source: NYC Department of Homeless Services

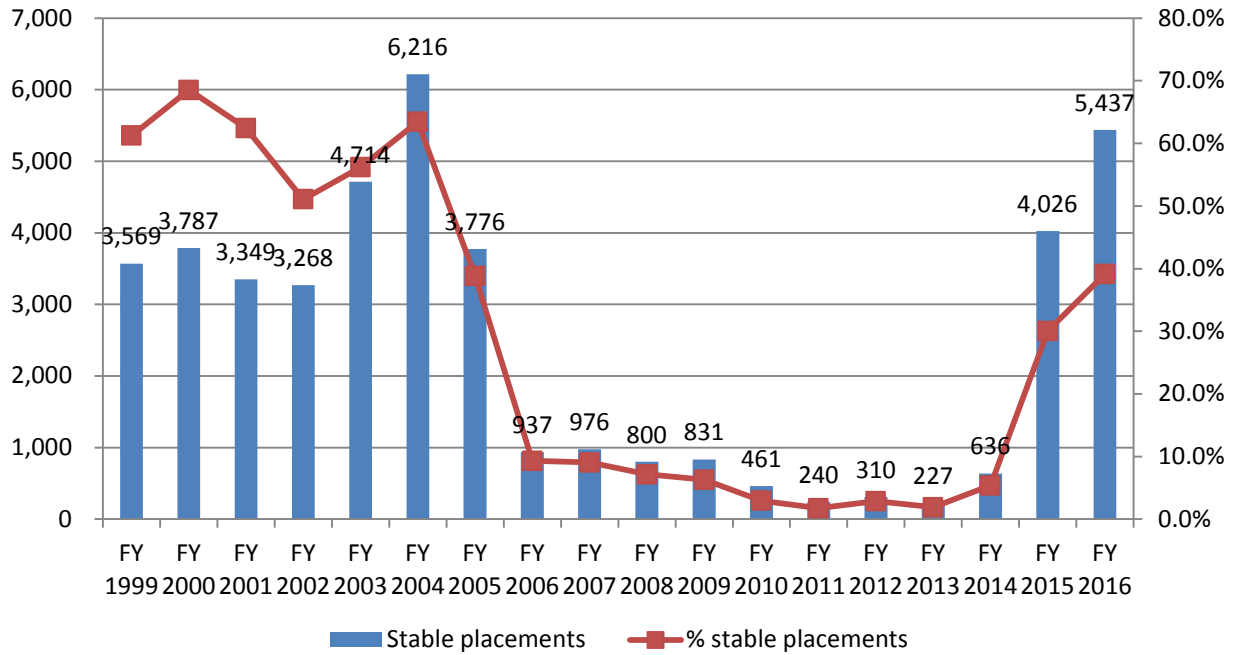
Number of Families Placed with City-Funded Rental Subsidies FY 15, 16, and 17 (projected)



Source: NYC Department of Homeless Services

Number and Percentage of Families Provided Stable Placements FY 1999 to FY 2016

Stable Placements Include NYCHA, Section 8, and Long-term Rental Subsidies



Source: NYC Department of Homeless Services

Conclusion

Family homelessness in New York City has continued to increase to alarming levels. The crisis derives from developments both positive and negative: Some smart policy changes and programs have produced promising results in housing stability, while the larger housing and economic conditions in the city – combined with some inadequate policy responses – contribute to growing homelessness.

Positives	Negatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The City’s new eviction prevention programs have helped to keep thousands of families in their own homes, and eviction is no longer the leading reason homeless families enter shelters. • In FY 2013, only 2 percent of families leaving shelters moved to long-term stable placements, but by resuming public housing preferences and long-term rent subsidies, <u>the City increased the stable placement rate to 30 percent in FY 2015 and 40 percent in FY 2016.</u> • <u>The City is now placing more families into stable homes than any year since FY 2004;</u> The City made roughly 10,000 stable housing placements for families in the first two-and-a-half years of Mayor de Blasio’s administration (compared with the fewer than 1,300 made by Mayor Bloomberg in his last four years in office). • <u>The increase in stable housing placements has helped decrease the number of families <i>returning to shelters</i> by 15 percent since FY 2013.</u> • <u>The number of family applicants found eligible for shelter has increased since FY 2014,</u> owing to a shelter application process that is marginally less onerous for the truly needy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An insufficient number of NYCHA and HPD units have been allotted to homeless families given that the number in need has nearly doubled since the start of the Bloomberg administration, and given an accumulated deficit in the number of Federal housing placements for homeless families that accrued at a rate of 3,548 families who did not receive these placements each year, for nine years. • Families and individuals fleeing domestic violence are entering the shelters in larger numbers, and domestic violence is now the leading reason homeless families with children cite as their reason for needing shelter. • Growing economic insecurity and job loss in a City with a dearth of affordable housing are causing a rapid increase in doubling-up and shelter demand for the lowest-income New Yorkers who have virtually no financial cushion to help them withstand job losses or health crises. • Thousands of families are still experiencing evictions leading to homelessness, in part because too few can access eviction prevention legal services.

Recommendations

While the record number of families in homeless shelters tonight would seem to belie the success of new City housing programs, these efforts have clearly helped thousands of families in crisis achieve stability and have kept the shelter census from growing even higher. There are, however, critical structural changes that, if implemented immediately, could change the trajectory of family homelessness in the coming years.

The number of families sleeping in homeless shelters each night is directly related to the number of families entering the system and the number moving into (and remaining in) permanent housing. The last time a multi-year decrease in the shelter census occurred was in FY 2004 and FY 2005, when the number of public housing and Section 8 placements averaged about 5,000 per year, and when the census was about half its present size. In FY 2016, the number of such placements was only 2,612. Public housing and Section 8 subsidies are well documented as cost-effective, long-term solutions to homelessness and so, given the scope of the current crisis, the de Blasio administration should:

- **Immediately increase the number of public housing placements for homeless families from 1,500 per year to at least 3,000 and the number of Section 8 and HPD resources to at least 2,500 placements, for a minimum of 5,500 annual placements to begin to recoup the nearly 32,000 placements denied to homeless families during the Lost Decade;**
- **Continue to place at least 3,000 families through City-funded rent subsidy programs each year;**
- **Implement more aggressive homelessness prevention policies, such as establishing a right to legal counsel in housing court for low-income tenants.**

While the City has had some success in moving families into housing with rent subsidies, many families continue to have trouble utilizing housing vouchers (both City- and Federally-funded) as a result of rampant and illegal landlord discrimination. Accordingly, the City must:

- **Aggressively enforce the source-of-income anti-discrimination law with landlords who illegally reject families who attempt to utilize rent vouchers.**

However, the City cannot solve this crisis alone and needs a full and willing partner in the State. Recent commitments by Governor Cuomo to build affordable and supportive housing have been needlessly stalled in Albany, leaving nearly \$2 billion already appropriated for this purpose sitting idle. Additionally, the State controls many aspects of social service regulation and has the opportunity to implement broad-based solutions that would alleviate record homelessness for New York City and the rest of the state. To fulfill its commitments and aid the City in alleviating the current homelessness crisis, the State must:

- **Immediately release the nearly \$2 billion for affordable and supportive housing funds appropriated in 2016 and currently stalled due to inaction by the Governor and Legislative leaders; and**
- **Implement Assembly Member Hevesi's proposed plan to create a State- and Federally-funded long-term rent subsidy program, known as Home Stability Support.¹⁵**

For more information, please visit: www.coalitionforthehomeless.org

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