

## Children in Peril

By **BOB HERBERT**

With so much attention focused on the banking system and arguments over bailouts, the plight of America's children in this severe economic downturn is getting short shrift.

Official statistics are not yet readily available, but there is little doubt that poverty and family homelessness are rising, that the quality of public education in many communities is deteriorating and that legions of children are losing access to health care as their parents join the vastly expanding ranks of the unemployed.

This is a toxic mix for children, a demoralizing convergence of factors that have long been known to impede the ability of young people to flourish.

"It's actually quite frightening," said Dr. Irwin Redlener, president of the Children's Health Fund in New York. "We're seeing very unsettling reports of increased numbers of children in poverty. Those numbers may rise from about 12.5 million before the recession to nearly 17 million by the end of this year."

Dr. Redlener is a pediatrician who also is a professor at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health. He co-founded the Children's Health Fund with the singer Paul Simon back in 1987 in response to a homeless crisis in New York City that saw families with small children wallowing tragically in squalid welfare hotels.

Dr. Redlener and Mr. Simon raised enough money to purchase a medically equipped van that traveled the city to bring free health care to homeless kids.

What is happening now, nationally, is overwhelming compared with the problems in New York City in the mid-1980s. "We are seeing the emergence of what amounts to a 'recession generation,'" said Dr. Redlener. "This includes the children who were already living in poverty, but also millions more whose families had a reasonable chance of making it. Two years ago, they saw themselves as working class and middle class, but now many are unemployed or underemployed, and one of the results is that we're seeing growing numbers of children depending on emergency rooms for health care or going without care."

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities has noted that changes in food stamp enrollment closely track changes in poverty. Since the start of the recession, the number of people receiving food stamps has increased by 4.6 million, nearly 17 percent. According to the center, that's an indication of a substantial increase in poverty over the same period. And that's bad news for children.

Similarly grim evidence is mounting with regard to homelessness. Surges in the number of families living in shelters are being reported by officials in communities across the country.

“This spike in homelessness,” the center said, “is worsening what was already a large and persistent problem. Even before the current recession, an estimated 1.6 million people, including 340,000 children, were homeless and living in emergency shelters or transitional housing over the course of a year. Many more adults and children were living on the street, in shelters for victims of domestic violence, or temporarily in the homes of friends and relations.”

With unemployment expected to continue to rise for the foreseeable future, and with state and local governments staggering beneath the weight of budget deficits, there is no reason to believe that these problems — and their profound negative impact on children — will do anything but worsen.

States from coast to coast are cutting social service programs. Arizona’s child protection agency, for example, has cut back on its investigations of abuse and neglect reports. Similar cutbacks in socially beneficial and even life-saving programs for children are in the works in many states.

Dr. Redlener described what is occurring as “a quiet disaster.”

The number of state-of-the-art mobile medical units operated by the Children’s Health Fund has grown from one in 1987 to 37. In an effort to bring health care to some of the children most in need right now — while at the same time drawing attention to the plight of children in general in these tough economic times — Dr. Redlener is planning to deploy the distinctive blue vans to some of the communities hardest hit by the recession.

The first stop will be Detroit this coming weekend.

“We’re going to take them to various parts of the country where there have been significant cutbacks in services,” he said, “and for a weekend we’ll provide free health and dental care to children whose parents cannot afford to pay for care. We’ll also refer every child that we see to an ongoing source of care in their community, if we can find one.”

The goal, he said, in addition to helping as many children as possible, is to spark additional help for children from all quarters, government and private. “Kids can’t wait for the economic recovery to have their immediate needs cared for,” he said.

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