



## **Deep Dive: *Unpacking Child Poverty and Youth Homelessness in Allegany County***

### **Introduction**

As a Community Action Agency dedicated to empowering families, we recognize the pressing challenges faced by our community. Following the success of our two 2024 community forums—“Housing for All” in February and “Poverty and Food Insecurity” in May—we have developed the “Deep Dive” series. This initiative aims to provide actionable insights into critical social issues affecting Allegany County.

Our first edition focus is on the urgent realities of child poverty and youth homelessness—issues that go beyond mere statistics. In the heart of our community, a silent crisis unfolds daily, hidden behind closed doors and masked by the routines of everyday life. These challenges represent children filled with dreams and aspirations, children who go to bed hungry, and children whose laughter is silenced by uncertainty.

We believe these challenges do not define our community; rather, they highlight the areas where we must concentrate our collective efforts to inspire hope and action. Through this report, we aim to shed light on the urgent need for support, culminating in a community forum that will galvanize dialogue and encourage collaborative solutions to uplift our most vulnerable residents.

### **Defining Homelessness and Measuring Poverty**

**Homelessness** is defined by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) as the condition of an individual or family lacking a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. This includes various situations, such as:

- **Sheltered Homelessness:** Individuals and families living in emergency shelters or transitional housing.
- **Unsheltered Homelessness:** Individuals living in places not meant for human habitation, such as cars, parks, or abandoned buildings.
- **Couch Surfing:** Individuals who do not have a permanent residence and rely on temporarily staying with friends, family, or acquaintances, which can lead to instability and insecurity.

Homelessness is often accompanied by other challenges, including limited access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and employment, which can perpetuate a cycle of poverty.

**Poverty** is generally defined as the condition in which individuals or families lack sufficient financial resources to meet basic needs for living, such as food, clothing, and shelter. In the United States, the U.S. Census Bureau defines poverty using specific income thresholds that vary by family size and composition. A family is considered to be living in poverty if their total income is below this threshold.

For example, in 2023, the poverty threshold for a family of four was set at \$30,000. However, this measure does not account for regional differences in the cost of living, meaning that families in areas with higher costs may struggle more even if their incomes are above the poverty line. Poverty can have profound implications for individuals and families, affecting health, educational outcomes, and overall quality of life.

These definitions are crucial for understanding the broader context of child poverty and youth homelessness in Allegany County. By grasping the nuances of homelessness and poverty measurement, we can better address the root causes and implement effective solutions to support our community.

## Overview of Child Poverty and Youth Homelessness

### Current Statistics

In Allegany County, **23.3% of children aged 0-5** live below the poverty line—significantly higher than the national average of 18% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). For **children aged 6-17, 19.5%** live in poverty, illustrating that economic hardships continue to affect older children as well. Additionally, the **NY-501 Continuum of Care** reported **594 individuals experiencing homelessness** in the county in 2023, marking a **16% increase** from the previous year. **20%** of the homeless population are **youth aged 18-24**, highlighting the significant number of young adults facing housing instability (HUD, 2023).

### Demographic Insights

- **Racial Disparities:** The ACS reports that Black children in Allegany County experience poverty rates exceeding 40%, while Hispanic children also face elevated rates compared to their white counterparts, highlighting significant racial disparities in economic stability (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024; Census Bureau).
- **Single-Parent Households:** Approximately 40% of children in poverty live in single-parent households, which are often more vulnerable to financial strain (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024; ACS).
- **Disproportionate Impact on LGBTQ+ Youth:** Nationally, LGBTQ+ youth are 120% more likely to experience homelessness than their heterosexual peers, a trend mirrored in Allegany County, where a lack of supportive housing options exacerbates their vulnerability (True Colors United, 2023; True Colors United).

## Factors Contributing to Child Poverty and Youth Homelessness

Child poverty and youth homelessness in Allegany County are influenced by a complex interplay of economic, social, and systemic factors. Understanding these contributing factors is essential for developing effective interventions and support systems.

- **Economic Challenges:** Allegany County's median household income of \$58,725 falls significantly below the New York state median of \$81,386, underscoring considerable economic disparities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). Many families struggle to meet their basic needs, often prioritizing one

essential requirement over another. For those living paycheck to paycheck, unexpected expenses such as medical bills or car repairs can trigger a financial crisis, resulting in unstable housing, food insecurity, and inadequate healthcare. These economic pressures limit access to resources necessary for healthy development, perpetuating a cycle of chronic poverty across generations.

- **Educational Attainment:** While 91.4% of Allegany County residents hold a high school diploma, only 24.5% attain a bachelor's degree or higher, indicating limited access to higher education opportunities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). The absence of nearby colleges, coupled with financial barriers and challenges like transportation and childcare costs, restricts many from pursuing further education. This lack of advanced education diminishes parents' earning potential, confining them to low-wage jobs with minimal upward mobility. Consequently, children in these environments grow up with normalized economic hardship, which can negatively impact their educational aspirations and opportunities.
- **High Housing Costs:** Nearly 30% of families in Allegany County spend over 30% of their income on housing, exceeding the standard measure of housing affordability (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). This burden leaves families with limited resources for essentials like food, transportation, healthcare, and education, leading to heightened stress that adversely affects children's emotional and psychological well-being. Families facing housing instability often find themselves on the brink of eviction, causing disruptions in schooling, friendships, and overall security.
- **Family Instability:** Economic struggles frequently breed instability within households, where stress and uncertainty strain family relationships. Children living in poverty are more likely to experience familial breakdowns, as parents struggle to provide necessary emotional and financial support. This instability can lead to foster care placements or homelessness. Furthermore, some children may leave home due to neglect, abuse, or parental addiction, with few resources available to help them cope with such traumatic experiences.
- **Substance Abuse:** Substance use is both a cause and consequence of youth homelessness. Families grappling with addiction often foster unstable environments, leaving children and teenagers without a safe space to grow up. Many youth escape abuse or neglect related to parental substance use, often finding themselves on the streets. Conversely, homeless youth face a heightened risk of developing substance use disorders, with studies indicating that 20-30% of this population struggles with addiction (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2023; Covenant House, 2023). Without intervention, substance use can hinder stable housing access, job retention, and educational attainment, creating a cyclical pattern of homelessness and addiction.
- **Lack of Support Services:** Allegany County's critical shortage of mental health and substance abuse services severely impacts vulnerable youth. Comprehensive support—including counseling, therapy, housing assistance, and rehabilitation programs—is vital for helping at-risk youth and families overcome their challenges. However, limited resources often leave youth facing trauma, abuse, or substance use disorders without necessary help, perpetuating cycles of homelessness and mental health crises.
- **Educational Disruptions:** Homeless youth confront substantial barriers to education, as frequent relocations and unstable living conditions disrupt their schooling. Without a stable home, attending school regularly becomes challenging, leading to poor academic performance and higher dropout rates. Consequently, homeless youth often lag academically, making it increasingly difficult to catch up and graduate, which deprives them of skills needed to escape poverty.
- **Social Isolation:** Poverty and homelessness alienate children and youth from their communities, fostering social isolation and contributing to mental health challenges such as depression and anxiety. The stigma surrounding poverty and homelessness can deter these young people from seeking help or building supportive relationships, further weakening their social safety nets and exacerbating their vulnerabilities.

## Social Determinants of Health and Lifelong Impacts

The social determinants of health—conditions in which individuals are born, grow, live, work, and age—play a pivotal role in shaping the experiences of child poverty and youth homelessness in Allegany County. These determinants create a complex web of challenges that significantly impact overall health and well-being.

### Key Social Determinants of Health:

- **Access to Healthcare:** Uninsured children often miss essential health appointments, leading to untreated conditions that can escalate into more serious health issues (Children’s Health Insurance Program, 2023). The lack of preventive care can result in chronic illnesses, complicating the lives of low-income families.
- **Food Security:** Approximately one in six children in Allegany County experiences food insecurity, hindering access to nutritious food and affecting both physical and emotional development (Feeding America, 2023). Malnutrition during critical growth periods can result in cognitive delays and chronic health conditions.
- **Community Support Networks:** Strong community support systems are vital for building resilience among families facing adversity. Insufficient resources can limit families' ability to break free from cycles of poverty and homelessness (National Academy of Sciences, 2019).
- **Housing Stability:** Safe and affordable housing is a fundamental determinant of health. Families facing housing instability endure significant stress, complicating their ability to maintain employment and provide a secure environment for their children (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2023). Children in unstable housing situations are more likely to struggle academically and socially.
- **Educational Opportunities:** Access to quality education is crucial for long-term health and economic stability. Children from low-income families often attend under-resourced schools, which limits their future opportunities (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).
- **Economic Stability:** Families with low incomes face numerous barriers, including limited access to employment opportunities and inadequate wages. These challenges can prevent families from meeting basic needs and contribute to a persistent cycle of poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023).
- **Social and Community Context:** Family structure and neighborhood safety significantly impact economic stability and resource access. High-crime neighborhoods can increase stress and anxiety, affecting children's well-being (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023).
- **Transportation Access:** Limited access to reliable transportation can restrict families' abilities to reach jobs, healthcare, and educational opportunities, compounding the effects of poverty and homelessness (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2023).
- **Environmental Factors:** Exposure to environmental hazards, such as lead and poor air quality, can adversely affect children's health, particularly in low-income neighborhoods (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023).
- **Trafficking Vulnerability:** Children living in poverty and unstable housing situations are at increased risk of trafficking and exploitation. The absence of protective factors, such as supportive family environments and community resources, can make vulnerable youth targets for traffickers (National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, 2023). Trafficking can have devastating physical and emotional consequences, further entrenching individuals in cycles of poverty and homelessness.

## Lifelong Impacts of Child Poverty and Homelessness

The consequences of growing up in poverty and experiencing homelessness can last a lifetime, affecting multiple aspects of individual development and well-being:

- **Cognitive Delays:** Children from low-income families frequently score lower on cognitive ability and language development tests, leading to academic challenges. These cognitive delays can stem from limited access to early childhood education, fewer educational resources at home, and increased stressors that distract from learning. As a result, these children may struggle with basic academic skills, which can hinder their performance in school and limit future opportunities for higher education and stable employment (American Psychological Association, 2023).
- **Increased Risk of Homelessness:** Children in poverty are more likely to experience homelessness as adults, perpetuating a cycle of instability. The instability of their childhood living conditions can make it difficult for them to secure stable housing later in life. This pattern creates a generational cycle where children who grow up in precarious situations may replicate the same circumstances for their families, contributing to ongoing community challenges related to housing insecurity (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2023).
- **Health Issues:** Childhood poverty is linked to higher rates of chronic illnesses, such as asthma and obesity, often due to inadequate healthcare and nutrition. Limited financial resources can prevent families from accessing quality healthcare, leading to untreated health issues. Poor nutrition, a common consequence of food insecurity, can also result in developmental delays and long-term health complications. This combination can severely affect a child's overall health and well-being throughout their life (Children's Defense Fund, 2023).
- **Mental Health Challenges:** Young people experiencing homelessness are at greater risk of developing anxiety, depression, and PTSD, which can impede their ability to thrive. The trauma associated with homelessness—such as instability, loss of community, and exposure to violence—can have lasting effects on mental health. Additionally, mental health issues can hinder educational attainment and job prospects, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and homelessness (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2023).
- **Unemployment:** Adults who faced homelessness in their youth are significantly more likely to be unemployed or underemployed, continuing the cycle of poverty. The challenges of securing stable employment can stem from limited education, lack of work experience, and mental health challenges. Unemployment not only affects individuals' financial stability but also their self-esteem and ability to provide for their families (National Center for Homeless Education, 2023).
- **Substance Abuse Disorders:** Youth who experience homelessness are at a greater risk of developing substance abuse disorders as a coping mechanism for their trauma. The stressors associated with homelessness—such as social isolation, physical danger, and emotional pain—can lead individuals to seek relief through substances. This coping strategy can create additional barriers to recovery and contribute to ongoing health and social issues (Covenant House, 2023).
- **Social Skills Deficits:** Children growing up in poverty or homelessness may struggle with social skills, complicating healthy relationship development. The instability of their environments can limit opportunities for social interactions, making it difficult for them to develop essential interpersonal skills. These deficits can impact their ability to form and maintain relationships in adulthood, leading to isolation and further emotional distress (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2023).
- **Risky Behaviors:** Adolescents from impoverished backgrounds may engage in risky behaviors, leading to long-term negative health outcomes. Factors such as peer pressure, lack of supervision, and limited access to positive activities can contribute to risky behaviors, including substance use,

unsafe sexual practices, and criminal activity. These choices can result in legal issues, health complications, and other challenges that further entrench individuals in cycles of poverty (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2023).

- **Cycle of Poverty:** The intergenerational cycle of poverty continues as children from low-income households are more likely to remain in poverty as adults, impacting their own children. Structural barriers, such as systemic inequality and lack of access to quality education and job opportunities, perpetuate this cycle. Children raised in poverty are less likely to have the resources and support needed to break free from these constraints, making it challenging for future generations to achieve financial stability (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023).
- **Educational Attainment:** Reduced educational outcomes result in lower earning potential and job opportunities, perpetuating poverty. Children who struggle academically due to the factors mentioned above are less likely to graduate from high school or pursue higher education. This lack of educational attainment limits their job prospects, leading to low-paying jobs and increasing the likelihood of remaining in poverty (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).
- **Victimization Effects:** Survivors of trauma may experience significant mental health challenges and stigma, hindering their social integration and making it difficult to rebuild their lives and escape poverty. The psychological impact of traumatic experiences can lead to feelings of worthlessness and isolation, preventing individuals from seeking help or forming supportive relationships. This stigma can also discourage them from accessing necessary services, further entrenching them in cycles of hardship (U.S. Department of Justice, 2023).

## Impact on the Community and Future Generations

The ramifications of child poverty and homelessness extend beyond the individual and family units, significantly influencing the fabric of the community in Allegany County, NY, and shaping the prospects for future generations.

### Community Stability and Economic Health

High rates of child poverty and homelessness can destabilize communities, leading to increased demand for public services, including healthcare, education, and social services. As families struggle to meet basic needs, community resources become strained, resulting in:

- **Increased Social Service Costs:** Local agencies may face escalating costs associated with emergency housing, healthcare, and food assistance programs. For instance, the average cost of emergency shelter can exceed **\$30,000** per family per year, diverting funds from other community initiatives (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2023).
- **Decreased Economic Productivity:** As a significant portion of the population grapples with the effects of poverty and homelessness, overall workforce participation may decline, limiting economic growth. The **5.1%** unemployment rate in Allegany County indicates challenges in achieving full economic participation, particularly among those with unstable living conditions (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023).

### Educational Challenges

Children living in poverty and homelessness face numerous barriers to educational success, which can have long-term implications for the community:

- **Lower Educational Attainment:** Disruptions in education caused by homelessness can result in higher dropout rates. This not only impacts the individuals but also affects the community's skilled workforce and economic vitality. According to the National Center for Homeless Education (2023), students experiencing homelessness are twice as likely to drop out of school.
- **Reduced Community Engagement:** A poorly educated population may lead to lower levels of civic engagement, affecting community participation in local governance, volunteerism, and overall social cohesion.

## Intergenerational Poverty

Intergenerational poverty refers to the persistent transmission of economic disadvantage across generations. Children who grow up in poverty often face significant barriers that hinder their ability to escape the cycle of deprivation, which in turn affects their children and subsequent generations. In Allegany County, NY, this phenomenon poses critical challenges to community development and individual well-being.

- **Cycle of Poverty:** Research indicates that children from low-income households are more likely to remain in poverty as adults, leading to a generational cycle that can hinder community development. This cycle can reduce the overall economic resilience of the community and limit opportunities for social mobility (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023).
- **Impact on Future Generations:** The consequences of child poverty and homelessness can extend to future generations, as children raised in these conditions may struggle to provide stable environments for their children, thus continuing the cycle of disadvantage (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2023).

## Public Health Concerns

Childhood poverty and homelessness can lead to a range of public health issues that burden the community:

- **Higher Rates of Chronic Illness:** Increased prevalence of health issues such as asthma and obesity among children in poverty can lead to greater healthcare costs for the community. The Children's Defense Fund (2023) highlights that children living in poverty are more likely to experience chronic health conditions that require ongoing medical attention.
- **Mental Health Implications:** The stress and instability associated with poverty and homelessness can lead to long-term mental health issues for both children and adults. This places additional burdens on local mental health services and impacts overall community well-being (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2023).

## Conclusion and Next Steps

The challenges posed by child poverty and youth homelessness in Allegany County are urgent and demand immediate action. These issues are not merely statistics; they represent the hopes and dreams of our children and families, who deserve better. By engaging the community in open dialogue, we can deepen our understanding of these challenges and work toward sustainable solutions that uplift our most vulnerable residents.

***Upcoming Community Forum: Join Us for an Engaging Discussion***

We invite you to be part of a pivotal community forum on **Thursday, October 24th, from 6:00 PM to 7:30 PM** at the **David A. Howe Library in Wellsville**. This event will feature a panel discussion with local experts and advocates, offering invaluable insights into the urgent issues surrounding child poverty and youth homelessness in Allegany County.

**What to Expect:**

- **Panel Discussion:** Listen to community leaders and advocates share their expertise and personal experiences related to child poverty and homelessness.
- **Data Insights:** Gain a clearer understanding of the current landscape through presentations that illustrate the challenges and opportunities our community faces.
- **Community Engagement:** Connect with fellow attendees to share thoughts, experiences, and innovative ideas for tackling these critical issues together.
- **Advocacy Opportunities:** Discover ways to get involved in local initiatives and support efforts aimed at fostering lasting change.
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This forum is an essential opportunity to engage with others who share a commitment to improving the lives of children and families in Allegany County. Your participation is vital.

***Your voice matters***—together, we can inspire action and cultivate hope for our most vulnerable residents.

**Follow-Up**

After the forum, we will compile a comprehensive summary report that captures community input, perspectives, and insights from our discussions. This report will serve as a roadmap for actionable strategies aimed at addressing child poverty and youth homelessness in Allegany County, ensuring that we stay focused on our mission.