

Post-Forum Analysis: Child Poverty and Youth Homelessness in Allegany County

The third forum of 2024, part of ACCORD's Deep Dive Series, focused on Child Poverty and Youth Homelessness, offering an in-depth exploration of the systemic challenges affecting Allegany County's most vulnerable populations. The forum served as a platform for open dialogue among community leaders, educators, advocates, and community members, creating a shared understanding of the barriers facing families and youth while emphasizing the importance of collaboration to drive long-term solutions.

While forums like this one cannot resolve these issues immediately, they are a critical step in fostering partnerships, raising awareness, and guiding future planning efforts. The insights shared highlight both the urgency of these challenges and the pathways for change that will require local, state, and federal engagement.

Key Findings: Challenges and Barriers

1. No Shelter, Few Safety Nets

The lack of emergency shelter options in Allegany County is one of the most pressing issues identified. Families and youth in crisis often have nowhere to turn, forcing them into precarious situations such as overcrowded homes, temporary arrangements with friends, or even unsafe environments. These conditions exacerbate the instability already faced by those living in poverty or on the brink of homelessness.

"We don't have those residential places, those emergency housing options," a panelist noted. "So, we're stuck trying to figure out where to send people."

Traditional support programs, while essential, are stretched thin and limited by restrictive eligibility requirements. Many families and youth fall through the cracks because they do not meet narrow program criteria, such as being classified as "literally homeless." The need for increased shelter capacity and more flexible program eligibility was emphasized, but achieving these goals will require advocacy at the state and federal levels to secure adequate funding and policy reform.

Local organizations have stepped in where possible, but their efforts remain constrained by limited resources. The discussion underscored the necessity of multi-level engagement to create both immediate and sustainable solutions.

2. Youth Homelessness is Invisible

Youth homelessness remains largely hidden due to its unique characteristics. Many young people are not visibly homeless but instead rely on temporary housing arrangements, such as couch-surfing with friends or extended family. These situations often disqualify them from programs that require documentation of "literal homelessness," leaving a significant portion of the population unsupported.

This invisibility is compounded by the lack of a unified, community-wide data system to track youth homelessness. Without comprehensive data, Allegany County struggles to quantify the scope of the problem and advocate for the resources it needs.

"These kids aren't counted because they're not literally homeless," a panelist explained. "But they're still without a stable place to call home, and that instability affects every part of their lives."

Additionally, the absence of accurate data directly impacts the allocation of state and federal resources. "When youth aren't counted," another panelist emphasized, "it directly impacts the resources that are sent to our county."

Improving data collection practices and expanding definitions of homelessness to include these hidden populations are critical steps. Advocacy efforts at higher levels of government will be essential to ensure that all youth experiencing homelessness are recognized and supported.

3. Emotional and Social Impacts

Poverty and homelessness have profound emotional and social consequences for children and youth. Many live in chronic instability, where meeting basic needs such as food and safety takes precedence over building relationships, pursuing education, or envisioning a hopeful future.

Panelists described how these stressors manifest in behavioral challenges, with students showing increased aggression, emotional withdrawal, and difficulty regulating emotions. One panelist shared a personal story: "Poverty for me meant chaos. There was yelling, sometimes violence, and I learned to walk on eggshells just to stay out of the way."

This environment of constant stress often leads to long-term mental health challenges, such as anxiety, depression, and difficulties in forming healthy relationships. Schools and community organizations have taken on the critical role of providing social-emotional support, but panelists noted that these efforts are often underfunded and insufficient to meet the growing need.

Reducing the emotional toll of poverty requires addressing its root causes. While local initiatives can provide immediate relief, systemic change—such as policies that alleviate family stressors and improve access to housing and mental health services—will be necessary to achieve lasting impact.

4. Hunger and Educational Disruptions

Hunger emerged as a pervasive issue during the forum. Many children rely on school meal programs for their primary source of nutrition, highlighting the critical role of schools in addressing food insecurity. Panelists shared stories of students who come to school hungry, unable to concentrate or participate fully in their education.

"I see kids going through the lunch line twice, just trying to fill up," one educator shared. "It's heartbreaking."

In addition to hunger, homelessness creates significant educational barriers. Students without stable housing face challenges such as inconsistent attendance, lack of internet access, and limited study spaces. These disruptions have long-term consequences, including lower academic achievement and reduced opportunities for higher education or employment.

A panelist illustrated this issue: "I can give a child a computer, but if they're homeless, do they have a place to plug it in? Do they have a warm library to go to? How do we expect them to get their homework done?"

Expanding local food security initiatives and providing school-based support services can address some of these immediate challenges. However, ensuring equitable access to education and nutrition will require sustained investment from state and federal programs.

5. Economic and Life Skill Gaps

Youth experiencing poverty often lack the basic life skills needed for independence, such as cooking, budgeting, or navigating housing systems. Without these foundational skills, many struggle to break the cycle of poverty or transition successfully into adulthood.

One panelist raised an important question: "How do you use a washing machine if no one's ever taught you? What else do you need besides putting coins in it?"

The discussion highlighted the critical need for transitional housing programs that not only provide shelter but also equip youth with the skills necessary for long-term stability. Mentorship initiatives and hands-on training programs can help bridge these gaps, but such efforts require consistent funding and support that often extend beyond local capabilities.

6. Stigma and Systemic Barriers

The stigma surrounding poverty and homelessness remains a significant barrier for families and youth seeking help. Many parents fear judgment or separation from their children, especially when emergency housing options are only available for minors. This fear often prevents families from accessing the services they need.

"Be kind, be compassionate, be nice," one panelist shared on behalf of a parent experiencing homelessness. "That's what they want you to know, because it could be any of us."

This stigma, coupled with rigid program requirements, creates systemic barriers that leave many families feeling unsupported. Reducing stigma requires a cultural shift toward empathy and understanding, as well as advocacy for policy changes that expand program eligibility and increase funding for family-focused support services.

The Power of One: Small Actions, Big Impact

The forum emphasized the importance of individual actions in driving change. Even small gestures, such as helping a family navigate available resources or offering emotional support, can make a significant difference in reducing stigma and fostering trust.

"Sometimes, it's just one small thing I can do—maybe helping a family connect with a service or showing someone they're not alone," a panelist reflected. "It's small to me, but it's huge to them."

The Power of One reminds us that collective change begins with individual efforts. By showing kindness, challenging stereotypes, and advocating for vulnerable populations, every community member can play a role in addressing poverty and homelessness.

Forums as a Catalyst for Change

Forums like this one provide an essential platform for collaboration, exploration, and advocacy. They help:

Build Partnerships: Strengthen connections among schools, social services, and local organizations.

Explore Challenges: Identify systemic barriers and gaps in resources.

Raise Awareness: Increase understanding of poverty and homelessness while reducing stigma.

Promote Advocacy: Amplify local voices to influence state and federal policies.

"We're identifying the gaps and bringing things to the table," one panelist noted. "That's where it starts—by coming together as a community."

Looking Ahead: Planning for 2025

As ACCORD plans its 2025 forum series, the insights from this discussion will guide future planning, advocacy, and program development. While many solutions will require action at state and federal levels, local efforts remain critical in the meantime.

The Deep Dive Series will continue to serve as a foundation for addressing systemic challenges and building a stronger, more equitable Allegany County. Join us in 2025 as we work together to create lasting change.

To view the initial Deep Dive report, visit www.accordcorp.org/deepdive.