

Homeless students: Increasingly, families taking shelter anywhere they can

Homelessness rises, redefining living conditions for schoolchildren

Living in a storage unit

Shane Palmer, right, kisses his fiancée, Maria Maior outside the storage unit they are living in with her 12-year-old son in a northwest Chicago suburb. The family of three splits time between their storage unit and motels following a job loss and a string of bad luck. (Tribune photo by David Pierini / October 22, 2009)

By Bonnie Miller Rubin Tribune reporter

October 28, 2009

Maria Maior's son is a football-playing, skateboard-riding, Xbox-loving kid whose home reveals all the trappings of domesticity: a cushy sofa, big-screen TV, a framed poster of [Brian Urlacher](#) -- one of the 12-year-old's favorite football players. On most evenings, two big dogs curl up on the carpeting.

The scene could be lifted from any suburban subdivision -- except that it's located not in a den, but in a storage unit.

The boy moved into the 10-foot-by-25-foot bunker about two months ago with his mom and her fiancée, after a long run of bad luck and the loss of both of their jobs. His mother didn't want his name used for this article. "As long as I have my parents, I'm fine with this," Maior's son said of the accommodations. "It's really not that bad."

School district officials said the boy is one of a record number of area students living in motels, campgrounds, shelters, cars and, yes, storage facilities.

According to recently released data, McHenry County's homeless enrollment increased by 125 percent from the 2007-08 school year to the 2008-09 school year -- the biggest hike in the six-county metropolitan area. Schools in Kane (85 percent), Will (61 percent), DuPage (53 percent), Lake (44 percent) and suburban Cook (24 percent) counties also posted their largest increases, reflecting the surge in foreclosures and unemployment. Early reports indicate that the trend has continued this fall, with numbers spiraling even higher.

"These are not people in cardboard boxes," said Maggie Dempsey, homeless liaison coordinator for School District U-46, which covers 11 communities in the northwest suburbs. "These are the people next door."

Though the economy is behind the uptick, homeless advocates and school officials say they're doing a better job of identifying and counting kids such as Maior's son -- one of 230 homeless students enrolled in U-46, an increase of 57 from last year, Dempsey said.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, federal legislation passed in 2002 to ensure that transient youth are enrolled in school, defines homelessness as "children who lack a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence."

For those students, school is a beacon of stability -- one reason that federal law requires all districts to provide this group with everything from crayons to transportation.

Maior prefers to drive her son to school rather than have him take the bus and risk arousing suspicion about their \$179-per-month housing, which is a breach of their storage facility lease and an apparent violation of local ordinances.

Waking up early, before any storage facility workers arrive, is one part of the family's elaborate daily choreography -- along with knowing the fast-food restaurants where you can wash, doing homework by candlelight or flashlight and preparing dinner on a propane grill, which also serves as the primary source of heat. A sense of humor doesn't hurt, either. Punching in the security code for access to the property, Maior tells visitors, "I've always wanted to live in a gated community."

It wasn't always like this. Before the housing market crashed, the family rented houses and apartments. Shane Palmer -- the only father Maior's son has known -- would lay 200 to 300 yards of carpet a day; now, he's lucky to get 100 yards a week. Maior repaired TVs and other electronics at \$13.50 an hour, but business dwindled in 2008. Sometimes, she'll make quick cash working on someone's car, but what she'd really like is a full-time job. So far, filling out dozens of applications has been futile. No responses.

"Of course, it's hard to look presentable," she said, her voice trailing off.

To get into an apartment would take at least \$1,000, she estimated. But even if the couple could scrape together that kind of money, their ordeal is complicated by two large dogs, including a Rottweiler -- a breed few landlords welcome.

"People say I should put the dogs to sleep ... but I wouldn't put down a family member just because they were inconvenient," she said, wiping away a tear. "If I do that, our whole world would crash."

Sometimes, when Maior or Palmer gets paid, there's a reprieve from the storage unit. For \$40 a night, the family can check into a motel and take a hot shower, watch a movie, pop popcorn in the microwave and sleep in a real bed instead of on air mattresses. "That's when I get to pretend that this is not really happening," Maior said. "At least until the next morning, when it's time to pack up and go home."

Ron O'Connor, Will County's homeless liaison, said this academic year has been like no other. "Where we used to see single moms, maybe leaving a domestic situation, now we're seeing more and more two-parent homes that just aren't making it," O'Connor said. "That's never happened before."

The burgeoning homeless student population is taxing strapped school districts, say educators, who also must deal with everything from what is a reasonable amount of homework to students' not getting medication to their being bused long distances to stay in the district -- a right protected by law.

"Kids shouldn't have to suffer," said Sharon Gronemeyer, an assistant superintendent in Plainfield Community Consolidated School District 202. "If school can do anything to lessen the burden, that's what we're doing."

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/education/chi-homeless-studentsoct28,0,7967162.story>