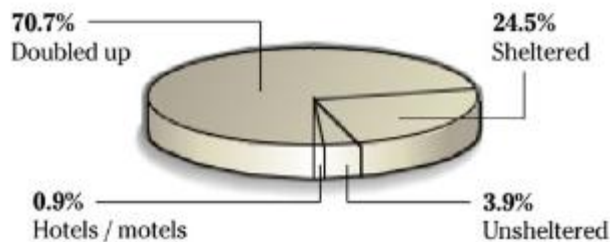


Safety cited in concerns on shelters

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HOMELESS CHILDREN

Most homeless children in Hawaii live in shelters, but hundreds still remain on the streets. Among homeless children who attend public schools, about 4 percent are unsheltered.



Source: National Center for Homeless Education

There's no doubt that the number of unsheltered homeless children has declined significantly since 2006, when hundreds of people were living in tents along the Waianae Coast.

Since then, the state and nonprofits have spent more than \$40 million to open shelters and beef up outreach services, moving families off beaches and out of parks.

Of the 2,966 children in public schools who were identified as homeless last school year, about 4 percent — or 118 students — were unsheltered, living in a tent or a car. That's up slightly from 93 in the 2008-09 school year, but way down from 250 students who were unsheltered in the 2007-08 school year, statistics reported to the U.S. Department of Education show.

Homeless outreach statistics paint a similar picture. Over the course of fiscal year 2010, outreach providers helped 697 children statewide, most of whom were living on the streets. The year before, 831 children were helped, according to statistics compiled by the University of Hawaii Center on the Family.

Oahu and the Big Island saw the largest numbers of

unsheltered children; the biggest age group for unsheltered kids — 378 in 2010 — was 5 and under.

Advocates say families remain unsheltered for a variety of reasons. They stress that space is available at shelters, and that waits can be short to nonexistent for families at high risk.

Last week, however, the state's Next Step shelter in Kakaako didn't have any more space for families, with all 18 spots taken because of the recent cleanups in the area. It did have room for about 10 more single women and four couples, and the Institute for Human Services' family shelter in Kalihi did have a few more open beds. That shelter has room for up to 28 families at a time.

There was also space at several shelters in Leeward Oahu.

Why not go to a shelter, then? Some families are offered beds outside of their communities, and they prefer not to move, providers say. Others have pets they don't want to part with. And some avoid shelters because of the structured environment, the rules and a dislike of living in such close quarters with other families.

Erica Leialoha, 31, lives on the streets in Kakaako with her 6-year-old, Morgan, and said she doesn't want to move into a shelter because she doesn't like crowds and has heard bad things about some programs.

The two have been living in a tent on the streets since October, after losing their home because Leialoha could no longer afford the rent.

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On Friday morning, Morgan played in a vacant lot — the family's home for now — with her favorite toy, a bear named Bubú.

Her mother was sick and could not get her to school that day.

Erica Leialoha said they would probably be moving soon, after being warned by police that they were not allowed to camp in the area.

"We're just going to have to find someplace to live," said Leialoha, adding that she's determined to find herself and her daughter a permanent home.

Connie Mitchell, executive director of the Institute for Human Services, which operates homeless shelters and outreach programs, said she is seeing "quite a few" unsheltered families these days.

Last year, the nonprofit helped 227 families with support — money for a deposit or first month's rent — to get into a home. Of those, 130 were unsheltered.

Mitchell said oftentimes what drives families into shelters is "fear for their children."

"If you don't have a place to prepare meals or to provide for the basic hygiene for your children, it's very challenging," Mitchell said.

After becoming homeless in January, Tenes Selet and her family initially did not go into a shelter and instead lived in their van.

Selet, 32, said living on the streets was a harrowing experience.

She worried daily about how it was affecting her three young children, ages 5, 4 and 1.

On rainy days, the kids had to stay inside the van and would get cranky. The family often had to park near places where there was night life, so it wasn't rare to see drunk people walking by at wee hours. Once, a man urinated on the van, thinking no one was inside. Selet didn't say a word because she worried about being reported to the authorities.

"I just tried to survive. It hurt me sometimes (to see the kids there)," she said. "I asked myself, 'What am I doing?' I just prayed."

After about two months on the streets, Selet and her husband inquired about moving into a shelter and got a space at Next Step after a short wait.

She said she's grateful for the roof, and has seen her children's spirits improve.

"It's a safe place for our kids," she said last week as she sat with her youngest in the play area at Next Step. "It's really safe."

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