



## Homework, no home

By Donna Winchester

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They fly under the radar in places few would think to look. At night, they lay their heads down in abandoned automobiles, in motel rooms, in spare corners in the homes of relatives. They are the estimated 1,500 children who are homeless yet enrolled in a Pinellas County public school. Thousands of others can be found in Hillsborough and Pasco schools, and in school districts across the state.

Curtis Reitmeyer is one of them. The 10-year-old will tell you the best hours of his day are the ones he spends at Skycrest Elementary School in Clearwater. The rest of the time, he's cooped up in a cramped motel room with his mom and dad, his older brother and two younger sisters.

Curtis says that sharing a bed with another family member makes it hard for him to fall asleep. Traffic along U.S. 19 and arguments among other motel dwellers sometimes wake him in the middle of the night.

And the utter disarray that results when six people spend months together in a small space makes it hard to keep track of things. Curtis says he missed a day of school recently because he couldn't find one of his shoes.

"At our apartment, they were always right next to each other," he says.

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Barbara Duffield, policy director for the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, describes childhood homelessness as pervasive, hidden and heartbreaking.

"It's pervasive in that it exists in every community across the country," Duffield says. "It's hidden in that families with children are less visible than other segments of the homeless population. It's heartbreaking because of the damaging effects homelessness has on every aspect of a child's development."

Under federal law, homeless advocates must identify and provide education services to homeless children. In Pinellas, the school district's homeless education assistance team includes two resource teachers, a social worker and a program coordinator.

Althea Hudson, the coordinator, has seen enough to know how important the smallest comforts can be to needy children.

"The things we take for granted," Hudson says, "are the things they cherish."

While people are quick to judge the homeless, there often are extenuating circumstances that land them in difficult situations. Jon Reitmeyer, Curtis' dad, acknowledges that he hasn't always managed his money well. But he is working two jobs to save for an apartment.

Unfortunately, his credit is bad, which makes landlords wary of leasing to him. So he hands over close to \$2,000 a month to the motel, which makes it hard for the family to get ahead.

Debi Turner, principal at Blanton Elementary School, says she has seen many families like the Reitmeyers. At present, she knows of at least five Blanton families who live in shelters. Six to 10 are "doubled-up" with friends or relatives, and one family is living in a van.

"These kids have to come to school and perform, yet they have the weight of the world on them," Turner says.

Largo Middle School principal Fred Ulrich also has seen his share of homeless children. In most cases, Ulrich said, the families are doing everything they can to work toward a better life.

"It's part of our culture to think people are supposed to pull themselves up by their bootstraps," Ulrich says. "But if you've dealt with these issues, you see there's more to it than, 'Why don't you get a job?' "

The two school district employees who know this better than anyone are Janet Walker and Duane Kinnison, resource teachers with the homeless education assistance team. They encounter childhood homelessness every day as they travel from Tarpon Springs to St. Petersburg.

They visit the county's family shelters to check on new arrivals and tell them their rights under federal law. They make sure schools know that homeless children can't be denied enrollment even if they are unable to show proof of age, residency or immunizations.

For Walker and Kinnison, the job often is very basic.

"Sometimes, the children just need some good old reassurance," Kinnison says. "You've got to be a friend to them."

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Diamond Williams loved being in her school's gifted program. She cried when she found out she would have to leave it.

Diamond, 8, and her two older brothers now live with their mom, Martisha Haymon, at a Clearwater shelter. They've been there ever since Haymon, 36, a licensed child care worker, fled an abusive relationship in Georgia.

Haymon hopes the eight weeks the family is allowed to stay will be enough time for her to save the \$3,100 she needs to move into an apartment. Meanwhile, her biggest worry is that her kids will fall behind in school. That's why she's glad the Pinellas school district has placed an after-school tutor at the shelter.

From 4 to 6 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays, Highland Lakes Elementary teacher Rachel Barnes works with as many as a dozen children in a small space set up like a classroom. Some, like Diamond, don't need much help. Others are so far behind Barnes wonders if they'll ever catch up.

"You would never know walking up to them that they're in this situation," Barnes says. "I'm sure there are kids in schools nobody knows are homeless."

The district's homeless education assistance team works hard to keep it that way. Sometimes that means providing school supplies, like pencils with good erasers. Other times, it means outfitting kids with everything from jeans to sneakers.

"They won't be name-brand," says Hudson, the coordinator. "But at least they'll fit."

Most school districts receive federal grant money to fund their homeless programs. Pinellas got \$95,000 this year. Hillsborough got \$125,000, and Pasco got \$90,000. But 34 of Florida's 67 districts didn't get any funding at all.

That's because there's not enough money to go around.

Nationally, more than 900,000 children in kindergarten through 12th grade were identified as homeless last year. That's up 50 percent from the 2003-04 school year.

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Emina Dizdarevic became homeless last summer when her mom got evicted from a low-income apartment complex in Largo. Emina's dad had left, and her mother, who was making \$8-an-hour cleaning houses, couldn't afford rent.

Emina and her older brother, Adis, moved with their mom to a homeless shelter in Clearwater. But they weren't able to stay long enough for Bosnian-born Sada Dizdarevic, 34, to save money for another apartment. Since December, the family has been staying at Resurrection House, a long-term residential program for homeless families in St. Petersburg.

Emina, 10, hopes she'll have her own room some day in a big house. Maybe then, she thinks, she won't be embarrassed to invite her friends from school over to play.

"I know it's not my fault," she says. "But they might make fun of me now."

The toll of childhood homelessness can extend beyond academics, says Harry Brown, an associate superintendent for Pinellas schools who served as the district's first homeless resource teacher. Children like Emina often have a hard time making friends because their lives have been so chaotic, he says.

"It can be like an adult starting a new job every couple of weeks," Brown says.

That's another reason why the work of homeless liaisons within school districts is so vital, says Duffield, the National Association policy director. School often is the only place where homeless children can form stable relationships. School gives structure to their day and provides services, such as breakfast and lunch.

"Ultimately," Duffield says, "school is the place where they hopefully will gain the skills they need to prevent them from becoming homeless adults."

\* Source: National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty

An estimated 1.35-million children are homeless. That's 39 percent of the homeless population. Forty-two percent are under 5; 47 percent of homeless students do not attend a full year of school; they are twice as likely to have a learning disability; and three times more likely to have emotional or behavioral problems.\*

### **State numbers**

Florida ranked sixth in the number of homeless children and youth enrolled in public schools during the 2003-04 school year, the most recent year for which data is available, according to a U.S. Department of Education report to Congress. Here are the 10 states with the greatest reported numbers of homeless children and youth for that year. Because many homeless children go unreported, the actual numbers of homeless children are much greater.

California 142,554

Texas 137,858

New York 20,838

Pennsylvania 19,631

Louisiana 17,079

Florida 16,069

Arizona 14,597

Kentucky 13,640

Missouri 12,983

Ohio 12,482

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