

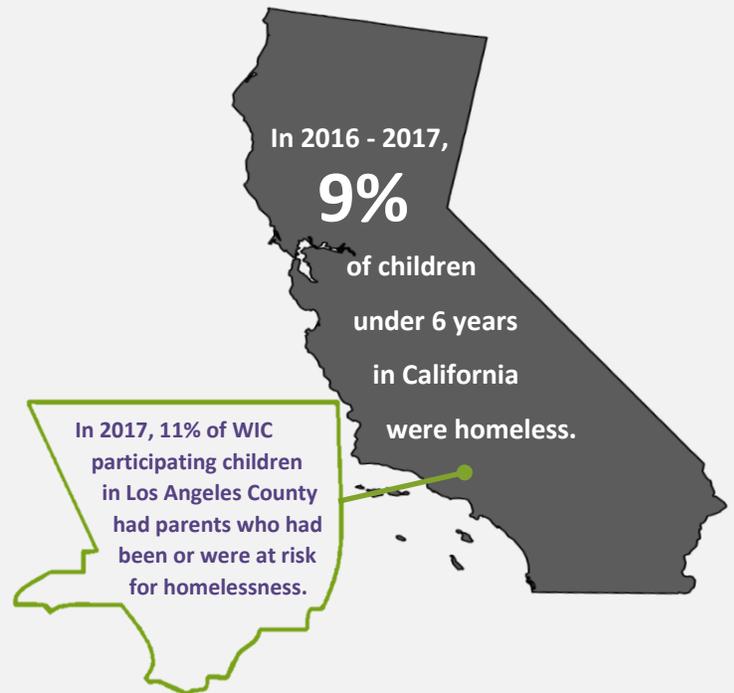
# Housing Insecurity and Homelessness among WIC Participants in Los Angeles

**Our role at WIC:** WIC reaches a large share of young children in Los Angeles County, and can inform efforts to assess and address housing insecurity and homelessness that affect the youngest children in Los Angeles County.

**Across time:** Since 2008, the prevalence of housing insecurity has decreased.

**Implication:** Housing insecurity can affect development, receipt of medical care, and physical and mental health both in childhood and later in adulthood.

Safe, stable housing is essential for the well-being, health and development of children and families. However, many low-income families in the United States are living in unstable housing situations. While no standard definition exists, housing insecurity encompasses many dimensions of housing that is unstable and insecure.<sup>(1,2)</sup> It can include housing that is unaffordable (>30% of income on housing costs), missed housing payments, frequent moves, doubling-up with relatives or couch-surfing, crowding, being threatened with eviction, poor quality housing, having the utilities shut off, and living in an unsafe neighborhood.<sup>(1,2)</sup> Extreme housing insecurity includes being homeless: living in a car or motel, or having no shelter.<sup>(1)</sup> Homelessness is primarily caused by a lack of affordable housing and being poor or low income.<sup>(3)</sup> Factors such as weak social networks, insufficient housing subsidies, domestic violence and substance abuse also contribute.<sup>(3)</sup> Housing insecurity can disrupt families and social ties.<sup>(3,4)</sup> It can have a life-long impact on children since it can affect development, behavioral development, receipt of medical care, academic achievement and physical and mental health both in childhood and later in adulthood.<sup>(5-11)</sup>



## Dimensions of housing insecurity and risk of homelessness

For this brief we examined the following dimensions of housing insecurity and risk of homelessness:

- **Severe housing-cost burden:** The family currently has a very difficult time paying for housing.
- **Multiple moves:** The family has moved 2 or more times in the past 3 years.
- **Doubled up:** The family is currently living with relatives.
- **Parent was homeless:** Since the child was born, a parent was homeless.
- **No regular place to sleep:** Since the child was born, a parent did not have a regular place to sleep at night.
- **Forced move:** Since the child was born, a parent was forced to move because they could not pay for their housing.

Because Los Angeles County is home to both one of the highest rates of homelessness in the nation and to an extreme shortage of affordable housing,<sup>(12-14)</sup> the objective of this brief is to document the prevalence of housing insecurity among young children living in Los Angeles County and participating in the Special Supplemental Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). WIC is a federal nutrition assistance program for low-income families that reaches over half of all children under 5 in Los Angeles County. This brief also presents trends in housing insecurity over time as well as racial and ethnic disparities. Since a large share of young children in Los Angeles County participate in WIC the findings presented in this brief are useful to inform efforts to address housing insecurity and homelessness that affect the youngest children in Los Angeles County. The data for this brief come from the Los Angeles County WIC Survey, a survey conducted on a random sample of approximately 5,500 children every 3 years.

### Housing insecurity in the US and in Los Angeles County

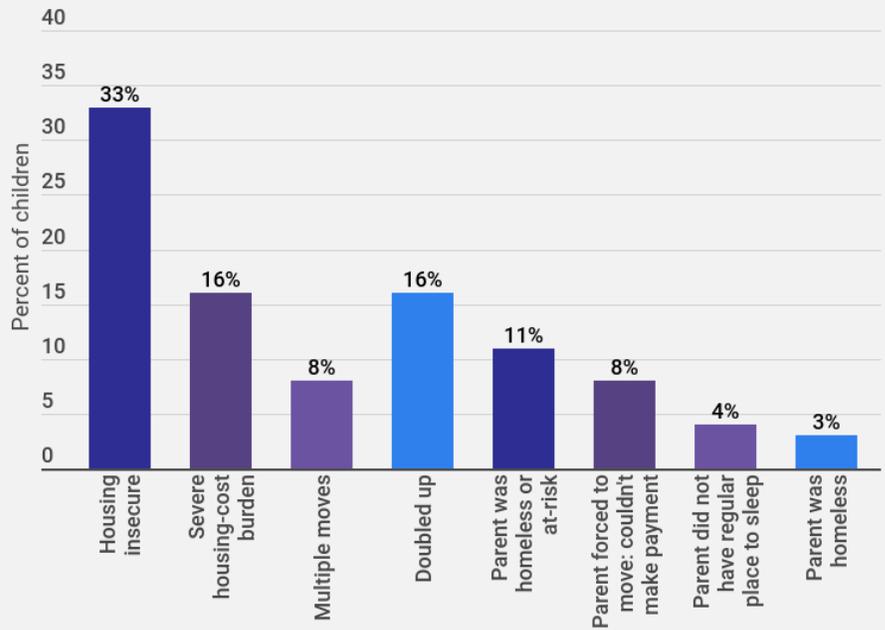
In 2017, 33% of WIC-participating children ≤ 5 years were either doubled up with relatives, severely housing-cost burdened, and/or moved frequently (Figure 1). A negative event such as losing a job, experiencing a rent increase or getting a divorce can push these families into homelessness. Indeed, we found that 11% of children had parents who had been homeless or at-risk of becoming homeless since the child was born (Figure 1). While we do not know if these children also experienced homelessness, their housing situation was at least very insecure. It is difficult to compare these findings to state or national levels because housing insecurity and homelessness are inconsistently defined. In 2017, 32% of households in the U.S. were burdened with housing costs, nearly half of whom spent more than 50% of their income on housing.<sup>(13)</sup> In the Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim metropolitan area, 46% of all households were burdened with housing costs. Over half of them spent more than 50% of their income on housing.<sup>(13)</sup>

In January of 2019, Los Angeles County conducted a point-in-time count and found that 59,000 people lack a “fixed, regular and adequate night-time residence”.<sup>(15)</sup> Fifteen percent are families with children.<sup>(15)</sup> The U.S. Department of Education uses the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act definition which is a broader definition of homelessness than the point-in-time count.<sup>(16)</sup> Children are considered homeless if they share housing with other people due to loss of housing or economic hardship.<sup>(16)</sup> During the 2016-2017 academic year, 9% or more than a quarter million children under 6 years in California were homeless.<sup>(17)</sup>

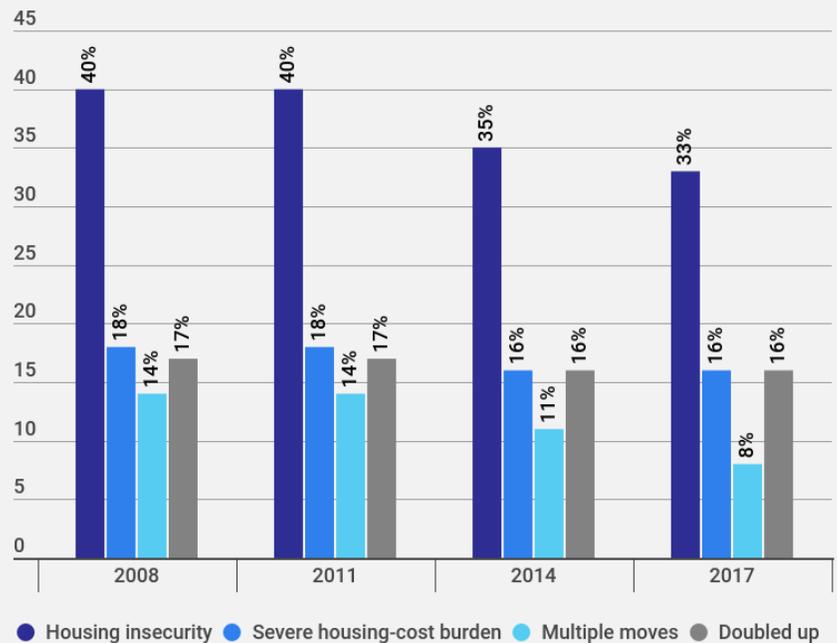
### Trends in housing insecurity over time

Figure 2 illustrates the trends in housing insecurity by survey year among WIC-participating children in Los Angeles County. Since 2008, when the Great Economic Recession occurred, the prevalence of housing insecurity has decreased. This decrease is primarily due to the smaller share of families moving 2 or more times in the past 3 years.

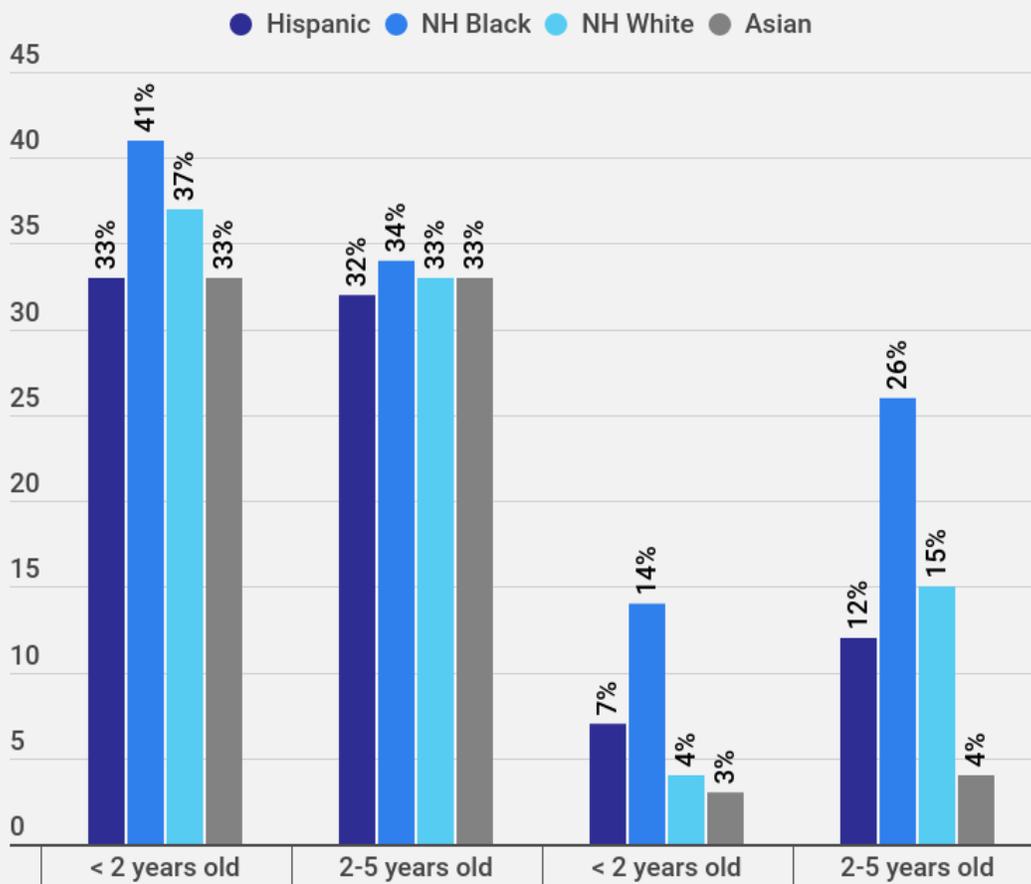
**Figure 1.** Prevalence of housing insecurity and parent’s risk of homelessness among WIC children ≤ 5 years, 2017 (n=5,270)



**Figure 2.** Prevalence of housing insecurity among WIC children ≤ 5 years in Los Angeles County, 2008-2017



**Figure 3.** Prevalence of housing insecurity and parent’s risk of homelessness by child’s race/ethnicity and age, 2017 (n=5,270)



### Disparities in housing insecurity and parent’s risk of homelessness by race/ethnicity and child’s age

Figure 3 illustrates the racial and ethnic disparities in housing insecurity and parent’s risk of homelessness by child’s age. Children of Hispanic, Non-Hispanic (NH) Black, NH White, and Asian race and ethnicity experience high rates of housing insecurity. Although the differences are not statistically significant, among children less than 2 years old, higher rates of housing insecurity exist among NH Black and White children compared to Hispanic and Asian children. Among children 2-5 years old, the prevalence of housing insecurity is similar across the four racial/ethnic groups.

There are stark racial/ethnic differences in the prevalence of children with a parent who experienced or was at-risk of experiencing homelessness. NH Black children have the highest rates. Asian children have the lowest rates. Among children < 2 years old, 14% of NH Black children had a parent who experienced or was at-risk of experiencing homelessness. This rate was 2 and 3.5 times higher than the rate among Hispanic and NH White children, respectively. As Hispanic, NH Black and NH White children age, the prevalence of children with a parent who is at-risk of homelessness also increases. Among NH White children, the prevalence increases nearly 4 times to 15%. Among NH Black children, the prevalence nearly doubles to a staggering 26%.

The high rates of NH Black children with a parent who experienced or was at-risk of experiencing homelessness is very likely a consequence of the long-standing institutional and structural racism that Black families face in the United States, particularly in the housing and labor markets, and the criminal justice, education and health care systems.<sup>(18)</sup> It is important to take a racial equity approach in addressing homelessness and housing insecurity among families with children.<sup>(18)</sup>

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