

# No DIRECTION HOME

*What's behind the shocking number of homeless students in the Twin Cities, and what's being done about it* **By Frank Jossi**

**T**welve-year-old Dja Lawler sits across a wood-grained conference table at People Serving People (PSP), a homeless shelter in downtown Minneapolis. She just walked off a bus with several other youth who live in the shelter with their families. Dressed in jeans and wearing a blue hoodie, Lawler has a caginess that slowly dissipates as she chats about life as a homeless kid in the city school system.

"I got to go with my mom everywhere, so if she's got to go somewhere, I have to go, even if I don't feel good," she says. "You can't have your friends come over ..."

Her voice trails off. When the talk turns to attending seventh grade at Anne Sullivan, a K-8 school where she has gone the last three years, she says, "I don't like to have to try to meet new friends because I'm shy."

She takes solace in books. Today she's carrying *Thirteen Reasons Why*, a Jay Asher novel about a girl who sends 13 interwoven stories to friends after she commits suicide. The story recounts bullying and other actions by fellow students that led to the tragic end. "I like the book but I'm not like her," she says.

Dja Lawler is among the more than 1,200 children enrolled daily in Minneapolis public schools who are homeless, a figure that turns out to be 6.4 percent of the student population, or one in 15.6 students, says Elizabeth Hinz, district liaison for homeless and highly mobile students. And it's likely there are even more who aren't being counted. "It's my opinion that we are under-identifying kids who are attending school but living in all these other situations," she says.

St. Paul also has a problem. The school district recently saw a whopping 44.5 percent increase in homeless students over last year, says Becky Hicks, St. Paul's homeless program coordinator. By the end of the 2009 school year, she estimates, St. Paul teachers will have instructed around 2,000 students who at some point during the previous nine months were homeless or highly mobile.

Two reasons account for the dramatic jump in St. Paul. One was the introduction of a survey last year in the district that allowed families to self-identify as being highly mobile or homeless. The other, of course, is the economy. "We're seeing more families who had been living in apartments that have been foreclosed," Hicks says.

State figures are little better. "The number of children [who are homeless] has increased steadily," says Michelle Decker Gerrard, a research scientist who leads a statewide survey of homelessness conducted by the Wilder Foundation every three years. "The survey shows 46 percent of homeless are 21 or younger—it's not just single, older adult males that we think of when we think of homelessness."

The cost of dealing with homeless kids is significant for both districts: Minneapolis spends \$1.5 million on transportation, and \$932,000 on administration and supplies and related materials; St. Paul \$729,000. Much of the money comes from the federal government, say Hicks and Hinz, with the remainder coming from the state and private donations.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, co-authored by former Minnesota congressman Bruce Vento, has been the major

provider of those funds. It has funded services and transportation to the families of children with no "fixed, regular" address since 1987. In 1990, the act paid for transportation of nearly 50 students in Minneapolis; this past school year that number had grown to 2,600, including those who attend both city and suburban schools.

Until the Twin Cities creates more affordable housing, and more education and job opportunities for low-income residents, the problem seems likely only to continue to worsen, says Cathy ten Broeke, Hennepin County's project coordinator to end homelessness. In the meantime, getting kids to school is critical—"even if the family is staying at different shelters on different nights," she adds. "As long as they can get to school, there's at least some stability in their lives."

Getting there is one thing; performing is another. "What being homeless does is undermine self-confidence, a sense of identity, a sense of safety," says Hinz. "It shakes one's ability to focus and has great effects on physical health. They have more hearing issues, stomach issues. And a substantial number of kids—two to three times the [normal] rate—suffer respiratory issues, such as asthma and other respiratory ailments." Physical and sexual abuse is also common among homeless children.

Still, if there is a bright sign, it may be that prospects for homeless kids are good once they are identified. Given the chance, children are quite capable of recovering for lost time caused by the turmoil of parental job loss and life in a shelter. Anita Larson, a research fellow at the Center for Advanced Studies in Child

Welfare at the University of Minnesota, conducted a study on homelessness in Minneapolis, Duluth and St. Paul. Using state data, she studied the attendance of kids who had been flagged as homeless—what it was before they were identified in the system, the year they were identified and the year afterward. Attendance dramatically improved after being identified.

“It looks like being identified [as homeless] does something to stabilize kids’ attendance at school,” says Larson. “That could be because of many factors—coming to the attention of school officials who make sure the child receives transportation, supplies, tutoring ... or the family obtains access to services and programs.”

Minneapolis is clearly doing some things right. Minneapolis Public Schools superintendent Bill Green says the news media, including *Time* magazine, has picked up on the district’s efforts to serve homeless and highly mobile youth, and he has “been pleased that the city has received national recognition for the high quality of our work.” Still, he acknowledges that more needs to be done, particularly in removing stigma from the lives of these students. “The most fundamental change we need to make, in my view, as a state and a nation, is to re-educate ourselves as to how we think about and see our homeless children. They are children first. Because of their circumstances, whether they are wearing dirty clothes or come to school without some of the basics other children have, it can be hard for these kids to feel like they ‘fit in.’ And what is more important to a child? It is too easy for students and adults to tend to stigmatize these children, and that is the last thing they need.”

Lawler and her younger sister, D’Shawna Williams, who’s 5 and attends Pica Elementary School in the Powderhorn neighborhood, have felt the burden. They’re doing well at PSP and at their schools, but they’re like any kids. They’d like some space of their own. “I don’t like not having my own room,” Lawler says.

Hinz and the other leaders in the Twin Cities homeless youth advocacy community are working on it. It isn’t easy. There are multiple causations—with the lack of jobs and affordable housing for parents chief among them—and let’s face it, confronting and ameliorating poverty just isn’t part of a school district’s charter. Nor should it be. But if a student can find his way to the classroom, no matter the stability of his home life, it is our job, or to use Green’s words, our “moral imperative,” to educate him.

“Public education is the biggest chance these children have to lift themselves out of poverty,” he says. “Let us remember that these children did not create the situation they find themselves in. We as a society did. And until we create a sound economic structure and a community that no longer stigmatizes them, we won’t have adequately addressed the issue.” L&P

Minneapolis’ two biggest shelters are People Serving People (PSP) and Mary’s Place. PSP, the largest, is a 28-year-old shelter with 98 rooms, and 10 apartments for more permanent residents. Two-thirds of the budget comes from Hennepin County, and the remainder from fundraising and private sources, according to Jim Minor, PSP’s CEO. Around 300 to 350 people stay at the shelter every night, more than 200 of them children. This year admissions are “30 percent ahead of last year,” with the majority of families arriving with kids under 5 years old, he says.

The shelter is a busy place. Throughout the day, 35 buses from various school districts pick up and deliver kids to the same schools they attended when they had a home, as required by the McKinney-Vento law. (At Mary’s Place, four buses fill with children bound for St. Paul.)

Minor has no easy-to-digest PowerPoint presentation of what Minneapolis should do to address the problem. Although Gov. Tim Pawlenty announced a plan in 2006 to end homelessness by 2010, and many communities and foundations have launched similar initiatives, it remains doubtful the streets and shelters will be empty of people anytime soon. Minor says it comes down to jobs and affordable housing, which are both in such short supply that on average his tenants stay 47 days before they find their own shelter. Add in the state budget crisis and escalating unemployment and the prognosis for decreasing the number of homeless remains bleak. —F.J.



Jim Minor of  
People Serving People.

## SIMONE AND SEVION

One of Dja’s neighbors at PSP is Simone Hall, 37. Hall has a 5-year-old son, Sevion Dryer, and they have lived at PSP for two years in one of the few units set aside for longer-term residents. The Chicago native lived in Texas for many years before heading to Minneapolis.

Tracking her offspring is more complicated and requires a scorecard: Six kids, four of whom live in Texas, one in Chicago and one standing next to her drawing animal pictures on a large sheet of paper on an easel.

Hall’s own background includes three terms in jail for selling cocaine and other offenses that led to her having to give up three of her children. Part of her problems, she believes, stems from an undiagnosed bipolar disorder, accompanied by past struggles with drug abuse, alcohol and domestic violence, a cocktail of ills commonly associated with homelessness. In talking to Hall, it’s hard to reconcile drugs and jail time with a woman who seems so timid.

At least these days she’s focused on Sevion, the only of her children she has raised. He attends Harvest Preparatory and looks snappy in the required white button-down shirt and dress slacks. While he’s at school, Hall finishes a GED, with plans to return to working in catering or at a restaurant, which she did in Chicago.

Sevion appears a pretty normal kid, a tad energized after school. He likes school and enjoys living at the shelter, seeing the people there as his family. Tomorrow a bus will pick him up and take him to Harvest Prep on Olsen Memorial Highway. That much he can count on. —F.J.