

FOUNDATIONS AT RISK: Housing Instability and Young Children



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Safe, stable, and affordable housing is more than shelter; it is a critical foundation for healthy child development. When families cannot secure stable housing, children experience a ripple effect of disruptions that can undermine healthy development and emotional well-being.

Early Childhood Homelessness

Homelessness is not always visible. It may include staying with a friend or relative, residing in a motel, or sleeping in public spaces (like a park, car, or shelter).² Across Ohio, rising housing costs combined with stagnant wages are creating instability for families with young children.

10,348 children under
age 3 experienced
homelessness.¹

In the 2022-2023 school year, an estimated 10,348 Ohio children under age 3 experienced homelessness – enough to fill more than 430 preschool classrooms.

Housing Costs in Ohio

Housing in Ohio is increasingly unaffordable, 33% of Ohioans struggling to pay their rent or mortgage.³



- **Ohio has a severe housing shortage.** Ohio has a shortage of ~266,000 affordable rental units across the state. For low-income households, there are only 37 affordable units available for every 100 households in need – and even fewer in major cities.⁴



- **Housing costs are rising.** Median monthly rent reached \$1,014 in 2023; median mortgage costs hit \$1,429/month – sharp increases from earlier decades.⁵
- **Cost burden is a pervasive challenge.** 14.7% of Ohio's young children, are living in cost-burdened homes⁶; meaning 30% or more of family income is spent on rent⁷
- **Housing burdens expose racial disparities.** Black children are 3X more likely, and Hispanic children 1.6X more likely, to live in rent-burdened homes.⁸



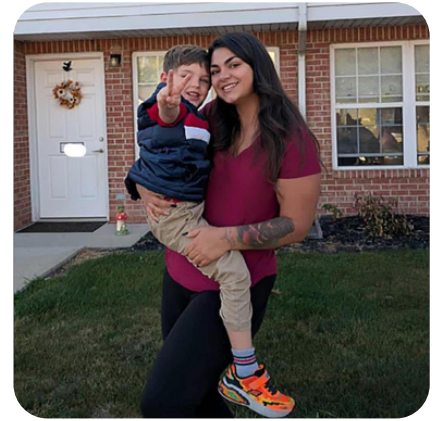
- **Wages aren't keeping up.** 21% of Ohio jobs (nearly 1.2 million) don't pay enough for a two-bedroom apartment.⁹
- When housing costs rise faster than wages, families with young children are forced into impossible tradeoffs between rent, food, child care, and other basic needs.

Housing Stability and Early Childhood Development

Housing instability disrupts the safe, stable, and nurturing environments that infants, young children, and pregnant moms need to thrive.

- **Poor quality housing; disrupted development.** Children living in poor-quality or overcrowded housing face increased exposure to environmental hazards such as lead, mold, and pests.¹⁰ These conditions also undermine sleep quality and emotional security, both foundational for healthy development.¹¹
- **Loss of early supports.** Frequent moves and eviction risk can undermine stability that young children need. Each move can interrupt access to early learning, developmental services, and access to trusted caregivers. When families lose access to grandparents, neighbors, and friends who provide child care or emotional support, families are at greater risk of isolation, stress, and child welfare involvement.¹²
- **Safe sleep starts with stable housing.** Safe sleep recommendations call for babies to sleep on a firm surface, such as a mattress in a safety-approved crib with a fitted sheet, and not in adult beds, on couches, or chairs—alone or with others.¹³ For families facing housing instability, overcrowding, or lack of space for cribs, following these recommendations becomes significantly more difficult, making stable housing a critical component of meeting Ohio's infant vitality goals.

Housing instability is associated with increased risk of adverse birth outcomes, including preterm birth and low birthweight - key drivers of infant mortality and barriers to reaching a child's first birthday.¹⁴



THE BOTTOM LINE

Unstable or unsafe housing in early childhood creates a persistent sense of unpredictability that can trigger toxic stress, disrupting healthy brain development.¹⁵ The effects are far-reaching: children exposed to housing instability are less likely to celebrate their first birthday, and more likely to struggle in school, repeat grades, and graduate at lower rates, and experience higher rates of chronic illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes, and depression.¹⁶

Ensuring stable, safe housing in the earliest years is critical to supporting healthy development and shaping lifelong health, educational, and economic outcomes.

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