GLOBE EDITORIAL

On the edge, in borrowed homes

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SOMETIMES THEY are called the invisible homeless or, more bluntly, couch-surfers. They are parents and children who crowd into other people's homes, living "doubled up" with friends or relatives.

These families do have roofs over their heads, but their position is tenuous. Sometimes their presence violates their hosts' leases. And they can put emotional and financial strains on the households that host them. One doubled up domestic violence victim was asked to leave because her host feared the woman's abusive husband. It's rich soil for bad outcomes, especially for homeless children who struggle in school as their families move from place to place.

Smart policies can help ease doubled up families into permanent housing. The challenge is how to do this without drawing resources away from relief efforts for the more visible homeless - those who are living on the streets and in shelters.

Doubled up two times over

Some families only need to borrow a few nights' worth of sleeping space. But others spend months doubled up, unable to save enough money to move.

For one Boston mother, being doubled up meant putting her children in the home of a relative, while she stayed with someone else. She essentially paid two rents: for her own lodging and for her children. She took her children to school and worked two jobs. She eventually got a housing subsidy to help pay the rent. And she got money for the security deposit from the Family-to-Family Project, a small nonprofit that gives grants to homeless families. Although the organization focuses on helping families leave shelters, it has for the last few years expanded into preventing homelessness and is working with families who are doubled up. The group gives a total of $200,000 to 200 families each year.

Because doubled up families don't always identify themselves as homeless, measuring the size of the problem is tough. "Maybe it's an epidemic and we just don't know," Family-to-Family executive director Erin O'Connor Jones said. Nationwide, millions of families are doubled up, according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, which will release specific estimates next month.

The Census Bureau calls these families "subfamilies," and estimates that in Massachusetts from 1980 to 2000, their numbers jumped from 26,700 to 52,008. Analyzing these figures, a 2004 report from the Donahue Institute at the University of Massachusetts, noted that while many families choose to live together for reasons that don't relate to money, this increase in subfamilies occurred "in tandem with increases in home prices."
Homes of their own

A badly needed solution is more affordable housing, especially units within the reach of families with the lowest incomes. To its credit, though, the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless isn't waiting for a head count or a sudden bumper crop of cheap apartments. Instead, the coalition is finding and helping families that are facing evictions or already are doubled up.

Outreach has to occur where people go, says the coalition's executive director Robyn Frost. So for four years, the coalition's First Stop Initiative has been running in area health centers, screening families to see which ones need help staying housed.

To help schoolchildren, the coalition is working with Boston officials to set up a school-based outreach program to prevent families from becoming homeless.

Government solutions

In one sense, nonprofits like Family-to-Family and the coalition have an advantage: If they use private money, they have great flexibility. They can help families who may earn too much to get government assistance. Or they can make grants to improve a family's "lifestyle," as Family-to-Family did when it paid for one child's ballet lessons.

But it's tougher for governments. They have to play by budget and eligibility rules. They have limited resources. And they already have large caseloads of people on the streets and in shelters. If a state or city program were to offer help to doubled up families, the floodgates could open, creating a demand for help that public resources can't possibly meet.

Nevertheless, a systematic approach to the problem requires strong public involvement. The federal government should help by increasing Section 8 vouchers, which help low-income people pay the rent.

Prevention programs must expand as well. They should target families in the most dire circumstances, those who face severe economic hardships, and those who live in dangerous or severely overcrowded homes where they are tripled up or worse. Policy makers should also add more financial flexibility to publicly funded programs. Otherwise families can face stark choices, such as lowering their earnings to qualify for government help.

A bill in Congress, the Community Partnership to End Homelessness Act, would help by, in part, letting communities use federal funds to help doubled up families find their own homes. The bill is sponsored by Senators Jack Reed, a Rhode Island Democrat, and Wayne Allard, a Colorado Republican.

Doubled up families can be hard to see. But in the worst cases, their problems are clearly visible - from parents who struggle to hold jobs to children who do poorly in school. Left to fester, many of these challenges will get worse and cost more to fix.

It's far more effective to provide immediate help for families in the most need, securing housing, helping parents get training that leads to higher paying jobs, and helping children thrive in school so
that their early experiences with homelessness do not foretell their future.