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## 3 people, 200 square feet: Managing homelessness, remote school, and life in a pandemic

by [Kristen A. Graham](#), Posted: December 7, 2020- 5:00 AM



DAVID MAIALETTI / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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The hardest part about fifth grade for B.J. Todd isn't math or reading. It's WiFi.

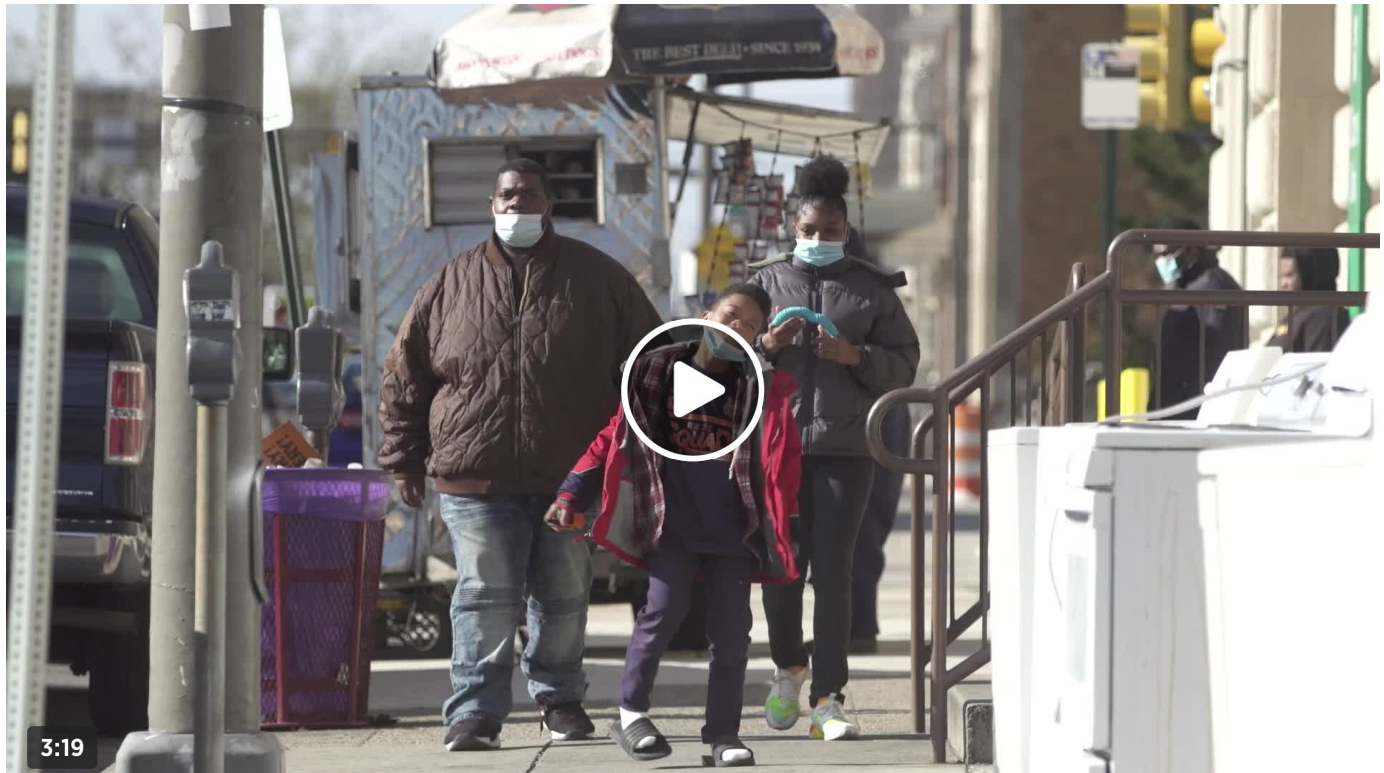
B.J., 11, lives with his father and sister at Jane Addams Place, a homeless shelter in North Philadelphia, and a spotty-at-times internet connection interrupts lessons regularly.

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"I get kicked off, and then I have to shut down my laptop, and the next thing you know, when I go back on, I missed the assignment," said B.J., an aspiring artist with a megawatt smile. "It's hard to not be at school with my teacher, and it's harder to keep track of stuff on the computer."



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Philadelphia family navigates homelessness, virtual schooling and life in a pandemic

COVID-19 has upended education for millions, shifting classes online, making traditional classroom experiences impossible for most kids, and forcing working parents to wrestle with child-care issues. For the city's [most vulnerable](#), including an estimated 8,000 children experiencing homelessness, such as B.J. and his family, it has [erected more barriers](#), in education and in life.





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Benjamin Todd Jr., 11, a fifth grader at A.B. Day Elementary in East Germantown, looks out a window during a virtual class lesson. B.J. lives at Jane Addams Place, a shelter run by the Lutheran Settlement House in North Philadelphia, with his father and sister.

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“It’s a population we’ve been worried about” since March, Philadelphia School Superintendent William R. Hite Jr. said at a news conference in November — because of the extra stress the pandemic puts on an already at-risk population, and the heightened possibility families will slip through the cracks, without their school security net able to lay eyes on them.

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Benjamin Todd keeps a close eye on B.J.'s schoolwork, and that of his 13-year-old daughter, Renee. Remote learning is not ideal, Todd says, but his kids are managing. And even if the Philadelphia School District, still fully virtual, offers in-person education this school year, his children won't be setting foot in A.B. Day Elementary in East Germantown.

"I just don't feel comfortable sending them until next school year," Todd said. "Things are getting worse, and I'm not putting them on a bus every day. It's not safe."

## **'This doesn't define my kids'**

Todd, 46, grew up in West Philadelphia, at 36th and Aspen. He was restless as a youth, in and out of trouble, but always good with his hands. After bouncing between high schools, he ended up at De La Salle Vocational School in Bensalem. He built a career as an auto mechanic, spending his spare time raising his kids and completing home repair projects.

"I never, never not had a place to call my own," Todd said.

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A few years ago, Todd developed a seizure disorder. Along with his chronic back pain and high blood pressure, he could no longer work. He struggled with addiction. Todd and the kids lived with his parents, then moved in with his sister after his mother died and his father lost the family home.



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Renee Todd, 13, an eighth grader at A.B. Day Elementary, attends a virtual class as her father, Benjamin, waits in the hallway. Renee, her brother B.J. and their father live at Jane Addams Place, a shelter in North Philadelphia.

Space was tight in the Germantown rowhouse, and COVID-19 further taxed the family, with Renee, B.J., and Todd's two nieces all trying to complete schoolwork remotely. By July, Todd knew he had to find a different space for himself and the kids.

"It was too much on my family," Todd said. "When you have all those kids learning at the same time, it gets tough."

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He landed at Jane Addams Place, a shelter run by the Lutheran Settlement House, where the family was "welcomed with open arms," he said.

The shelter, housed in a four-story brick building at Germantown and Lehigh, houses up to 23 families, 95 people total, most of whom have children learning remotely. Each has a single room — the Todds' is 14-by-14, about 200 square feet — and gets meals and services ranging from career preparation to help securing permanent housing. The typical family stays eight months.

These days, much of what the shelter offers, from play groups to art classes, is on hold. The COVID-19 surge and tightened city restrictions around gatherings and dining mean the Todds and other residents hardly leave their rooms, except to use the bathroom or take a walk. They now collect bagged meals from the kitchen rather than eating with others in the cafeteria, and schoolwork can no longer be done in common spaces fixed up for that purpose. There are no more overnight passes, either, which the Todds used for occasional respite to visit their family.

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Still, Todd is grateful. When he moved in, staff helped him find a lawyer and apply for disability payments. When coronavirus cases were lower and there were fewer restrictions, there were activities the kids loved: painting pumpkins, petting therapy dogs that visited.

"This path isn't a bad path if you get the help you need," Todd said. "This doesn't define my kids."

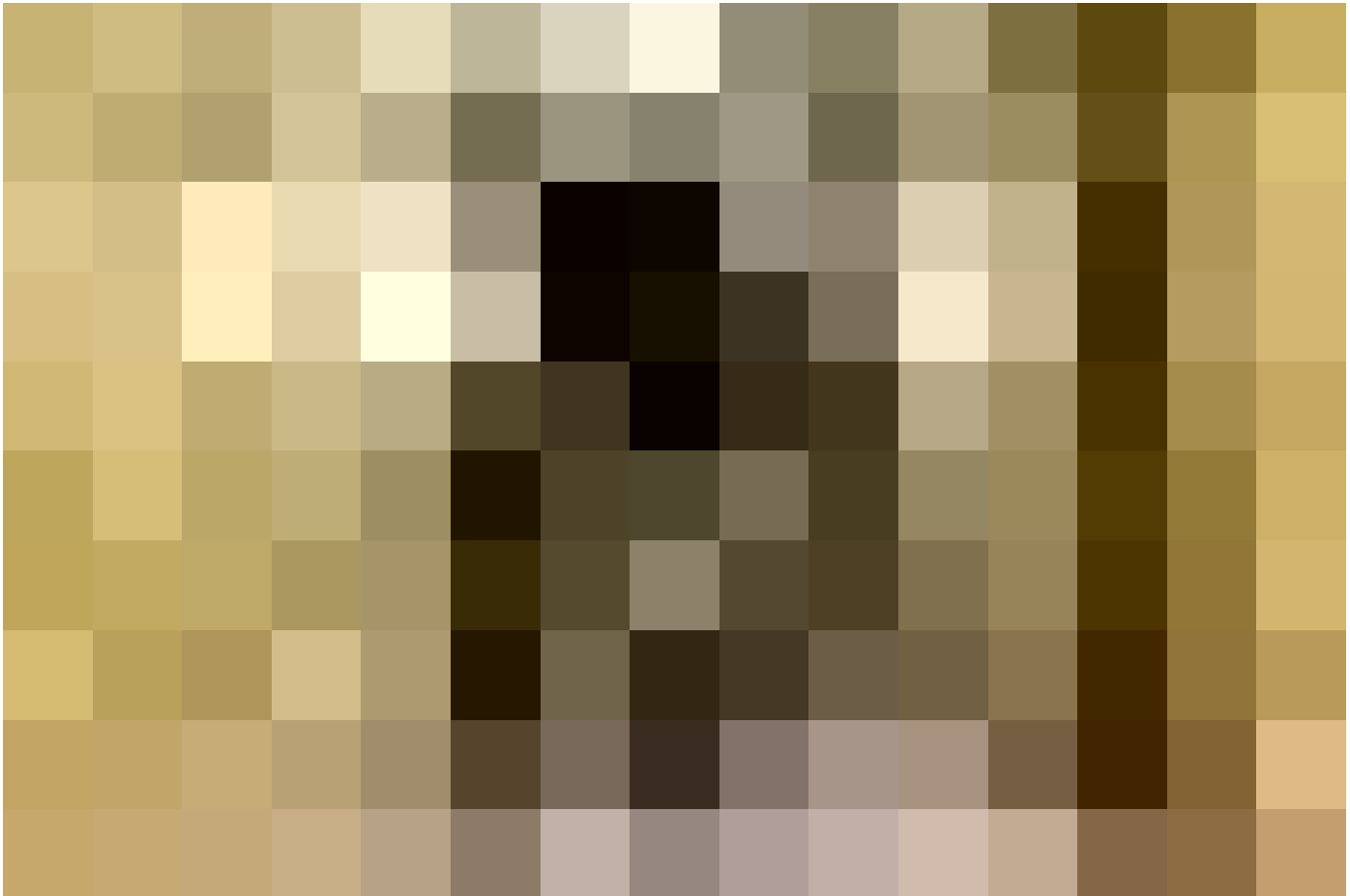
But living in a shelter, especially during a pandemic, has its challenges. All those people living together worries Todd sometimes, though the shelter staff is scrupulous about daily wellness checks, hand sanitizing, and social distancing. Renee recently got sick, congestion and a fever, low, but enough for Todd to worry, taking her temperature hourly, giving her Tylenol and plenty of water.

"I was scared," Todd said. "And she was freaking out, 'I have it, I have it.'" It turned out Renee had a cold.

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COVID-19 restrictions are keeping people in their rooms now, but for a time, B.J. liked to do his schoolwork sitting on a chair set up outside the second-floor elevator. It gave the gregarious, funny boy a chance to say hi to people, to see what was going on.

He wants to run around in the shelter gym, sit close to his friends, gather in the hallways, and go someplace other than his family's small room, B.J. said. But there are cameras everywhere, and if he lingers in the hallway, a voice comes over the loudspeaker, he said on a recent Thursday before restrictions were tightened.



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Benjamin Todd talks with his son, B.J., in the hallway at Jane Addams Place, the shelter where the family lives. Todd comforted B.J. after the boy was reprimanded for being someplace he wasn't supposed to be.

"All I hear is, 'B.J., go back to your room,'" the boy said. "I can't sit in the hallway anymore, I can't sit outside my door and it's making it harder."

His father understands the rules and precautions in a way an 11-year-old can't, but the pandemic compounds Todd's anxiety and depression, too. What if his health gets too bad and his kids have to enter the foster-care system?

"Sitting here in the shelter, you can get in your head," Todd said. "But it's up to you, you've got to get up, get out. You can't let it own you."

## **'Everything comes down on us'**

Renee stared into the distance, school-issued computer in front of her and bold geometric-patterned wall at her back. She likes to stay close to her father, but on one recent Thursday before rules prohibited learning in common spaces, she moved into the community room set aside for teens. She was alone.

"Again, distributive property, 6 times x," her teacher said. Renee looked at her nails, distracted.

She's a strong student, a smart eighth grader with a report card full of A's and B's. But school seems different these days, she said.



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Renee Todd and her brother, B.J., exit Jane Addams Place with their father, Benjamin. The Todds, who live at the shelter, were going for a walk. Because of restrictions caused by COVID-19, the family must spend most of their time in their 200-square-foot room, and relish getting outside.

“I’m used to waking up and getting dressed and going somewhere,” said Renee said. “I’m still getting used to this.”

A minute later, B.J. appeared, in tears. During a break in lessons, he got hungry and walked downstairs to get a snack, but got reprimanded by a shelter staffer for being where he shouldn’t be. His father talked softly to him, angling one broad arm up against the wall where B.J. stood. He told him it would be OK.

B.J. bounced back quickly, parking himself again outside the second-floor elevator. It was time to work independently on iReady, an online program for reading and math, but B.J. said he’d already fulfilled his quota of minutes for the day, so he opened up a browser to dream a little, looking for things he wished he could buy: an iPad for his illustrations, some toys. At one point, he put his computer down and showed off some gymnastics moves to his best friend in the shelter, a girl who attends a different school.

He lost his headphones, and the sound of whatever he’s doing on his computer competes with other noises: a family talking while they dragged their laundry down the hallway in a giant black garbage bag, his friend’s teacher talking.

He gets distracted easily, B.J. said. A lot of kids do, learning remotely.

“Kids can just go on different tabs and watch YouTube anytime they want,” he said. “I have to push myself.”

At the beginning of the pandemic, Lutheran Settlement House upgraded the wireless network in the shelter, but the large number of kids learning remotely means their connections still drop.



Like other low-income Philadelphia families, the [Todds are entitled](#) through a partnership with the city, the School District, and internet providers to [either a wired internet connection or a mobile hot spot](#) that would make things easier, but Todd has so far been unable to secure a hot spot. He tried multiple times to pick one up, he said, but none was available, and he stopped trying. When he leaves the shelter for a medical appointment or any other reason, the children must go with him, so they miss school; they can't be left alone at the shelter.

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## What you should know about coronavirus

*Updated: December 7, 2020 — 8:08 AM*

### How many cases have there been?

There have been about 67.18 million confirmed cases and 1.54 million deaths globally. In the United States, there have been about 14.76 million confirmed cases and 282,340 deaths.

### What are the symptoms?

Like other respiratory infections, symptoms of coronavirus can include fever, cough, and difficulty breathing. [Here is an in-depth description](#)

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Colleen Landy, the School District's assistant director of education for children and youth experiencing homelessness, said one of her staff's chief challenges is educating people about the support open to them, such as the hot spot Todd could have.

"A lot of times, people don't even realize what they're eligible for, or how to get it," Landy said. Families such as the Todds have the right to keep their kids in the school they attended before becoming homeless, and when in-person school is in session, they're eligible for free transportation there.

Shelter staff have tried to solve for the pandemic as much as possible, adjusting mealtimes to match school schedules and converting community rooms into student work spaces. Donations have provided for supplies, headphones, and furniture. But the challenges are undeniable, especially now that a second wave of COVID-19 cases has meant tighter restrictions.



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Renee Todd, 13, an eighth grader at A.B. Day Elementary School, pauses during a virtual class. She misses in-person school, the routine of getting up and going somewhere every day. Renee, her brother, B.J., and their father Benjamin live at Jane Addams Place, a shelter in North Philadelphia.

Experiencing homelessness is traumatic for any child, said David Chiles, the organization's executive director, "and now they're living through the trauma of a pandemic and being out of school for a long time."

Shannon Healey, the organization's shelter director, was struck by something a resident said when Healey explained the new COVID-19 surge rules to her.

"She just took a beat and said, 'Everything comes down on us,'" Healey said.

B.J.'s teacher is sympathetic about his challenges, the boy said.

"She knows I live in a shelter, and she says, 'I understand,'" B.J. said. "She talks to my dad on the phone."

Sometimes, kids run up and down the shelter hallways, making noise, making it tough to concentrate, B.J. and Renee said. Todd keeps in touch with their teachers, checking on Renee's grades, making sure B.J., who needs learning supports, is getting the help he needs. He assigns them Dad research projects: Read about the pandemic of 1918, memorize state capitals.

"You've got to do your due diligence. You can't just ignore that they're in school," Todd said. "You have to teach them."

He's proud of his kids' resilience but worries about the amount of time they spend on screens now — six hours for school, then homework, and often more time on their computers or Renee's phone when schoolwork is done. Hemmed in, what else is there to do?

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Aside from walks around the neighborhood or moments spent on the concrete patio outside, the family spend most of the time in their room; they stayed in for Thanksgiving, instead of eating with family as originally planned. It can feel claustrophobic, but Todd is hanging on to a bit of good news that came his way recently: He was approved for housing and hopes to move out of the shelter soon.

"It's a nice, bright hope," he said.



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