

Educational opportunity for homeless students

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Since the beginning of the Great Recession, rates of student homelessness have risen rapidly in urban, suburban, and rural school districts throughout the United States. Approximately one million students were identified as homeless during the 2009 to 2010 school year. Although many more homeless students remained unidentified as such, this official number still represents a 41 percent increase over the number of students identified as homeless during the 2007 to 2008 school year.¹ Nearly three-quarters of school districts throughout the United States reported local increases in student homelessness throughout this period.² Since homelessness has been associated with an array of negative school outcomes including low attendance rates, poor grades and attendance scores, and social stigmatization, this increase represents a significant challenge for schools.³ As the depth and breadth of student homelessness have increased, education scholars have examined student-level effects of housing instability, evaluated policies that define homeless students' rights and responsibilities, and suggested approaches that are responsive to homeless students' needs.⁴ One clear finding that has emerged from studies of homeless and highly mobile students is that schools and community-based organizations have important roles in connecting students and families to a variety of education-related opportunities. The purpose of the study summarized here was to learn more about these efforts, especially to determine what practices, routines, and schools were used to connect homeless students to educational opportunities, both in and out of school.⁵

Student homelessness

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987, most recently amended and reauthorized in 2002, defines homeless students as not only those who live in shelters or on the street, but also those living in motels, vehicles, or who are forced to temporarily “double-up” with family members or friends. The effect of homelessness on students' schooling experiences varies by age, setting, and duration of homeless spell.⁶ For example, homeless adolescents may be

more likely than younger students to be affected by social stigmatization in school. Those who stay in settings that are cramped, stressful, or dangerous face different sets of challenges in accessing educational opportunities than those living in stable and supportive shelter settings. Those who are homeless for months may be more profoundly affected by the experience than those who are homeless for a few days. There is no “universal homeless student experience,” but rather a broad range of specific stories and experiences of homelessness with specific student assets, needs, and challenges.

Research suggests that students who experience homelessness are likely to demonstrate a variety of negative school outcomes, including lower grades, attendance rates, and graduation rates, compared to the overall student population.⁷ Homeless students are also more likely than average to have been cited for behavioral issues in school.⁸ While it can be difficult to disentangle the direct effects of incidences of homelessness from those of poverty, violence, and breakdowns in supportive relationships, there are two particularly notable factors that distinguish the experience of homeless students from their peers who are residentially stable. First, these students have higher rates of school mobility than other students, even those who are from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.⁹ Frequent school changes may be particularly detrimental to homeless students, since unlike those who move due to such stable or upward changes as parental employment opportunities or military transfers, these moves are marked by ongoing stress, conflict, instability, and even danger.¹⁰ When homeless students change schools, the move tends to be abrupt and unplanned, providing little if any time for students to prepare emotionally or psychologically, and little opportunity for the new schools to prepare for them. Second, and closely related to the challenge of school mobility, homeless students tend to experience isolation more frequently than those in poverty who are not homeless. This includes physical isolation from parents and other family members, since homeless families are often forced to split up; and social and psychological isolation from peers and teachers, both within and outside school settings. Students who are separated from supportive relationships usually fare worse in school than those who are well connected.

Policies related to homeless students

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Act states that students should be accorded certain rights and opportunities during periods of homelessness. Its implementation depends on schools and community-based organizations working together to provide homeless students with uninterrupted

access to supportive resources and relationships. In past years, McKinney-Vento implementation was primarily conceived as an urban policy, done through city schools near homeless shelters. However, the Homelessness Emergency and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act, implemented in 2009, moves away from traditional models of service that operate through cooperation between schools and shelters, and instead focuses on the rapid rehousing of residentially unstable families. Additionally, the HEARTH Act includes suburban and rural as well as urban areas. HEARTH, combined with post-recession housing trends, has acted to disperse homelessness and residential instability. Student homelessness is no longer seen as solely an urban issue, and schools, neighborhoods, and communities that had not previously addressed poverty and homelessness to any great extent are now faced with the imperative to do so. Research suggests that implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act requires strategic connection of students to education-related resources and relationships, within and across organizations and settings.

Description of study

Our study is based on work done by Mario Small, which suggests that what people gain from their relationship network depends on the organizations in which these relationships are rooted. Small proposes a concept of “organizational brokerage,” defined as “the general process by which an organization connects an individual to another individual, or to the resources they contain.”¹¹ Small notes that the frequency and nature of interactions that individuals have with each other are affected by their organizations. Organizations that emphasize respectful, purposeful, regular, and ongoing interactions can efficiently nurture trust and shared purpose among a diverse group of people. These trusting relationships then become channels of support and information sharing, providing the groundwork upon which larger institutional purposes can be achieved.

Schools’ larger teaching and learning purposes, then, are achieved not only through overtly academic efforts, but also through everyday routines and practices that connect students to people and resources including mentors, jobs, and after-school programs. Schools that have strong ties to community-based organizations and programs, and that are well-supported by their school district, are in a good position to help homeless students find and maintain connections to education-related resources and relationships.

In our study, we looked at how schools connected homeless and highly mobile students and families to resources, relationships, and broader opportunities to achieve educational success. Specifically, we considered relationships within and across schools and their neighboring community organizations, including: (1) How are these relationships nurtured and maintained? (2) How and to what extent is information shared? (3) How are networks of relationships cultivated and sustained by and for homeless

students? The findings described here are drawn primarily from 132 interviews with parents, school personnel, and relevant staff from community-based organizations, in a mid-sized Midwestern city.

This city provides a particularly rich context for learning about student homelessness for three reasons. First, like many other places, it has experienced a significant increase in homelessness in recent years. Homeless shelters served nearly 40 percent more families and school-age children in 2013 than they had five years earlier, and the number of district students identified as homeless more than doubled between the 2008 to 2009 and 2012 to 2013 school years. About one out of every 20 students in the district was identified as homeless in 2012 to 2013, and numerous other homeless students undoubtedly went unidentified. Second, unlike many other comparably sized school districts in the United States, the school district attempts to address student homelessness in a purposeful and strategic manner. The district devotes significant resources toward the implementation of McKinney-Vento policy, and more broadly to the facilitation of stable educational opportunities for homeless students and their families. Third, the region has progressively adopted the HEARTH philosophy of directing families to permanent, independent housing, rather than traditional shelters and transitional programs. Initial evaluation reports indicate that the move toward independent housing solutions has stabilized hundreds of families, but little is known about accompanying education-related outcomes and implications.

Findings

At the school district level, an overarching homeless services framework prompted information and resource dissemination within and among district schools. At the individual school level, wide-ranging differences in school environments and conditions affected the ways that routines and relationships developed. Finally, at the neighborhood level, a group of community-based social workers served to bridge the gap for school-based personnel and homeless students and families. Conditions and practices at each level affected, and were affected by, the conditions and practices of the other levels.

District-level efforts

The school district has a “Mobile Student Support Team” that focuses exclusively on ensuring that homeless and highly mobile students are provided educational opportunities commensurate with their housed peers. Our interviews suggest that this support team, composed of a teacher, two social workers, and an administrative assistant, is a driving force behind the district’s generally focused and coherent daily service of homeless students. The support team uses both referral and collaborative methods to connect schools and families. Team members know and speak regularly with staff from area shelters, youth programs, and food pantries, and thus understand the subtleties of accessing

and making use of local services. On a daily basis, support team members refer families and social workers to the people and services they need, most often for immediate shelter and transportation needs, but also for supplementary education programs, recreational activities, and more. These referrals were effective because they were provided within a collaborative orientation. The support team cultivates and sustains relationships among and between individuals and organizations, allowing for not only more accurate referrals, but more fundamentally, a city-wide understanding and commitment to serving homeless students through integrated, collaborative means.

A poignant example of this collaborative orientation is the poetry program designed for homeless students by the support team. This program brought experts from the local university together with district and community leaders over the course of several months to give students advanced instruction in poetry and writing, culminating in a well-attended public presentation of the students' work at a local library. Beyond its cognitive, social, and emotional benefits for the students, the poetry program facilitated ongoing connections between district staff, students, parents, school staff, and other community stakeholders. Overall, the Mobile Student Support Team appeared to contribute to what one school social worker described as a "united purpose" throughout the district in addressing student homelessness. The district's sustained, centralized commitment serves as a central point of connection for all who are charged with supporting homeless students.

School-level efforts

School-level efforts to connect homeless students and families with services are clearly informed by and associated with district-level efforts. School social workers who are designated as McKinney-Vento contacts within each school work regularly with the district support team. There is considerable variation, however, in how social workers interpret and address situations of homelessness in their schools. Three factors appeared to be particularly important in this variation: grade level of the school, internal school culture, and neighborhood conditions.

Grade level of the school

Staff at middle schools and high schools noted that one of the main challenges in addressing issues of student homelessness in their schools was identifying which students were experiencing homelessness during the school year. Middle and high school students who become homeless but do not change schools as a result are particularly difficult to identify and thus to connect to appropriate supports. While elementary school students spend the majority of their days with a single teacher, middle and high school students shuffle between multiple teachers each day. As a result, middle and high school teachers are less likely to form close bonds with students and to be aware of changing home situations. Younger students were also described as being more "unfiltered" in discussing family situations, and thus as

more likely than older students to provide information that could facilitate helpful and targeted school responses.

Student transportation also varied by the grade level of the school. All U.S. students are permitted to remain in their "school of origin" while homeless even if their temporary residence is outside their school's attendance area. At the elementary school level, transportation in this case is generally provided by private taxi. While this strategy is far from ideal, as it is expensive for the school district, and young students have to ride unaccompanied with a driver they do not know, it does present a direct and reliable method for transporting students. As one high school social worker explained, however, similar services are not provided to middle and high school students:

Transportation, obviously, is a really big issue... As you get to middle and high school, it's a lot harder because our students are automatically given transportation in the form of a bus pass... They are not taxed to school unless it's a very extreme circumstance... So I really help navigate that bus system. Coming from the east side, from the north side, or from the south side, you have to get transfers at all these different points. It's very complicated and it's very cumbersome for them, so I try to help them with this.

Social workers and parents alike noted that the challenges of figuring out multi-stop bus routes often led to tardiness and absences from school and extracurricular opportunities.

At the elementary school level, nearly all school staff described their students as having at least one parent, community social worker, teacher, or other adult with whom school social workers could collaborate in providing needed support. Additionally, the larger community was described as having numerous services and opportunities for young children, including family shelters, academic mentoring, and arts and recreation programs. At the high school level, however, where homeless youth are more likely to be unaccompanied (i.e., not living with their parents), school social workers appeared to have fewer adult advocates to facilitate their efforts. Since the community has no shelters for unaccompanied youth, and there are few after-school services for children of this age, the list of potential program opportunities is short. Some social workers noted that job referrals are often the best opportunities they can provide to homeless high school students.

Internal culture

Nearly all district schools had several routine practices used to actively address student homelessness. Most schools also provided information referrals in non-interactive ways by creating community information bulletin boards and posting fliers. While some parents appreciated this method of providing information they might not otherwise know about, families often became overwhelmed with many seemingly disconnected referrals. Collaborative efforts, where staff worked directly with students and families to make connections to resources, tended to be more effective.

The specific ways that collaboration and referral occurred in individual schools was influenced by social workers' roles and responsibilities, and by the working relationships among staff members. Most of the school social workers we interviewed described their job responsibilities as having expanded in recent years to include tasks such as behavior management, hallway monitoring, and classroom intervention. These new duties have left them with less time to work with families and other staff members to support homeless students. Most elementary school social workers also split their time between two schools. Social workers were particularly burdened in schools that had experienced significant recent increases in student homelessness. Over a six-year period, more than a quarter of schools had gone from an average of less than ten homeless students per school year to more than thirty, with some schools experiencing a ten-fold increase. One social worker described her frustration with not being able to devote sufficient time to supporting homeless students:

There is just not enough time with the number of students that are coming in and limited resources within the school. We get stretched thinner and thinner and then there are certain expectations or additional expectations that get pulled in to try to get that [homeless] student what they need... And budget cuts are continuously reducing time we can actually spend with the students. So even if you get them registered and you get an interview with a student and spend a lot of time with them initially, and you are really connecting them and meeting with teachers and really finding out what it is that is really needed to support them, then it's really the follow-up that becomes hard because three or four more students come in with the same situation. So you are leaving a note to make sure to follow up with so and so and have them connected with this person or that person. So it's really the time... the students really, really need the time and they want the time and they are really struggling with the adjustment... And along with the time is just the amount of staff to be able to meet their needs.

Working relationships among school staff also affected how homeless students were connected to services. While nearly all school staff members and parents noted the careful balancing act required to provide teachers with sufficient information to respect and respond to students' needs while also respecting their privacy, some social workers appeared to be better than others at this. One mother described a successful interaction:

Well, it was the school social worker over at Lawson Elementary—she was the greatest person! When she found out that we needed help, she gave me all sorts of information and was really pretty discreet about it. It's not like she was going to tell the whole school. She figured out a way for my daughter to get back and forth to school. She got me a gas card, which really helped when I needed to pick her up from school.

Not all social workers were able to work so adeptly. In particular, several schools had experienced significant staff turnover in recent years, which appeared to work against staff trust and collaboration in those schools, and made it more difficult for staff to decide how much and with whom to share information about homeless students.

Neighborhood characteristics

As the ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic compositions of local neighborhoods changed in the years prior to our study, the manifestations of and responses to homelessness also changed. Two neighborhoods in particular had population changes that affected school homelessness. Both neighborhoods shifted from having mostly African American residents to mostly Latino, but the causes and consequences of the shifts were quite different.

On the south side, discriminatory practices by new landlords shaped the population. A Latino social worker who worked in this neighborhood explained:

It [the south side neighborhood] was largely African American...and now is a much bigger Hispanic population here. The makeup now is like 70 percent Hispanic... It's kind of a trend that we are seeing. And I kind of feel like, even though it is illegal to discriminate, you can totally see landlords being more willing to rent to Hispanic populations. It's just kind of a thing that I've noticed. I know the landlords. Pretty much all of the landlords in the neighborhood, I know them. You can see just when pretty much a whole complex is Latino, you just have these thoughts about well, I can see that they're weeding out other applicants. I don't know why, but they just have maybe a better record working with those families? I don't know, but it's just kind of what I'm seeing. These are families coming from within the community and from outside of this state and outside of the United States.

In addition to being very troubling for black families who were being displaced from the neighborhood, this trend affected the ways that homelessness was identified and addressed in schools. Many of the Latino residents who were new to the south side were undocumented, and were thus reticent to disclose personal information to social workers for fear of being "caught." The south side social worker noted that he was certain that many families were homeless and doubling-up with others—and therefore eligible for McKinney-Vento benefits including transportation and academic support—but they were nearly impossible to identify without their willing disclosure. Since there is no school in this low-income neighborhood, students are bussed to schools in other parts of town. As a result, school staff responsible for helping them are located miles away, and are often unfamiliar with neighborhood organizations and services.

On the north side, there has been a similar demographic shift from a black majority to an immigrant Latino majority, but

the cause and school response are markedly different. On the north side, most of the new Latino residents are in one large public housing complex, and most of the students in the complex attend the same elementary and middle schools. The elementary school's longtime social worker noted that, as on the south side, undocumented parents were wary about identifying themselves, but that rigid housing policy enforcement and a new online student registration system further complicated homeless student identification and service within her school:

What's interesting about Lane School is that there is one apartment complex that primarily feeds into Lane and that is the Clinton Heights apartment complex. And they're one of the original Section 8 federal buildings from back in the 1970s...And the whole apartment complex, the way they operate is not like private landlords. There's a lot of rigorous federal legislation. And so what happened is they're not allowed to double-up. And so if families double-up, the people who have the lease could actually lose their lease. So they don't like to acknowledge that maybe there are families that are homeless living with them. They won't come to school and say they don't have permanent housing. When we went to the computer online [student enrollment] system, that was kind of like a backdoor approach to getting into schools. So one of the things that happens is that even though they are homeless [doubled-up with other families], we get families that go and register for the school themselves on the computer. We have families in the registry and not providing an address or else they are providing an address for a business or nonexistent address. There are a fair number of families where we really don't know where they're going after school...Families used to have to come in and get everything from the secretary. The secretary would put information in the computer and she would verify all information or address contacts and everything else. They would have to provide a utility bill and a lease. But now one of my concerns is that we have a lot of kids coming to school and we really don't know where they are. Part of my job now is that I end up having to function like a private detective. They are mysteries and they are interesting stories to me. So I am trying to figure out from kids and from parents where are the kids and where are the addresses. And because they are so afraid of their family or friends losing their housing in Clinton Heights, they don't like to tell me.

Despite the considerable challenges to identifying and serving homeless students in the north side neighborhood, we found some of the district's most promising and innovative practices there. School social workers designed their daily routines in strategic response to the schools' changing populations. The north side school social worker quoted above developed a close working relationship with her school's bilingual resource specialist, who had become a trusted intermediary between families and school personnel. The social worker also spent time each week at the apartment

complex where so many of the doubled-up students resided. She developed a friendly working relationship with the landlord, who kept her updated about events and policies around the complex; her presence also increased families' familiarity with her. She noted that many families had come to trust her not just because she could connect them with programs and resources, but also because she told them she would not report them to immigration services (as many had feared), and would not even identify them as doubled-up and homeless, if that was their preference. She was thus able to identify, engage, and support homeless students, even though many of them were never officially labelled as such by the school.

The role of empathy

While some of the social workers and leaders we interviewed delineated their tasks and responsibilities with a degree of professional detachment, most spoke, unsolicited, of their empathy for and commitment to homeless children and families. The social workers, in particular, spoke of homelessness not as a broad social problem for larger systems to address over time, but as an everyday crisis being faced by specific people in their school buildings. For example, an elementary school social worker cried as she described a young single mother who had recently visited her office:

Two of her kids are here [in this school] and she also has a two-year-old and a two-week old. She rolled in here with their double stroller and everything she owned jammed on a double stroller along with the two kids. She was basically exposing her soul. She is letting it all out with me. It can be a very vulnerable position to be in for anyone...When it's [homelessness] alive and in front of you and real like that—like right here—it makes it very different. I kept thinking “this baby is two weeks old.” That really, that just should not be. This situation should just not be. And this is happening right now when the County is going back and forth as to whether they're going to cut the hours of the shelter. And I just thought, “Boy, I need to be speaking at one of those public hearings because they need to understand what this [homelessness] really looks like.”

This social worker fulfilled her formal McKinney-Vento responsibilities by helping the young mother find food and emergency short-term housing and connecting the children with school transportation. What impressed us even more than her impressive knowledge of policy and service delivery, however, was the way she portrayed and interacted with these and other students and families. She highlighted her love and respect for the homeless students, praised their resilience in response to an extremely difficult situation, and vowed to advocate for them to the fullest extent she could. In fact, the majority of our interview participants used words like “dignity,” “respect,” “justice,” “beauty,” and “belief” far more often than words like “policies” and “roles” in response to our questions about how and why they devoted themselves to homeless students and families. Although our findings

largely center on organizational practices that facilitate education-related connections, these practices should be understood as resting upon individuals' experience-informed understandings and responses.

Discussion and implications

Research suggests that connections to education-related resources and relationships are often difficult for homeless students to establish and maintain. We drew conceptual guidance from Small's perspectives on organizational brokerage to learn how schools go about fostering such connections.¹² Our intent was to learn about the daily practices through which a community responded to student homelessness. The city we studied was chosen because of its commitment to ensuring equitable access to educational opportunities for all students, regardless of their residential situations. As in most other communities, in this city the pursuit of this goal faces a range of challenges, including insufficient school funding and a lack of connection within and between many schools.

We believe that this study offers researchers and practitioners insights that can be used to inform their own community's responses to homelessness of school-age children and their families. In particular, we offer three lessons for practice. First, guidance and support from the school district central office is extremely important. For example, the Mobile Student Support Team provided daily coordination and oversight of transportation and other services for the school district. This demonstrated district-level commitment to supporting homeless students helps to motivate and normalize efforts to address homelessness beyond the central office.

Second, the efforts of the central office need to be connected to and enhanced by responsive networks within each individual school. Schools that rely on single positions (typically social workers) to carry out all activities related to homelessness in that school are unlikely to be able to respond as comprehensively and efficiently as those that develop regular multi-personnel routines and practices to identify, connect, and serve homeless students.

Third, having approaches to homelessness that are well-integrated into daily school life can help schools respond appropriately in diverse local contexts. Rather than relying on "one-size-fits-all" understandings of and responses to homelessness, schools can acquire more detailed knowledge about local trends in homelessness by including in their homeless student support teams those who have relationships with landlords, police, community housing developers, and other community members. Each school needs individually-tailored strategies to help their students, and those who are most immersed in the issue are well positioned to develop effective responses. The empathy, passion, and commitment that tend to accompany individuals' close interactions with homelessness also appear to heighten immediacy in responding to it.

Beyond these three lessons for practice, the findings from our study highlight the need for additional research on schools' responses to student homelessness. Specifically, more needs to be known about how various school-level positions, including social workers, teachers, administrators, and front office staff, communicate about and respond to homelessness in strategic ways. It would also be helpful to know more about how the McKinney-Vento Act, the HEARTH Act, and other homeless-specific policies intersect. ■

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