Minn-LInK Issue Brief
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Homeless and Highly Mobile Students: A description of students from three Minnesota districts

Homeless Students: A Growing Population
Minnesota has seen an increase in homeless children and families over past decades. From 1991 to 2006 the number of homeless families with children in Minnesota tripled, now comprising 35% of Minnesota's total homeless population (Wilder, 2007). Nearly 85% of the children in these families are under twelve years old. Though these numbers remained steady between 2000 and 2006, they are increasing dramatically in the current mortgage and economic crisis. As this population continues to grow, it is important to have the fullest possible understanding of these children and the struggles they are facing.

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (2002)
In 2002 the McKinney Vento Homeless Assistance Act (2002) was reauthorized. This policy ensures that homeless students receive the opportunity to the same free, appropriate education as non-homeless students. Under McKinney-Vento, states are required to enroll homeless students in any public school immediately, even if they do not have proper documentation, such as birth certificates or immunization records. McKinney-Vento also provides federal funding to states for a variety of services, such as transportation, tutoring and after school programs, school supplies, parent education, pre-school, and referrals to health and mental health services.
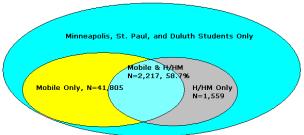
Literature
Homeless students face many obstacles to success in school. Overall findings suggest that homeless students perform more poorly on measures of academic achievement than non-homeless children (Masten, et al.,1997; Obradovic, et al., 2007; Rafferty, et al., 2004; Rubin, et al., 1996; Zima, et al., 1994). Homeless students are more likely to change schools, receive special education services, repeat a grade, have lower attendance rates, and exhibit behavior problems (Buckner, et al., 2001; Masten et al., 1997; Rafferty et al., 2004; Rubin et al., 1996).

When looking at child welfare outcomes, homeless children are more likely than non-homeless children to have child welfare contact and experience out of home placements (Culhane, et al., 2003; Park, et al., 2004; Wilder, 2007).

Study Data
Using statewide administrative data from the Department of Education, Minn-LInK separated all students in Minnesota public schools during the 2006 school year (N=858,023) into Mobile and Non-Mobile groups. Students were considered Mobile if they had a number of codes in their record that indicated residential moves (see Appendix A of the full report for details). McKinney-Vento grantee districts were invited to work with the University to explore whether homeless students could be accurately identified using administrative education data to support a population-based description of these students. A sub-file containing only students from three core school districts was created (*n=104,680*). These three districts provided identified data for their students, coded as homeless or highly mobile. Of the 3,776 Homeless or Highly Mobile (H/HM) students identified by the districts, 2,217 were also identified using only the administrative education data (58.9%). There were 1,559 students identified as H/HM by the districts who were not identified as Mobile by using the administrative data, and another 41,805 were flagged as mobile by the University, but not by the districts.
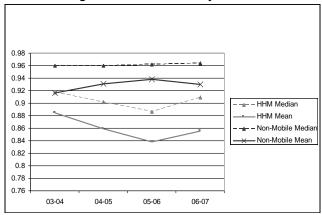

Figure 1. District Data

The University examined the group identified by both the administrative and the district data (n=2,217) to explore in what ways these students differed significantly from Non-Mobile students in the same districts. In addition to education data, statewide child welfare records from the Minnesota Department of Human Services were examined. Given the large number of student records, two sub-populations, younger children (kindergarten and first grade) and older children (seventh, eighth, and ninth grades), were created and matched with the core district file.

Findings
Data were examined for the 2006 school year, as well as the two years prior and one year after. Initial findings show that H/HM students are disproportionately African-American, more likely to receive free/reduced meals, have an emotional or behavioral disability, and receive special education services. By age, the H/HM population appears to peak at ninth grade, falling off in grades thereafter (perhaps indicating students dropping out of high school). The longitudinal data show a decline in attendance rates for H/HM students two years prior to homeless identification by districts. During the year following identification, attendance rates for H/HM students improve.

Figure 2. Attendance Trajectories

Child welfare outcomes were compared by mobility status using the students in the younger and older children sub-populations. During the two years prior and the study year (2003-2006), H/HM students experienced significantly more substantiated maltreatment findings and more out of home placements than Non-Mobile students. During the year after the study period, the majority of H/HM students had no child welfare contacts.

Limitations

Since this study was conducted using administrative data, homeless children who have not yet come to the attention of the school system could not be included. Second, it was unknown whether or not some of these students had been previously identified as H/HM in another district. Finally, given the current economic crisis, many more children are experiencing homelessness, so these findings are unlikely to accurately describe the current homeless student population.

Discussion Points

This study was able to explore and describe a broad picture of homeless students in Minnesota by using a multi-system approach and examining students from different regions of the state. In particular,

- This work brought to light interesting findings with regard to attendance that might be helpful in reaching out to students who are in danger of becoming homeless or otherwise disconnected from school.
- It is also useful in uncovering the potential depth of this problem. It is the belief of those working in the schools that there are many more homeless students than are being identified. When looking at the administrative data from the three core districts, Minn-LInK identified 42% of the students as being Mobile, a category where most homeless students likely reside. Currently, districts are overwhelmed with the number of identified H/HM students they have. More funding and resources need to be allocated to help accurately identify and serve homeless students.

To read the full report, visit the CASCW web site at http://cascw.umn.edu and follow the link to Publications or Minn-LInK.

Next Steps

As the homeless population continues to grow, it is critically important to have a broad understanding of homeless youth and their needs and elevate discourse beyond the level of individual students and schools. Future research should continue to investigate homeless students from a multi-system perspective and could include the following:

- Longitudinal studies examining graduation rates, special education rates, and homeless status for students over a longer period of time.
- Qualitative measures to capture students' experiences firsthand.
- More careful comparison of outcomes for homeless youth involved in child welfare compared with homeless youth who are not.
- Evaluation and outcome measures for current interventions with homeless students.
- Further refinement of an estimation model to help provide more accurate picture of the number of homeless students currently enrolled in schools.

References

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