

Who is Homeless in School? Evaluating Overlap and Outcomes of Student Homelessness

Translating research to practice may be difficult, yet a better understanding of current research is necessary to ensure child welfare workers engage in best practices when working with children and families. The Minn-Link Discussion Guide is designed to help facilitate thoughtful discussions about the information presented in the research brief in order to inform practice and enhance discussion surrounding meaningful issues.

In this issue we were interested in understanding how differences in federal definitions of counting student homelessness determine who is considered homeless, and how homeless students are performing in school. We found that students identified as homeless by the Department of Education (ED) comprise a much larger proportion of all homeless students (91%) than those identified as homeless by Housing and Urban Development (HUD); only 14% of ED-homeless are also HUD-homeless. On the other hand, only 20% of all homeless students were counted by HUD, but 61% of those were also identified by schools as homeless. Students experiencing homelessness performed more poorly on tests and had lower school attendance than their peers who received free lunch. However, students identified as ED-homeless faced slightly lower risk than HUD-homeless students on these outcomes.

Discussion on Practice Implications

1. We found that students experiencing homelessness came from disproportionately Black and/or Native American families in comparison to free lunch students, and that they were even more overrepresented in comparison to the general student body in Minnesota. What role do you think bias and racism has in these producing these inequalities? What things can we do as concerned stakeholders to reduce how the burden of hardship in our communities is felt by historically marginalized and oppressed people of color?
2. Despite guarantees of the McKinney Vento Act that children experiencing homelessness have the right to remain at the same school for the entirety of the school-year, we find that ED-homeless students have much higher rates of school moves in the middle of the academic year than their free lunch peers. Have you worked with students who switched schools during a spell of homelessness? What factors do you think might lead a family to switch schools for their children when they are experiencing homelessness? What things might you do to support children's school stability during periods of homelessness?
3. The study found that, in comparison to students receiving free lunch, students who are experiencing homelessness (in either HUD's or ED's definition) are less likely to meet the standard on state tests even after controlling for many relevant factors such as race, limited English proficiency status, and disability status. What other factors do you believe lead to these "achievement gaps" and what policies or programs do you believe would be best suited to reducing them for students experiencing homelessness?

Discussion on Agency- & System-Level Changes

1. The study found that only 60% of HUD-homeless students were identified by their school districts, even though they would all be technically considered homeless according to the McKinney-Vento Act. What can schools do to improve their detection rates of students staying in HUD shelters or those identified as "street homeless"? What, if any, changes to policies at the local, state, or federal level might help schools identify and support children experiencing homelessness?
2. The study also found that students with shorter stays in shelter were much less likely to be identified by their schools as homeless. How can we develop more efficient communication systems between schools and shelters so that schools are in the know when their students are experiencing homelessness?
3. The study found that students experiencing homelessness were much more likely to switch schools in the middle of the year and attend school at lower rates than their peers. Aside from the current rights granted by the McKinney-Vento Act such as specialized transportation, what other policies would empower schools to ensure that students are able to continue attending their school of origin, even when they are experiencing housing insecurity?