

RESEARCH BRIEF

Profiles of Risk Among Students Experiencing Homelessness

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study examined profiles of risk among 6th graders who experienced homelessness across a 10-year period and the relationship with student graduation. Understanding risk profiles of homeless youth related to academic outcomes can inform how schools and communities develop interventions for addressing homelessness in students.

BACKGROUND & PURPOSE

Homelessness has increased nationally and in Minnesota by 10% since 2015 (Pittman et al., 2020). According to a Minnesota Department of Education report (2019), close to 1% of the student population in 2018 was identified as homeless near the beginning of the school year. The four-year graduation rate for students experiencing homelessness is much lower than that of the general student population (46.8% compared to 83.2% overall; MDE, 2019), and youth without a high school diploma are 4.5 times more likely to experience homelessness later in life than students who graduate (Morton et al., 2017).

Moreover, homeless and highly mobile students have lower reading and math scores than students eligible for free or reduced-price meals (Cutuli et al., 2013). Common academic issues associated with student homelessness include low attendance, school dropout, school mobility, and low achievement (Piescher et al., 2014; Pittman et al., 2020).

Additionally, increasing evidence suggests that homelessness is associated with child protective service (CPS) involvement (Culhane et al., 2003; Fowler et al., 2013; Palmer et al., 2023; Pelton, 2015; Rodriguez et al., 2020). While some commonalities exist, research suggests diversity among youth who become homeless, reflecting a broad spectrum of experiences, backgrounds, and trajectories (Toro et al., 2011).

Despite the prevalence and complexity of student homelessness, little is known about the varying profiles of risk among students experiencing homelessness. Therefore, this study answered the following questions:

1. *What are the profiles of homelessness-related risks among students who experienced homelessness over 10-years?*
2. *How do the identified risk profiles differ by sex and race?*
3. *How do the identified risk profiles relate to the likelihood of high school graduation?*
4. *How do disability and timing of child protection involvement differ across identified risk profiles?*

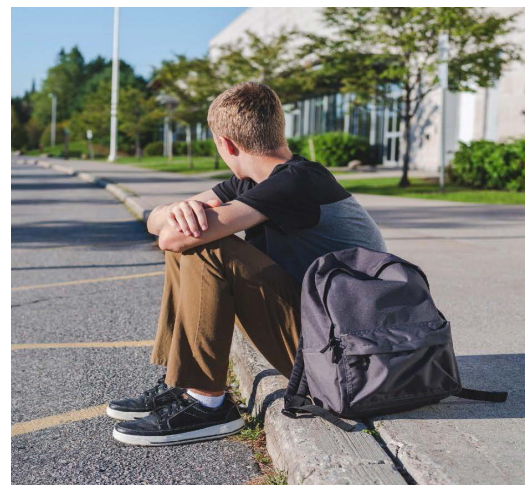


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WHILE SOME COMMONALITIES EXIST, RESEARCH SUGGESTS DIVERSITY AMONG YOUTH WHO BECOME HOMELESS, REFLECTING A BROAD SPECTRUM OF EXPERIENCES, BACKGROUNDS, AND TRAJECTORIES. DESPITE THE PREVALENCE AND COMPLEXITY OF STUDENT HOMELESSNESS, LITTLE IS KNOWN ABOUT THE VARYING PROFILES OF RISK AMONG HOMELESS STUDENTS.



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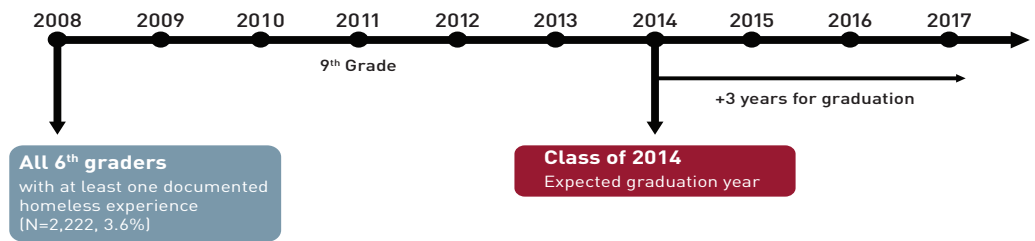
METHODS

Utilizing integrated statewide administrative education and child welfare data, this study identified 2,222 6th graders in the 2008 school year who also had at least one documented occurrence of homelessness across 10 years (2008 to 2017). These students comprised 3.6% of total Grade 6 students in 2008. Latent class analyses were used to identify unique profiles of risk.

Through Minn-LInK, statewide data from the Minnesota Departments of Education and Human Services were integrated. Education data from the Minnesota Automated Reporting Student System (MARSS) were used to identify students experiencing homelessness across 10 academic years. Data corresponding to students' involvement in the child protection system were added, including accepted CPS and out-of-home placement (OHP) cases from 2000 to 2017. All students who were in Grade 6 in the 2008 school year and had at least one documented experience of homelessness across 10 years (from 2008 to 2017, which includes a 7-year graduation period from 9th grade in 2011; Figure 1) were included.

The study identified a total of 2,222 students who experienced homelessness at least once across 10 years, representing 3.6% of all Grade 6 students in the 2008 school year. The primary focus of the study was to identify unique profiles of risk for students who experienced homelessness. Therefore, the study used a person-centered latent class analysis (LCA) to classify subgroups of homeless students with shared experiences. These experiences included chronic homelessness, school outcome risks (school mobility, low attendance, special education, out-of-school suspension), and child protection involvement (CPS and OHP).

Figure 1: Students who Experienced Homelessness Across 10-Years



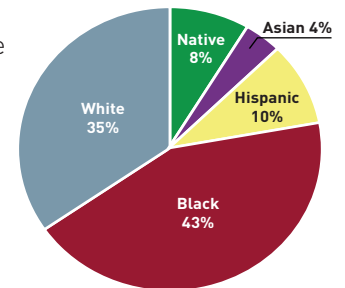
FINDINGS

We identified four unique risk profiles: 1) 22% High Multisystem Need (high-risk group), 2) 35% High Educational Need, 3) 14% High CPS Involvement, and 4) 29% Low Multisystem Need. School mobility, low attendance, and receiving out-of-school suspensions were risk factors for high school graduation.

Student Demographics

The sample of 2,222 students included in this study showed a balanced sex ratio (51.4% female). Demographic data indicated that 43% identified as Black and 35% as White (Figure 2). Fewer than half of students experiencing homelessness (45%) graduated within seven years. Of those who graduated within seven years, 69% graduated in four years, and the rest graduated gradually over three additional years. The mean attendance of students across 10 years was 82%, which is below the recommended minimum of 90% attendance defining chronic absenteeism. Approximately 12% experienced chronic homelessness (defined in this study as experiencing homelessness three years or longer, range: 1-7 years); 39% experienced five or more school moves within the 10-year period. Almost half (48%) had at least one CPS involvement, and about 28% experienced out-of-home placement.

Figure 2: Racial Distribution of Students who Experienced Homelessness



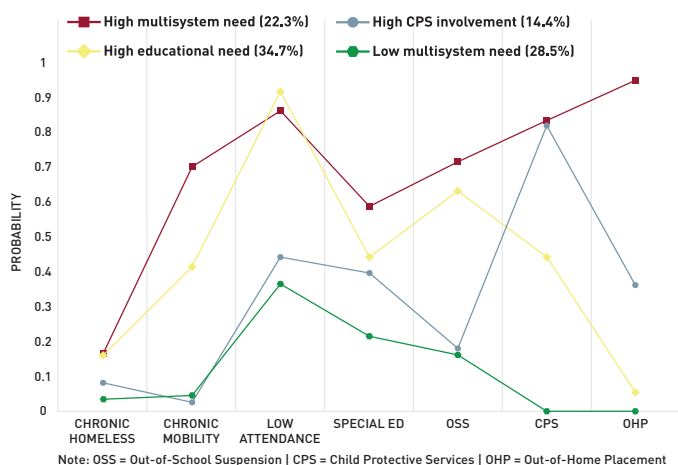
Risk Profiles of Students Experiencing Homelessness

The person-centered latent class analysis identified four unique profiles of risk among students experiencing homeless (Figure 3):

- 22% (n=496) were identified in the **High Multisystem Need** group (red line), or high-risk group, that showed a high probability across risk factors, with notably high school mobility, low attendance, and high rates of suspension as well as involvement in CPS and OHP;

- 35% (n=772) were identified in the **High Educational Need** group (yellow line) which showed moderate school mobility, the lowest school attendance of all groups, a relatively high suspension CPS involvement rate, and moderate OHP involvement;
- 14% (n=321) were identified in the **High CPS Involvement** group (blue line) which had low school outcome risks but a distinctly high probability of CPS involvement and moderate OHP involvement; and
- 29% (n=633) were identified in the **Low Multisystem Need** group (green line) of having the lowest probability of all risk factors, with the lowest rate of chronic homelessness, low school risks, and lack of CPS involvement.

Figure 3: Risk Profiles of Students



and **High Educational Need** groups. Additionally, a greater proportion of students in the **Low Multisystem Need** and **High CPS Involvement** groups graduated within four years (52% and 48%, respectively) than students in other groups.

The study employed regression analysis to investigate the predictors of high school graduation for each group (see Supplemental Table A). Results revealed that in the **High Multisystem Need** and **High Educational Need** groups, being a male and having high rates of school mobility significantly reduced the likelihood of graduating high school. In the **High CPS Involvement** group, being a White student and high rates of school mobility significantly decreased the likelihood of high school graduation. On the other hand, being enrolled in special education for emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) increased the graduation rate. Overall, school mobility emerged as a critical risk factor for preventing students experiencing homelessness from graduating high school. It is important to note that special education for students with EBD increased the graduation rate of homeless students with high CPS involvement, and students of color were more likely to graduate regardless of their CPS involvement.

Disability and Timing of Child Protection Involvement

Descriptive findings revealed that students in the **High Multisystem Need** group were more likely to have an emotional and behavioral disability (37%) than students in other groups. Students in the **High Educational Need** group had a greater prevalence of learning disabilities (21%) than students in other groups. Moreover, CPS involvement during early and middle childhood and involvement in OHP during adolescence were more likely to be classified in the **High Multisystem Need** group (see Figure 4).

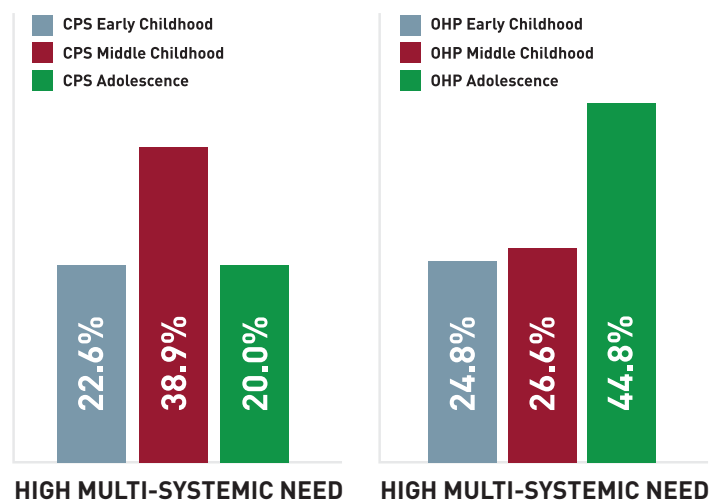
Sex and Race Disparities in Homeless Student Risk Profiles

Girls were 1.36 times, and White students were 3.44 times more likely to be in the **Low Multisystem Need** group than the **High Multisystem Need** group (OR = 1.36, SE = 0.15, $z = 2.01$, $p < .05$; OR = 3.44, SE = 0.16, $z = 7.51$, $p < .001$). Similarly, girls were 1.65 times, and White students were 3.72 times more likely to be in the **High CPS Involvement** group than the **High Multisystem Need** group (OR = 1.65, SE = 0.22, $z = 2.28$, $p < .05$; OR = 3.72, SE = 0.23, $z = 5.81$, $p < .001$). No differences were found for sex and race between the odds of being in the **High Multisystem Need** group and the **High Educational Need** group.

Association Between Risk Profiles and 7-year High School Graduation Rates

The **High CPS Involvement** group showed the greatest probability of 7-year graduation with a graduation rate of 70%, followed by the **Low Multisystem Need** group with a graduation rate of 69%. The expected 7-year high school graduation rate was 29% for the **High Multisystem Need**

Figure 4: Timing of CPS/OHP Involvement



Conclusion

Our study identified four distinct risk profiles among students experiencing homelessness: 1) High Multisystem Need, 2) High Educational Need, 3) High CPS Involvement and 4) Low Multisystem Need - highlighting the heterogeneity of experiences within the homeless student population. We also learned that for Minnesota students who experienced homelessness, risks closely related to school outcomes predicted graduation rates more so than child welfare involvement. Especially high levels of school mobility emerged as a critical risk factor for graduation. Boys and students of color were found to be at greater risk for these factors. In addition, early CPS involvement and OHP involvement during adolescence were shown as a risk to achieving academic goals. However, the findings suggest CPS involvement (an indicator of potential maltreatment *and* service provision) can be a protective factor for graduation among students of color; special education for EBD can further support students' academic success.

Given the diversity among homeless students, findings suggest that a one-size-fits-all approach service is inappropriate to meet student needs. Preventive strategies that focus on improving school-related outcomes, such as reducing school mobility, improving attendance, and reducing disciplinary actions, are recommended. Sharing educational records between schools and districts to create a comprehensive picture of student cumulated risks of students experiencing homelessness can be helpful. For homeless students with relatively stable school attendance but exposed risk of child maltreatment or CPS involvement, identifying EBD and providing effective special education is suggested. Coordinated action across systems is important to address the complex need of students experiencing homelessness while also preventing homelessness later in life.

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LIMITATIONS

The population-level data of students is limited to Minnesota so it cannot be generalized to other states. Also, it focused on 6th graders in 2008 and their experiences over a 10-year period (2008-2017). It may not represent 6th graders at other points in time or students of other ages. Additional research is needed to learn how multisystem coordination could prevent chronic homelessness and mitigate associated risks.

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