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Homelessness *and Student Learning*

It

is an obvious assumption that students of all ages are affected negatively by losing their regular place of residence and relocating for an indefinite period to a relative's or friend's house (if they are lucky), to a motel or shelter (if they are less lucky), or to a campground, tent city, park, abandoned building, bus station, vehicle, or the street (if they are really unlucky). But one need not rely on assumptions. There is a wealth of evidence documenting how learning suffers, and it's especially worth paying attention to today as foreclosures increase and create more homelessness.



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The definition of homeless used here is that of the federal McKinney-Vento Act: children and youth who lack “a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.”¹ That usually translates into living in overcrowded—and hence unstable—conditions not conducive to a focus on schoolwork.

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Recent evidence of the effect of homelessness comes from the Gulf Coast, where according to the U.S. Dept. of Education, the 2005 hurricanes displaced some 372,000 students—preschool through college. Tens of thousands of K-12 students changed school districts, disrupting their studies and their relationships with teachers and peers. And although some student challenges resulting from a hurricane may be unique, the arrival at a new school without records on health, past discipline, immuni-

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zation, or academics is not unusual for any homeless child.²

Whatever the individual cause, more than 1.5 million children go to sleep without a home each year, according to the National Center on Family Homelessness (NCFH).³ The experience—no matter how temporary—can severely disrupt a child’s future sense of security.⁴ And schools are seeing the problem worsen. As a recent *Time* article reported, nearly 16 percent more students were homeless in the 2007 to 2008 academic year than in the previous one.

The reasons why homelessness undermines the concentration needed for learning are legion. According to the NCFH report, homeless “children endure a lack of safety, comfort, privacy, reassuring routines, adequate health care, ... sustaining relationships, and a sense of community.” Moreover, their homelessness often involves other hurdles to getting an education. NCFH notes that “children without homes are twice as likely to experience hunger” and “are more than twice as likely as middle class children to have moderate to severe acute and chronic health problems.” Unsurprisingly, the report continues, “homeless children are twice as likely as other children to repeat a grade in school, to be expelled or suspended, or to drop out of high school.”

First Focus, a bipartisan organization advocating for children and families, has identified behavioral issues associated with forced mobility. It notes a study showing that “frequent movers were 77 percent more likely than children who have not moved to have four or more behavior problems.” In another study tracking 4,500 California and Oregon middle school through high school students, says First Focus, young people who attended several different elementary schools showed 20 percent increased “likeli-

hood of violent behavior in high school.”⁵ In fact, frequent moves were correlated with 28 percent of homeless children attending three or more schools in a single year.⁶

Numerous localities are testing interventions. The *Time* magazine report zeroed in on Minneapolis, where nearly one in 10 children attending public school is homeless. “Perhaps out of necessity,” *Time* says, “the district has become a national model for how to identify what it refers to as ‘highly mobile students’ and ensure that their education is not interrupted. ... Teachers and school social workers are trained to recognize signs that a child may be between homes: hoarding food, wearing the same clothes every day, regularly falling asleep in class. ... The school district gives each homeless child a new backpack full of school supplies paid for by private donations and federal dollars.” And in the winter, “staff members hand out coats, mittens, and hats. Year round, they find free medical clinics to treat earaches and provide dental services. School social workers take kids to get glasses and vaccinations. Many high schools offer laundry or shower facilities for teenagers.” Additionally, the district “provides funding to make sure kids don’t get left out of sports, field trips, school dances, or special projects like the

science fair.”

The economic crisis is intensifying the challenges.⁷ First Focus estimates that over the next two years “2 million children will be directly impacted by the mortgage crisis as their families lose their homes due to foreclosures.” It adds that the estimate would be higher if it included children evicted from rental units affected by foreclosure.⁸ More than two-thirds of the children losing homes through foreclosure are either African American or Latino, exacerbating long-recognized achievement gaps for those populations.

Using Center for Responsible Lending projections and 2005 to 2006 data, the First Focus report provides a state-by-state estimate of future foreclosures and their direct effects on children. It gives 76,000 as the number of such foreclosures in the six New England states, with more than 60,000 children affected.

Although more help is needed, the administration’s economic stimulus package included \$70 million in supplementary funding for the McKinney-Vento Act’s Education for Homeless Children and Youth program. The legislation required the U.S. Department of Education to provide funding for the program to state educational agencies within 60 days of the legislation’s enactment, and states were required to distribute the money to local school districts within 120 days of receipt of funds. Additionally, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act provided funding for programs that benefit homeless children among others: Head Start and Early Head Start, HUD’s Emergency Shelter Grant program, FEMA’s Emergency Food and Shelter program, Child Care Development Block Grants, Special Education Funding to the States and Special Education Grants for Infants and Families, and Title 1 funding to school districts. A State Fiscal Stabilization Fund intended to prevent cutbacks in critical education and other services received \$53.6 billion.

As the National Center on Family Homelessness says, homelessness in a country like United States is unacceptable. The

severe effects on the educational enterprise need to be added to the many compelling reasons for solving the problem.

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Endnotes

¹ See 42 U.S.C. §11434A(2)(a).

² See Chester Hartman and Gregory Squires, "Katrina and Kids: The Impact, the Sequelae" in *Rebuilding Sustainable Communities for Children and Their Families after Disasters*, ed. Adenrele Awotona (Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, forthcoming). The chapter includes an appendix with information on the Congressionally mandated National Commission on Disasters and Children. See also "Student Mobility: How Some Children Get Left Behind," eds. Chester Hartman and Todd Franke, *The Journal of Negro Education* 72, no. 1 (2003), in particular, Patricia F. Julianelle and Maria Foscarinis, "Responding to the School Mobility of Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness: The McKinney-Vento Act and Beyond," and articles on migrant students, students in career military families, immigrant students, students with emotional and behavioral disorders, children in foster care, and an overview of research on the causes and consequences of student mobility, which pinpoint housing instability as the principal trigger for school changes.

³ *America's Youngest Outcasts: State Report Card on Child Homelessness* (2009), www.HomelessChildrenAmerica.org.

⁴ Urban Institute research regarding the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement workplace raids' effects on children are a case in point. See for example, http://www.bos.frb.org/commdev/c&b/2008/summer/capps_immigrant_children.pdf.

⁵ Phillip Lovell and Julia Isaacs, "The Impact of the Mortgage Crisis on Children," *First Focus* (May 2008), www.firstfocus.net.

⁶ "Education of Homeless Children: Overview," *Street*

Lawyer (Washington, DC: National Law Center for Homelessness and Poverty, June 18, 2008). See also the PBS NewsHour's March 31, 2009, segment on homeless children in schools, focusing on Green Bay, Wisconsin, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/video>.

⁷ Barbara Duffield and Philip Lovell, *The Economic Crisis Hits Home: The Unfolding Increase in Child and Youth Homelessness* (Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth and First Focus, December 2008). The study provides recommendations for federal policymakers, schools, and community agencies.

⁸ Danilo Pelletiere and Keith Waldrip, "Renters and the Housing Credit Crisis," *Poverty & Race* (July-August 2008).

