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A Policy Research Commentary

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The Silent Crisis

Student Homelessness on the 30th Anniversary of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act

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Introduction

For thirty years, the federal government has kept tabs on student homelessness thanks to a law passed in 1987 known now as "McKinney-Vento." Yet while we've made progress understanding the issue of student homelessness and developing strategies to address it over the ensuing three decades—we can only conjecture how much worse the challenge would be had the law never been signed—the problem has become more acute. Some of that has to do with changing circumstances on the ground. But we in the housing and education advocacy communities need to re-think our approach as well.

The bottom line is clear. In too many cases, student homelessness cannot be addressed simply by providing a family with subsidized housing. Providing a "home" is not a sufficient intervention. Sleeping in different locations is one thing; losing the continuity of a single school setting is another. As we now understand, mitigating the impact wrought by bouncing perpetually from one educational setting to another is more powerful than many observers might expect. So as we plot our approach to this ongoing and worsening crisis, focused concern on the plight of homeless students should point advocates, educators, and policymakers to take a more comprehensive view.

Background

In July 1987, median monthly rent in the US was $399,[1] a gallon of milk cost $1.98, approximately 500,000 children nationwide were homeless,[2] and President Reagan signed the McKinney Homeless Assistance Act. With an initial appropriation of $4.6 million, the new law included fifteen programs providing a range of services to people experiencing homelessness. In 1987, 43% of homeless children — over 200,000 children — did not attend school due to lack of transportation, lack of records, or denial of residency. One section of the law — arguably the most controversial — required states to remove educational barriers experienced by homeless children and youth.

Thirty years later, and despite decades of effort, that figure has more than quintupled. Milk is now 64% more expensive ($3.24). But reported student homelessness has grown by 160% to more than 1.3 million individual children reported as homeless. And that's a reflection of a broader trend. Like in the late 1980s, almost 20% of children under 18 live in poverty, and 35% of Americans had at least one spell of poverty lasting two or more months since 2009.[3]

We must give credit where credit is due: The McKinney-Vento Act has made important investments in trying to combat the problem of homeless students. The $59 per homeless student granted to resource-strapped school districts helps ease the burden on educators working to help impoverished students succeed. But the statistical insights mandated by the Act are proving even more useful. Now we can use a much more discerning lens to understand what has worked, what hasn't, and what we ought to do moving forward.

> "Over the past thirty years, advocates across the country have torn down barriers that once prevented kids in homeless situations from accessing the very education they needed to lift themselves out of poverty. Thanks to the McKinney-Vento Act, and those who enforce it in our public schools, students who at one time were unable to enroll are now attending and succeeding in school. In some Texas schools, students experiencing homelessness have higher attendance and graduation rates than their non-homeless peers!"
>
> — Barbara James
> McKinney-Vento State Coordinator, Texas

Housing v. Education: A Battle over Priorities

A false dichotomy continues to frame the debate over how to address student homelessness. Some believe advocates choose to advocate for housing *to the exclusion* of education, or education *to the exclusion* of housing. Neither approach is sufficient in and of itself. Families need to be able to pursue stable housing while also ensuring that their children are appropriately educated through the turbulent experience of homelessness.

Those who advocate for a focus on housing may say, "Education is important, but the real problem — the bigger problem — is finding housing for these children and their parents." Do homeless students need stable housing? Of course. Beyond resolving whether they'll sleep under the same roof on consecutive nights, children need a stable education; without one, they are at higher risk of dropping out of school, and possible continued homelessness and instability. The global economy demands that members of the workforce attain high school and college degrees. Education also plays a crucial role in determining an individual's health and overall well-being. Simply put, to be successful, efforts to prevent and end homelessness must prioritize education — from birth through post-secondary graduation — as an intervention that is equal to housing in urgency and impact, particularly with the long lens of child development.

Meanwhile, the world of education reform often bypasses any detailed discussion of homeless students. But homeless students are much more than a drop in the ocean of overall poverty. Nearly 3% of the nation's student body has been identified as homeless, with much higher rates in certain localities. More importantly, homelessness, over and above poverty, has a disproportionate impact on the education, health, and well-being of students: compared with students who are merely low-income, homeless students suffer from higher rates of health and mental health problems, and lower graduation rates.

Bottom line: Homeless students are rarely "just" homeless. They experience trauma, loss, instability, and are uniquely vulnerable. Some of their challenges tie into the *reasons* for their homelessness, and some are the *results* of their homelessness. The cumulative impact of the causes and effects of homelessness wreak havoc on young lives, including on educational attainment.

> "Today … we have the codification of what used to be non-regulatory guidance into a congressional mandate to identify and serve homeless pre Kindergarten–12 students and their younger siblings with a kaleidoscope of educational services. But in my state, the number of homeless children still increases each year. It amazes me how we have come so far, yet have so very far to go."
>
> — Dona Bolt
> original and still-serving McKinney-Vento state coordinator, Oregon

The Past Thirty Years

Since its passage in 1987, the McKinney-Vento Act has been modified and updated. Amendments in 1990 established that homelessness alone isn't sufficient reason to separate students from the mainstream school environment — a change that allowed a student enrolled in school on one side of a city, for instance, from having to switch schools if her family were transferred to a shelter in a far-away community. In 1994, Congress required district liaisons to provide eligible homeless families and children with educational services including Head Start, Even Start, and local preschool programs where available. Only in 2001, as part of No Child Left Behind, was every district required to have a homeless liaison and to provide parents and unaccompanied youth with the ability to request and receive transportation to and from the school of origin. And with the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015, McKinney-Vento is focused on long-term stability, from early childhood through high school graduation, and the transition to the post-secondary education that is essential for earning a living wage.

Despite these improvements, the population of homeless students has grown. That is at least partly because America's approach to homelessness generally has failed to account for unique challenges facing young people — or to the wide disparity in how homelessness affects certain corners of each rural, suburban, and urban community. In the Bronx, one of New York City's five boroughs, for instance, one out of every three students in some schools has been homeless in the past five years. Across the state of Florida, small towns and rural areas educate 14% of all homeless students despite enrolling only 7% of the state's total student population.

The McKinney-Vento Act has certainly made a difference. Without it, many homeless students might not be enrolled in any school. But hurdles remain. Outside the fact that the population of homeless students has actually grown, many homeless students are not properly identified, meaning that a large population of children and youth remain without the law's protection.

It is impossible to know how many homeless students a given district or state "should" identify; homelessness is a moving target. But advocates should take better notice of red flags that often indicate that a school district is likely to have a surfeit of unidentified students. In *Out of the Shadows: A State-by-State Ranking of Accountability for Homeless Students*[4] published in June 2017 by ICPH, we include five indicators of how states identify and support homeless stu-

"In 1988, the power of this law was unknown. It felt as if two or three of us across the entire country even knew much about it. Engaging with families in poverty, we knew we must make the law real and enforceable. Each of our great civil rights struggles began at the schoolhouse door — race, disabilities, immigration, LGBTQ. Homelessness would be no different. Well, we did it! We won the cases and year after year (30!) the structure, funding, teacher and staff buy-in, legislative commitment and research has grown."

— Laurene Heybach
attorney who argued an early McKinney-Vento case in Illinois that made clear the enforceability of the act

dents. One of these indicators is a proxy measure using the number of identified homeless students compared with all students living in extreme poverty (less than 50% of the federal poverty level) to suggest whether homelessness is being effectively identified across each state. These and other indicators can help advocates ensure that all students experiencing homelessness receive the supports they need to succeed academically and ultimately graduate.

What We've Learned

In the thirty years since the McKinney-Vento Act was first signed into law our understanding of the impact of homelessness on students' lives has grown much more sophisticated.

We know that continuity in a child's education contributes to his or her success. Homeless children must both be ready to learn before Kindergarten and be equipped to obtain living-wage employment when their education is complete. Fortunately, Head Start, Early Head Start, the Child Care and Development Fund, and the Higher Education Act collectively provide a foundation to support homeless children and youth. But too many young people fall through the cracks.

We now know that homelessness is a persistent and cyclical experience for many students — not a brief, one-time occurrence. *Hidden in Plain Sight,* released in 2016 by Civic Enterprises, found that 80% of homeless youth said they were homeless more than once, and over half said they were homeless *both* with their families and on their own. These facts underscore the fact that homelessness is often fluid and recurring, realities that make clear the strong case for school stability. Indeed, more attention to the needs of adolescents in homeless families may help stem the growing tide of unaccompanied youth homelessness.

We've come to glean a much clearer understanding of the lasting impacts that homelessness has on student achievement. ICPH's research reveals that students who experienced any episode of homelessness within three years score at the same low proficiency rates as currently homeless students. Moreover, these students rate markedly lower than poor students who have never been homeless. These findings suggest that we need to target interventions to students trapped in any stage of the cycle of homelessness—even those who are presently in stable housing.

We know we need to do more to address and resolve the psychological and emotional issues stemming from homelessness. Today, discussions of homelessness among educators and advocates are finally beginning to include the effects of trauma and adverse childhood experiences. More communities are finding ways to provide wrap-around services at schools; homeless student liaisons can provide schools and community-based organizations with important perspectives on where homeless students attend school, how to identify homeless students, and how to best support them. But these efforts are far from complete.

Finally, we are beginning to see more state legislatures address the needs of homeless students: state laws that prioritize homeless children for preschool; support credit accrual and graduation; extend the liaison model to higher education; and even offer dedicated state funding to support school districts. The Homeless Student Stability Act in Washington State offers a powerful model.

We also know how to achieve successful outcomes — for example, when we can keep homeless students from unnecessary school transfers and from insurmountable chronic absences, these students can and will thrive, learn, and graduate. Data from New York City[5] show that the overall graduation rate for homeless students is just 52%—well below the 72% for housed students. However, when homeless students experience no further instability—when they remain consistently housed in a shelter, do not transfer schools, and do not become chronically absent—almost 90% of those homeless students graduate from high school on time. Some school

"When we began to implement McKinney-Vento in 1987–88, we did not know what to do. It took about four weeks to understand children were suffering, and another decade to get them into school and begin to be accepted. It's still a work in progress but thankfully, no longer a foreign language."

— Shaun Griffin
original McKinney-Vento state coordinator, Nevada

districts across the country have graduation rates for homeless students that are over 90%, and even exceed the overall district average. We must learn from these communities, and replicate their efforts.

> "Who knew 30 years ago how vital educational stability would be for students experiencing homelessness? Who knew how astronomically the numbers of homeless students would skyrocket? Our efforts to open school doors and ensure educational success are needed now more than ever."
>
> — Diane Nilan, HEAR US

Starting in school year 2017–18, states must track and report high school graduation rates for homeless students, just as they are required to report those rates for students of color, low-income students, and other student subgroups. This data will be a powerful tool to shine more light on the specific needs of homeless students, as well as to help state leaders better understand if they are making progress, and where to focus their attention.

The Future

For thirty years, the McKinney-Vento Act has grown and adapted to the changing nature of homelessness. It has incorporated best practices and policies from across the country—refinements built on realities. Homeless students may still often be invisible in our nation's schools, but educators and advocates are becoming increasingly aware of the crisis.

That awareness has emerged not a moment too soon: among students, homelessness has continued to grow.

If advocates can put educational continuity at the center of their strategy for combatting student homelessness, we will take hold of a powerful new tool in the campaign to break cycles of poverty. And that success could well provide a path for assisting low-income students more generally. If a school can determine how to support homeless students academically, the same approach can be scaled up to support other struggling students as well.

We can't say whether we will have ended family and youth homelessness in the next thirty years. Sadly, the rights and services provided by the McKinney-Vento Act may well still be needed at that time. But the wisdom we've gleaned from the past thirty years could propel us to make much more progress in the decades to come. What we can and must achieve, however, is to put homeless students on the map. We must gain awareness and acceptance of homelessness as a specific sub-group of students with particular experiences and outcomes. Our leaders and educators must regularly discuss how to support students experiencing homelessness, including collaboration with housing and homelessness agencies. Our nation and communities must provide adequate resources to boost academic achievement, as well as for mental and physical health needs. Homeless students must know that they are safe in school, and have adults who can and will advocate for them. Their hopes and dreams must guide us, with urgency, as we learn from the past and step into the future.

Endnotes

1 https://www.huduser.gov/datasets/ahs/ahs_taskc.pdf

2 This approximate number was developed by ICPH. It's important to note that while identification remains an issue today, the current number of 1.3 million identified homeless children is significantly more accurate than any approximation from the 1980s.

3 https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2016/demo/p60-256.pdf

4 http://www.icphusa.org/national/shadows-state-state-ranking-accountability-homeless-students/

5 http://www.icphusa.org/new_york_city/1897/

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