
HOMELESS STUDENTS IN THE SCHOOLS: INFORMATION FOR EDUCATORS

By Elizabeth A. Mizerek
University of Minnesota



NATIONAL
ASSOCIATION OF
SCHOOL
PSYCHOLOGISTS

The number of homeless students is steadily increasing in today's schools. Each year, close to 1.4 million children are homeless. Homeless youth, like any population, have particular needs when it comes to academic and emotional assistance.

These students can lack basic needs and social skills, and often have low levels of academic achievement. Consequently, it is essential that educators and advocates ensure that these students receive necessary supports in school.

Background

Schools in particular are very important in the lives of homeless youth. In fact, schools may be the only place that provides stability in their daily lives and gives these students a sense of self-worth. Further, schools might be the only social agency available to advocate for the rights of these youth in some areas. Graduating from high school has been identified as a protective factor for this population, highlighting the critical need for intervention to ensure that they are getting the same educational opportunities as their peers.

Addressing the needs of homeless youth is also required by law. In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act reauthorized the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. This is a federal law that entitles homeless children to a free appropriate education. This law also says that schools must eliminate barriers to enrollment, attendance, and success in school for homeless students. School districts are required to appoint a liaison to work with homeless students and their families, and serve as a resource for teachers.

Characteristics

Homeless students are of every race, gender, and background. Ninety percent of homeless families are single-parent families, typically headed by the mother. The characteristics of homeless students are similar to other students in poverty, the difference being that they do not have consistent housing. According to the law, homeless children include those who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. Homeless students can live in vehicles, makeshift housing, shelters, or in a crowded residence with several other families. Some states define these students as those who move three or more times within one school year.

The characteristics of the primary caregiver, usually the mother, of homeless youth are critical. Research shows that homeless and low income housed mothers have higher lifetime and current rates of major depression and substance abuse than do women in general. In addition, these groups have higher rates of post-traumatic stress and two or more chronic conditions relative to their same age peers. Many homeless and poor housed mothers report severe physical abuse by a childhood caretaker, childhood molestation, and severe violence by a male partner. These possible family patterns should be noted when working with homeless youth.

Developmental Issues

Basic needs. The first and foremost issue for homeless children is the lack of fulfillment of basic needs. These students often do not get enough to eat, and therefore come to school hungry. Homeless youth might not get enough sleep at night or be afraid to sleep, depending on their current place of residence. These students also have poor health more often than their peers, and have higher rates of upper respiratory and ear infections, skin diseases, and common cold symptoms. Many students do not receive adequate medical or dental care. Such factors can certainly influence optimal performance in school.

School attendance. In addition, attendance is a relevant concern because it is, of course, a significant predictor of dropout. Although school enrollment and attendance for this population has recently improved, about 12% of homeless children are not enrolled in school, and up to 45% do not attend school on a regular basis. Obstacles to school attendance have to do with frequent moves in and out of temporary housing, resulting in students having to choose between transferring schools or spending hours commuting.

Achievement. Teachers often report that homeless students seem to lack some of the basic skills that facilitate success in school. These include listening, following directions, asking for help, and participating in cooperative activities. Other factors impede academic success as well. Studies have shown that up to half of homeless students show developmental delays, and many students have more than one. These students are far more likely to have a learning disability. Homeless youth often do not turn in their homework, and are less likely to be promoted to the next grade.

Overall, the academic achievement of homeless students is poor. They are more likely to repeat a grade, be placed in special education, and to fail academically, which are all predictors of dropout. Researchers have also found that only one-third of homeless children read at grade-level, as compared to more than one-half of same-aged peers.

Mental health. Homeless students also seem to have higher rates of social and emotional problems than their peers. They often lack basic social skills and therefore have difficulty making friends. Homeless students tend to have lower self-esteem, higher anxiety, and can be depressed. They are reported to be shy and withdrawn, and tend to feel isolated and disconnected from school. Further, homeless youth often feel stigmatized and alienated from their classmates.

Homeless youth face many barriers that affect achievement, including transportation, enrollment requirements, and lack of support services. Educators need to become more involved in implementing interventions that will promote the academic success of these students.

Intervention

Often, teachers of homeless students are aware of these problems, but feel that they have no resources to help. Thus, these youth may not receive appropriate assistance. Supports and opportunities should be provided to enhance students' social, psychological, and academic competence. What follows are some ideas to provide support in school for homeless youth.

Establish services at the school to meet the basic needs of homeless students. Many schools provide

breakfast for homeless youth in addition to the traditional lunch. Schools should consider providing extra clean clothes for these students, or having laundry facilities to wash clothes. Showers can also be made available, as well as toothbrushes and hairbrushes. School supplies may be provided. Also, a nap room would be helpful for those students who do not get enough sleep at night.

Provide some structure in the classroom. School is often the one place that gives these students a sense of consistency in their stressful lives. Make sure that homeless students have their own work space with their own materials. Rather than being angry that their desk is disorganized, teach these students how to arrange their materials more constructively.

Bridge the gap between schools if a child moves. Teachers can attempt to learn which school a homeless child is moving to, and initiate contact with the office staff and new teacher at that school. This will facilitate the transfer of records and background information, allowing the children to make a smooth transition and continue to receive the best education possible. Maintaining contact will also indicate a special relationship to the child, adding stability in their life.

Consider implementing a mentor program. Sometimes these children experience a lack of a positive role model in terms of a value for education and academic achievement. Mentors can provide such a role model, as well as access to tutoring for students. Mentors can also work with the students on basic skills, problem-solving skills, and social skills.

Keep in contact with parents as much as possible. This gives teachers and other school staff an idea of what is going on outside of school for these students. It might also help children and parents feel more connected to school, and this is associated with increased attendance and higher academic achievement.

Keep in contact with the district liaison. This should be a great way to obtain community resources (e.g., medical and dental care, clothing, food, shelter). The liaison will be an expert in terms of working with homeless youth and their families, and can help educators get in contact with local shelters or law enforcement personnel. Teachers and advocates can also work with the liaison to promote more effective transportation services, so that homeless students do not have to change schools each time they move.

Resources

Kozol, J. (1989). *Rachel and her children: Homeless families in America*. New York: Fawcett. ISBN: 0449903397.

Nunez, R., & Collignon, K. (1997). Creating a community of learning for homeless children. *Educational Leadership*, 55, 56–60.

Shane, P. G. (1996). *What about America's homeless children? Hide and seek*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage. ISBN: 0803949839.

Websites

National Center for Homeless Education—
www.serve.org/nche

National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth—www.naehcy.org

National Coalition for the Homeless—
www.nationalhomeless.org

Elizabeth A. Mizerek is a third-year doctoral student in the School Psychology program at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. She currently works as a graduate research assistant for the Strengthening Skills project, a research initiative that supports the development of positive classroom behaviors and social relationships among African American children at risk for special education referral.

© 2004 National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814—(301) 657-0270.



The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) offers a wide variety of free or low cost online resources to parents, teachers, and others working with children and youth through the NASP website www.nasponline.org

and the NASP Center for Children & Families website www.naspcenter.org. Or use the direct links below to access information that can help you improve outcomes for the children and youth in your care.

About School Psychology—Downloadable brochures, FAQs, and facts about training, practice, and career choices for the profession.
www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/spsych.html

Crisis Resources—Handouts, fact sheets, and links regarding crisis prevention/intervention, coping with trauma, suicide prevention, and school safety.
www.nasponline.org/crisisresources

Culturally Competent Practice—Materials and resources promoting culturally competent assessment and intervention, minority recruitment, and issues related to cultural diversity and tolerance.
www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence

En Español—Parent handouts and materials translated into Spanish. www.naspcenter.org/espanol/

IDEA Information—Information, resources, and advocacy tools regarding IDEA policy and practical implementation.
www.nasponline.org/advocacy/IDEAinformation.html

Information for Educators—Handouts, articles, and other resources on a variety of topics.
www.naspcenter.org/teachers/teachers.html

Information for Parents—Handouts and other resources a variety of topics.
www.naspcenter.org/parents/parents.html

Links to State Associations—Easy access to state association websites.
www.nasponline.org/information/links_state_orgs.html

NASP Books & Publications Store—Review tables of contents and chapters of NASP bestsellers.
www.nasponline.org/bestsellers
Order online. www.nasponline.org/store

Position Papers—Official NASP policy positions on key issues.
www.nasponline.org/information/position_paper.html

Success in School/Skills for Life—Parent handouts that can be posted on your school's website.
www.naspcenter.org/resourcekit