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Addressing Identification, Stigma and Trauma to Support K-12 Homeless Youth

Homelessness is a persistent problem in this country. Children account for much of the homeless population. K-12 school leaders should be aware of the chronic daily hardships of homeless youth to ensure their needs are met and they can thrive in school. The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent transition to remote learning created acute challenges for school leaders in terms of identifying and serving this vulnerable student population. Addressing these challenges can buffer hardships for homeless youth and provide them with support, care and safe educational climates to succeed in life.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ Collaborations and partnerships including local and regional efforts can help with identifying homeless youth, personalizing support, addressing basic needs and providing resources.
- ▶ Research shows that trauma-informed perspectives and practices can provide much needed support for homeless youth and families that may have experienced compounded trauma, conflict and loss before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ▶ Efforts should be made to reduce stigma and biases about homeless youth and youth identity.

This research brief discusses obstacles K-12 homeless students encounter during schooling, how the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted and brought about some acute challenges regarding educating and supporting homeless youth, and how to target interventions to ensure healthy youth development.

More than **1.5 million** homeless children enrolled in public schools during the 2017-18 academic year. New York had

more than 150,000 homeless students during this period.¹

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, as an ESSA provision, ensures that local education agencies have a liaison for homeless students that helps school staff get related professional development, identifies and enrolls homeless youth and assists them with needed referrals. According to the Act, **homelessness** means not having “a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence.”



¹ See also “Districts focus on homeless youth during school closures.” On Board Online. June 8, 2020.



Daily Educational Obstacles Homeless Youth Face

Academics is traditionally thought of as the number one priority for school districts, however, recent research shows that schools may want to first ensure that homeless

difficulty [identifying students](#) who are homeless, and even if these students are identified, getting them to show up to school is often a challenge. Homeless students, more so than their peers tend to be at risk of missing a lot of school (i.e. chronic absenteeism).

The research points to “[critical conditions](#)” that influenced homelessness for these youth pertaining to three themes: personal (individual characteristics), relational (peer and family connections) and structural (environmental policies and procedures). Regarding personal conditions, approximately one-half of interviewees considered themselves self-reliant and self-characterized themselves as prideful, which may have contributed to homelessness. For example, one youth would not go to a shelter because of his pride.

[Relational connections](#) often play a role in youth homelessness. Peers may impact youth homelessness in positive and negative ways. Peers can positively impact homeless youth via access to resources. “Peers outranked street outreach, helplines, health care providers, police, schools, and family combined as youths’ primary link to informal housing,” says the report. Peers can also have a negative impact on homeless youth. Yet, “... 36% of youth also named relationships with peers as the reason why they became or stayed homeless, got kicked out of a shelter, or lost an informal living arrangement. If pushed to choose, youth consistently prioritized retaining important relationships with peers over securing their access to formal resources, including housing.”

[Family dynamics](#) can play a role in youth homelessness. Two primary themes popped up during youth interviews: chronic family discord and stigma. In general, youth discussed family conflict such as fighting or violence. One-quarter of interviewees talked about parental addiction and just under 10 percent spoke of unchecked mental health issues of parents. Forty-six percent of interviewees felt stigmatized by their families. Youth who identified as transgender or lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer or asexual (LGBQA) or multiracial tended to experience higher rates of stigma.

The interviewees also spoke of [structural obstacles](#) that contributed to their homelessness. Many youth received needed services



students are [emotionally supported](#) which will, hopefully, help set them on the path to academic stability and future success.

Homeless children may often deal with some tougher issues than their peers. For example, they may be more vulnerable to [toxic stress](#),² which can impair brain development.

Homeless youth may feel out of control, have less self-confidence, display more anxiety and combative behavior, and due to their living situations, they often are [highly mobile](#). Additionally, they are more likely to exhibit a learning disability compared to their peers.

Homeless students often have a lot of obstacles to overcome before they can focus on academics. Often schools have

Schools can take some simple steps to help homeless youth feel comfortable at school. First, educators should check their [biases](#) at the door to ensure they do not label these students. Homeless students may require more mental health support too, so schools can address this need by providing mental health resources for these students.

Conditions that may set the stage for youth homelessness are reflected in a [University of Chicago](#) study that was part of a series on youth homelessness. Understanding these conditions and what the research calls “tipping points” for long-term homelessness can provide insight for interventions. The interview study included more than 200 youth ages 13-25 from various counties in Illinois, California, Texas, Pennsylvania and Washington. Additional data included surveys and “housing timelines.”

² See also Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. [ACES and Toxic Stress: Frequently Asked Questions](#).



but felt service processes fell short. According to the report, “once they were receiving services, especially housing, like shelters and transitional living, youth identified practices and policies that... felt unsafe or unsanitary, and policies that caused or required them to disconnect from important and valued relationships.”

More than one-third of youth surveyed experienced, at a minimum, the traumatic loss of one parent. “These losses were not only traumatic, but frequently created a ripple effect of instability and additional loss in housing, schooling, and changes in neighborhood,” states the report. These youth were left alone or with their family unit to grapple with this instability and grief. “None of these young people reported receiving supports in addressing grief,” notes the research.

The report points out that “housing-first models are increasingly dominating the landscape of homelessness intervention as an empirically supported, effective approach to interrupting housing instability,” yet this data shows that addressing the personal, relational and structural [tipping points](#) in youth narratives of homelessness is an essential component of ameliorating the hardships of homelessness.

Youth Homelessness in the Time of COVID-19

The COVID-19 global pandemic has highlighted obstacles and even created more challenges for homeless youth including a greater need for internet access and a lessening of community-based supports. As the pandemic surged in spring 2020, K-12 homeless students’ need for internet access topped food and temporary housing as the primary concern for this student population, according to a [survey](#) of homeless youth stakeholders including McKinney-Vento liaisons. In addition, the pandemic has curtailed the ability of many [community-based supports](#) for homeless youth to provide a safe space for youth programming and nourishment.

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Debra Montroy, McKinney-Vento Act/Foster Care Liaison
Syracuse City School District

Homeless youth enrollment in public schools across the nation decreased this year, states recent research by [SchoolHouse Connection](#), a non-profit dedicated to eradicating homelessness, and a University of Michigan initiative to end poverty called Poverty Solutions. The report findings derive from survey results of homeless liaisons in fall 2020. Identification of homeless youth decreased, says the report. Specifically, per “responses from 1,444 liaisons in 49 states, there was a 28% decrease in the number of identified homeless students in the fall of 2020 compared to the fall of 2019.” Most who responded that enrollment declined attributed this to online learning and school closures which may have impeded communication efforts with students. Eviction moratoria may also play a role in lower numbers, states the report.

As McKinney-Vento Act/Foster Care Liaison for the Syracuse City School District, Debra Montroy works daily with homeless students. According to 2016 state data, the school district ranks [number one](#) for student homelessness excluding New York City. Many students live with others, which is called [doubling up](#). District collaborations address students’ fundamental needs, though the pandemic highlighted identification challenges and a generational tech gap, says Montroy. Regarding collaborations, the district works with area shelters to ensure basic needs are met, she told NYSSBA. “A collaboration with local shelters has proved to be successful, as the family and shelter staff notify the liaison when a family enters a shelter. This allows transportation to be set up in a timely manner, and communication with

school-based staff allows communication and supports for families to occur quickly,” Montroy explained. According to her, the pandemic has affected how district staff work with McKinney-Vento eligible youth, since the lessening of in-person communication can make identification of homeless youth more difficult. Also, for non-traditional family units, remote learning can be a challenge. “Technology can be challenging for grandparents who are responsible for children, or for single parent families who may have to work during the day, leaving students on their own to engage in remote learning,” she explained.

In line with research from the SchoolHouse Connection and University of Michigan, Syracuse’s “numbers of identified students who are eligible under the McKinney Vento Act, are less than this time last year,” notes Montroy. “Perhaps the newly created ‘prohibition of eviction’ laws, lack of “daily” eyes on a child, and an increase in teacher/child/parent illnesses due to the pandemic are factors,” she told NYSSBA. The district ramped up supports to homeless students during the pandemic. School district staff work with a group of school-based supervisors from Onondaga County called ACCESS Team supervisors. Homeless youth “are assigned to an ACCESS Case Worker, who is already assigned to the school for the purpose of needs assessment and 1:1 assistance, i.e. referrals to county services and supports. The assigned ACCESS Case Worker is able to connect with the school social workers and school-based support teams to gather information, to identify needs, make home visits, and to provide a three-tiered assessment to determine



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the level of need families report,” Montroy told NYSSBA. Tier 1 supports include foundational supports for all students, Tier II supports students’ immediate needs and Tier III targets students with the most needs and follow-up care, Montroy explained.

Collaboratives similar to Syracuse’s partnership can build on human capital already in local and regional communities to support homeless students. [Regional support networks](#) can address

transportation, food, housing and mental health concerns among homeless students and families. School districts can also [train](#) additional staff beyond educators to identify homeless students.

School staff should also “meet people where they’re at” by personalizing needs of youth to support education and development, says Dr. Elizabeth Bowen, associate professor at the University of Buffalo’s School of Social Work. This personalization may mean tutoring or

homework help, mental health counseling or assistance acquiring basic needs. If you are just trying to survive, it is difficult to concentrate on your studies, Bowen told NYSSBA. “Another challenge is that many young people experiencing homelessness have also experienced trauma, which can have numerous effects on health, learning, and relationships with peers and adults,” she added.

Understanding the context of the daily struggles that homeless youth face, as well as the additional challenges related to identification, trauma, and access to resources and services created or emphasized by the pandemic, will help school leaders make informed local decisions regarding intervention and support.

