

Homeless and Highly Mobile Students

Implications for Practice and the Potential for Improved Educational Outcomes for Students in Child Welfare



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Background

The Urban Institute (2000) estimates that of 2.3 million individuals experiencing homelessness in the United States each year 1 million are children. Wilder Foundation (2007) found that children in families made up 35% of Minnesota's homeless population in 2006, with eighty-four percent of these children under age twelve. The same study observed that the number of homeless families tripled in Minnesota between 1991 and 2000 but stabilized between 2000 and 2006. Given the recent economic downturn, the media has begun reporting an increase of homelessness across the U.S. as both home owners and renters lose housing due to foreclosures.

Consequences of Homelessness on Children

Compared to their housed peers homeless students

- Perform below grade level on academic achievement tests
- Are more likely to receive special education services, repeat a grade, change schools and miss school
- Are more likely to have an emotional or behavioral concern than non-homeless children

Families who have been homeless at some point have higher rates of child welfare contact and homelessness can be a barrier for reunification of children in foster care, particularly if their parents have a mental illness.

McKinney-Vento Act (2002)

McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Improvements Act

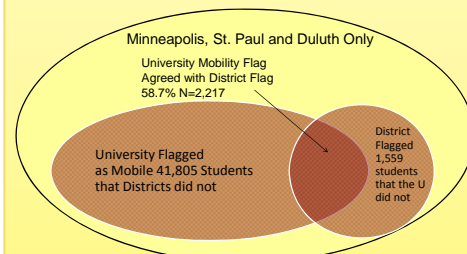
This federal policy defines homelessness as lacking "a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence" and includes children who are sharing the housing of other persons, awaiting foster care placement, living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, camp grounds, shelters, cars, bus or train stations, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, or any other public place not ordinarily used as a sleeping accommodation. The policy:

- **Facilitates immediate enrollment in school**, without typically required documents;
- **Provides funding for supportive services**, such as tutoring, after school programs, school supplies, parent education, preschool, and referrals to other health services;
- **Allows students to receive transportation to their school of origin** for the remainder of the year in which they became homeless; and
- **Establishes a State Coordinator's office** which gathers data on and creates a plan for the education of homeless students.

Methods

This exploration described a population of homeless students in Minnesota using statewide administrative data. Three school districts receiving McKinney-Vento funds agreed to participate: Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Duluth. The study examined the education and child welfare status of students identified as homeless compared to non-Mobile students in the same districts. The target year for the study was 2005-2006; however, data were explored for the years prior to and after the target year to get a more long-term picture of the events that preceded the identification of homelessness.

Statewide Education data were used and a sub-file created that included only students from the three participating districts (n=104,680). First, a definition was created for coding students as Mobile or Non-Mobile. Next, the three districts provided identified data for the homeless students they had identified in their districts. Minn-LInK linked data sets to create the four groups used in the study: District Flagged, University flagged, Both Flagged, and Non-mobile.



Finally, the study file was matched with Human Services data to examine child welfare outcomes. Given the size of the file, two sub-populations of children were created to examine these outcomes: young (K-1st grade) and older children (7-9th grades).

Results

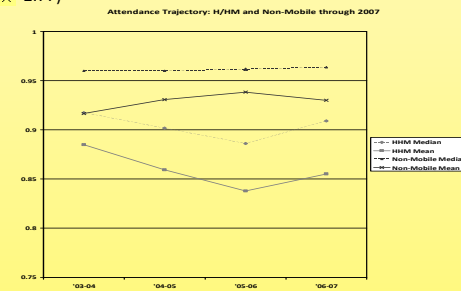
Detecting Mobility

Using administrative education data, it was possible to identify a significant portion of homeless students. The Mobility code agreed with the district homeless identification on 59% of homeless students.

Attributes

Compared to Non-Mobile students, homeless students were more likely to

- be African American (65% vs 27%) or Native American (7% vs 3%) than another race,
- be in grades up to ninth (79%), with a dramatic decrease in 10-12 (21%).
- have a history of declining attendance prior to being identified as homeless.
- have a history of maltreatment ($\bar{X} = .321$ vs $\bar{X} = .027$)
- have significant numbers of days in foster care ($\bar{X} = 51.26$ vs $\bar{X} = 2.77$)



Minn-LInK Project

The Minn-LInK project began in the late 1990's as a collaboration between the University and State agencies. The purpose was to create a way to study child and family outcomes across programmatic boundaries.

The Minn-LInK Project is housed within the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW) in the School of Social Work.

Minn-LInK uses data from the Departments of Health, Education, and Human Services to improve our understanding of child and family well-being and explore the ways in which social work training can be improved to enhance foster care services.

Each study forms a community advisory group to help design, review, and distribute reports.

MINN-LInK PROCESS



Discussion/Implications

Limitations

- Use of administrative data does not provide qualitative information that is critically important to child and family outcomes.
- Administrative data is variable and subject to inaccuracies.
- Homeless children are highly mobile and difficult to track.
- Cross-sectional design (single year versus multiple)
- Limited in geography (three districts)

Implications of Findings

- Understanding how homeless students interact with other systems such as **child welfare creates opportunities for partnerships** on case planning that can improve educational outcomes of children involved in foster care placement.
- Examining the attendance trajectories of students could be useful in **earlier identification of homeless students**, particularly if the student has other associated factors such as receiving free or reduced meals. Even if these students are not homeless, they clearly are in danger of disengaging from school.
- **McKinney-Vento appears to be working**: the attendance of homeless students improved dramatically in the year after they were identified.

Recommendations and Next Steps

- **Fortify social worker understanding of the McKinney-Vento policy as it relates to foster care** and consider expansion of the policy to all children in care, not only those who are awaiting placement.
- **Create a model** that identifies and estimates the total number of homeless students in the state.
- **Use estimations to support funding requests** and monitor program reach.
- **Replicate this examination** to discover whether McKinney-Vento policies are consistently associated with improved subsequent attendance.