Homelessness is a significant problem in the United States. In 2007, it was estimated that 3.5 million people experience homelessness in a given year. Shockingly, 1.35 million of them are children and youth. These numbers are likely much higher now. For example, in 2009 the National Coalition for the Homeless noted “dramatic increases” in shelter usage. The U.S. Conference of Mayors (2008) noted similar trends, reporting widespread increases of individual and family homelessness in cities across the country.

Schools across the country have also witnessed the increase of school-age homeless children and youth. A recent study found that nearly 20% of surveyed schools identified the same number, or more, homeless students in the first few months of the 2008-2009 school year than they identified the entire previous year. These increases create challenges for school districts. One challenge reported by school districts is a lack of staff to identify and support students experiencing homelessness. Such challenges present barriers to the educational support and services homeless students receive.

Research over the past 20 years has identified wide-ranging problems for homeless students in areas such as mental health, social and emotional behavior, speech and language delays, social isolation, malnutrition, and chronic illness. These issues are found among homeless students from diverse backgrounds. Given the far-reaching impacts of homelessness, and the challenges that schools face in supporting these students, it is evident that multiple institutions need to assist. In particular, residential homeless serving agencies (RHSAs), which offer shelter and support to families experiencing homelessness, appear to be especially vital.

Indeed both schools and RHSAs are interested in ameliorating the impacts of homelessness on school-age children and youth, yet many are uncertain how to assist. This brief addresses this need. It first provides an overview of the impacts of homelessness on children and the role residential housing service agencies (RHSAs) play in supporting children’s educational pursuits. It then offers five recommendations, based on recent research, for school and RHSA leaders interested in improving the education experiences of homeless children.
Impacts of Homelessness

Homeless children and youth face numerous barriers and obstacles to their education. Homeless individuals experience illnesses at three to six times the rates experienced by housed people. These illnesses, in turn, impact students’ school attendance. Homeless students also tend to be highly “school mobile.” That is, as their families move from one temporary location to another, children change schools. It is estimated that a student is set back academically four to six months with each change in school. In addition, issues of misdiagnosis are common among homeless children nationwide. Misdiagnosis often results in inappropriate class placement upon enrolling in a school, creating further disturbances to homeless children’s education.

These barriers and obstacles contribute to the academic difficulties that homeless students experience. Indeed, the negative impacts of homelessness have been documented in a number of areas pertaining to education and schooling. For example, one study found that 52% of homeless students experience reading difficulties and 28.3% of homeless students experience math difficulties. In addition, compared to their peers, homeless students are more than twice as likely to repeat a grade.

As noted, it is evident that multiple institutions – not only schools – need to support homeless students as they pursue their education. The following section details the unique role residential homeless serving agencies have in supporting families, children and youth experiencing homelessness.

Role of Residential Housing Service Agencies (RHSAs)

Residential homeless serving agencies (RHSAs) vary greatly in mission, size and infrastructure, but each shares the common purpose of providing safe spaces for families to stay during times of extreme duress or instability. Thus their fundamental role is to provide families with places for sleeping, eating and safety. RHSAs are often colloquially referred to as “homeless shelters.” This term, however, is typically affiliated with short-term or emergency residential options. It does not, therefore, represent the diversity of organizations that provide living spaces for the homeless, including long-term program-based residential services, transitional housing programs, and permanent housing programs. For this reason, we use the broader term RHSA to account for the diversity of program.

Research suggests that RHSAs often play important roles in improving the lives of homeless families – including improvements in schooling and education experiences for children. Specifically, some RHSAs have demonstrated the capacity to increase students’ academic motivation and homework completion rates, improve students’ school behavior, and connect students and families to valuable community-based education resources. Thus, RHSAs play a vital role in the lives of homeless families and demonstrate potential to have a great impact on the education experiences of homeless students.

Recommendations for School and RHSA Leaders

Schools and RHSAs play critical roles in improving the lives and education experiences of homeless children. Yet many school and RHSA leaders are uncertain how to assist. Recognizing this uncertainty and need, I conducted a study that examined how homeless families access and mobilize school-related resources and relationships. This study was conducted in a large urban region in the eastern United States. Data were collected through surveys of 151 sheltered homeless mothers, focus group interviews with 51 homeless mothers, and analysis of a countrywide homeless
management information system. Based on the findings from this research, I offer the following five recommendations for school and RHSA leaders:

Develop An Awareness of the Homeless Situation

School and RHSA leaders who address education matters must have a broad awareness of the homeless situation, including its recent escalation and changing conditions. These leaders should also be familiar with the McKinney-Vento Assistance Act (described below) to ensure that homeless students are receiving proper treatment in their districts.

Equally important, school and RHSA leaders have the capacity to provide their staff members – teachers, social workers and counselors – with the necessary time, resources and training to develop their awareness of homeless issues and policies in their regions. Trainings for school personnel should focus on the rates and conditions of homelessness, how school personnel can identify students experiencing duress and potential homelessness, and what community-based resources (such as RHSAs) are available for these students and their families. Similarly, trainings for RHSA staff should focus on developing staff knowledge about school resources and expanding their awareness of additional community-based resources. This broad awareness in both schools and community-based organizations could help set valuable foundations for committed and collective action in the area of homeless education.

Strengthen Connections Between Schools and RHSAs

Strengthening the linkage between students’ school and RHSAs could be extremely beneficial and might minimize the need for new programs or services. By simply developing efficient communication channels, families and students might become more aware of existing school and community resources that could benefit them. As noted above, the first step towards accomplishing this goal is ensuring that faculty and staff are aware of both school and community resources.

Recognize the Diversity and Unique Needs of Homeless Students

Homeless students should not be treated as a homogenous group with the same needs. Rather, assistance and actions should be based on the individual conditions and needs of the student. Service providers, for example, should consider the type of RHSA at which the student resides when offering assistance. It is essential to connect families and students staying in short-term RHSAs with other community-based programs and resources. This ensures they are connected to broader, and more sustainable, social and educational supports upon leaving the RHSA. For students staying in long-term RHSA, it is important that effective communication channels are established between school leaders and agency leaders. This formal connection benefits the student by ensuring that teachers and tutors are working in concert with one another.

Inform parents and students of their rights according to the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act

Homeless students’ school experiences might be significantly improved if families understood their rights according to the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. In my study, only 20% of parents claimed to know very much about their children’s educational rights. School and RHSAs should be responsible for informing parents and students of their rights according to this policy.

The McKinney-Vento Act outlines a foundational set of operating principles that are to guide school and community leaders in their work with students experiencing homelessness. All districts – regardless of size, location, or demographic characteristics – are required by the McKinney-Vento Act to afford homeless students certain opportunities and rights. Specifically, this policy advocates for students who are homeless by (1) detailing which students are eligible for homeless services, (2) increasing students’ school choice options during mobile periods of their lives, (3) mandating that schools must immediately enroll and provide services for students who are homeless, and (4) creating supportive infrastructures for students and their families.
Ensure that students and parents are aware of and connected to quality before and/or after-school programming

School and RHSA leaders can help stabilize homeless students’ lives and improve their education experiences by ensuring quality before and/or after-school programs are available and accessible. Accessibility is a key issue. In my study, mothers commonly cited childcare and transportation as barriers to their success. Special attention should be given to these issues. When connecting homeless students with before and/or after-school programs, school and RHSA leaders must ensure students are capable of accessing the programs with relative ease. Leaders should consider how to offset or minimize transportation costs.

Conclusion

Largely due to the economic and housing crises, schools and communities across the country are reporting increases in the number of homeless children and adults. Given the increased need, and widespread impacts of homelessness, multiple institutions must play a role in supporting homeless students. Schools and community-based RHSAs both offer vital support roles. By collaborating more effectively, and ensuring parents are informed of their legal rights and valuable community-based resources, communities can begin to improve the educational experiences of homeless children and youth.
Further Resources and Reading


