

IDENTIFYING AND SUPPORTING STUDENTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

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This brief is one in a series aimed at providing K-12 education decision makers and advocates with an evidence base to ground discussions about how to best serve students during and following the novel coronavirus pandemic. [Click here](#) to learn more about the EdResearch for Recovery Project and view the set of COVID-19 response-and-recovery topic areas and practitioner-generated questions.

CENTRAL QUESTION

What can schools do to best support students experiencing homelessness given the added vulnerability they have faced due to the pandemic?

KEY INSIGHTS

Breaking Down the Issue

- Homelessness is not a uniform experience.
- Even before the pandemic, student homelessness was increasing, and many schools were struggling to respond.
- Students experiencing homelessness may be particularly vulnerable to health-, wellbeing-, and education-related adversity brought on or exacerbated by the pandemic.

Strategies to Consider

- To successfully implement the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, schools should prioritize proactive identification and consider fostering an environment that frames policy supports as rights for students.
- Collaborations and data sharing with community providers can improve identification of students experiencing homelessness and ease access to resources and supports for families.
- Regular communication to build relationships with student-identified networks of trusted adults allows schools to tailor practices and supports in ways that meet individual needs.
- When weighing the risks and benefits of various models for reopening schools in the fall, plans must consider local COVID-19 conditions, available funding, and the realities of students' home environments.

Strategies to Avoid

- Deficit-oriented and stigmatizing practices may have adverse short- and long-term consequences for students and their families.

BREAKING DOWN THE ISSUE

Homelessness is not a uniform experience.

- **Nationwide, students experiencing homelessness spend their nights in various residential settings, including: doubled up with others due to economic reasons or loss of housing (74%), in shelters (12%), in motels/hotels (7%), and in unsheltered contexts, like parks, cars, and public spaces (7%).**
 - Students may move from one residential setting to another over time (e.g., doubled up into a shelter). In general, research suggests that educational outcomes and experiences vary based on the setting in which students experiencing homelessness reside. Research conducted prior to the pandemic suggests that when doubled up families function as a single unit, students may have more access to resources, such as the internet, space to complete homework, or educational support. However, doubled up families may also be less likely to be identified as homeless, disconnecting them from resources provided by schools, community-based organizations, or other agencies.
 - Research from Houston found that doubled up students had more positive educational outcomes than similar students experiencing homelessness in other residential settings.
 - National data suggests that 9% of students experiencing homelessness are unaccompanied, or not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian. Unaccompanied students, many of whom identify as LGBTQ, face unique challenges and tend to have particularly poor educational outcomes.
- **Students experiencing homelessness live in communities with different resources and challenges.**
 - Research has documented wide variation in the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which provides support to students experiencing homelessness.
 - Local policies, such as “right to shelter” in New York City, and local commitment to various rehousing programs may also shape shelter capacity and housing options.
 - Student homelessness is not only a concern in large cities. A policy report by the Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness found that student homelessness in Florida was concentrated in the suburbs, while another noted that Georgia had more student homelessness in rural areas than in its cities. Homelessness may be less visible in suburban and rural areas – areas that may also have unique gaps in social services and have less established practices in place.
- **Students experiencing homelessness are disproportionately Native American, Black, and/or Latinx.**
 - Research suggests that systemic racism shapes the implementation of education policy and the opportunities and experiences of students experiencing homelessness.
 - One study found that unaccompanied youth of color exhibited great resilience, creativity, and strength in staying connected to school, solving problems, and accessing needed guidance and support. Unfortunately, these youth also faced substantial hurdles, such as low academic expectations, deficit views, and systemic barriers to accessing supports.
 - Another study found that Black youth who graduated from high school while experiencing homelessness were often deterred from revealing their housing status by volatile racial climates at school, which subsequently cut them off from federal supports.

Even before the pandemic, student homelessness was increasing, and many schools were struggling to respond.

- **Student homelessness was increasing even prior to the pandemic.**
 - Between the 2015-16 and 2017-18 school years alone, the number of students experiencing homelessness increased 15%, from 1.3 million to 1.5 million.

- **Research consistently documents the challenges schools and districts face in addressing rising student homelessness, particularly when coupled with economic downturns.**
 - Students experiencing homelessness tend to change schools frequently. Evidence suggests that mobility disrupts academic learning and relationships, especially when it is frequent and poverty-related. Schools with high rates of students who move face unique challenges in school reform efforts.
 - While some are able to beat the odds, students experiencing homelessness tend to have lower attendance, higher rates of dropout, lower rates of graduation, and poorer achievement relative to similar low-income students. A recent report found that roughly one-quarter of students experiencing homelessness in New York City were proficient on state math and English tests in 4th grade – about half the rate of permanently-housed students.
 - Identifying students as homeless and meeting their needs can be time consuming and costly. Needs may include transportation; access to food; medical and dental care; mental health services; school supplies; clothing and hygiene items; and academic as well as socio-emotional support.
- **These challenges are likely to be heightened by the pandemic – presenting unique, critical obstacles for the fall semester.**

Students experiencing homelessness may be particularly vulnerable to health-, wellbeing-, and education-related adversity brought on or exacerbated by the pandemic.

- **Due to the diversity in living situations, it is challenging to generalize about the risk of COVID-19 exposure for students, youth, and families experiencing homelessness.**
 - High mobility of students, youth, and families may contribute to community spread, with individuals of color at particular risk for poor COVID-19 outcomes due to existing health disparities.
 - Students and families experiencing homelessness may face different coronavirus-related risks based on their residential settings. For instance, according to the CDC, sleeping in congregate settings, such as shelters, places individuals experiencing homelessness at higher risk of contracting coronavirus, but may also help connect them to other vital resources, such as medical care or testing. Conversely, sleeping in an unsheltered context (e.g., street, car, or abandoned building) reduces proximity to others, but also impedes practices, such as hand washing, that help reduce transmission.
- **Social distancing and COVID-related school closures may exacerbate social isolation of students experiencing homelessness.**
- **The pandemic has hindered some community service providers' ability to offer necessary supplies and supports (such as food, afterschool programming, and shelter) even as the need for these services has increased.**
 - For students with inadequate hygiene items, focusing on learning may be difficult, whether virtually or in-person. Furthermore, a lack of specific items such as hand sanitizer and face masks may increase risks for contracting coronavirus.
 - Students experiencing homelessness may face challenges with online learning due to a lack of technological equipment such as laptops, tablets, or headphones, adequate internet connectivity, electricity to charge laptops or tablets, or access to a quiet space. Prior to the pandemic, students often completed school work in libraries, which provide internet, computer, and printer access – an option that is not currently available in many places.
- **Due to the economic downturn related to the coronavirus, students who have not previously experienced homelessness may become homeless during the pandemic and be especially unfamiliar with their rights under McKinney-Vento.**

STRATEGIES TO CONSIDER

To successfully implement the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, schools should prioritize proactive identification and consider fostering an environment that frames policy supports as rights for students.

- **The goal of McKinney-Vento is to ensure that children and youth who experience homelessness have equal access to the same free, appropriate public education afforded to other children and youth. Identification is key to connecting students and families to resources efficiently.**
 - Due to stigma, fear, racism, and inconsistent understandings of their rights, students and families are often reluctant or unable to self-identify as homeless.
 - Schools can proactively provide opportunities for family members to update housing forms during the year at parent-teacher conferences or by “backpacking” forms home. Non-instructional staff, such as social workers, can also support identification through proactive outreach to families about their housing situation.
 - In districts using online enrollment, best practices such as telephone and safe in-person alternatives may reduce barriers.
 - Schools that engage in ongoing training of instructional and non-instructional staff, including training on trauma-informed practices, available socio-emotional resources, and anti-racist, critical pedagogical practices, may be better positioned to foster a climate where students and families feel comfortable self-identifying.
- **Treating McKinney-Vento as a series of rights for students rather than charity may be beneficial, particularly for students of color.**
 - Scholars have highlighted the ways that a charitable framework blames the individual for their situation rather than systems, creating a value hierarchy where only some are worthy of support. It provides short-term assistance often couched in stigma, but does not promote substantial, structural changes. A rights framework, in contrast, sets forth accountability for individuals, schools, and districts that are tasked with ensuring students’ rights are protected.
 - A caring and stable classroom and school environment and social justice-oriented education may support a rights-based approach.

Collaborations and data sharing with community providers can improve identification of students experiencing homelessness and ease access to resources and supports for families.

- **Relationships with community providers can ease information sharing and aid.**
 - For example, in 2016, the New York City Department of Education and Department of Homeless Services changed their data sharing agreement so that the Department of Education now receives daily lists of students in shelters, as opposed to monthly rosters.
 - Since our knowledge about the effectiveness of interventions for students who experience homelessness is still growing, information sharing can also include the pooling of knowledge about local policies or events (e.g., the destruction of a local low-income housing complex or closure of a school); increasing families’ access to educational information by posting on-site at community organizations; or using national data, such as the results of the Youth Risk Behavior Survey or federal data summary reports to inform local decision-making.
- **Building relationships with community providers can help meet service needs while minimizing duplication. These relationships may take a wide variety of forms, ranging from referrals or broader models of wraparound services or community schools.**

- School and district staff can play varying roles to [broker resources](#) for families experiencing homelessness. At the school level, social workers, teachers, and principals can handle registration, enrollment, and immediate needs. District-level personnel can facilitate transportation and community-wide professional development. It is important to consider that the ability of organizations to identify and support students experiencing homelessness depends on neighborhood factors such as immigration and housing trends.

Regular communication to build relationships with student-identified networks of trusted adults allows schools to tailor practices and supports in ways that meet individual needs.

■ **Research recommends that school and community stakeholders incorporate the [expertise of youth](#) as well as the student-identified network of trusted adults, such as parents, cousins, coaches, afterschool providers, and/or religious leaders, in students' academic planning.**

- One [study](#) showed that positive relationships with teachers, strong connections to peers, and attending church were important sources of support for students who graduated high school while also experiencing homelessness.

■ **[Fostering healthy partnerships](#) with families experiencing homelessness may depend on communicating regularly with parents to share students' successes (rather than just negative news), inquiring about their strengths and needs, and connecting them to supports.**

- Schools should ensure families have the [technological connectivity](#) to remain engaged with schools and their support networks through free WiFi or prepaid phones with unlimited minutes. This is always critical, but particularly important during a time of pandemic and economic downturn. Technological connectivity allows parents experiencing homelessness to stay abreast of students' progress, remain informed about school events and their rights, minimize social isolation, increase access to resources, and keep schools up-to-date on their address, housing status, or changing needs.

When weighing the risks and benefits of various models for reopening schools in the fall, plans must consider [local COVID-19 conditions](#), [available funding](#), and the [realities of students' home environments](#).

■ **For online plans, [access to appropriate technology and connectivity](#) for students and families experiencing homelessness is paramount, but not sufficient.**

- Due to unstable housing conditions – which may increase the risk of theft, loss, or damage – consider [providing insurance](#) on devices.
- Because schools often provide a sense of stability and routine, the safety and security of students' home environments should be considered when assessing the viability of plans.
- Online arrangements may exacerbate [social isolation](#); virtual opportunities for peer socialization and meaningful youth-adult connections may mitigate this adverse outcome.
- Integrating [physical activity](#), even for students with [limited access to green space](#), may support healthy child and youth development.
- On an ongoing basis, consider making alternative arrangements for assessing students' needs and connecting them to resources that they might otherwise have received at school. Access to food, as well as basic [hygiene](#) (e.g., masks, sanitizer, deodorant, feminine products), and school supplies (e.g., books, paper, pens, clipboards for a portable desk) would facilitate instructional learning and help keep students safe. [Mailing or delivering materials](#) would reduce transportation barriers.
- Flexibly measuring attendance, [examining attendance data for trends and possible explanations](#), and [purposefully reaching out to every student](#), ideally on a regular and one-on-one basis, may aid in fostering trust and reducing attendance gaps by housing status.

- **Face-to-face plans will likely also require the provision of basic hygiene and safety supplies, creative transportation plans, and safe, socially distanced, on-site space at schools, shelters, and other settings for students to complete homework.**
 - Districts may need [contingency plans](#) in case of increased health risks in the area or illness of teachers and/or students, and special considerations for students who experience homelessness alongside underlying medical conditions.
 - Even in face-to-face plans, providing devices or connectivity to households in need may reduce students' barriers to completing homework and may facilitate families' access to [telehealth](#), benefit applications, or other online resources.
- **The considerations that are important for blended and hybrid learning options will vary based on the specifics of each plan.**
 - Because schools often serve as [stabilizing forces for students during crises](#), plans that include staggered schedules or spreading students out across district buildings should consider how consistent schedules and familiar surroundings may be helpful for students experiencing homelessness. Students' age, transportation needs, and unique medical issues may also be important variables.
- **Across all reopening models, [strategies](#) such as targeting COVID-19 relief funding to students experiencing homelessness, ensuring students have access to community mental health professionals, offering consistent mentorship, and providing supplemental academic aid, may prove helpful.**

STRATEGIES TO AVOID

Deficit-oriented and stigmatizing practices may have adverse short- and long-term consequences for students and their families.

- **[Practices that stigmatize students experiencing homelessness](#) such as separate bus routes, homework assignments asking families to draw their house, or meeting families at the gas station to reimburse for gasoline, can hinder confidentiality, diminish students' wellbeing, and discourage students and families from sharing information with school staff.**
- **[Research](#) suggests that marginalizing the role of race and its complex interactions with social class can be particularly damaging to students of color experiencing homelessness.**
- **While many anti-poverty strategies may also be applicable to the contexts of homelessness, [one-size-fits-all solutions](#) that assume all students and families experience homelessness in the same way, have the same needs, or that treat homelessness as an identity rather than an experience, are unlikely to effectively meet the diverse needs and assets of students experiencing homelessness.**
- **With few exceptions, [segregation by housing status](#) is not permissible under federal law and is linked to damaging outcomes for students.**

FOR MORE INFORMATION

More evidence briefs can be found at the [EdResearch for Recovery website](#). To receive updates and the latest briefs, [sign up here](#).

Briefs in this series will address a broad range of COVID-19 challenges across five categories:

- Student Learning
- School Climate
- Supporting All Students
- Teachers
- Finances and Operations

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