

Homelessness and Housing Instability: The Impact on Education Outcomes

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Introduction

A growing body of empirical research links homelessness and housing instability¹ to negative education outcomes.² Considered together, the research finds that **homeless or unstably housed children are often absent from school, change schools frequently, have lower test scores, slower grade progression, and are more likely to drop out of school.**

This brief highlights findings from the recent literature on these damaging impacts of homelessness, drawing evidence from Washington State and identifying studies where researchers make comparisons to stably housed poor children whenever possible. We focus on several important indicators of academic success: attendance, school mobility, test scores, grade progression, and likelihood of dropping out of school.

The Impact of Homelessness and Housing Instability on Educational Outcomes

Homeless and Unstably Housed Children have High Rates of Absenteeism

Consistent attendance in school is widely accepted as a basic component of academic success.³ Children who miss school frequently may lag behind on coursework and be more likely to be held back. Absences tend to be high among all poor children and it is difficult to establish whether homeless/unstably housed students miss more school than their stably-housed low-income peers—which may in part be attributable to McKinney-Vento Act services.⁴ Nevertheless, some recent evidence links homelessness to increased absences and to chronic absenteeism.

- Among a sample of children living in a Los Angeles homeless shelter, approximately 16 percent missed more than three weeks of school in the previous 3 months.⁵

- Chronically homeless children in a New York City supportive housing demonstration project missed on average 30 percent (54 of 180) school days each year. After families received supportive and stable housing, attendance improved by an average of 25 days per school year.⁶
- Among a cohort of 10,000 third-grade students in Philadelphia, students with one or more homeless episodes were 30 percent more likely to meet the school district’s definition of “truant” compared to students with only one homeless episode.⁷

Homeless and Unstably Housed Children Change Residences and Schools Frequently, with Damaging Impacts on Educational Achievement

Frequent residential moves can be both a precursor to homelessness and a characteristic of homelessness, and lead to frequent school changes. School changes are in turn extremely disruptive to children’s educational achievement.^{8,9,10} A large body of evidence links school mobility—particularly moves within the academic year—to negative education outcomes.^{11,12} Children who change schools frequently may have trouble bonding with teachers¹³ and need to adjust to new classrooms, classmates and curriculums—which can leave them at a disadvantage socially and academically.¹⁴ Any residential move can be stressful to children¹⁵ but frequent moves are particularly damaging,¹⁶ and the negative impacts appear to deepen with each additional move.^{17,18} Homeless children are more likely to be “high-frequency” movers: among King County, Washington households who received Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) in fiscal year 2011, homeless families experienced more moves on average over a three-year period and were more likely to be high-frequency movers compared to stably-housed TANF recipients.¹⁹ This has troubling implications for academic achievement.

- In Washington State, nearly half of the 1st and 7th graders who received TANF during the 2011/2012 academic years changed schools at least once that year, and 7 to 10 percent changed schools three or more times. Increased school changes were associated with higher use of social and economic services (i.e., Basic Food and Medicare), more interactions with the child welfare system, lower test scores, lower grades, higher rates of school absenteeism, and lower graduation rates.²⁰
- An early study of a large sample of Denver K-12 students found that as mobility increased, academic achievement suffered. More mobile students had lower test scores and were more likely to perform below grade level compared with students who did not move. The differences were larger for math achievement, and held after controlling for socioeconomic status.²¹
- Homeless students in Chicago changed schools an average of 3.2 times (excluding expected transitions with grade advancement), and 60 percent of these moves occurred during the academic year. Homeless children also attended schools that had higher student mobility rates and greater attendance problems compared to all elementary schools in Chicago.²²

- A sample of homeless adolescents in New York City changed schools more frequently than their low-income but stably housed peers (an average of 4.2 school moves since kindergarten, compared to 3.1). The higher mobility was associated with higher rates of being held back in school, as noted below.²³
- An analysis of school mobility among New York City K-5 students found that performance in English language arts and in math declined significantly with each additional move that a child made.²⁴
- Qualitative interviews with homeless adolescents in Los Angeles who changed schools frequently reported that the mobility affected their ability to sustain friendships and relationships with teachers.²⁵

“... in a large, urban district, [homeless and highly-mobile] children are facing higher risk for school failure than children who come from low-income but residentially stable families.”²⁶

Homeless and Unstably Housed Students Have Lower Test Scores

It is well established that homeless students have below average standardized test scores compared to housed students who may be of any income.²⁷ For example, about 20 percent of homeless elementary students and only ten percent of homeless high school students nationwide score at or above grade level in math, compared to over a third of non-homeless students.²⁸ Homeless 3rd through 8th graders in New York City performed worse than other public school students on all tests at the end of the 2004/2005 academic year.²⁹ Studies that control for child and family characteristics are scarce, but several have similarly found that homeless and unstably housed students perform worse on standardized tests compared to other poor but stably-housed children.³⁰

- A robust study comparing homeless New York City children ages 6 through 11 with housed children in the same classrooms found that the homeless children scored significantly lower in reading, spelling, and math even after controlling for child and family characteristics.³¹ In total, 75 percent of homeless children were below grade level in reading (versus 48 percent of housed children), over 72 percent of the homeless children were below grade level in spelling (50 percent of housed children) and 54 percent of the homeless children were below grade level in math (22 percent of housed children). Differences were associated with school changes for reading and grade repetition for spelling.

- A longitudinal study of a large sample of Minneapolis public school students in grades 2 through 5 found that homeless and highly mobile students performed worse in math and reading compared to their low-income peers. The disadvantage was present from the second grade through elementary school.³²
- A second longitudinal study of Minneapolis students found that public school students with one episode of homelessness had significantly lower math and reading achievement compared to similarly low-income but stably housed peers. The achievement gap widened over time from third to eighth grade.³³
- A study using a large dataset of second graders from an east coast city found that children who had experienced homelessness had lower levels of achievement in literacy and science, even after controlling for other child and family characteristics.³⁴

Homeless and Unstably Housed Students are More Likely to Repeat Grades or Drop Out

One of the more damaging consequences of falling behind in school is repeating grades or dropping out. Holding students back does not help them catch up to their peers and may contribute to continued academic failure.³⁵ Some research, including recent work from Washington State, finds that grade retention and dropping out is more common among homeless students.

- Half of the sample of homeless New York City adolescents repeated a grade and 22 percent repeated two or more grades; in comparison, 40 percent of low-income youth who had never experienced homelessness repeated one grade and only 8 percent repeated two or more.³⁶
- Among Chicago homeless children, one third were held back at least once. Among homeless students who entered shelter in 10th grade, nearly half dropped out of high school.³⁷
- Among Washington State TANF recipients in the 2011/2012 academic year, public school students ages 12 to 18 with multiple indications of homelessness or housing instability in their social service and school administrative data experienced lower rates of grade progression and lower rates of on-time high school completion compared to stably housed TANF students. Approximately 69 percent of homeless/unstably housed high school freshman dropped out of school, compared to 54 percent of stably housed students.³⁸

“All students suffer in a school with a large population of highly mobile students.”³⁹

Homelessness and Housing Instability Impacts Classrooms and Schools

High student turnover can affect teachers, classrooms and schools. Churning of new students may require more of a teacher’s attention and more time reviewing lessons—potentially slowing down the pace of learning and disrupting the classroom for all students.

- Teachers in schools with high student mobility rates may need to spend extra time reviewing past material and classroom behavior expectations, which impacts instructional time and contributes to higher teacher turnover.^{40,41}
- Teachers in schools with highly mobile populations may be hampered from moving the curriculum forward. One estimate from Chicago found that by the 5th grade the curriculum was one grade below grade level in high-turnover schools.⁴²
- Students in schools with highly mobile populations have lower test scores than students in schools with more stable populations.⁴³

In Summary

The research summarized above suggests that homelessness is damaging to academic achievement. Homeless or unstably housed students miss school or change schools frequently, perform poorly on standardized tests, and repeat grades or drop out. All of which can have lasting implications for wellbeing in adulthood.

There are limitations to our understanding of how homelessness affects achievement. Homeless students experience hardships that are similar to those facing all students living in chronic poverty, and housing instability impacts academic outcomes in different ways for different students. This presents a challenge to researchers looking to disentangle the unique role of housing instability from other aspects of poverty, like family instability, poor health, food insecurity, or child maltreatment.⁴⁴ Even so, the evidence clearly connects homelessness and housing instability—whether directly or through its correlation with chronic poverty—to poor academic outcomes. As several researchers note, all children face a “continuum of risk.” On this continuum, homeless children are a particularly vulnerable group that faces higher risk than other poor children who never experience homelessness.^{45, 46, 47}

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Notes and References

- ¹ We define homelessness and housing need broadly, including HUD's definition (individuals who "lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence" or whose primary nighttime residence is a shelter, institution, or a "public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings") and the McKinney-Vento definition, which expands to include children and youth who are doubled up ("sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing [or] economic hardship"). We also include conditions that may be or indicators of unstable housing or precursors to homelessness, such as frequent moves, poor housing quality, or extremely high rent burdens.
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