Homeless Students and Mental Health Cultural Competency

Background and Major Concerns

Whether they are with their families or on their own (otherwise known as "unaccompanied"), youth experiencing homelessness face serious mental, emotional, and physical challenges. Schools often struggle to assist these students, in part because it is very difficult for agencies to assess who is and how many people are homeless. According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development's 2014 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR), there were 216,261 homeless families and 45,205 homeless unaccompanied children and youth on a single night in January, 2014. In total, nearly one-fourth of all homeless people (135,701, or 23%) were under the age of eighteen.[1] However, in 2013, the U.S. Department of Education found that many more students in public schools qualified were eligible for McKinney-Vento Act protections for students experiencing homelessness.[2] Schools are required by the McKinney-Vento Act to try to identify and assist these students, but schools may not always know how best to do so.

Youth and young adults experiencing homelessness suffer significant barriers to full participation in school. When homeless youth attend school they are unlikely to have eaten or slept sufficiently; however, while an estimated 87% of homeless minors attended U.S. schools in 2009, only 77% attended regularly. They often lack medical and dental care, and are more susceptible to common illnesses like skin diseases and upper respiratory infections. Compared to their peers, they have higher rates of: depression, low self-esteem, suicide, substance abuse, and anxiety. They are often alienated and experience difficulty making friends. In the classroom, they may have difficulty listening, asking for help, and following directions, and they often have to repeat grades, especially because they may rarely turn in homework and often suffer from one or more learning disabilities.[3] In one study, an estimated 10-26% of preschool children had mental health problems significant enough to require clinical evaluation, which increased to 24-40% among school-aged youth (two to four times as high as low income youth of the same age).[2]

Family life can be challenging for homeless youth, as well. The majority of homeless individuals (around 2/3s) are male, but as many as 90% of homeless families are headed by single mothers, many of whom suffer from mental health issues like depression or PTSD that can indirectly impact their children. Homeless parents may only have time to provide the necessities for survival to their children, so homeless youth may receive little or inconsistent nurturing.[4] For unaccompanied

homeless youth, the decision to run away is often precipitated by neglect, severe family conflict, and/or physical or sexual abuse. LGBTQI2-S youth (lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer and questioning, intersex, and two-spirit) are a major growing population of the homeless, because they are often rejected or evicted by their families.[3] Approximately 6-35% homeless youth identify as LGBTQI2-S, with a meta-analysis by the National Alliance to End Homelessness estimating the number at around 20%. LGBTQI2-S homeless youth are twice as likely to experience sexual victimization before becoming homeless; are more likely to experience PTSD and attempt suicide; and are at high risk for substance abuse, mental illness, self-harm, and STDs.[5]

However, having a supportive family can be a powerful protective factor and source of strength for youth experiencing homelessness. In addition, while many families may experience homelessness at some point, this situation can be temporary, and it is often best to keep these families together if possible. Therefore, as discussed below, it is important that schools partner with families where feasible rather than alienating or antagonizing them.[6] With support and care, students and families experiencing homelessness can recover from its traumas to live meaningful and successful lives.

Faculty and Staff Training to Help Students Experiencing Homelessness

School, and particularly achieving high school graduation, can provide an important protective factor for homeless youth. A major factor that promotes resilience in students experiencing homelessness is whether they have caring relationships with staff and other students. Even brief encounters with staff that make homeless youth feel cared for, listened to, and advised can make a huge difference for these students.[6] When homeless youth receive consistent behavioral interventions from staff and develop nurturing relationships with them, the youth can:

- o learn coping skills,
- o receive guidance on behaving in social and work situations,
- o learn how to follow directions and be mindful,
- o and develop emotional and executive functions that contribute to better outcomes.[7]

It is important to train school personnel about (a) the legal rights of homeless or unaccompanied youth, (b) their unique needs, and (c) how to deal sensitively with them. Many educators do not know, for instance, that undocumented and runaway youth can be eligible for McKinney-Vento protections, or that the legal definition of "homeless" includes situations like living in motels or "doubling up" with family because of economic hardship.[10] In addition, educators may have unrecognized prejudices toward people who are homeless that prevent them from providing a nurturing, nonjudgmental environment.[7]

Training about homelessness and education is usually directed toward teachers , but researchers note that all school employees can benefit from training. For instance, coaches, school nurses, and secretaries or office personnel will have different interactions with a student than his or her teacher, and in some cases will be better able to spot the signs of homelessness.[4]

Training should include:

- realities of homelessness, and what situations or factors may precipitate homelessness;
- common developmental and mental health issues of youth without homes;
- the importance of protecting the privacy and emotional health of homeless students;
- the definitions of "homeless" under the McKinney-Vento Act;
- what constitutes abuse or neglect, and when/how school personnel must report it;
- how to inform homeless students and families of their rights and resources.[10]

To help overcome ingrained prejudices, training may also involve a service learning element, such as volunteering at local shelters, food banks, or service agencies.[7]

Because so many homeless youth face ostracism from their peers, some researchers also recommend educating all students in a school about homelessness.[4] The Illinois State Board of Education (has created a PDF linking to a number of lesson plans and toolkits on teaching children about homelessness (*http://www.isbe.state.il.us/homeless/pdf/Lesson_Plan_Links.pdf*). North Dakota has another with lesson plans and activities for older grades (*http://www.dpi.state.nd.us/title1/homeless/ resources/onlinplan.pdf*).

Effective Approaches for Schools

- For both adults and youth who are experiencing homelessness, ***fulfilling basic needs should be the first priority***. Many researchers stress that it would be misguided to try to get a person who lacks survival necessities to join extracurricular activities, do homework, seek counseling, etc.[4]

- Research clearly indicates that more students experience homelessness than schools are aware of, in part because students take pains to hide their homelessness. To better identify these students, school districts can:
  - o conduct snowball sampling (reach unknown homeless youth through networks of visible/known homeless youth);
  - o coordinate with homeless shelters and church groups;
  - o post information about support for homeless students in areas where youth congregate;
  - o and coordinate with trusted educators, adults, and other school workers with whom homeless minors feel safe.[7]

The National Center for Homeless Education created free [posters for parents and youth](#) (in English and Español), explaining their rights under the McKinney-Vento Act (*http://center.serve.org/nche/pr/er_poster.php#youth*).

- Schools can offer simple but vitally necessary supplies: clean clothes (especially underwear and socks), school supplies like pencils and paper, toothbrushes/toothpaste, hairbrushes, deodorant, etc. In addition, homeless youth can be permitted to use facilities: laundry rooms, showers, a nap room, a quiet place to do homework, etc.[8]

- Homeless, runaway, and foster youth are automatically eligible for school lunches, so schools should enroll them as soon as they enroll.[11,13] Additionally, many schools provide basic breakfasts for homeless youth in addition to school lunches.[8]

- Schools can become aware of local social services and housing opportunities and convey that information to students.[11] It can be posted visibly, so that youth can access the information even if they are not comfortable asking for assistance.

- The National Center for Homeless Education evaluated four broad-based school intervention strategies for supporting homeless youth (PBIS, RC, RTI, and CE). These are evidence-based practices that are generally directed toward elementary schools, where students remain in the same learning community all day, rather than upper grades. All of these mental health programs had the potential to positively impact homeless youth. (See the [report here](#): *http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/res-summ-pos-beh.pdf*) [9]

- Implement a mentor program to model academic achievement as well as help homeless students with basic social skills and, if possible, tutoring. Many homeless youth are very isolated and feel stigmatized or alienated by their classmates. A mentor can help these students feel more connected to his or her school and lower their dropout risk.[8] Some elementary schools with large numbers of homeless youth have had success with a "buddy" system in which each newly enrolled student is assigned a helper to acclimate them to the new school.

- To make homeless youth feel more involved in school, inform them of the clubs and activities available to them, and enroll them quickly in those that interest them. Deadlines and fees should be waived or covered with Title I funds.[10]

- Maintain communication: with the student's parents, with the district's required homeless education liaison, and to the new school when a homeless student is going to move. When sharing information with a new school or other agency, it is important to respect the family's confidentiality and avoid sharing unnecessary personal details or opinions. [11]

- Familiarize faculty and staff with laws related to abuse, neglect, and runaway students. Make it clear to faculty and staff when they are required to report charges to law enforcement or child protective services.[11]

- Develop a sensitive attendance policy and convey it to students and educators, particularly around tardiness. For instance, homeless students may have to make multiple bus transfers to

remain in their school of origin, and should not be penalized just for being late for this reason.[12]

- Create alternative opportunities for homeless youth to earn graduation credit. Offer partial credit for completed coursework. Consider programs that allow flexible school hours, like work-education programs (that allow students to earn money as well as credit) or computer-based training. For students who join partway through the year, provide ways for them to make-up the work they have missed, including online learning or independent study. [13]

Effective Approaches for Educators and Staff

- When discussing students' housing status and needs, make conversations sensitive and nonjudgmental. Conduct conversations in an office or another area that allows for confidentiality.[11]

- When students are absent for a day, tell them that they were missed; many homeless and highly mobile students believe that no one even notices or cares when they are gone, especially in middle and high school. If a homeless student is gone for a few days or more, alert school officials.[12]

- Provide flexibility around assignments, including deadlines and supplies—homeless youth may not have access to quiet workspaces, technology, or materials. Allow students to work on homework in class.[11]

- Research shows that certain educator qualities lead to greater success with homeless and highly mobile students. These include: being a caring, positive individual; showing all students that they are valued; conveying high expectations for students; reevaluating teaching methods and goals when students are not meeting expectations, not blaming the students; having a strong belief in one's ability to make a positive difference. It is also important to provide norms and establish routine. For instance, educators can print out explanations of classroom rules and procedures (usually given in the first few weeks of school) for students who join the class later in the year.[10]

- Encourage youths to stay in school.[4]

- If an educator has prior knowledge that a homeless or highly mobile student will be moving, he or she should create a portfolio of the student's work and the knowledge and skills the student possesses. This will assist future educators in assessing the student's abilities.[14]

- Homeless youth and their parents are often very fearful about being turned in to authorities. Educators should *never* threaten to report families experiencing homelessness to authorities unless it is actually warranted (e.g., do not threaten to call social services if a student's parents miss a teacher conference, if the student falls behind in his or her homework, etc.). [11]

  When approaching students and their parents, educators should proactively explain under what conditions they must make a report to child welfare and/or law enforcement. Reporting requirements for suspected child abuse or neglect vary by state; check with your state's Child

Protective Services or Department of Social Services for laws. ChildWelfare.gov has many guidance resources, including "Mandatory Reporters of Child Abuse and Neglect" (2014) (*https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/manda/*).[11]

Unsupported Approaches

- Suspension and expulsion are ineffective in improving outcomes for students experiencing homelessness. These practices are used as punishments much more frequently with certain groups, like students from lower economic status (including homeless students) and students with learning disabilities. Homeless youth are especially vulnerable; they are twice as likely as low-income youth to develop learning disabilities, and three times as likely to have emotional and behavioral problems. But evidence suggests that punishing youth by preventing them from coming to school does not help students improve behavior and it does not improve school climate. It may be particularly detrimental to homeless youth, who have high dropout rates and who rely on schools for meeting their basic needs (food, shelter, socialization).[7]

- It is not recommended by researchers or allowed by McKinney-Vento for schools to withhold enrollment until students can produce paperwork, such as immunization or school records. Youth seeking enrollment should be allowed to start classes as quickly as possible. It is also important not to force students to live on the streets or in homeless shelters before they are allowed McKinney-Vento Act protections (remember that under the law, many other situations count as "homelessness").[13]

- When trying to assess McKinney-Vento eligibility, schools should not: follow students outside of school; speak with their landlords, neighbors, or other outside parties about the students' housing status; intimidate families or threaten to contact Child Protective Services; require that students present a legal guardian in order to enroll in school; use police to conduct home visits.[13]

Resources

- The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) Homelessness Resource Center (HRC) is an interactive learning community dedicated to disseminating knowledge and best practices to prevent and end homelessness (*http://homeless.samhsa.gov/*). The HRC has resources on supporting homeless children (*http://homeless.samhsa.gov/Channel/Children-421.aspx*), families (*http://homeless.samhsa.gov/Channel/Families-422.aspx*), youth

(*http://homeless.samhsa.gov/Channel/Youth-31.aspx*), and LGBTQI2-S youth (*http://homeless.samhsa.gov/Channel/LGBTQI2-S-Youth-153.aspx*).

- The National Center for Homeless Education (*http://center.serve.org/nche/*), a TA center for the U.S. Department of Education, has resources for educators and administrators including:
  - One-page guide to recognizing students who are experiencing homelessness (*http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/toolkit2/app12b.pdf*).
  - Resilience and At-risk Children and Youth: a guide on promoting resilience through relationships with educators, school staff, and other caring adults (*http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/resilience.pdf*).
  - NCHE regularly conducts free webinars (~1 hour each) on laws, resources, and best practices related to education for homeless students: webinar registration information and links to recorded webinars *(http://center.serve.org/nche/web/group.php).*
  - Summary of McKinney-Vento Act after the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act reauthorization (*http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/summary.pdf*).
  - "Clearing the Path to School Success for Students in Out-of-Home Care": a practical guide to supporting homeless and runaway youth, using the examples of three young people and the obstacles they face (*http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/ctp.pdf*).
  - "When Working Together Works: Academic Success for Students in Out-of-Home Care": a brief on developing and sustaining collaborations between schools and child welfare agencies for foster and homeless youth (*http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/ briefs/wwtw.pdf*).
  - Other Best Practice in Homeless Education policy briefs (*http://center.serve.org/nche/ briefs.php*).

- The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY.org) has a page of training videos (*http:\www.naehcy.org\educational-resources\videos*). These include several YouTube videos in which homeless youth talk about their lived experiences, as well as a DVD for sale to train administrators and faculty about the McKinney-Vento Act.

- Beyond Stigma and Stereotypes: What is Homelessness? Guide to a 45-60-minute class lesson for 6th-8th graders on homelessness and stereotyping. Meets Common Core Standards: Reading, Speaking, and Listening (*http://www.adl.org/assets/pdf/education-outreach/beyond-stigma-and-stereotypes-what-is-homelessness.pdf*).

- Healing Hands: Protecting the Mental Health of Homeless Children & Youth: a brief on why homeless students act out, the mental health risks and barriers they face, and promising practices and programs (*http://www.nhchc.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/hh.02_00.pdf*).

<div align="center">**SAMPLE RESIDENCY INFORMATION FORM**[14]</div>

This questionnaire is in compliance with the McKinney-Vento Act, U.S.C. 42 § 11431 et seq. Your answers will help determine if the student meets eligibility requirements for services under the McKinney-Vento Act.

Student _____   Parent/Guardian _____
School _____   Phone/Pager _____
Age ____ Grade ____   D.O.B. _____
Address _____ City _____
Zip Code _____ Is this address Temporary or Permanent? (circle one)

Please choose which of the following situations the student currently resides in (you can choose more than one):

____ House or apartment with parent or guardian
____ Motel, car, or campsite
____ Shelter or other temporary housing
____ With friends or family members (other than or in addition to parent/guardian)

If you are living in shared housing, please check all of the following reasons that apply:

____ Loss of housing
____ Economic situation
____ Temporarily waiting for house or apartment
____ Provide care for a family member
____ Living with boyfriend/girlfriend
____ Loss of employment
____ Parent/Guardian is deployed
____ Other (Please explain)

Are you a student under the age of 18 and living apart from your parents or guardians?   Yes   No

Residency and Educational Rights

Students without fixed, regular, and adequate living situations have the following rights:

1) Immediate enrollment in the school they last attended or the local school where they are currently staying even if they do not have all of the documents normally required at the time of enrollment without fear of being separated or treated differently due to their housing situations;
2) Transportation to the school of origin for the regular school day;
3) Access to free meals, Title I and other educational programs, and transportation to extra-curricular activities to the same extent that it is offered to other students.

Any questions about these rights can be directed to the local McKinney-Vento Liaison at [Insert phone number] or the State Coordinator at [Insert phone number].

By signing below, I acknowledge that I have received and understand the above rights.

_____   _____
Signature of Parent/Guardian/Unattached Youth   Date

_____   _____
Signature of McKinney-Vento Liaison   Date

CONTACT THE NOW IS THE TIME TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

Phone: (844) 856-1749

Email: NITT-TA@cars-rp.org

Online: www.SAMHSA.gov/NITT-TA

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