

CHILDREN ENROLLED IN HEAD START WHO ARE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

By Dr. Mary Haskett, North Carolina State University

The subject of this Brain Gain is the report by Haskett, M. E., Neal, S. C., & Norwalk, K. (2020), "Variability in social and behavioral adjustment among children in Head Start who are unstably housed." *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*. [Read the full report here.](#)

Highlights

Young children who experience homelessness are at risk for a host of behavioral and social challenges in preschool, but we know these children are quite diverse in their strengths and challenges.

Understanding those differences among children can contribute to service planning and policy.

Therefore, our aim was to form subgroups of children who had common patterns of adjustment and identify factors that might account for differences in adjustment among the subgroups.

Our sample was 314 four-year-old children enrolled in Head Start classrooms whose families were living doubled-up. This is a group of children we know relatively little about because most studies are based on children in shelters. Children's problem behavior and social-emotional adjustment in the classroom were measured by teachers' reports. Teachers also reported on the amount of conflict and closeness they experienced with each student.

Results

Our analysis indicated that there were **four** unique subgroups of children.

- **High Functioning** (69%) children had the highest levels of interpersonal and social skills and the lowest levels of problem behaviors.
- **Moderate Risk** (16%) children showed slightly elevated levels of externalizing behaviors, internalizing behaviors, and hyperactivity. Their social skills were slightly better than children in subgroups 3 and 4.

- **At Risk** (12%) children had elevated levels of hyperactivity and externalizing and internalizing behavior problems, and the poorest social functioning.
- **Struggling** (3%) children showed high levels of externalizing behavior problems, and moderate levels of internalizing behaviors and hyperactivity. Their social skills were the most delayed.

We found that **quality of student-teacher relationships predicted** subgroup membership; specifically, the likelihood of being in the High Functioning group was greater for children whose teachers rated their relationship as close and not conflictual.

Conclusions

- A promising finding was that the largest group of children, representing well over one-half of the sample, were **functioning well**.
- Another 15% showed some difficulties, but their **teachers did not view** them as having serious behavioral or social challenges.
- **Only 15%** of the children (At Risk and Struggling, combined) demonstrated clear behavior adjustment and social problems.

This sample of children experiencing homelessness was unique in that they were living in **doubled-up** circumstances and were enrolled in **Head Start**, a high-quality early childhood education program.

Relative to other families facing homelessness, these families were sufficiently stable to enroll them in Head Start. Perhaps Head Start served a **protective role** for these children.

Indeed, **results** of a recent study indicated that homeless children in Head Start or other center-based care displayed stronger school readiness skills than those who were not enrolled in care. Therefore, **identifying doubled-up children** and reducing barriers to enrolling them in high-quality early childhood education programs as soon as possible **should be a high priority**.

Promoting warm relationships with early childhood teachers could lead to improved behavioral adjustment and social competence of young children experiencing homelessness.

Brief in-class interventions such as “banking time” that promote positive relationships between teachers and their students might prove useful.

For these interventions to have intended results, however, **preschool teachers might need guidance** to work effectively with children who are unstably housed. Teachers could be **susceptible to stereotyped beliefs** about homeless students and their families, and those beliefs might impact their relationships with the children.

Indeed, a prior **study showed that pre-service early childhood teachers held stereotypical and negative views** of children who were homeless and described them in negative terms (e.g., “messy”, “dysfunctional”). In a qualitative study of teachers who worked with homeless families, teachers discussed challenges such as difficult communication with parents and frequent changes related to students moving in and out of their classroom.

Some of the teachers **felt overwhelmed** and **lacked necessary supports** to handle the stress of working in a school with homeless students. **Online training materials** for the early childhood education sector were released recently by the U.S. DHHS Administration for Children and Families. If such professional development materials show positive results, required completion of the training modules should be considered.

Who Should Read This?

Head Start teachers, administrators, and early childhood education advocates would benefit by familiarizing themselves with the content of this report and the other reports that are cited in the original academic paper. Administrators may want to consider these findings to inform trainings and professional development.

In addition, policy makers and system leaders of the early childhood education and homeless housing systems should consider collaborating to improve outreach and services to children living doubled up – a category of homelessness recognized by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) and the Department of Education (DOE) but not the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

About Dr. Mary Haskett

Dr. Haskett is a longtime friend to People’s Emergency Center. She is a Professor of Psychology at North Carolina State University and Director of the Family Studies Research Team.

Dr. Haskett is interested in the linkages between parenting and young children's social adjustment. Specifically, she is interested in the adjustment of children who have experienced harsh, abusive parenting. Dr. Haskett learned about PEC during the co-editing of the book [Supporting Families Experiencing Homelessness: Current Practices and Future Directions](#) with PEC's initial Visiting Scholar Dr. Staci Perlman and Dr. Beryl Cowan.

PEC continues to work with Dr. Haskett on the 'Yay Babies' initiative to increase early intervention and early education services' delivered to children birth to five years experiencing homelessness' that she started in North Carolina. Learn more at [Home - Faculty and Staff - Dr Mary E Haskett - NC State \(ncsu.edu\)](#)

About People's Emergency Center (PEC)

[People's Emergency Center \(PEC\)](#) uplifts our community by providing housing, social services, and quality of life supports that empower people and encourage more prosperous and safer neighborhoods.

For families and youth experiencing homelessness, we offer housing, social services, access to early childhood education, and educational programs in career training, parenting, financial literacy, life skills, and technology.

The PEC Community Development Corporation programs respond to community needs and build on neighborhood assets to help bridge the digital divide, expand mixed-income housing opportunities, stimulate economic growth, create wealth, and improve the quality of life for all West Philadelphia residents.

PEC advocates for urgently needed public policy changes on behalf of families and youth experiencing homelessness and the neighborhoods we serve. We have worked successfully with local, state, and federal government agencies to advance legislation and budgets that prioritize these communities.

For additional publications from our policy department, visit [pec-cares.org/policy-publications](#).