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# Residential Instability and the McKinney-Vento Homeless Children and Education Program
*What We Know, Plus Gaps in Research*

## Mary Cunningham, Robin Harwood, Sam Hall

As homelessness increased among families and children during the 1980s and 1990s, policymakers created, and strengthened, the McKinney-Vento Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program. This response came in part because a growing body of evidence showed that residential instability (e.g., frequent moves, doubling up, homelessness) is associated with poor academic outcomes among children (Rafferty 1998; Rafferty, Shinn, and Weitzman 2004; Rubin et al. 1996). The McKinney-Vento EHCY program aims to mitigate the effects of residential instability through the identification of homeless children in schools and the provision of services, including expedited enrollment, transportation to school, tutoring, and mental and physical health referrals. The program has been in place for more than two decades, yet policymakers know little about how schools identify homeless children, the specific services that individual children receive, and how these relate to academic outcomes.

In August 2009, with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Urban Institute completed a study that looked at the McKinney-Vento EHCY program in the Washington metropolitan region. As part of this reconnaissance, we reviewed the literature on how residential instability affects academic outcomes among children; collected descriptive data on the extent of homelessness in the region's schools; and convened a group of homeless liaisons, state coordinators, and advocates to discuss local implementation of the program and types of data collected by program staff. This brief summarizes the literature and data collected during this reconnaissance and provides questions for future research on residential instability and the McKinney-Vento EHCY program.

## Residential Instability among Low-Income Families

Residential instability is common among low-income families, with low-income families moving more often than higher-income families (Coulton, Theodos, and Turner 2009; Crowley 2003) Low-income families move for a variety of reasons.

For some the moves are reactive and thus negative (e.g., moving because of an eviction) while others may make positive, proactive moves (e.g., moving to a better neighborhood or purchasing a home). For example, Making Connections, a 10-city survey of low-income, mostly minority neighborhoods, finds that 46 percent of those who moved during the survey period were "churning movers," suggesting that they were "moving in response to financial stress or problems in their rental agreements" (Coulton, Theodos, and Turner 2009).

A combination of factors contributes to frequent moves and residential instability among low-income families, including the family's search for affordable housing in the midst of ever-changing circumstances; overcrowded living conditions; and the desire to escape domestic violence or unsafe neighborhood conditions (Crowley 2003). The quality of the housing stock also matters, with low-income families more likely to live in substandard housing (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development [HUD] 2005).

Residential instability is often a precursor to homelessness—perhaps the worst possible housing outcome for families. As Rog and colleagues (2007) write, "homeless episodes are typically part of a long period of residential instability, marked by frequent moves, stays in one's own housing, and doubling up with friends and relatives." Indeed, many low-income children live in families that move frequently, sometimes more than once a year. Masten et al. (1997) describe these children as "highly mobile." Recent national data show that 43 percent of adults in families entering homeless shelters from 2007 to 2008 were living with friends or family the night immediately before shelter system entry (HUD 2009). While the ubiquity of doubling up among low-income families is widely acknowledged, no reliable national data that quantify the problem are available (Cunningham and Henry 2007). Researchers must turn to

data collected on homelessness to capture what we know about residential instability.

## Children a Significant and Growing Number of the Homeless Population

Homeless families with children represent a significant and growing number of the homeless population. The U.S. Department of Education requires local schools to identify and count the number of homeless students, which they define as students who are sleeping in shelter, on the street, or doubled up for economic reasons (see the next section, "The Definition of Homeless Children under Two Federal Agencies"). During the 2007–2008 academic year, school districts reported that 794,617 homeless children were enrolled in public schools across all 50 states, Puerto Rico, and the Bureau of Indian Education; this represents a 17 percent increase over the 2006–2007 year (National Center for Homeless Education 2009). Although this increase may represent in part improved data collection by schools, in a voluntary survey of 1,716 school districts across the country, 27 percent of school administrators similarly reported significant increases in homeless children in the 2007–2008 year (Duffield and Lovell 2008).

Among homeless students identified by schools, nearly two-thirds (65 percent) were doubled up, 21 percent were living in homeless shelters, 7 percent were unsheltered, and 7 percent were living in hotels or motels (National Center for Homeless Education 2009). Because almost 10 percent of local education agencies (LEAs) failed to report data on the enrollment of homeless and doubled up children during the 2007–2008 academic year, and because identification remains imperfect, the true number of homeless children is undoubtedly higher than the reported number (National Center for Homeless Education 2009).

Communities across the country are also reporting that the economic recession and unprecedented problems with foreclosure are contributing to increased home-

lessness among families (National Coalition for the Homeless 2009). Reports from homeless shelter providers show that homelessness among families increased 9 percent from 2007 to 2008. Importantly, the share of sheltered homeless people who are members of families went from 29.8 percent to 32.4 percent (HUD 2009). In some places, increases in homelessness among families have been dramatic: for example, the District of Columbia recently reported a 20 percent increase in homeless families using emergency shelter and transitional housing (Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments 2009). DC is not a unique case; other communities, such as New York City and Minneapolis, are also reporting significant increases in homeless families with children (Cunningham 2009).

## The Definition of Homeless Children under Two Federal Agencies

The Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 and its subsequent amendments created numerous homeless assistance programs (e.g., emergency shelter, transitional housing) administered by HUD, and one, the McKinney-Vento Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program, administered by the U.S. Department of Education (ED).[1] Although HUD and ED both administer programs that serve homeless children, these programs provide fundamentally different services based on two different definitions of what constitutes "homelessness." Both HUD and ED take homelessness to mean children who "lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence" due to the lack of alternative accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals or awaiting foster care placement; or are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, or other places not ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings. But the ED definition differs from the HUD definition in that it includes children living in households that are tem-

porarily doubled up due to hardship or loss of housing and migrant workers and their children who are living in the conditions described above. It also includes children who are temporarily living in motels. How much the two agencies (ED and HUD) overlap in identification and service provision remains unclear.

## Impact of Homelessness and Residential Instability on Children

The absence of stable housing can have severe consequences for children and their families. Homeless children, high in poverty and lacking many of life's necessities, suffer from high rates of hunger and malnourishment, mental and physical health problems, out of home placement in foster care (Buckner 2008; Culhane et al. 2003; Park et al. 2004). Homeless children carry many problems to school with them and face numerous challenges to achieving positive academic outcomes (Buckner 2008; Crowley 2003; Masten 1997; Obradovic et al. 2009; Rafferty, Shinn, and Weitzman 2004; Rubin et al. 1996).

As Buckner (2008) notes, it is difficult to disentangle the effects of poverty from the effects of homelessness, and studies generally show mixed results in demonstrating an independent effect related to homelessness. Because children who are permanently housed in chronic poverty endure many of the same stressors as children who move in and out of homelessness, it is not surprising that some studies have found no difference in selected outcomes among homeless and housed low-income children (Buckner et al. 2001). Other studies, however, have found that homeless and highly mobile students score lower than stably housed children do on standardized tests in reading, spelling, and math (Obradovic et al. 2009; Rafferty et al. 2004; Rubin et al. 1996). Despite the difficulty in disentangling the effects of homelessness from the effects of poverty, homeless children nonetheless represent a

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particularly vulnerable group of low-income children.

### Homeless Children Change Schools Frequently

The residential instability associated with homelessness has the potential to disrupt children's educational progress by necessitating frequent school changes. GAO (1994) found that low-income children or those who attend inner-city schools are more likely to change schools frequently: over 17 percent of all third graders have changed schools more than three times by third grade. A more recent study, completed in Chicago Public Schools with a convenience sample of homeless children living in a large homeless shelter for families experiencing chronic homelessness, found that children changed schools, on average, 3.2 times per year, with a third of those moves taking place mid-year (Dworsky 2008). Frequent school changes mean children must adapt to a new school curriculum and, in many cases, may have to catch up to students in the new classroom. Homeless and highly mobile students are also at high risk for "broken bonds" with teachers (Obradovic et al. 2009). Weak teacher-student relationships may leave homeless children at a disadvantage in the classroom.

### Many Homeless Children Lack Necessary Tools to Succeed Academically

Homelessness or doubling up can lead to poor academic outcomes simply because students do not have stable and safe home environments; their surroundings may not be conducive to learning or completing homework assignments (Dworsky 2008). Children living in shelters often must share rooms and common spaces with other families, and may not have adequate workspaces or access to school supplies. Furthermore, overcrowding typical in shelters or doubled-up situations may be noisy and chaotic, further interfering with children's ability to complete homework assignments.

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### Residential Instability Can Affect Attendance; Research Is Mixed

Frequent school changes caused by residential instability may also decrease attendance. In a study of 169 school-age children and their parents living in Los Angeles homeless shelters, Zima et al. (1994) found that while access to school was not a reported problem among homeless children (88 percent were registered in school), about 16 percent had missed more than three weeks of school over the previous three months. Missing school puts children behind in their schoolwork and may result in staying back a year and poor academic outcomes. However, Rubin et al. (1996) compared homeless students ($N = 102$) to well-matched housed children ($N = 178$) and found that although the homeless students reported missing a greater number of school days, these differences in attendance did not explain differences in academic outcomes, even after controlling for age, sex, race, social class, family status, and tests of verbal and nonverbal intelligence. Similarly to these two studies from the early 1990s, Buckner et al. (2001) found no differences between homeless and housed children on attendance rates, possibly attesting to the effectiveness of McKinney-Vento legislation at ensuring homeless children have access to school.

### Residential Instability Affects Academic Test Scores

On academic outcomes, homeless and highly mobile students score lower than housed children do on standardized tests in reading and math (Rafferty et al. 2004; Rubin et al. 1996). Stressors related to poverty explain some of these differences; however, researchers find differences in academic outcomes even after controlling for these factors and prior academic achievement. For example, Rubin et al. 1996) compared 102 homeless children (ages 6 to 11) with 178 housed classmates and found, even after controlling for differences in socioeconomic status and demographic factors, that homeless children scored lower on reading, spelling, and math, as measured by the Wide Range

Achievement Test. Buckner et al. (2001), however, found no significant differences between homeless and low-income housed children (ages 6 to 17).

## Poor Academic Outcomes Often Coexist with Behavioral Problems; Unclear Why Some Do Better Than Others

Poor academic outcomes often coexist with behavioral problems. Masten et al. (1997, 27) investigated educational risks among 73 children 6 to 11 years old from homeless families staying in a Minneapolis shelter and found that "academic and behavioral problems often co-occurred, as did good achievement and good behavior." Similarly, Huntington, Buckner, and Bassuk (2008) examined behavior problems, adaptive functioning, and academic achievement among preschool and school-age children in homeless shelters using cluster analysis. They found higher-functioning and lower-functioning groups, with some homeless children showing a constellation of co-occurring behavior and academic problems, and other children showing greater resilience in both academic and behavioral domains. They suggested that more work is needed to understand why some groups of homeless children do better than other groups. Masten et al. (1997) found that a diverse range of outcomes among homeless children were mediated in part by such factors as the quality of parenting and children's own executive functioning and cognitive skills. Homeless children thus constitute a "heterogeneous group likely to have diverse academic and socio-emotional needs" (Obradovic et al. 2009, 493). Efforts to enhance their achievement require researchers to gain a more differentiated knowledge regarding the factors that may shape academic and behavioral outcomes among homeless children.

## Long-Term Effects of Residential Instability and Homelessness Largely Unknown

The long-term effects of homelessness and residential instability are largely unknown,

as longitudinal studies are scarce. Rafferty et al. (2004) examined reading and math scores for a small sample of adolescents who had previously experienced homelessness (but were housed at the time of the study) ($n = 46$) and low-income housed adolescents who had never experienced homelessness ($n = 87$), ages 11 to 17, and found that scores for previously homeless adolescents were lower than housed adolescents for the year after they first entered shelter. However, a follow-up five years later showed that differences had dissipated, suggesting that a period of stable housing may close some of the gaps. A more recent study with a larger sample ($n = 14,754$) of students in the second, third, fourth, and fifth grades in Minneapolis compared homeless and highly mobile children to low-income, consistently housed and advantaged students during a three-year period (Obradovic et al. 2009). Study researchers found that even after controlling for sex, ethnicity, English as a second language (ELL status), and attendance, homeless and highly mobile students scored lower in reading and math than their low-income housed and advantaged counterparts (Obradovic et al. 2009). These differences were evident as early as second grade and persisted through elementary school. The study was limited in that it could not look at how the length of homelessness (chronicity) or how the number of homeless episodes affected outcomes.

## High Rates of Turnover Related to Residential Instability Harms Schools

In addition to creating problems for homeless and highly mobile students, high turnover rates in classrooms have implications for schools. Schools with high numbers of highly mobile and homeless children experience strain on resources because teachers must adjust to new students constantly entering the classroom, repeat lessons, and manage any behavioral problems caused by the disruption. Further, high rates of student mobility caused by frequent moves

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among families may lead to lower parental involvement in parent-teacher associations (Turner and Berube 2009).

### The McKinney-Vento Homeless Children and Youth Education Program

As homelessness among families grew during the 1980s and 1990s, the problems that came with moving so frequently became apparent to researchers and policymakers. Homeless and highly mobile children met numerous barriers when enrolling in new schools; they often lacked the proper documentation and immunizations required by local school districts. Furthermore, many homeless and highly mobile students often needed to change schools mid-year, enrolling in a new school closer to where they were currently staying, usually a shelter, a motel, or the home of family or friends.

In response to a growing concern regarding the link between residential instability and academic outcomes for children, Congress created the McKinney-Vento EHCY program in 1987 by passing the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act and its subsequent amendments in 1990 and 1994; it was then reauthorized in 2002 by No Child Left Behind. Under this law, states must ensure that every homeless child "has equal access to the same free, appropriate public education, including preschool education, as provided to other children and youth" (42 U.S.C. Sec. 11431). States must identify homeless children, remove barriers to enrollment in school, and provide services to increase opportunities for academic success.

State and local educational agencies administer McKinney-Vento EHCY, which was funded at $61.9 million in FY2006 and FY2007, and at $64 million in FY2008 (ED 2008). Recently, through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, Congress awarded an additional $70 million to the program (ED 2009). Each state receives McKinney-Vento EHCY formula grants to support program administration.

The states award subgrants to LEAs, typically based on the number of homeless children already identified within a district. Only about 6 percent of all school districts receive subgrants; however, because subgrants are awarded based on need, school districts with subgrants served about 61 percent of the 679,724 identified homeless students enrolled in public schools in 2006–2007. The remaining 39 percent of identified homeless students were enrolled in public schools that did not receive subgrants through McKinney-Vento EHCY funds. These school districts are expected to piece together required services for homeless children out of existing resources. Even among schools that do receive subgrants, these funds only cover a small share of program costs in most jurisdictions.

McKinney-Vento EHCY provides that each state must have a state coordinator, that each school district must designate a staff person to serve as a local homeless liaison, and that school personnel within each school identify homeless children and provide them with services. Homeless liaisons are not always funded at a full-time level, thus limiting the amount of time the liaison has to spend on McKinney-Vento EHCY tasks. For example, the homeless liaison may be the coordinator for other state or federal programs that serve disadvantaged children and youth or be responsible for monitoring truancy and attendance among all students. The state coordinator and local liaisons are required to coordinate their efforts with local agencies that serve homeless families and children and youth to promote appropriate identification. The coordinator and liaisons must also provide professional development for school staff designed to raise awareness and sensitivity among teachers and principals regarding the definition, condition, needs, and rights of homeless children.

To mitigate the potential effects of residential instability on children and youth, the McKinney-Vento ECHY aims to (1) identify homeless children, (2) remove barriers to their school enrollment and attendance, and (3) provide services that promote opportunities for school success (figure 1).

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*Figure 1. McKinney-Vento EHCY Program*
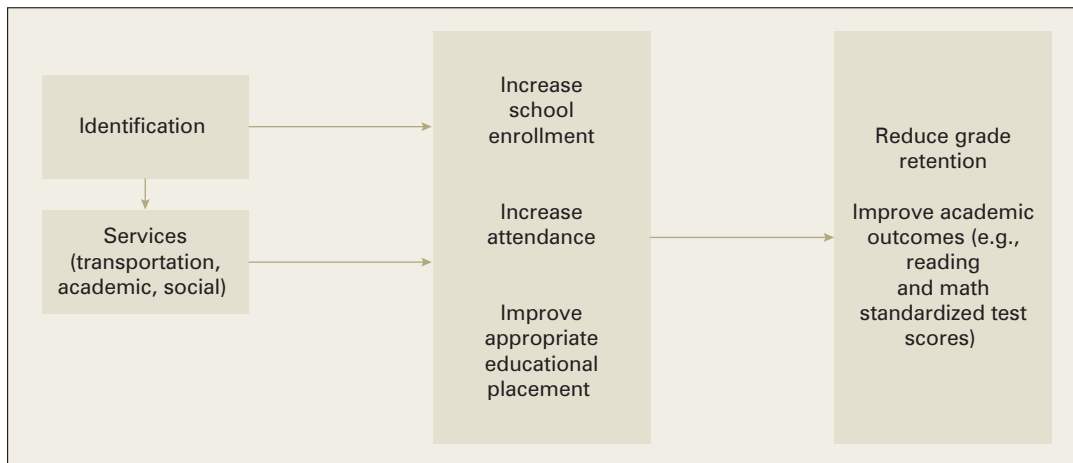


## Identification of Homeless Children

Identification is the first step in the process of helping homeless children succeed in school. Due to the protections provided to homeless children and youth through the McKinney-Vento Act, identification should help expedite enrollment in school and ensure school continuity by providing students with transportation services. Identification is also the first link to services available through McKinney-Vento ECHY (e.g., tutoring, schools supplies, clothing, physical and mental health referrals). Ultimately, identification and services should contribute to improving school attendance and academic outcomes. Not much systematic information is known about how identification rates relate to school attendance among homeless and highly mobile students. One recent study the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (2009a) conducted found that longitudinal data on homeless and highly mobile students (i.e., frequent movers) indicated that their attendance rates declined before the districts identified them as homeless, but increased the year following identification.

Under McKinney-Vento EHCY, homeless liaisons and other school personnel (teachers, registrars, and guidance counselors) have primary responsibility for identifying homeless children in schools. According to the National Center for Homeless Education (2008), homeless liaisons use various strategies to identify homeless children, including some mix of the following:

- Asking parents at enrollment about their current housing situation;
- Sending letters home with students informing parents of the educational rights of homeless students and encouraging them to identify themselves;
- Coordinating with homeless service providers and other community-based nonprofits and government agencies that may serve homeless families;
- Posting outreach materials and flyers where there is a frequent influx of low-income families and youth in high-risk situations (e.g., welfare agencies and child welfare agencies);
- Contacting managers of low-cost motels and campgrounds where homeless families may stay temporarily to inform them of school-based services available to homeless children; and
- Developing relationships with truancy officers so that they can refer homeless children to the homeless liaison.

Identification of homeless children can be difficult for several reasons. First, many parents who are experiencing homelessness may not be aware of the laws that protect the educational rights of their children, and so they may not report their situation to the

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school. Second, many parents avoid identifying their family as homeless because of the stigma attached to homelessness as well as the fear of child welfare involvement if the family is staying in places not meant for human habitation. Third, as mentioned above, homeless liaisons, including those in districts with McKinney EHCY subgrants, are not always funded at a full-time level and often have other responsibilities, thus reducing the time they have to actively identify homeless students. Fourth, the funds received even among McKinney-Vento EHCY subgrantees are not enough to provide for all needed activities, including identification of new homeless students, so school personnel have an inherent disincentive to identifying homeless students. Fifth, unaccompanied youth may not report their homeless status for fear of being returned home or to unsafe living situations. Finally, identification is also challenging in rural and suburban areas where there are fewer shelters and local services that can aid the schools in identifying homeless children.

To what extent local liaisons and school personnel are successful at identifying homeless children and youth remains unknown, and advocates suspect that many homeless children and youth go unnoticed by school personnel (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children 2008). Recent data from the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (2009b) suggest that schools may underidentify homeless students by a wide margin: in Minnesota, when estimation models were used to predict the number of homeless and highly mobile students, rates increased from 3.6 percent of students in districts (actually identified) to an estimated 9 percent of students statewide. Further, it is unclear to what extent local school districts coordinate with service providers working in emergency shelters to identify homeless students. Some homeless liaisons report that they have structured partnerships with homeless service providers—a few even have data sharing agreements.[2]

## Expedited Enrollment and Transportation

Once homeless liaisons or other school personnel identify students' homeless status, the students receive special protections under the law to either expedite enrollment in a new school or to remain in their school of origin (where the student was enrolled when they were last permanently housed or the school in which the student was last enrolled). In particular, the homeless student's expedited enrollment in a new school is protected through a requirement that schools must waive prerequisites such as proofs of immunization, residence, and legal guardianship prior to enrolling.

Students may stay in their school of origin the entire time they are homeless or until the end of the academic year after they move into permanent housing. To help facilitate attendance and school continuity, parents may request transportation assistance to and from the school of origin. Transportation methods vary among school districts. Schools use a mix of bus transfers and subway tokens, taxi vouchers, reimbursement for gas, school bus service, or private drivers, depending on what is most suitable for the child and the schools' budget for such purposes.

Transportation services serve two primary purposes: improving school continuity by allowing students to remain in their school of origin until the end of the academic school year and improving attendance by using pick up and drop off to mitigate transportation problems common among low-income families. The decision to provide transportation to the school of origin is made on an ad hoc basis, using the best interest of the child as the guiding factor. It should be noted that schools have an inherent disincentive to provide transportation services, as the service is expensive and providing transportation to every homeless student identified would be well beyond the funds provided by McKinney-Vento subgrants, and would cause financial burden on the school district.[3] It is

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unclear how many homeless children identified through McKinney-Vento receive transportation services and how transportation services relate to school access and attendance, or how all of these relate to academic outcomes.

### *Academic Supports and Social Services*

Once identified, homeless children receive a variety of services designed to help mitigate the effects of homelessness or residential instability on academic outcomes. According to the National Center for the Education of Children (2008), in addition to expedited enrollment and transportation, services could include

■ Tutoring or other instructional support;
■ Expedited evaluation for appropriate educational placement;
■ Early childhood programs;
■ Assistance with participation in school programs;
■ Before-school, after-school, mentoring, and summer programs;
■ Clothing to meet a school requirement;
■ School supplies;
■ Emergency assistance related to school attendance;
■ Services related to domestic violence;
■ Referrals for medical, optical, and other health care services.

School-based services for homeless children can serve numerous functions, including (a) minimizing the number of school moves, (b) decreasing barriers to school enrollment and attendance, (c) providing more academic opportunities (e.g., tutoring, access to special educational programs), (d) improving stability (e.g., before- and after-school care and summer care), and (e) ensuring access to necessary physical and mental health care. In addition, the school is a place where most children spend a significant portion of their time; for homeless children, it may represent an important source of continuity in the midst of residential instability, thus making it an important place for services aimed at improving academic success, social and emotional well-being, and physical health.

### Previous Research

Despite being in place for over two decades, very little rigorous evaluation of the McKinney-Vento EHCY program exists. Descriptive program evaluations of the program were performed by Policy Studies Associates (PSA) in 1995 and by the Planning and Evaluation Service of the U.S. Department of Education in 1998 (final report released in 2002). The 1998 evaluation, which included a telephone survey of all McKinney-Vento EHCY state coordinators and site visits to 14 local school districts, seven of which were McKinney-Vento EHCY subgrantees (U.S. Department of Education 2002), found that, although states had revised their policies over time to remove obstacles to the education of homeless children and youth, significant barriers still remained, including a lack of adequate transportation to and from the school of origin, enrollment delays due to guardianship and immunization requirements, and a lack of awareness and sensitivity among school personnel regarding the educational needs of homeless children. In addition, state coordinators described difficulties in the ability of homeless children to access specific educational programs (e.g., special education, Head Start, gifted and talented programs, family literacy programs, and programs for students with limited English proficiency) (U.S. Department of Education 2002). The report also concluded that McKinney-Vento EHCY subgrantees generally were able to meet program goals and requirements more consistently than non-subgrantees.

Following the 2002 reauthorization of McKinney-Vento EHCY, the U.S. Department of Education began to require states to submit verifiable and school-based data on homeless children and to include homeless students in local and state accountability systems (U.S. Department of Education 2006). Beginning in 2004, data on McKinney-

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Vento EHCY program improvement were required from all states; during the 2006–2007 school year, states were required to submit McKinney-Vento EHCY program data online as part of the consolidated state performance report. Data on numbers of homeless students targeted through McKinney-Vento EHCY, types of services provided by subgrantees, barriers to education, and student achievement in reading and mathematics have with a few exceptions been collected by states since the 2004–2005 school year; the 2007–2008 school year is the most recent year for which data are currently available (National Center for Homeless Education 2009). According to these data, among homeless students identified in 2007–2008, only 44 percent of homeless students in third to eighth grade are exceeding or meeting state proficiency in reading and only 42 percent are doing so in math (National Center for Homeless Education 2009).

## Future Research

An overwhelming body of research finds that affordable housing—through the provision of housing subsidies—is the most effective way to protect families and children from homelessness, and will help those who are already homeless exit shelter (Khadduri 2008). Considering that we know how to end homelessness among families, it should be a brief and rare occurrence, if it happens at all. For families and children who do fall through the cracks, the homelessness experience should not lead to permanent, lifelong setbacks—it should not leave homeless children behind in the classroom.

There is a paucity of research on how homelessness and residential instability influence the academic performance of school-age children, and our review of the literature and discussions with homeless liaisons raised more questions than answers. This section highlights key research questions that could help policymakers improve responses to help mitigate the effects of homelessness and residential instability.

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## Improving Data Collection in Schools

Data on the academic outcomes of homeless children are severely lacking. Although schools are required to collect data on identified homeless children, the quality of that data relies heavily on the investment in identification methods and the data collection procedures. If schools are not investing in identification, they do not have reliable estimates of the extent of homelessness in their schools. Policymakers should investigate how to improve school data in the following ways:

- Improving the identification of homeless students in schools, and improving the quality of data that schools collect about the characteristics of homeless children and youth, as well as the services offered to individual children.
- Fostering partnerships between school administrators and homeless service provides to help improve the identification of homeless students and coordination of services. This could include matching school data with data on homeless children collected by homeless service providers through their homeless management information systems.
- Requiring schools to improve data collection about school and address changes, both within and across districts. This data could help improve information on frequent movers and identify students who are precariously housed.

## McKinney-Vento and Academic Outcomes

Before further research can be done examining the impact of the McKinney-Vento EHCY program on children's academic outcomes, schools need to start maintaining administrative databases that include the following information:

- Detailed information on which specific services are provided to which children and the dates of receiving those services;

- A single-user ID that would allow school administrators and researchers to track the progress of individual children across different schools and addresses, both within and across districts; and
- The ability to track individual children across years.

## Efficacy of the McKinney-Vento ECHY Program

The McKinney-Vento ECHY program has been in place for more than two decades. Despite this, little research exists examining how school administrators implement the program at the local level or testing the efficacy of the program. To understand program outcomes, policymakers need research on the following questions:

- How do schools identify homeless students? How successful is identification? Are there model identification strategies that are effective?
- What types of academic supports and social supports do schools provide homeless students? How effective are these services in improving academic outcomes?
- What share of identified homeless students receives transportation services through McKinney-Vento ECHY? How does transportation to school of origin affect academic outcomes?
- How does the quality of implementation and staffing affect outcomes for students. Specifically, how does the capacity of the homeless liaison and state coordinators influence the success of the program? Are there differences in outcomes for programs that have full-time, experienced liaisons? How does staff turnover affect programs?

Today, the nation faces a deep economic recession and an unprecedented problem with housing foreclosures; both have repercussions for residential instability. Schools too are feeling the aftermath of the recession both in responding to the increase in homeless and highly mobile children and because local school budgets are strained. Increases in affordable housing are desperately needed, as are programs to help alleviate the trauma and side effects of frequent moves and homelessness. The importance of the McKinney-Vento ECHY program—especially in light of current economic circumstances—makes answering these questions critical for informing policymakers and program administrators who are grappling with the consequences of homelessness and residential instability.

## Notes

1. HUD General definition of homeless individual, as defined in Title 42, Chapter 119, Subchapter I:
   (a) In general
   For purposes of this chapter, the term "homeless" or "homeless individual or homeless person" includes—
   1. an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and
   2. an individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is —
      A. a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations (including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill);
      B. an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or
      C. a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.
   (b) Income eligibility
   1. In general
      A homeless individual shall be eligible for assistance under any program provided by this chapter, only if the individual complies with the income eligibility requirements otherwise applicable to such program.
   2. Exception
      Notwithstanding paragraph (1), a homeless individual shall be eligible for assistance under title I of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 [29 U.S.C. 2801 et seq.].
   (c) Exclusion
   For purposes of this chapter, the term "homeless" or "homeless individual" does not include any individual imprisoned or otherwise detained pursuant to an Act of the Congress or a State law.
      General definition of "homeless children and youths", as defined in Subtitle B of Title VII of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act
      (Title X, Part C, of the No Child Left Behind Act):
      (A) means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence (within the meaning of section 103(a)(1)); and

(B) includes—

   (i) children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement;

   (ii) children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings (within the meaning of section 103(a)(2)(C));

   (iii) children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and

   (iv) migratory children (as such term is defined in section 1309 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965) who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii).

2. In August 2009, the Urban Institute convened a group of homeless liaisons and state coordinators from D.C., Maryland, and Virginia to discuss the McKinney-Vento Homeless Children and Youth Education Program. The discussion topics included identification, implementation challenges, and current data collection methods.

3. August 2009 discussion of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Children and Youth Education Program among homeless liaisons and state coordinators from D.C., Maryland, and Virginia at the Urban Institute.

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