Homelessness in NYC Elementary Schools:
Student Experiences and Educator Perspectives

By Kathryn Hill and Zitsi Mirakhur
Acknowledgements

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Homelessness in NYC Elementary Schools:
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The large and growing number of New York City students who lack stable housing has recently received much attention from advocates, researchers, educators, and policymakers. Figure 1 below highlights not only that rates of homelessness have increased in recent years, but also that the problem is most prevalent among our youngest students. The percentage of middle and high schoolers in the district who experienced homelessness increased from about 5 percent in 2012 to a little over 7 percent in 2017. Among elementary-aged students, the rate already stood at 7.5 percent in 2012 and has since grown to more than 9.5 percent. Put another way, during the 2016-2017 school year, nearly one in ten New York City students who were enrolled in kindergarten through 5th grade experienced homelessness.

Figure 1: Trends in Percentages of NYC Students Experiencing Homelessness, by Grade Level

Source: Research Alliance calculations based on data obtained from the NYC Department of Education.
Note: Figure includes all kindergarten through 12th grade students enrolled in NYC public schools in a given year. Total student enrollment varies by year and ranges from 943,592 to 987,331 students.
This means an extraordinarily large group of students (over 45,000 during that single school year) are experiencing instability at a young and developmentally important age. Driven to the homes of extended family or friends, shelters or hotels, or—in some cases, cars, tents, or the street—by eviction, domestic violence, overcrowding and other factors, these students arrive at their schools with heavy academic, social, and emotional burdens. Understanding the challenges these students face, and how their schools respond, is crucial, given that the elementary years serve as a foundation for long-term academic success. Our study starkly illuminates that—from the earliest grades—school teachers, counselors, and principals often find themselves on the frontlines in grappling with the consequences of larger societal inequalities.

In this brief, we seek to better understand the experiences of NYC’s homeless elementary students and those who serve them at school. The second in our series on *Equity, Access, and Diversity*, this brief makes two important contributions to the existing research on student homelessness in our city. First, we explore the multiple ways in which young children experience homelessness by attending to differences in the type and duration of housing instability. Second, we highlight the challenges that schools face in serving large numbers of homeless students, as well as the practices that school staff say contribute to improving homeless students’ school experiences. We hope these findings can inform the design and implementation of future interventions that more effectively support this vulnerable population of students.

Our study draws on the Research Alliance’s extensive archive of system-wide administrative data, as well as interviews with principals, teachers, and counselors in five elementary schools. The bulk of our quantitative analysis focuses on the cohort of students who began kindergarten in the fall of 2012, following them through the end of the 2016-2017 school year, when they should have been completing 4th grade. This approach allows us to develop a richer understanding of how students experience homelessness over time (versus annual snapshots of the proportion of students who are homeless in a given year). For our qualitative analyses, we identified a set of elementary schools where there were much higher proportions of students living in shelters than the Citywide average, but where those students had test scores and attendance rates that were similar to those of housed students across the City. We conducted fieldwork in five of these schools, consisting of interviews and focus groups with 18 school staff members, including principals, social workers, guidance counselors and classroom teachers. Additionally, we conducted interviews with four district officials tasked with supporting schools’ efforts to serve their homeless student population. Please refer to the Technical Appendix for more detailed information about our samples and analysis.
Measuring Homelessness in NYC

The NYC Department of Education (NYCDOE) identifies “students in temporary housing” each academic year, as defined in the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act. This includes those who are:

- Doubled up with another family or person because of housing loss or economic hardship;
- Living in emergency or transitional shelters;
- Awaiting a foster care placement (refer to the Technical Appendix for more details about this population);
- Living in a hotel or motel because they lack other housing, and are paying for it themselves; and
- Living in “other temporary living situations,” including trailer parks, campgrounds, and public places.

Our brief defines all of these students as “homeless,” but also presents some analyses that distinguish between varying types of homelessness.

It is important to note that there are several difficulties in effectively identifying homeless students. First, students’ housing status is generally self-reported by parents or guardians when families move or when a student enrolls in a new school. This likely means that some changes in residential status go unreported—both when families become homeless and when they transition into permanent housing. Second, within a given year, we do not know the length of time that students are homeless. All students in our data archive are flagged as either being in temporary housing, or permanently housed, during the school year, whether they experienced housing instability for a few nights or for the entire period. Relatedly, administrative records do not capture multiple forms of homelessness within the same school year. So, for instance, if a student’s family was doubled up and then moved into a shelter, our records would identify them as being “in shelter” for that year.

Finally, our interviews with NYCDOE officials suggest that, during the past few years, changes have been implemented to improve the quantity and quality of data on student homelessness. For instance, in 2016, the DOE and the City’s Department of Homeless Services altered their data-sharing agreement so the DOE now receives daily (as opposed to monthly) rosters of students who are in shelters. Relatedly, the DOE has encouraged schools to routinize the completion of the Housing Questionnaire, which is how families report their residency status. Thus, some portion of the increase in rates of homelessness (as shown in Figure 1) is probably due to improved data collection.

These data considerations are important to bear in mind while examining any work focusing on student homelessness in NYC. Please refer to our Technical Appendix for more details about the collection of data on student homelessness.
Who Are New York City’s Homeless Elementary School Students?

Of the 81,669 students who began kindergarten in the fall of 2012, **10,312 students—over 12 percent of the cohort—experienced homelessness at some point before their 5th grade year.** The number of students experiencing homelessness in this single cohort is larger than the entire population of the vast majority of school districts in our country.³

While there is very little systematically collected data on how families become homeless, our interviews with educators highlighted a range of root causes, including high rents, domestic violence, and issues relating to mental health or substance abuse. This generally fits with prior research, which has found that families are increasingly entering the NYC shelter system due to evictions and to escape domestic violence.⁴

The characteristics of these students reflect larger, persistent and troubling inequalities along racial and socio-economic lines. As Table 1 demonstrates, students who experienced homelessness were disproportionately Black and Latino, and less likely to be White and Asian. Perhaps unsurprisingly, students who experienced homelessness were consistently economically vulnerable—with nearly two thirds qualifying for free or reduced price lunch every year between kindergarten and 4th grade.⁵ As other researchers have shown, students who experience homelessness were also disproportionately more likely to be identified as English Language Learners⁶ or in need of special education services.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/ethnicity (%)</th>
<th>Full Cohort</th>
<th>Homeless Students</th>
<th>Never Homeless Students</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>6.3</td>
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<th>Free or reduced price meals for all five years a (%)</th>
<th>Full Cohort</th>
<th>Homeless Students</th>
<th>Never Homeless Students</th>
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<th>Never Homeless Students</th>
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<td>Special education</td>
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<tr>
<td>English language learning</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>18.4</td>
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**Table 1: Student Characteristics by Homelessness Status**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Sample size</th>
<th>Full Cohort</th>
<th>Homeless Students</th>
<th>Never Homeless Students</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>81,669</td>
<td>10,312</td>
<td>71,357</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Research Alliance calculations based on data obtained from the NYC Department of Education.

**Note:** Table includes all students who enrolled in NYC public schools as kindergarteners in 2012 (N=81,669).

a This measure captures students who qualified for free or reduced price meals every year for all five years that we followed them.

b We categorize students as receiving these services if they ever received them during the five years that we followed this cohort.
Students who experienced homelessness were not evenly distributed across community school districts (CSDs) and schools in the City. Some CSDs and schools served much higher concentrations of these vulnerable students. Figure 2A on the next page highlights the top 10 districts where students in our cohort who ever experienced homelessness began kindergarten in 2012-2013. These students were concentrated in upper Manhattan, central and western parts of the Bronx, and in northern Brooklyn. Remarkably, over 10 percent of all students who experienced homelessness began their kindergarten year at schools in District 10 in the Bronx, which includes the neighborhoods of Riverdale, Bedford, Fordham, Belmont, and Kingsbridge. The neighborhoods with the highest proportions of homeless students map closely on to neighborhoods with the highest levels of poverty, underscoring that homelessness among students is just one symptom of deeply rooted economic inequality and concentrated poverty in the City.

Relatedly, Figure 2B on page 7 highlights the 100 elementary schools that had the highest and lowest proportions of homeless students during the 2012-2013 school year, when the students in our cohort were beginning kindergarten. Consistent with Figure 2A, schools with the highest proportion of homeless students were located primarily in the Bronx and upper Manhattan as well as northern Brooklyn. In these schools, students who experienced homelessness made up between 17 and 52 percent of the student body. The 100 schools with the lowest proportion of students who experienced homelessness were mostly located in lower Manhattan, Staten Island, and Northern Queens. In these schools, homeless students made up 1 percent or less of the student body; 12 of those schools had no homeless students.

Equity, Access, and Diversity in NYC Schools: Exploring Steady Progress and Stubborn Barriers

This brief is part of the Research Alliance’s Equity, Access, and Diversity series, which aims to advance a better understanding of the mechanisms driving educational inequality and to identify promising strategies to promote more equitable learning opportunities and outcomes for NYC students. The series focuses on students who are historically underserved and vulnerable to challenges, both inside and outside of the classroom. The first study in the series explored the outcomes and experiences of “persisting students”—that is, those who do not graduate on time, but remain enrolled in a NYC high school:

- Research Brief on Persisting Students
- Spotlight on NYC Schools Post: How Have the Rates at Which Students Are Graduating in Four Years, Dropping Out, or “Persisting” in NYC High Schools Changed Over Time?

Forthcoming work in the series will examine racial and socio-economic segregation in NYC schools. We are also developing a study of middle school students with disabilities in charter and traditional public schools.
Figure 2A: Students Who Experience Homelessness Are Not Evenly Distributed Across Community School Districts

Source: Research Alliance calculations based on data obtained from the NYC Department of Education.

Note: Calculations include all students who were enrolled as kindergarteners in the 2012-2013 school year (N=81,669). Districts highlighted in purple are the top ten where students who ever experienced homelessness began kindergarten (i.e., schools with the highest proportions of these students in the 2012-2013 school year).
Figure 2B: Students Who Experience Homelessness Are Not Evenly Distributed Across Elementary Schools

Source: Research Alliance calculations based on data obtained from the NYC Department of Education.

Note: Figure includes all schools that served exclusively kindergarten through 5th grade students and does not include charter, District 75 or District 88 schools (N=647).
What Are the Different Ways in Which Students Experience Homelessness?

Our data allow us to examine two key dimensions along which students’ experiences of homelessness vary—duration and type. In the cohort of students we follow, almost 70 percent of those who experienced homelessness did so for more than one year, and more than a quarter were homeless for all five years. On average, students experienced homelessness for just under three years. It is important to remember that “duration” here refers to the number of academic years students were flagged as experiencing homelessness—and students can be flagged after experiencing homelessness anywhere from a few days to many months each year. Still, it remains troubling that so many young children appear to have endured homelessness for extended periods of time during their early years in school.

When we examined the types of homelessness students experienced, we found that a large majority—over 90 percent of students who were ever homeless—experienced the same form of homelessness from year to year. The most common experience of homelessness was living doubled up with another family or another person—58 percent of students experienced homelessness only in this form. An additional 30 percent of homeless students were only in shelter. Just under 10 percent of students experienced multiple forms of homelessness across years.

To better understand students’ experiences of homelessness, and the implications for their outcomes, we divided the 10,312 students who experienced homelessness into four groups. The groups were based on the type of homelessness students experienced and whether they were homeless for more or less than the average duration (of three years). As Figure 3 on the next page shows, 28 percent of homeless students were doubled up for fewer than three years. Another 30 percent were doubled up for three or more years. The third and fourth groups include students who were either in shelter, experienced another form of homelessness, or experienced multiple forms of homelessness. Since the vast majority of these students (about 87 percent) were in shelters at some point, we refer to these two groups as being “in shelter.” The “shelter – fewer than three years” group constitutes 24 percent of all homeless students. The remaining 19 percent were in shelters (or experienced other or multiple forms of homelessness) for three years or more.

In our interviews with district staff, they highlighted differences in the experiences of students who were doubled up relative to those who were in the shelter system. In general, staff said that the shelter population is “needier” than the doubled up population. As an official in the NYCDOE’s Office of Students in Temporary Housing noted,

“I find that the doubled up population tends to, actually, be more stable than the shelter population. If you’re doubled up, that means you have some kind of support system. You’re most likely working. Even if a parent is economically unstable, there are other stable people in [students’] lives.”
Put differently, the fact that doubled up families are able to find a place to stay with family or friends suggests they might have a social network to support them in times of crisis. District staff we spoke with saw shelters as places that families go as a last resort. Indeed, we found other evidence of meaningful differences between the four groups of homeless students. As Table 2 on the next page shows, students who were doubled up were disproportionately Asian or Latino, while students in shelters were disproportionately Black. Students who were doubled up were more likely to be receiving English language learning services at school. In contrast, students in shelters were less likely to be English learners, but more likely to be receiving special education services.

White students were not only the least likely to experience homelessness—when they did, it tended to be for shorter periods of time. As we would expect, longer-term homelessness was associated with other signs of persistent poverty: More than 75 percent of students who experienced homelessness for three or more years (whether doubled up or in shelters) qualified for free or reduced price meals for all five years between kindergarten and 4th grade. Students who were in shelter for three or more years—perhaps the neediest of the four groups—were almost entirely (95%) Black or Latino. This underscores the disproportionate impact of extreme poverty on NYC’s Black and Latino students.

The last set of findings in Table 2 focuses on students’ academic performance. Overall, across the four groups, only about a quarter of homeless students attained proficiency on state math and English tests in 4th grade, which was about half the rates of proficiency for
students who were permanently housed. Homeless students in doubled up settings were more likely than those in shelters to achieve proficiency on these assessments. Students who were in shelters for longer periods of time had the lowest scores—with less than 20 percent attaining proficiency on either test.

Table 2: Student Characteristics by Type and Duration of Homelessness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All Homeless Students</th>
<th>Doubled Up - Fewer Than Three Years</th>
<th>Doubled Up - Three Years or More</th>
<th>Shelter - Fewer Than Three Years</th>
<th>Shelter - Three Years or More</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/ethnicity (%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>1.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black</td>
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<td>5.3</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Free or reduced price meals for all five years a (%)</strong></td>
<td>63.3</td>
<td>46.5</td>
<td>83.0</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>74.8</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>School services b (%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>40.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English language learning</td>
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<td>27.3</td>
<td>31.4</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
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</table>

| **State test scores c (%)** |                       |                                     |                                  |                                  |                               |
| Proficient in Math      | 26.4                  | 32.5                                | 31.4                             | 20.1                             | 17.6                          |
| Proficient in English   | 28.8                  | 34.3                                | 34.1                             | 23.6                             | 18.9                          |

**Source**: Research Alliance calculations based on data obtained from the NYC Department of Education.

**Note**: Table includes all students who experienced homelessness between kindergarten and the end of their scheduled 4th grade year (N=10,312). The shelter groups include students in shelter as well as those who experienced other or multiple forms of homelessness.

a This measure captures students who qualified for free or reduced price meals for all five years that we follow them.

b We categorize students as receiving these services if they ever received them in the five years that we follow this cohort.

c This table highlights proficiency levels based on students' performance on their 4th grade tests. We are missing data on test scores for approximately 20 percent of students who experienced homelessness; these students are excluded from the denominator for this analysis.
How Does Homelessness Disrupt Students’ Academic Experiences?

Our interviews with school staff suggest that homeless students’ academic struggles are partially a result of higher rates of school mobility. As Figure 4 shows, **homeless students in NYC changed schools more often than permanently housed students, with those in shelters moving around the most.** The average student who was in shelter for three or more years changed schools at least once between kindergarten and 4th grade. Some of these students changed schools seven times during this five-year span.\(^{12}\)

School mobility can be detrimental for children in the best of circumstances. But for many families experiencing homelessness, these moves are sudden. Abrupt breaks to students’ relationships with their peers and teachers can be painful, and changing schools can be disruptive to their educational progress and development.\(^ {13}\) Families who go into shelters might be especially likely to move their children to new schools because they are often placed in housing based on available space, and can end up living far away from their original neighborhood and school.\(^ {14}\) This is troublesome because scholars have demonstrated that such long-distance moves are particularly harmful to students’ academic performance.

**Figure 4: Students Who Experience Homelessness Move Schools Often**

![Figure 4: Students Who Experience Homelessness Move Schools Often](image)

**Source:** Research Alliance calculations based on data obtained from the NYC Department of Education.

**Note:** Figure includes all students who experienced homelessness between kindergarten and the end of their scheduled 4th grade year (N=10,312). The largest group (doubled up – three years or more) has 3,040 students; the smallest group (shelter – three years or more) consists of 1,915 students. The shelter groups include students in shelter as well as those who experienced other or multiple forms of homelessness.
A principal of a school in northern Brooklyn—where nearly half of the student body is homeless—told us about how he believed that changing schools due to homelessness had consequences for students’ academic preparedness:

“We have a lot of children who have been shuffled around. I call them my ping-pong children, because they’re in one school, and another. It’s constantly back and forth from school to school like a ping-pong, and they’re not getting that stable education. When you get a child who has been in three or four different schools, and they’re eight years old, it’s difficult to adequately educate (them)...because you’re constantly playing catch-up.”

Providing academic interventions for students who are highly mobile is challenging. The principal told us that he had confidence in his staff’s ability to identify and support students who have fallen behind academically through the use of strategies such universal screening and targeted small group or individual instruction. However, frequent school moves disrupt these attempts at intervention, with the process beginning anew each time a student enters a different school. School staff also reported difficulties in gaining and sharing information—beyond what is reported in the district’s database—between schools when students moved. Such information could be useful to counselors and classroom teachers as they try to seamlessly incorporate newly enrolled students into their schools and classrooms.

Even when students experiencing homelessness do remain in their original school, they struggle to maintain good attendance. As Figure 5 on the next page shows, students who experienced homelessness had almost double the levels of chronic absenteeism, between kindergarten and 4th grade, relative to students who did not experience homelessness. Strikingly, over 80 percent of students who lived in shelters for longer periods were chronically absent—meaning they missed about a month of school—during one or more of the years between kindergarten and 4th grade.15

Attendance issues are driven, in part, by the long trips that students in shelter must often take to and from school. A kindergarten teacher told us about one of her students, whose family was suddenly moved from their shelter in Brooklyn to another in the Bronx. The student’s mother wanted her to remain in this school, and so it took some time to sort out busing, during which the student was absent. She said,

“What I see now is—when she comes to school—she’s five, and she’s sleepy. She’s been on a bus since very early in the morning. I need to teach her how to write, read, do math, but by a certain time, in about an hour, her gasoline tank is done. She gets in a bad mood. She’s grumpy. She starts not being able to cope. And then it’s time to go home and get on the bus for the long ride again.”

Even though the district has made efforts to improve transportation options for students who experience homelessness, including creating more bus routes and providing students with free metro cards, transportation difficulties remain. Students may come in late, or miss school altogether. And the long distances that some students must travel to stay in their original school can impact their sleep patterns and thus their alertness in the classroom.
Figure 5: Students Who Experience Homelessness Have High Rates of Chronic Absenteeism

Educators emphasized how all of this disruption in student lives—both in school and at home—can lead to social-emotional difficulties. Research has demonstrated that students who experience homelessness are at greater risk of social and behavioral problems, especially students who live in shelters.\(^\text{16}\) As a school social worker told us,

“When there’s a major change in the family, children become very restless. They’re going through all these changes, and they don’t have control over them. It may present itself as behavior difficulties. In the classroom, they may become very distracted, and get bad grades. Or they may become unusually quiet or even act out—looking for attention and wanting be helped by an adult.”

For families in shelter, the conditions can be particularly stressful. They may struggle to maintain privacy, and parents are often overwhelmed with trying to meet immediate needs for themselves and their children. Our interviews illuminated the emotional toll that living in shelter can take on children—and how this may negatively impact their behavior in the classroom, as well as their academic performance.
What Does it Take for Schools to Serve Homeless Students?

Schools are one of the primary places where homeless children are identified, and where families experiencing homelessness can be connected to information, services and resources. In fact, school districts are federally mandated to identify of students who are experiencing homelessness, to work to eliminate barriers they face in attending school, and to provide them with access to additional programming and resources. Because homeless students are concentrated in particular schools (see Figure 2B on page 7), the burden of serving them falls most heavily on those schools, which generally already have a high concentration of needy students, and limited resources to support them.

To better understand how such schools serve homeless students, we spoke with staff in five schools with particularly high concentrations of homeless students—two in the Bronx, two in upper Manhattan, and one in northern Brooklyn. In the 2016-2017 school year, the proportion of students who experienced homelessness in these schools ranged from 30 percent to nearly half of the overall student body—much higher than the 10 percent of elementary-school-aged students who are homeless Citywide. These five schools had particularly high proportions of students living in shelter, in part because they were located near clusters of shelters that fed into the schools. While the proportion of elementary school-aged students living in shelter was just over 4 percent in the 2016-2017 school year, in these five schools, the proportion of students living in shelter ranged from 14 percent to nearly a quarter. Below we discuss some of the challenges these schools face—as well as strategies they are using to grapple with these obstacles and better support their homeless students.

Going Above and Beyond to Coordinate Services

Our conversations with educators in these schools highlighted the lengths to which they often go—devoting extra time and resources—to support families and students experiencing homelessness. For example, in a school in Harlem where over 30 percent of students were homeless, a school social worker talked about consoling families in crisis and even accompanying parents to PATH, the office located in the Bronx, where families must go if they need to apply for shelter. Educators told us that this level of personalized attention and care is what it takes to effectively support homeless students and families, but the volume of students who are in need makes it almost impossible to do consistently.

In particular, educators reported that it was often challenging to coordinate with shelter-based staff, perhaps because those staff are also stretched very thin—having to spend much of their time supporting families in crisis. As a DOE official, who Oversees the district efforts to support students experiencing homelessness across several CSDs, told us,

“We just don’t have enough staff to do all of the work. There’s a lot of work to be done. We have a bunch of hotel sites that we don’t even have enough staff to man. We need more boots on the ground. We need more people engaging with the families, day to day.”

As an example of this, a DOE family assistant, whose role is to serve as a liaison between students in shelters and the staff at the schools they attend, estimated that she worked with
over 100 students across multiple shelter sites. Even though she was based in Brooklyn, she talked about traveling as far away as the Bronx to work with the schools that these students attend. Given the number of students and schools that she worked with, it was extremely challenging for her to routinely coordinate with staff at each school.

**Identifying Students Experiencing Homelessness**

Identifying homeless students can be a challenge for schools—especially when it comes to students who are doubled up, because these families self-report their housing status. There are many reasons why families may be reluctant to disclose their residential status to their child’s school. As a district staff member who works with homeless students told us,

> “Identifying [doubled up families] can be a challenge if they’re not forthcoming on the Housing Questionnaire that the school asks parents to fill out. Sometimes they are a little reluctant to share their housing situation for fear of judgement, or because of external repercussions, be it governmental, or other things that they may be wanting to not reveal. We try our best to connect them to services, as they’re willing, and sometimes we even coach them that it’s actually in their best interest to share.”

The school staff we spoke with tried various approaches to better identify students who may be doubled up. Schools created routines and set aside time, so staff could discuss which students might be experiencing problems and strategize about how to reach out to families. Staff told us that they look for a few key warning signs that students might be facing housing instability, including sudden changes in behavior, a lack of weather-appropriate clothing, or poor attendance. However, school staff also noted that many of their students who are not currently homeless but live in poverty have similar patterns of behavior and needs.

School staff also talked about the importance of building relationships and trust with families and students, and how this can help them be more aware of challenges students are facing outside of school. **When families trust school staff, they are more likely to confide in them, including when they are having difficulties with housing.** In fact, it is through these conversations that families sometimes disclose their residency status. Educators and district staff also report encouraging parents to provide any updates to the Housing Questionnaire mid-year, such as during parent-teacher conference time, or through “backpacking” the forms home with students. A social worker in a school in the Bronx, where nearly half of the student body was homeless, explained to us that the time he took to build relationships meant that parents would come to him if they needed support.

This Bronx social worker was part of the Bridging the Gap program, which, during the time of our fieldwork, placed 44 social workers in schools across the City to support students and families experiencing homelessness. Bridging the Gap social workers were placed in schools with particularly high concentrations of students experiencing homelessness. School staff we interviewed said that having a staff member who could fully devote their time to supporting these students allowed schools to build stronger connections to families and be aware of those who might be struggling with maintaining stable housing. These social workers did outreach to families to ensure that Housing Questionnaires were up to date and helped schools identify homeless students so that they could provide them with support.
Addressing Barriers to School Attendance

As we noted earlier, another barrier that schools face in serving homeless students is their high levels of chronic absenteeism. Educators told us that regular school attendance was important for students experiencing homelessness, not only because school is a place where students learn—but also because they could access resources and supports and experience regular classroom routines that provide welcome stability to students who are facing uncertainty in their home lives.

Similar to the efforts schools undertook to identify students who were experiencing homelessness, school staff created routines for examining attendance data and had fixed meetings to strategize about how to respond when student attendance faltered. Ideally, these meetings would include the principal, classroom teachers, parent coordinator, attendance teacher, and DOE staff who are based in shelters. With time set aside to analyze trends in attendance data, staff could work through ways to respond and offer more systematic support. The principal from the school in Harlem talked about how keeping track of both morning and afternoon attendance allowed her to notice that many students in shelter were leaving school early. She realized that it was because some families in shelter had to attend mandatory meetings with social service agencies that were scheduled during the school day. She explained,

“It’s up to us, the school, to find those attendance trends, like students being picked up at 12:30 three days a week, and then intervene. A lot of times, parents, they’ll say, ‘Well, that’s the appointment they gave me. I have no choice.’ It’s true. Then the school has to step in and say to the agency, ‘You need to reschedule. They’re missing two hours of instruction every Tuesday. Do it after school. Do it on a Saturday.’ We have to advocate for our children and our parents that way.”

As this principal highlighted, for elementary school-aged students, preventing chronic absenteeism involves working closely with families, as young students usually rely on their parents to take them to school. Parents experiencing homelessness are often overwhelmed with arranging childcare, dealing with social service agencies, and securing basic needs—such as food, clothing and safety—for their children. Schools serving large numbers of homeless students often find it challenging to support all of the families who might need their help getting children to school—on top of the school’s usual instructional duties. School staff who we interviewed said they often have to conduct outreach to families on their own time. As one example a para-professorial, at a school where over a quarter of the students lived in shelter told us about how she coordinated with families to pick up students from nearby shelters, and walk them to school, so that they can arrive early enough to eat breakfast.

Educators reported that having additional non-instructional staff who focus specifically on homeless students enables schools to more effectively connect with families and shelter staff and work together to improve attendance. One of the schools in the Bronx that we visited was a community school, meaning that it had support from the DOE to create a long-term partnership with a community-based organization (CBO). Much of their partnership work was focused on preventing chronic absenteeism, and the principal of that school noted how important the additional CBO staff had been for doing outreach to families. The two Bridging the Gap social workers we interviewed also talked about how
some of their time was devoted to visiting shelters and helping families address barriers to
school attendance.

**Deciding How to Allocate Resources, Programs and Services**

While schools can be an important place for students and families experiencing
homelessness to access support, the capacity of schools to provide these resources is
necessarily limited. Schools with high concentrations of needy students can easily become
over-extended. Schools are mandated to set aside a portion of their Title I funding—which
is meant to support all students in economic need—to provide services specifically for
homeless students. The schools we visited set aside these limited funds (only $100 per
student) to purchase additional school supplies and clothing for students, and to make sure
that students did not have to pay for school trips. This funding was not sufficient to hire
additional non-instructional staff who could devote all of their time to supporting homeless
students. Moreover, while educators understood that homeless students could benefit from
the additional resources they could secure with the set-aside funds, they noted that many
of their students who are not currently homeless, but are living in poverty might also be in
need of such support. As a principal in a school in the Bronx, where over 30 percent of the
student body experienced homelessness, told us,

> “We do provide [homeless students] with the things they need as far as clothes and
shoes. We collect clothes. We have our own holiday Christmas, where they let them
go and take toys or whatever. Whatever we do, we try to not provide it under the
heading of ‘this is for the children that are homeless.’ It’s for our children. Because
many children who are not in shelters are in need.”

This principal, like many of the educators we spoke to, did not label resources as being
designated just for students experiencing homelessness. This was because they did not
wish to stigmatize these students, but also because they recognized that many of their
housed students might also be in need. **Schools worked to make resources accessible
to as many needy families as possible, including—but not limited to—those
experiencing homelessness.** For example, schools encouraged families to enroll their
children in afterschool programs, which in addition to academic support and mentorship
opportunities, often provided dinner. Combined with school breakfast and lunch, this could
guarantee three meals a day during the school week. Schools would also direct families to
resources in the community, including food banks and places to access mental health
services.

As noted, schools often relied on partnerships with CBOs, which increased their capacity to
support students and connect families with a web of external resources. The schools where
we conducted our fieldwork all had organizations that provided programming for students—
creating opportunities for students to build relationships with compassionate adults. School
staff believed that it was especially important for students experiencing homelessness to
have a caring and consistent adult presence in their lives, because, as one principal put it,
so little was consistent for them outside of school.

Notably, however, **schools often built such partnerships in an ad hoc fashion, based
largely on the networking of principals and the connections of other staff.** Several
principals noted that having institutional support could provide them with greater capacity to
leverage community resources. The one community school in our study had a full-time community school director who was based in the school building. The school’s principal described this role as especially valuable for coordinating with other staff to bring in relevant resources and make sure that they were well integrated with the work of the school. These resources included academic and social supports—such as tutoring, arts and mentoring programs, as well as health services and donations of clothing. In this case, the partnership also provided additional staff who worked to develop supportive relationships with students and assisted with family outreach. The principal noted that this has allowed the school to become a place where—not just her students—but their families and community members could all be connected to much needed services.

Questions Raised for Policy, Practice and Research

Taken together, our findings underscore that homelessness is not a uniform experience. Students who are doubled up and in shelter appear to be rather distinct populations. The length of time that students are homeless is also associated with different student characteristics and outcomes. Our interviews with school and district staff highlight the challenges inherent in serving these vulnerable students. As NYC works to improve supports and services for homeless students and their families, it will be important to grapple with four related questions:

What Information Do Schools Need to Better Serve Homeless Students?

Our findings highlight ways that additional information about homeless students’ experiences might be useful to educators. For example, while administrative records contain some information about the types of homelessness that students experience (e.g. doubled up, in shelter, etc.), they generally do not contain detailed information about how long students have been homeless. Our study showed that students who live in shelters for an extended period are especially vulnerable—four out of five of them were chronically absent, and less than 20 percent scored proficient on state tests. Flagging “long-term homeless” students could help educators target interventions to those who are particularly high risk. Our findings suggest a need for better data systems—building on the data that is already being collected by the DOE and the City’s Department of Homeless Services—as well as new tools designed to make this information easily accessible to school staff.

School staff also emphasized the value of more qualitative information about students’ experiences that goes beyond what is captured in administrative records. This knowledge is especially useful when students arrive at a new school. For example, data about student trauma might help school social workers or counselors identify and better serve students in need of support. Likewise, information about students’ prior instruction, routines, and behavior might help classroom teachers be more effective. That being said, collecting, organizing, and safeguarding such information would certainly present challenges. Who would collect it, and how would it be stored? Would the current DOE database be sufficient—or would a whole new system be needed to track this kind of data? Given the sensitive nature of some of the information, how would the confidentiality of students and their families be preserved? What kinds of data-sharing structures and practices are needed to ensure that even highly mobile students are able to receive appropriate instruction, care, and consistency across different schools?
What Staffing Is Required to Meet Homeless Students’ Needs?

Our interviews with educators suggest that non-instructional staff can play a critical role in building relationships with homeless students and families, addressing barriers to school attendance, and connecting families and students to the resources and supports that they need. The presence of non-instructional staff in a school building lessens the burden school staff often face in helping so many students and families in crisis—allowing classroom teachers to focus on instruction, guidance counselors to focus on providing mandated academic support, and administrators to focus on providing high-quality leadership for the entire school community. There is a lot to be learned about how schools can best leverage the time and expertise of non-instructional staff. For instance, how many students should each of these individuals be expected to serve? Should these staff be based at shelter sites, or should they be based in schools? Are particular staff characteristics and training associated with better outcomes for students and families? What routines, structures, and conditions facilitate effective coordination between instructional and non-instructional staff?

How Should the District Deal with the Concentration of High-Needs Students in Particular Schools?

Students who experience homelessness—and other students living in extreme poverty—are not evenly distributed across NYC’s community school districts and schools. Entrenched patterns of socio-economic and racial segregation mean that some schools are being asked to serve very large numbers of disadvantaged children. Our interviews suggest that this sometimes creates opportunities for targeted, intensive service provision, with schools becoming a hub where students and families can connect with resources. Yet, there is very likely a “tipping point” for schools, where the sheer number of students in need becomes overwhelming and makes it impossible for school staff to serve them effectively. Given the concentration of poverty in particular neighborhoods, what would it take to foster more socio-economically diverse elementary schools? And would this improve homeless students’ access to support (because the schools are generally higher-performing and better resourced), or reduce that access (because staff have less expertise in serving homeless students or because services are no longer focused in one place)? Nascent efforts to address racial and socio-economic segregation in NYC schools will need to be attentive to these issues. Moreover, while the prevalence of homelessness currently varies greatly across schools, we found that 98 percent of elementary schools in the City serve at least some homeless students. It is likely that schools will need to employ different strategies to serve students experiencing homelessness, depending on the concentration of homeless students in the building.

How Can Schools Best Connect Students to External Resources and Supports?

The findings in this brief highlight that schools are one of the primary places where homeless students and their families can connect with resources and supports provided by CBOs and social service agencies. All of the schools where we conducted interviews have partnerships with local CBOs; however these partnerships took a wide variety of forms. This underscores the need for better evidence about such partnerships, and their capacity to improve school experiences and outcomes for homeless students. What does it take to build sustainable and effective partnerships between schools, shelters, social service
agencies, and other CBOs? What structures and routines encourage strong working relationships between school and CBO staff? And do such partnerships actually keep students engaged in school and improve their academic performance? Research that identifies elements of effective partnerships that can be broadly replicated across schools—and help make the most of the limited funding that schools have to serve homeless students—could be immensely helpful to schools, districts, and CBOs.

Conclusion

This brief provides a glimpse into the barriers to school success that children who experience homelessness face at a developmentally crucial age. It also highlights the myriad challenges that school staff encounter as they work to support these vulnerable students. Looking ahead, we hope to generate additional evidence about specific school practices and district policies that can help more homeless students succeed. That said, given the scope of the problem—with one in eight NYC students experiencing homelessness by the end of fourth grade—our findings also raise questions about the role of other institutions and systems, including efforts to prevent families from becoming homeless in the first place.
Endnotes


2 See Fantuzzo, J et al. (2013) and Herbers, J. et al. (2012).

3 As we have documented elsewhere, we can understand the magnitude of the NYC public school system by comparing it to other large districts in the US. Please also see Table 1 in this report from the US Department of Education.


5 Please note that this measure captures students who qualified for free or reduced price meals every year for all five years that we followed them. Proportions of homeless students who qualified for free or reduced price meals are higher if we look at yearly estimates (e.g., 98 percent of students who experienced homelessness during the 2016-2017 school year were eligible for free or reduced price meals).


7 This means that some of the students who are included in this graph experienced homelessness after the 2012-2013 school year.

8 See Austensen, M. et al. (2016).

9 For research that has focused exclusively on understanding the experiences of doubled up students see, for instance, Hallett, R.E. (2010).

10 Just over 70 percent of the students in the third and fourth groups were only in shelters for the duration of their homelessness.

11 About 48 percent of housed students in this cohort attained proficiency on the math and English state tests in 4th grade.

12 Deck, S.M. (2017) finds similar school mobility outcomes for students experiencing homelessness in Jefferson County, Kentucky: Students who lived in shelters had higher rates of school mobility than those who were doubled up or poor but permanently housed.


14 Even though students experiencing homelessness have the right to remain in their school of origin, and the district must provide transportation for them to do so, some families might have to or choose to switch their children into schools that are nearer to the shelter.

15 Deck, S.M. (2017) finds similar school attendance patterns in her analysis of students in the Jefferson County Public Schools: Students who were in shelters had lower attendance rates than those who were doubled-up or poor but permanently housed.

16 See Herbers, J.E. et al. (2014) and Brumley, B. et al. (2015).

17 See Ingram E.S. et al. (2017) and Miller, P.M. (2011).

18 See New York City Department of Education (2019).
Additional Figure and Table Notes

**Figure 1:** The numerator is the number of students who experienced homelessness in each grade band in each year; the denominator is the total number of students in each grade band in each year. Students who are ungraded are excluded from this analysis.

**Figure 2A:** The numerator is the number of students in our cohort who experienced homelessness between kindergarten and the end of their scheduled 4th grade year who were enrolled in a school in each district; the denominator is the total number of students who were enrolled in a school in each district.

**Figure 2B:** For each school, the numerator is the number of students flagged as living in any kind of temporary housing in the 2012-2013 school year; the denominator is the total number of students actively enrolled in October 2012.

**Figure 4:** We calculate total school moves between October of 2012 and June of 2017. If a student is actively enrolled in a different school each subsequent June or October (relative to the last), they are recorded as having moved schools.

**Figure 5:** Here, we show whether students were ever chronically absent—between their kindergarten and scheduled 4th grade year. This attendance measure uses a denominator of 180 school days for each of the five years.

**Tables 1 and 2:** The free or reduced price lunch measure tells us the proportion of students who were actively enrolled and qualified for free or reduced price lunch every year between kindergarten and the scheduled 4th grade year. Some students living in poverty may not be captured by our free or reduced price lunch measure if, for instance, their family did not return the requisite paperwork. The proportion of students for whom we are missing data on this variable increases each successive year, from 1.6 percent in 2012-2013 to 35.8 percent in 2016-2017 (when we would expect the students to be in 4th grade). Actively enrolled students who are missing data on free or reduced price lunch are coded as not receiving free or reduced price lunch.
References


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