

“Picking up the Pieces: Strengthening Connections with Students Experiencing
Homelessness and Children in Foster Care”
U.S. House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and
Secondary Education
May 19, 2021

Written Testimony of Jennifer Erb-Downward
Senior Research Associate
Poverty Solutions at the University of Michigan

Chairman Sablan, Ranking Member Owens, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify at this important hearing. It is truly an honor to be here and I commend you all for your focus on this critical educational issue.

I come before you today to share my research and what we know about the educational implications of homelessness, housing instability, and foster care among children in the United States. Data from my work in Michigan, New York City, and nationally corroborates a growing body of evidence that shows housing instability to have negative educational, developmental, and health consequences for children.^{1,2,3,4,5,6} Without needed supports provided through schools and in partnership with community based organizations, these impacts can be long-lasting with repercussions that continue into adulthood.⁷ I am also here today to share with you information on the impact the pandemic has had on homeless children and to talk about opportunities that funding through the American Rescue Plan brings to address these challenges.

Before I begin to discuss the data, I want to be clear that when I talk about homelessness, I am referring to children who are homeless as defined by Federal Education Law under the McKinney-Vento Act. Under this definition all children and youths who “lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence” are homeless. This includes children and youth who, due to loss of housing or economic hardship are living doubled-up in another person’s house, in hotels, motels, trailer parks, camping grounds, emergency or transitional shelters or any place not meant for human habitation (such as cars, public spaces, or abandoned buildings).⁸ This definition of homelessness is broader than the definition used by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which governs access to shelter and housing programs. While I am not here today to debate definitions, I want to be clear about the definition that is being used so that the implications of the data that I share in my testimony today are fully understood. While children who are homeless and children in foster care face many similar challenges such as housing instability, experiences of trauma, and educational setbacks, it is important

to note that these two groups are fundamentally different and are impacted by separate laws, systems, and resources.

Background: Young Children Face the Greatest Risk of Homelessness and Housing Instability

Homelessness is an issue impacting rural, suburban, and urban communities in every state.⁹ Young children face the greatest risk, with infants being the most likely to age group to stay in an emergency shelter.¹⁰ Roughly 1 in 16 – or 1.4 million - children under the age of 6 years were estimated to be homeless in SY 2017-18. Only 9% of these children, were enrolled in Head Start, Early Head Start, or programs funded with McKinney-Vento sub-grants.¹¹

In K-12 schools an additional 1.4 million homeless children were identified. This is the equivalent of 3% of the total K-12 student population. The vast majority (77%) of these children were living doubled up in another person’s house. Nineteen percent (19%) of homeless students had a disability, and 16% were English language learners.¹² While information on the race and ethnicity of homeless students is not yet universally available in the data reported to the Department of Education,* findings from the Youth Behavioral Risk Factor Survey show that Black, Hispanic, and Native American students face a disproportionate risk of homelessness.¹³

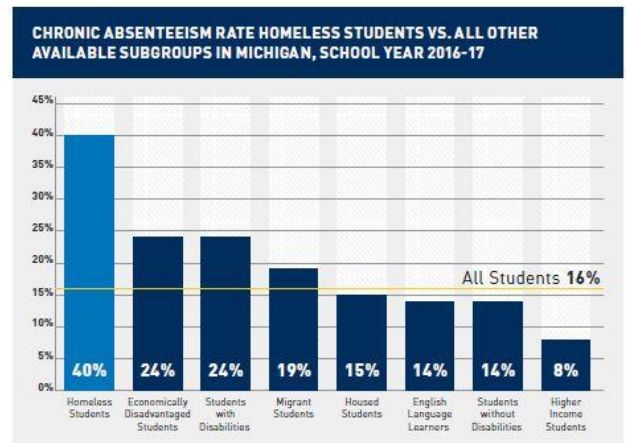
In regards to children in foster care as of September, 2018 there were an estimated 437,283 children in foster care. These children were in different types of placements with 46% in nonrelative foster family homes, 32% in relative foster family homes, 6% in institutions, 5% on trial home visits, 4% in group homes, 4% in pre-adoptive homes, 2% in supervised independent living. One percent had run away from the foster care system.¹⁴ Younger children faced greater risk of entering foster care with the median age of children in 2018 being 6.1 years. Like children who experienced homelessness, a disproportionate burden of foster care fell on communities of color and families with low-incomes.

Why Homelessness and Housing Instability Are Issues of Educational Concern

Homelessness and housing instability are associated with significant educational challenges across age groups.

In early childhood, children who experience homelessness are more likely to display social emotional delays. This impact has been shown to persist into elementary school with early child homelessness associated with lower rates of academic achievement.

Similar to their younger peers, children who experience homelessness during their K-12 education experience significantly worse educational outcomes than their housed peers regardless of income. In Michigan, and New York City where I have conducted much of my research, we found homeless students to be chronically absent at rates more than two times higher their housed peers.^{15,16}



* Beginning in SY 2020-21 the Department of Education will require all school districts to submit data on the racial and ethnic background of students identified as homeless.

We found these same disparities to exist in grade level proficiency rates, disciplinary action risk, and graduation and dropout rates, with homeless students struggling more than their housed peers.^{17,18} While children in foster care face different structural challenges than their homeless peers, entering foster care is a form of housing instability, and K-12 children in foster care face educational setbacks similar to those of their homeless peers. Further, a strong intersection exists between homelessness and the risk of entering foster care. Children who were homeless the year prior had 14 times the risk of entering foster care compared to their peers who were not homeless during that same year.

Homelessness and poverty alone are not reasons that a child should be removed from their family. More information on why homeless children have a greater risk of entering foster care and whether economic and housing supports could prevent removal from their families is needed.

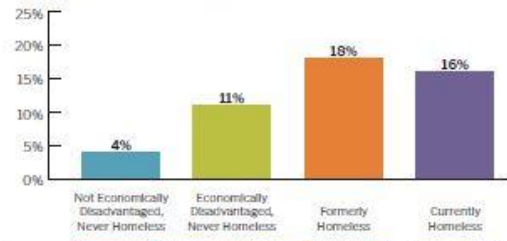
Of even greater educational concern for this committee is that the educational setbacks homeless students experience persist even after stable housing is found. My analysis of both Michigan and New York City educational data shows this to be true across educational indicators. Third through eighth grade students who were formerly homeless had almost the same grade level proficiency rates in English and math as their currently homeless peers. Formerly homeless students faced disciplinary action at rates slightly higher than their currently homeless peers and like their peers who experienced homelessness during high school, one quarter (24%) of students who experienced homelessness in middle school dropped out. Not only did 1 in 4 students who had experienced homelessness at any point during middle or high school drop out of school, these students accounted for 20% of all students who dropped out of high school in the state.

While housing is critical, housing alone does not close the educational gap faced by students who have experienced homelessness. Without the needed school supports, homelessness and housing instability have lasting educational impacts on children. No national estimate for the number of children who have experienced homelessness at any point during their K-12 education exists, but for perspective, I can share with you data on this from Michigan. In school year 2017-18, roughly 2% of all students were identified as experiencing homelessness during the school calendar year. An analysis conducted by Poverty Solutions found that roughly 1 in 10 students experienced homelessness by the time they graduated or left high school – this was five times the annual rate. This risk was even greater for Black and Hispanic students, with 15.7% and 13.6%, respectively, experiencing homelessness at some point during their K-12 years. It

Disciplinary Action by Economic and Housing Status

Percent of Students Suspended or Expelled

All Michigan Schools | SY 2017-18



Race/Ethnicity	Not Economically Disadvantaged, Never Homeless	Economically Disadvantaged, Never Homeless	Formerly Homeless	Currently Homeless
Black	10%	18%	27%	24%
White	3%	8%	14%	13%
Hispanic	4%	8%	15%	12%
Asian	1%	3%	7%	3%
Other Race/Ethnicity	5%	10%	16%	12%

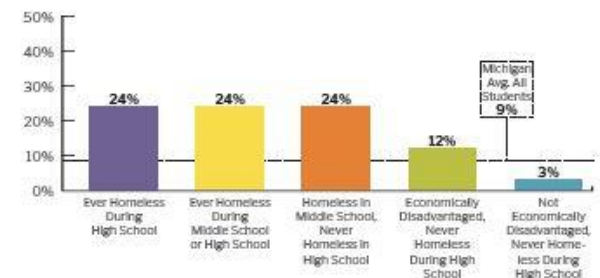
Source: Michigan Department of Education unpublished data tabulated by Poverty Solutions at the University of Michigan, School Year 2017-18

Note: Percentages represent children enrolled in any Michigan public or charter school in SY 2017-18. Currently Homeless students are those who have been identified as homeless in SY 2017-18. Formerly Homeless students are those who are not currently identified as homeless, but who have been identified as homeless at any point between SY 2009-10 and SY 2016-17. Always Housed, Economically Disadvantaged are those students who are identified as economically disadvantaged in SY 2017-18 who have never been identified as homeless between SY 2009-10 and SY 2017-18. Always Housed, Not Economically Disadvantaged are those students who are not identified as economically disadvantaged in SY 2017-18 who have never been identified as homeless between SY 2009-10 and SY 2017-18.

Four-Year Drop-Out Rate by Economic and Housing Stability

Percent of Students Who Dropped-Out of High School within Four Years

All Michigan Schools | Class of 2018



On average, close to 1 in 10 (9%) of Michigan students in the class of 2018 dropped out of school.

Students who experienced homelessness had dropout rates that were eight times those of their always housed, not economically disadvantaged peers (24% vs. 3%). This was true for both students who experienced homelessness during high school and students who were not homeless in high school but had experienced homelessness during middle school.

Students who had experienced homelessness at some point during middle or high school accounted for 1 out of every 5 (20%) students who dropped out of the class of 2018. By comparison they only made up 7% of all students in the class of 2018.

is reasonable to assume that this pattern is not isolated to the state of Michigan and that experiencing homelessness as a child is a much more common than any of us here today would like to believe. The immediate and lasting educational repercussions faced by homeless students means that meeting the needs of these students must be a part of our larger educational plan if we are going to see all students in our country's education system succeed.

I want to be clear that we are not just talking about numbers – we are talking about children. Brittney was homeless when she was 10 years old. She was a straight A student, somehow managing her school work while living in her family's car with her mother. Like so many other children who are unstably housed, just getting to school was a challenge. She was frequently late and missed more days than the school attendance policy allowed. As a result, she was suspended from school for 150 days. At that time, there was no one to advocate for her, no one to help connect her to the school transportation supports she had a right to under McKinney-Vento law, and no one to work with her school to remove the suspension.

This did not have to be the case for Brittney, but she was not identified as homeless by her school and as a result not only did she not receive the educational supports he needed, she was denied her educational rights under McKinney-Vento law.

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Brittney's story highlights one of the greatest challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic has created for homeless students. When children are not identified by their schools as homeless, they are denied their legal rights to immediate enrollment in school, transportation support to and from school, and accommodations that remove barriers at school which prevent them from fully participating in all school activities. As schools had to close in order to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, the number of students identified as homeless dramatically declined.

In the fall of 2020, I partnered with School House Connection to analyze responses to a survey sent out to their national network of school homelessness liaisons. The purpose of this survey was to better understand the impact that COVID-19 was having on students experiencing homelessness. The most striking finding was that at the same point in time that liaisons were reporting greater need in their communities the number of homeless students identified decreased by 28% in comparison to the prior year. This equates to 420,000 fewer students who were homeless being identified by their schools. Lack of identification places all of these students at greater risk for experiences like the one described by Brittney.

Another key finding of the survey was that although school districts were allowed to use COVID relief funds provided by the CARES Act to support homeless student outreach and support, only 18% of liaisons reported that this was happening. This highlights the critical importance of targeted educational funding for homeless students – particularly during times of crisis. The good news is that the American Rescue Plan recognized this problem and has provided \$800 million dollars in targeted funds to meet the educational needs of homeless children. Additionally, while the one billion dollars allocated for Head Start in the American Rescue Plan is not specifically targeted towards homeless children, opportunity exists to leverage these funds.

What Now?

The longer a student who is homeless goes unidentified by their school the more challenges that child faces and the more likely it becomes for them to struggle academically and socially at school. As we move forward it is critical that the money in the American Rescue Plan set aside for homeless students be used to support robust identification practices at schools. The pandemic has led thousands of children who are homeless to slip through the cracks. We must find and support them.

A complete list of ways that the \$800 million set aside for homeless students can be used in each of your states to improve identification and support for homeless students can be found on the School House Connection website.¹⁹ A few of these that I would like to highlight include:

- Increasing homelessness liaison capacity – particularly in the 75% of Local Education Agencies (LEAs) that currently do not have a McKinney-Vento sub-grants;
- Supporting transportation solutions to help homeless children get to school;
- Providing service and housing navigators to help families connect all of the strands of the American Rescue Plan;
- Supporting early education and college transitions;
- Ensuring access to summer supplemental programs; and
- Bridging structural gaps that would otherwise prevent families from accessing the supports they need. An example of this type of allowable use under the supplemental funding stream would be liaisons paying for a family to stay a few nights at a hotel in order to enable that family to meet the HUD homelessness definition and access other American Rescue Plan supports.

In conclusion, as we plan now for how we improve school identification and supports for children who are homeless, it is also critical that we look towards the future, beyond COVID. Under-identification of homelessness among children, while less extreme, existed prior to the pandemic and children will continue to need the supports that schools can provide in order to prevent both the immediate and long-term negative educational impacts highlighted in my testimony. For this reason, robust funding for the McKinney-Vento program is needed as an ongoing part of our nation's educational strategy.

Thank you again for inviting me to this hearing and I look forward to answering your questions.

¹ Perlman, S.M. & Fantuzzo, J.W. (2010). Timing and impact of homelessness and maltreatment on school readiness. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32: 874–883

² Haskett, M. E., Armstrong, J., & Tisdale, J. (2015). Developmental status and social—emotional functioning of young children experiencing homelessness. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 44: 119–125

³ Brumley, B., Fantuzzo, J., Perlman, S., & Zager, M. L. (2015). The unique relations between early homelessness and educational well-being: An empirical test of the continuum of risk hypothesis. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 48: 31–37.

⁴ School House Connection. (2021). Student Homelessness: Lessons from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). Available at: <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/student-homelessness-lessons-from-the-youth-risk-behavior-survey-yrbs/>

⁵ Joshua Cowen. “Who Are the Homeless? Student Mobility and Achievement in Michigan 2010–2013,” *Education Researcher*. (2017): 33-43.

⁶ Equity & Opportunity for New York State's Students. “Improving Opportunity & Achievement for Students Experiencing Homelessness: Recommendations for New York's Implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA),”

<https://equityinedny.org/> (accessed April 3, 2018).

7 School House Connection. (2021). Student Homelessness: Lessons from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). Available at: <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/student-homelessness-lessons-from-the-youth-risk-behavior-survey-yrbs/>

8 Center for Homeless Education. "The McKinney-Vento Definition of Homeless," <https://nche.ed.gov/legis/mvdef.php> (accessed January 29, 2018).

9 National Center for Homeless Education. State Level Data and Contact: Interactive Map. Available at: <https://nche.ed.gov/data/>

10 Scott R. Brown, Marybeth Shinn, and Jill Khadduri. (2017). Well-being of Young Children after Experiencing Homelessness. Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE), Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Available at: <https://aspe.hhs.gov/system/files/pdf/255741/homefambrief.pdf>

11 Amy Yamashiro & John McLaughlin. (2020). U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, Early Childhood Homelessness State Profiles 2020: Data Collected in 2017-2018, Washington, DC, 2020. Available at: <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/disadv/homeless/early-childhood-homelessness-state-profiles-2020.pdf>

12 School House Connection. (2021). Six Findings from Pre-Pandemic School Homelessness Data That Should Inform Reopening and Recovery. Available at: <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/six-findings-from-pre-pandemic-school-homelessness-data-that-should-inform-reopening-and-recovery/>

13 School House Connection. (2021). Student Homelessness: Lessons from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). Available at: <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/student-homelessness-lessons-from-the-youth-risk-behavior-survey-yrbs/>

14 <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/foster.pdf>

15 The Center for Education Performance and Information (CEPI). "Michigan Department of Education 2016-17 Student Counts: Attendance". <https://www.mischooldata.org/DistrictSchoolProfiles2/StudentInformation/StudentCounts/Attendance2.aspx>

16 Institute for Children Poverty and Homelessness. "The Atlas of Student Homelessness in New York City 2016," (2016): 1-155. http://www.icphusa.org/new_york_city/on-the-map-the-atlas-of-student-homelessness-in-new-yorkcity-2016/

17 Institute for Children Poverty and Homelessness. "The Atlas of Student Homelessness in New York City 2016," (2016): 1-155. http://www.icphusa.org/new_york_city/on-the-map-the-atlas-of-student-homelessness-in-new-yorkcity-2016/ (accessed January 30, 2018).

18 Erb-Downward, J., Blakeslee, M. (2021). Recognizing Trauma: Why School Discipline Reform Needs to Consider Student Homelessness. Available at: <https://poverty.umich.edu/research-funding-opportunities/publications/policy-briefs/>

19 <https://schoolhouseconnection.org/how-to-use-arp-funds/>