Housing Instability & Educational Outcomes of San Mateo County Youth

New research shines a light on the impact of homelessness on students

Homelessness has far-reaching consequences for local communities—and can greatly impact educational outcomes for students. Anywhere from 1.3 to 1.7 million youth in the US, including 260,000 living in California, experience homelessness each year. These trends are part of a wider crisis of housing instability, or lack of permanent, stable, and adequate housing conditions (Ziol-Guest & McKenna, 2014).

Housing instability of any duration matters for educational and social policy: children experiencing housing instability generally have less-desirable educational outcomes than their housing-stable peers (Burns et al., 2021; Cutuli et al., 2013; Herbers et al., 2012; Masten et al., 2014; Obradović et al., 2009). It is imperative, then, for state policymakers and local and county leaders to partner with the leaders of youth-serving organizations, including public schools, to identify and support youth who are experiencing housing instability.

In partnership with the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative and 22 San Mateo County school districts, this study by the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and their Communities explores the ways in which local students experience housing instability—and how cross-sector strategies can better identify and serve these students.

The report accompanying this brief considers a rich set of school administrative data, collected over the course of three school years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic: 2016-17 through 2018-19. This data set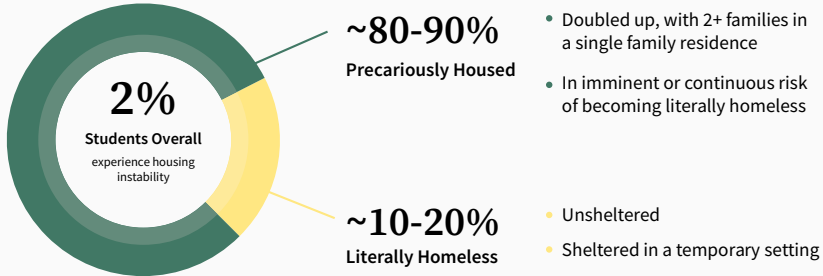 allowed the researchers to describe youth based on their dwelling status designations reported by the school districts, their free or reduced-price meal participation, and several demographic characteristics. District data were also used to examine the relationship between student dwelling status designation and educational outcomes. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews to understand current practices within San Mateo County schools that identified and allocated services to youth experiencing housing instability both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key Findings

01

Over the course of three school years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the researchers found that over 2,600 unduplicated youth in San Mateo County experienced housing instability. During each of these three years, approximately 1,700 students—or 2% of those enrolled—were identified as experiencing housing instability. Of those, a large majority (~80-90%) are experiencing "precarious housing" (e.g., doubled-up), whereas the remaining 10-20% are experiencing "literal homelessness" (e.g., living unsheltered or in a temporary shelter). These are almost certainly undercounts of the true population of students experiencing housing instability in these districts.

Over 2,600 K-12 students* in San Mateo County public schools are experiencing housing instability.

2%
Students Overall
experience housing instability

~80-90%
Precariously Housed
- Doubled up, with 2+ families in a single family residence
- In imminent or continuous risk of becoming literally homeless

~10-20%
Literally Homeless
- Unsheltered
- Sheltered in a temporary setting

*were reported as experiencing housing instability at some point between the 2016-17 and 2018-19 school years.

02

Youth identified as experiencing both precarious housing and literal homelessness are disproportionately represented across demographic groups.

Demographics

Youth who experience housing instability are disproportionately Latinx, Black, and designated as English language learners.

70%
Over two-thirds of students experiencing housing instability are Latinx.

3x
Black students have three times the representation among students experiencing housing instability as among all students.
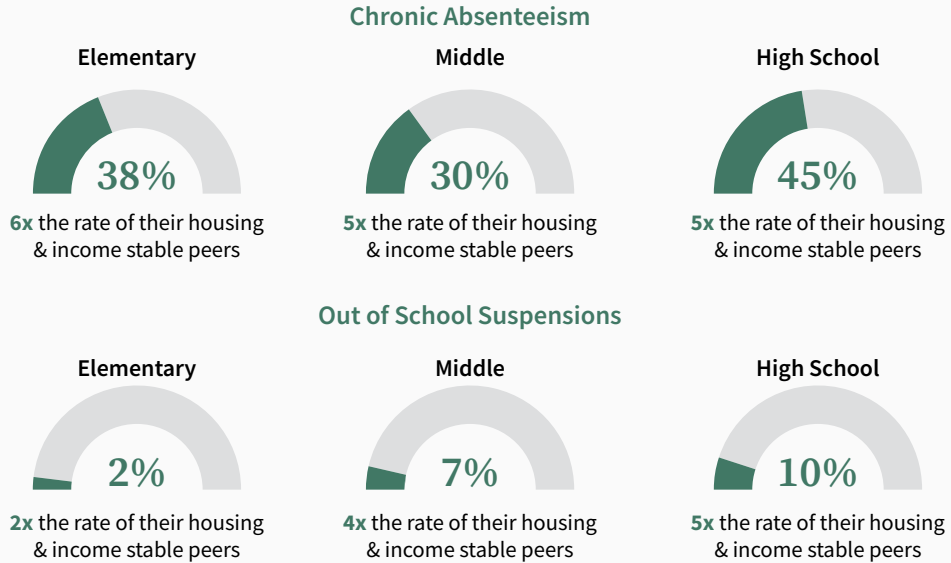
48%
Nearly half of students experiencing housing instability are designated as English language learners.
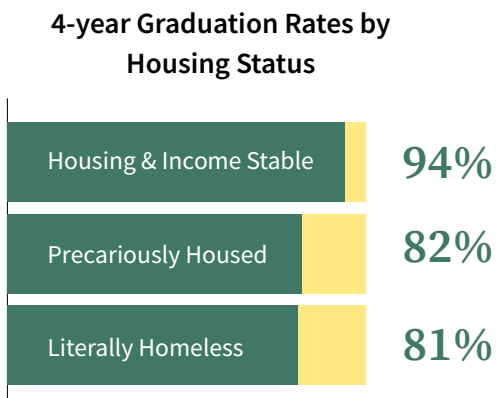
Key Findings

03

The relationship between housing instability and educational outcomes varies by school level. For example, there are wider disparities in chronic absenteeism between students experiencing housing instability and their income and housing stable peers in high school than in elementary school.

Educational Outcomes among Literally Homeless Youth by Grade Level

Chronic Absenteeism

Elementary	Middle	High School
38%	**30%**	**45%**
6x the rate of their housing & income stable peers	**5x** the rate of their housing & income stable peers	**5x** the rate of their housing & income stable peers

Out of School Suspensions

Elementary	Middle	High School
2%	**7%**	**10%**
2x the rate of their housing & income stable peers	**4x** the rate of their housing & income stable peers	**5x** the rate of their housing & income stable peers

04

Youth identified as literally homeless have four-year high school noncompletion rates nearly four times higher than housing and income stable peers.

4-year Graduation Rates by Housing Status

Housing & Income Stable	**94%**
Precariously Housed	**82%**
Literally Homeless	**81%**

05

Students experiencing housing instability are not evenly distributed across the region; rather, they are concentrated in certain districts in San Mateo County.

06

Several factors impact a district's ability to identify and support students experiencing housing instability (e.g., understanding what constitutes housing instability, communication between families and schools, data collection and record-keeping practices, access to resources and services); however, many of these factors can be addressed.

07

Identifying and supporting students experiencing housing instability requires increased awareness and coordination across sectors. This highly vulnerable population would benefit from systems and strategies that include monitoring indicators that signal when increased levels of support are necessary.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the researchers have developed several recommendations for state policymakers, local and county leaders, school district leaders, and leaders from youth-serving organizations to understand and address the needs of youth who experience housing instability:

State Policymakers

- Establish state-level commitment to understand and address the needs of youth who experience housing instability, emphasizing that this is a cross-sector call to action.

- Create the conditions for a statewide, cross-sector system for collecting and reporting accurate data regarding youth dwelling status, including clear guidelines, templates, and incentives for data collection and reporting that are developed in collaboration with leaders of school districts and youth-serving organizations.

- Support county leaders to create the conditions and resources needed to ensure accurate data collection and reporting regarding youth dwelling status in their region.

Local and County Leaders

- Establish regional commitment to understand and address the needs of youth who experience housing instability, emphasizing that this is a cross-sector call to action not only at the state level—but also at the county level.

- Create the conditions needed to ensure accurate data collection and reporting regarding youth dwelling status by leaders of school districts and youth-serving organizations.

- Foster shared understanding and collective engagement (e.g., via cross-agency data briefings) to ensure that accurate data collection and reporting is met with action to address the specific needs of youth experiencing housing instability.

- Convene a community of practice among leaders of school districts and community-based organizations to reflect together on the local/regional inventory of available services, identify gaps, develop plans for filling the gaps, and cultivate their collective engagement in understanding and responding to the needs of youth experiencing housing instability.

- Support school districts and youth-serving organizations to connect students experiencing housing instability with coordinated and comprehensive support within and outside of the school setting. Resources might include templates for needs assessments or intake interviews, school-based best practices around access to free and reduced-price meals and transportation, and an up-to-date inventory of discreet, accessible, and relevant community-based organizations.

Recommendations

School District Leaders

- Establish a district-wide commitment to be a key partner in state- and county-wide efforts to understand and address the needs of youth who experience housing instability.

- Provide discreet opportunities and incentives for students and/or their families to disclose housing instability. Focus on avenues that foster ease, confidentiality, and agency.

- Create a district-wide process for supporting students experiencing housing instability. Integrate this process into the district's broader approach for providing a multi-tiered, coordinated, and comprehensive system of student support.

Leaders of Youth-Serving Organizations

- Establish an organizational commitment to be a key partner in state- and county-wide efforts to understand and address the needs of youth who experience housing instability.

- Develop at least one annual practice for explicitly asking families to report their dwelling status, connected to an intake or program registration process.

- Provide discreet opportunities—and incentives—for youth and/or their families to disclose housing instability. Focus on avenues that foster ease, confidentiality, and agency.

- Collaborate with other leaders of youth-serving organizations to create a process for responding to youth experiencing housing instability.

Conclusion

Early evidence suggest the COVID-19 pandemic has and will continue to exacerbate the crisis of housing instability; some who had previously experienced housing stability are, for the first time, experiencing some form of housing instability, and others who previously experienced some form of housing instability may now face even greater or more frequent instability. Although the extent of the increases in homelessness and housing instability in San Mateo County is yet unclear, it is certainly time to acknowledge and address the significant housing-related challenges that many are experiencing.

From the report findings, the researchers concluded that youth experiencing housing instability face a range of unique challenges, and there are concrete actions that cross-sector leaders can take to help ensure positive and equitable outcomes.

Pre-pandemic housing instability, especially that described as "literal homelessness," is associated with lower levels of student learning and achievement. Students experiencing housing instability, but who have not been accurately identified as such, may not be connected to the resources and supports that are available to them.

Further, when not properly identified, relatively low educational outcomes among housing-unstable students (e.g. GPA, attendance, disciplinary involvement, test scores) may be misattributed to factors other than housing instability.

The report's findings highlight the importance of strengthening systems for identifying students who are experiencing housing instability, improving data systems for recording and maintaining this information, and using such data to inform policy and practice not only in schools and districts, but throughout the county. Needs are greater than prior to the pandemic, adding to the strength of calls for integrated county- and state-wide responses to this ongoing crisis in housing and more. This includes developing cross-sector awareness of youth experiencing housing instability and a similar cross-sector engagement in providing support. This is particularly critical in San Mateo County where residents face a persistent and growing crisis in the area of income inequality, cost of living, and financial precarity.

To download the full report, please visit our website.

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