



A Question of Priorities: A Critical Investigation of the McKinney-Vento Act

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Abstract

This critical policy ethnography analyzes the McKinney-Vento Act and how the policy is put into practice at a school district within Central Texas. Data comes from conversations with educators occupying key roles within the McKinney-Vento operational bureaucracy at the school district and the researcher's experience as an educator and volunteer at a homeless shelter. Analysis was informed by an ethic of care framework and a historiography was created to chronicle the policy's genealogy, intent, and guiding values. The findings are presented in a deliberate effort to put a human face to some of those the policy impacts. Major findings and recommendations include a need for increased awareness and compliance, monitoring of the policy, as well as an investment of additional resources to adequately respond to McKinney-Vento issues within the district.

Keywords: *McKinney-Vento, homelessness, homeless student, education policy, policy ethnography, marginalized youth*

The Problem

The United States has experienced an epidemic of youth homelessness since the 1980s.¹ The children impacted risk a plethora of problems associated with homelessness including a lack of educational success manifesting in such detrimental forms as learning disabilities, high rates of absenteeism, or increased rates of dropping out.² The potentially marginalizing impact of a negative educational experience on one's future opportunities is likewise well-established in the form of increased rates of poverty and accompanying issues.³ In short, a bout of youth homelessness

1. Ronald Hallett, *Educational Experiences of Hidden Homeless Teenagers: Living Doubled-up* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Joseph Murphy and Kerri Tobin, *Homelessness Comes to School* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2011).

2. Henrietta S. Evans Attles, *The Effects of Homelessness on the Academic Achievement of Children* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997); Jane Boyd-Zaharias and Helen Pate-Bain, "Class Matters: in and out of School," *Phi Delta Kappan* 90, no 1 (2008): 40-44; Hallett, *Educational Experiences*; Murphy and Tobin, *Homelessness Comes to School*; James H. Stronge, "Educating Homeless Children and Youth: An Introduction." In *Educating Homeless Students: Promising Practices*, eds. James H. Stronge and Evelyn Reed-Victor (Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education, Inc., 2000), 1-20. C.C. Tower and D.J. White, *Homeless Students* (Washington, DC: National Education Association, 1989).

3. Karl Ashworth, Martha Hill, and Robert Walker, "Patterns of Childhood Poverty: New Challenges for Policy," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 13 (1994): 658-680; Boyd-Zaharias and Pate-Bain, H., "Class

might reverberate for a very long time.

The question then turns toward how best to tackle the problem. It seems inescapable in the ubiquitously bureaucratic modern nation-state that government will play a large role in most efforts at impacting society at large. Guiding these state-led endeavors are policies through which the desired social change is supposed to occur. Working from the assumption that homelessness is detrimental to a child's education and that modern nations deal with large problems via state bureaucracies, this study investigated the policy the United States has crafted to handle the education of homeless students. I also assumed the stated purpose and spirit of this policy – “The McKinney-Vento program is designed to address the problems that homeless children and youth have faced in...succeeding in school”—was truly intended.⁴ By this standard I analyzed the policy's intent, process, and output.

The McKinney-Vento Act is the federal policy that for the past two and a half decades has governed the education of homeless youth in the United States. According to McKinney-Vento “the term ‘homeless child and youth’ means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence and includes children and youth who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason.”⁵ It also encompasses those forced to live in motels, etc., places not generally intended for habitation, as well as any sort of shelter situation. In 2009 (the government did not issue its final ruling on this definition of “homeless” until late 2011) a new wrinkle was added to the mix when McKinney-Vento was reauthorized as part of a larger federal homelessness policy effort, the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act (HUD, 2011b). While the bulk of HEARTH—as does much of McKinney-Vento itself—concerns wider homelessness issues in general, it impacts educational systems by expanding the definition of who is considered a homeless youth in the eyes of the law.⁶

HEARTH considers people homeless if they are at risk of losing their housing within 14 days (the previous standard had been 7 days). It also adds a new category of homelessness: families with children or unaccompanied youth who are “unstably housed.” People fitting this description are families with children or unaccompanied youths up to 24 years old “who have not had a lease or ownership interest in a housing unit in the last 60 or more days, have had two or more moves in the last 60 days, and who are likely to continue to be unstably housed because of

Matters”; David Brady, Andrew S. Fullerton, and Jennifer Moren Cross, “Putting Poverty in Political Context: A Multi-level Analysis of Poverty Across 18 Affluent Democracies,” *Social Forces* 88, no. 1 (2009): 271-299. Judith N. DeSena and George Ansalone, “Gentrification, Schooling, and Social Inequality,” *Educational Research Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (2009): 60-74; Vincent J. Felitti, Robert F. Anda, Dale Nordenberg, David F. Williamson, Alison M. Spitz, and Valerie Edwards, et al., “Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults,” *American Journal of Preventable Medicine* 14, no. 4 (1998): 245-58; Michelle Fine, *Framing Dropouts: Notes on the Politics of an Urban Public High School* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991); Jonathan Kozol, *Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1988); Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991); Ann R. Tickamyer and Cynthia M. Duncan, “Poverty and Opportunity Structure in Rural America,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 16, (1990): 67-86; LaTonya Waters and Sandra Harris, “Exploration of the Lived Experiences of Illiterate African American Adults,” *Western Journal of Black Studies* 33, no. 4 (2009): 250-258; Les B. Whitbeck and Dan R. Hoyt, *Nowhere to Grow: Homeless and Runaway Adolescents and their Families* (New York, NY: Aldine de Gruyter, 1999).

4. ED, 2004, p.2

5. *Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987*, H.R. 558, 100th Congress (1987).

6. HUD, 2009; National Alliance to End Homeless, 2012e; National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2011.

disability or multiple barriers to employment.”⁷

Even though this policy is intended to serve large numbers of vulnerable students there are definite gaps in our knowledge about how, and how well, it is working in schools.⁸ This study looked to contribute to our knowledge by investigating the policy itself, the bureaucracy that has grown around its implementation, and the impact it has on those it is supposed to serve.

Research Questions

The objective of this work was to determine how well McKinney-Vento was serving the homeless students it was designed to help. Part of the answer to this question involved determining how educators implementing the policy interpreted and turned it into practice at a local education agency (LEA). My inquiry was narrowed to the following three guiding questions:

1. How is McKinney-Vento being implemented at the LEA, including identification, learning, and support?
2. How does the McKinney-Vento bureaucratic framework impact the practice of the policy at the LEA?
3. How compliant is the LEA with the spirit and mandates of McKinney-Vento?

Methodology

This study took the form of a critical policy analysis of the McKinney-Vento Act. I chose an ethnographic research design for the purpose of bringing to life how this policy works and the effect it has on the humans it touches. I wanted to tell a story through the perspective of those living with the policy.⁹ In particular, the focus was on the intersection of policy and practice and how this affected how schools interacted with homeless students.

Based on an extensive examination of the literature I created a historiography of McKinney-Vento to serve as context for the study. I then had conversations with knowledgeable informants to learn how the policy was understood and implemented, and the impacts this was having on homeless youth. I then compared these findings with the literature, the policy itself, and the aforementioned historiography. My own personal experience as a volunteer at a shelter for two-plus years, personal friend to those on the streets for the two decades of my adult life, or through the multiple, ongoing times my own residence has served as a sort of informal shelter to others in need added perspective to the study.

7. National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2012e

8. James P. Canfield, Martell L. Teasley, Neil Abell, and Karen A. Randolph, “Validation of a McKinney-Vento Act Implementation Scale,” *Research on Social Work Practice* 22, no. 4 (2012): 410-419; Mary K. Cunningham, Robin Harwood and Sam Hall, *Residential Instability and the McKinney-Vento Homeless Children and Education Program: What We Know, Plus Gaps in Research*, 2010, accessed August 12, 2012, <http://www.urban.org/publications/412115.html>; Peter Michael Miller, “An Examination of the McKinney-Vento Act and its Influence on the Homeless Education Situation,” *Educational Policy* 25, no. 3 (2011), 424-450.

9. Michael J. Crotty, *The Foundations of social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process* (London: SAGE, 1998); David M. Fetterman, *Ethnography: Step-by-step* (London: SAGE, 2010); Joseph A. Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design: an Interactive Approach* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2005); Gretchen B. Rossman and Sharon F. Rallis, *Learning in the Field: an Introduction to Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003).

The research mainly took place in a large Central Texas suburban high school with a growing homeless population and the central administration of the LEA of which the high school is a part. In accordance with qualitative methodology, my research partners were purposefully selected.¹⁰ Each possessed knowledge about homeless education not known by the average person. All participants were voluntary and provided permission in compliance with Institution Review Board protocol. The participants were as follows:

District Homeless Liaisons: Liaisons are responsible for ensuring that their school district is McKinney-Vento compliant. My primary informant had recently become the district's liaison after many years as a social worker. I had two in-depth and several smaller interviews with her over the course of my research. I also talked with a liaison with more than five years worth of experience at her particular LEA which was well-known for having a very effective homeless student service organization; it too was in Central Texas.

Campus Principal: He had been running this public high school for several years at the time of the study and had noted a greater homeless presence recently. He is responsible for ensuring campus McKinney-Vento compliance. I had two lengthy interviews and several shorter conversations with him during this project.

Open-ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted with my partners to gather the rich data needed for ethnography.¹¹ The process allowed for back and forth discussions with participants regarding their experiences educating homeless children. The goal was to engage in deep conversations to learn their stories, perspectives, and understandings surrounding McKinney-Vento and homeless students.

My initial step in data analysis began when I became a participant observer at a homeless shelter. This became more formalized when I began recording my thoughts in a reflective journal and engaging in back-and-forth conversations with my participants. I initially hand sorted my data with the open/initial coding method, breaking it into discrete parts in the transcript margins to construct categories before naming and sorting these categories into separate computer files.¹² From these categories I developed the larger themes used to compose the study's narrative. I utilized structural coding in the first cycle and pattern coding in the second in the method described by Saldaña.¹³

Ultimately my analysis and output took the form of critical policy ethnography. Here I followed a path laid out by Dubois, who interprets critical policy ethnography in the following manner:

Two main premises lead researchers to carry out an in-depth fieldwork in order to analyze the concrete practices through which a policy is enforced in everyday life... The first consists in positing that subordinate officers in administrations can play a key role in defining a policy... The second premise consists in considering that a policy principally exists through the experience of its recipients.¹⁴

10. Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design*; Rossman and Rallis, *Learning in the Field*; Robert S. Weiss, *Learning from Strangers: the Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

11. Fetterman, *Ethnography*; Rossman and Rallis, *Learning in the Field*.

12. Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2009).

13. Ibid.

14. Vincent V. Dubois, "Towards a Critical Policy Ethnography: the 'Undeserving Poor' and the New Welfare State, *Critical Policy Studies* 3 (2009): 219-237.

In other words, to gain a better understanding of how a policy works, one must look not only at the policy from the top, but also at the different levels charged with its implementation. Furthermore, it must take into account the experiences of those the policy is intended to serve. It involved delving into a human story that could not be told through a quantitative analysis.

One of the main challenges in this investigation lay in that several of the participants were held specifically responsible for proper implementation of McKinney-Vento by law. There was, therefore, a reasonable possibility that any one of them might have been inclined to downplay information that might not make them look good or overstate that which did. It was critical, then, that I gathered rich data during our conversations and compared it to my own experiences and the literature to discover any anomalies that needed to be investigated more thoroughly.

Findings

The School: Schools are where the McKinney-Vento policy turns into direct practice. It is in classrooms where a homeless child's learning problem is most likely going to come to the attention of someone with knowledge of what to do about it. At the very beginning of our conversation the principal of the high school I investigated openly acknowledged they were underidentifying homeless students, an issue that has long been problematic.¹⁵ According to him, this mainly stemmed from the students' general reluctance to self-report their housing loss as well as his staff's ignorance of signs to look for that a child was homeless. That this underidentification was knowingly occurring was especially telling because he claimed to possess an earnest desire to treat the school's homeless students decently out of a sense of moral imperative. It was also a campus with a level of funding that enabled it to have nine counselors and a social worker on staff for little over 1000 students. It was situated within a district that actively participated in the McKinney-Vento subgrant process, in a wealthy suburb where the average home property value was well over \$200,000, with relatively few homeless students to deal with (400 had been identified in the district by the end of the school year in question out of a student body over around 20,000) compared to a large urban area. In other words, it was in as about as favorable a situation as could be hoped for a school to achieve full McKinney-Vento implementation. Yet students were still slipping through the cracks here by the principal's own admission. The campus had around 30 students identified and receiving services out of a total student population of over 1000 at the time. Even if the number of hidden homeless children—which, of course, no one knows—of such students was perhaps relatively small it was still notable that this school and principal were well aware that they were missing children.

The principal also opined that the manner in which information about McKinney-Vento was disseminated from the state to his school left much to be desired. One of the main charges of the policy requires that states develop plans to heighten awareness of the needs of homeless students. Obviously, this entails providing explicit information to districts. Yet a full decade after its 2002 reauthorization as part of NCLB, this experienced principal was still gaining information about McKinney-Vento in piecemeal fashion as he went along. Basically he would be confronted with an issue and then seek information on how to legally address the concern. In other words his McKinney-Vento knowledge had been gathered in a reactive and self-directed manner, not delivered proactively by higher state or federal authorities. When I asked him if he had any contact

15. Murphy and Tobin, *Homelessness Comes to School*; Stronge, *Educating Homeless Children and Youth*.

with the state about McKinney-Vento he laughed “only when we do something wrong!” Again, this is a principal who wanted to do right by these students; what would it have looked like if he had not possessed this ethos? It would be far simpler to tell a kid that he cannot attend because his parents are not around to sign paperwork and not bother with seeking solutions to the child’s situation.

He also noted some homeless students had behavioral and/or attendance issues that had a negative impact on their academics. He expressed frustration at the school’s frequent inability to overcome these obstacles and believed that forging caring student/teacher relationships was key to addressing the problem, but in many cases these youth faced so many issues that it was almost impossible to do so. He noted that many of them had “been through the wringer” and had more pressing needs like finding food understandably taking their focus from schooling. In other words, even when identified, he claimed that homeless students were among the most difficult to educate at his school.

These difficulties were illustrated during an attempt to establish a tutoring program specifically for the school’s homeless population. Despite the incentive of free food, the support of numerous stakeholders, and a conscious effort to keep the affair as private as possible, the average attendance at each of the sessions during several weeks near the end of the fall semester was less than two students. The principal and liaison attributed the failure to timing (the sessions were after school), transportation (almost all of the homeless students were dependent on the bus), or simply because many of the students were so far behind in their classes by that point that they saw little point in making the extra effort. Regardless of the reason, it highlighted the inherent difficulties this school had in systematically addressing the academic needs of their homeless students, even when they made a conscious effort to do so.

The principal also recognized that it would be beneficial to educate his staff about student homelessness. Adequately training school faculty and staff would enable them to properly identify homeless youth, and provide a better understanding of what life was like for these vulnerable students. Speaking, perhaps, to priorities, as of this writing (two full school years later), no such professional development had taken place at either the campus or district at large.

This seems especially noteworthy because the district is largely reliant upon teachers to identify students that become homeless during the school year after the Student Residency Questionnaire (SRQ)¹⁶—the vehicle by which the homeless population is initially identified—has been filled out. Given this, it would seem prudent that all staff be well-informed regarding McKinney-Vento; it is an undeniable underutilization of resources that the vast majority is not so knowledgeable.

To this point, I have been teaching in the area for a decade at public schools with high poverty rates, places that have likely had higher than average homeless populations. Yet I have received but *one* in-service (a brief online video with simplistic questions accompanying; you had to get a 70 to receive credit, with as many attempts allowed as you needed to pass) concerning homeless students during this time. Clearly the state has done an insufficient job of systematically disseminating McKinney-Vento information or mandating districts do so themselves. And it seems a basic truth that the policy requires a pervasive awareness to stand a chance at being optimally implemented. This had obviously not happened here; I assume it is hardly the exception. Indeed, when I asked a counselor who ran her campus’ McKinney-Vento program for several years to assess the general knowledge of the law and special needs of homeless students she had found the average teacher possessed her laughter spoke volumes about the need for change

16. See appendix for SRQ form with LEA identifiers removed.

in the way we systematically distribute information about this policy and the vulnerable children it is intended to serve.

The District: The district functions as the administrative arm for McKinney-Vento on the local level; it sets the tone for what happens within the LEA. If it possesses a strong commitment to serving homeless children, McKinney-Vento would presumably stand a better chance for success and vice-versa. A liaison is in charge of homeless services for a LEA. This position greatly influences how the system treats homeless students. I talked extensively with the liaison at the LEA of the high school detailed above. Not surprisingly, since they are part of the same system, many of the issues found at the high school also applied here. For instance, there was a strong sense that students were being underidentified. Part of this stemmed from the liaison's workload as the only district-wide employee dealing with McKinney-Vento; in an organization of 20,000 students it seems impossible for one person to determine who qualifies for service and not overlook some percentage.

The potential for underidentification is exacerbated by the primary method in which the district attempted to locate homeless students, namely two self-reported questions on the SRQ filled out upon enrollment. We know that many are hesitant to self-report homelessness, assuming they are even aware that something like being doubled-up qualifies.¹⁷ Another problem was that there was no systematic way to discover those who lost housing in the middle of the year. Again the onus lay with a student self-identifying or someone at the school noticing, methods we know are problematic.¹⁸

A more disturbing of the district's underidentification involved overt noncompliance. For instance, the liaison had been contacted by one student early in the year and informed he was being denied access due to absent parents. When she told the principal this was illegal, she met resistance on the grounds that the child was an alleged "drug user." The student was eventually admitted, but the implications were clear: if he had not contacted the liaison no one would have been the wiser. Much as it pained her, it seemed naïve to pretend this had not happened before. If there was any doubt about this it was dispelled when she was told by another administrator that homeless families needed to "jump through some hoops" before they were serviced!

Providing further evidence the district had been under-identifying homeless youth the liaison stated that the number of homeless students in the district jumped from about 30 in 2011 to nearly 400 in 2013. Some of this might be attributed to a natural increase, but more likely a significant portion stemmed from the new liaison more thoroughly finding eligible children; notably, there had been no obvious precipitating event to attribute such an increase like the shutdown of a large regional employer or the closure of a large housing project. It seems much more plausible that the cause for the increase was due to the fact that the liaison position was now staffed by an experienced social worker whereas the previous liaison had been a paraprofessional stretched thin by multiple responsibilities over and above serving the district's homeless population.

17. Pdraig Collins and Chris Barker, "Psychological Help-seeking in Homeless Adolescents," *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 55, no. 4 (2009): 372-384; Maria Foscarinis and S. McCarthy, "Removing Educational Barriers for Homeless Students: Legal Requirements and Recommended Practices, in Stronge and Reed-Victor, *Educating Homeless Students*: 135-163. James H. Stronge, *Educating Homeless Children and Youth: an Introduction*. C.C Tower, "The Psychosocial Context: Supporting Education for Homeless Children and Youth, in Stronge and Reed-Victor, *Educating Homeless Children*: 42-61. Yvonne M. Vissing, *Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Homeless Children and Families in Small-Town America* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996).

18. Collins and Barker, "Psychological Help-Seeking."

The liaison also reported a lack of clarity regarding her McKinney-Vento duties; she described herself as frequently defining the job on the fly. Granted, she had just started her position when we first talked, and as the months progressed she grew increasingly comfortable. But, this did not erase that she had been thrown into this important role and basically forced to figure it out on her own. She also described the job as being on an island with minimal monitoring. Tucked into a distant corner with no supervisor actively following her actions, she admitted it would have been easy to simply sit at her desk and collect a paycheck. She did not take advantage of this situation, but the implications of this lack of oversight seemed clear.

The liaison regularly lamented a lack of time to fulfill her duties. She was so busy identifying and procuring resources for students she had little time for anything else. This situation was exacerbated because she was also in charge of another important district-wide program (overseeing student mental illness issues, obviously a large and time-consuming task in itself considering the size of the district and perhaps telling in that it was combined with the homeless program). Unfortunately, this was nothing new at the LEA. Indeed, the previous liaison had five or six different duties besides McKinney-Vento. This was especially significant because the current liaison believed that the job actually required a “fulltime plus someone” if it was to be done adequately. In short, the liaison position at this LEA, by its very structure, was almost destined to fall short and fail to meet the needs of homeless youth.

Much of these circumstances hint at the unavoidable truth that McKinney-Vento appears to not be a top priority at the district (or by extension the state). Note, this does not mean that there were not diligent, humane, and competent people diligently striving to meet the needs of homeless students. Indeed, I found that most of those I met were quite dedicated; however, they were frequently running uphill as they attempted to perform their good work. The significant accomplishments that did occur did so almost despite the forces aligned against them. If thoroughly serving homeless children were treated as a priority of the district to the same degree as it approaches athletics, surely it would merit sufficient staffing. To this point, the LEA deemed it worthwhile to pay someone in excess of \$100,000 (plus a secretary) to act as its athletic director—clearly demonstrating a willingness to support programs it considered important.

One last issue about the district’s program concerned the McKinney-Vento subgrant they received from the state. Although the amount received was under \$30,000, the required documentation was disproportionately tedious. The liaison’s supervisor was shocked by what was required, describing it as significantly more time-consuming (the liaison spent the bulk of a work week simply gathering all the requested documentation) than another grant the district received worth several million and hardly worth the effort involved. One wonders if such disincentive has driven other districts away from pursuing the grant dollars.

Demonstrating further potential flaws in this process, at one point when the state auditor was going over the district’s documentation, the liaison was asked for evidence that she had communicated with local service providers as required. Unsure how to prove this, the liaison proffered her Roll-A-Dex with handwritten phone numbers and notations. The auditor glanced at them and this somehow served as ample evidence this aspect of the policy was being followed. The potential for abuse or mistake with such oversight was obvious.

Recommendations

McKinney-Vento aims to ensure that homelessness does not cause a child’s academic failure (ED, 2004, p. 2). I am going to consider this the standard while making my recommenda-

tions for how it can better meet this promise. I acknowledge that some of these recommendations require a rethinking of how schools address homelessness in general. They entail a higher level of commitment, assuming, once again, the stated objective of McKinney-Vento is more than a platitudinous catchphrase designed so we can pat ourselves on our collective backs, content that we have “done something.” The United States can, and should, do better. Here are some ideas for moving the country in that direction.

Awareness: One of the most persistent themes that emerged was a general lack of awareness throughout the district concerning homeless students. LEA’s must make a concerted effort to increase the pervasiveness of knowledge about McKinney-Vento throughout their entire systems. This is especially true regarding individuals who directly interact with students and would therefore be more likely to help identify eligible youth, an issue that repeatedly emerged during my investigation. The loss of housing is an intensely personal experience that many prefer to keep private. I was recently privy to a heartbreaking illustration of this when my son’s 7 year-old best friend told him his “big secret” in a hush: “We used to sleep in our van.” This was a child whose seven-member family had lived with us for a couple months in rather close quarters after we discovered their plight and welcomed them into our home until they could get back on their feet. Even though he had been my son’s best friend for over a year, he obviously still felt embarrassed by the situation. Imagine how difficult it must be to open up in a school setting. However, if a homeless child does open up, it will most likely happen with a teacher or counselor who has forged a bond with them. Thus, it is imperative the adults forming relationships with students are informed of McKinney-Vento so they can better identify and help vulnerable youth survive their ordeal. Quite frankly, it is unacceptable that so many educators are unaware of McKinney-Vento after more than two decades. This fact alone shows the policy has failed to some degree. The law mandates that states “create programs for school personnel (including principals, attendance officers, teachers, enrollment personnel, and pupil services personnel) to heighten the awareness of such personnel of the specific needs of runaway and homeless youths.”¹⁹ Obviously, this was not sufficiently happening in this LEA despite it being a critical component of a well run homeless student service organization.

Liaisons should therefore establish strong professional development programs to educate the *entire* district of the policy’s intent. This instruction must cover the basics of the law as well as information to counter the deficit thinking surrounding the issue of homelessness in general and the blaming of homeless people for what they are going through. A nonjudgmental mindset, which focuses attention on what matters for the students, must be embraced by the liaison and communicated to the entire district. It must be repeated consistently in different forums. The more people in the district who can look past these kids as objects to be judged and become aware of their mutual humanity, the closer the district will move towards serving them in a more substantive manner.

Another way a district might improve how they approach their homeless program would be to make the wider community more aware of their efforts. In the course of my investigation I was informed of a nearby LEA with a reputation for having a very well run McKinney-Vento program. I arranged an interview with the liaison from this district and inquired about why their program was so effective. She told me that other than having the clear backing of the superintendent and the time needed to accomplish her duties—McKinney Vento was clearly a priority at this LEA—there was nothing more critical than the support of the local community. She described efforts such as rallying local churches to provide funding for various efforts aimed at

19. ED, 2004.

helping the district's homeless students feel more integrated into "regular" student life; these efforts ranged from procuring prom dresses to basic school supplies to computers for a graduate to take on to college. It included efforts to coordinate the various aid organizations in the community so that they could better work with the schools and each other to provide better service for everyone involved. She described the effort as a slow and time consuming, but well worth the trouble, not only because it made for a more effective network of service across the board, but it also helped change the way many in the community saw their local homeless population. She described witnessing a shift in attitude amongst many people she worked with, moving from an attitude of hardly recognizing the problem of homelessness in their community at the beginning (and a tendency to blame the homeless if they did notice them) to a growing sense of viewing the issue in human terms that deserved a collective response. The end result was a more solid, humane homeless service organization to benefit the entire community.

Resources: Another problematic issue seen during the investigation involved a consistent resource shortage for implementing McKinney-Vento. To counteract this trend, district leadership should give liaisons the resources needed to thoroughly address the basic mechanics of the job; for example, provide the time to thoroughly identify all homeless students. At the very least this entails freeing the liaison from extraneous duties if the district is of sufficient size to require this level of support (it seems patently ludicrous to expect that a single person is sufficient for an organization with 20,000 students). Once again, as we have seen with examples like the athletic director, districts are more than capable of rearranging resources for causes they consider important. LEA's need to treat homeless children with at least the same level of prioritization as football. As seen in the effective example mentioned just above, such prioritization can pay big dividends.

As part of this increased effort district leadership must also make it widely known that the liaison has their support and that it will be considered unacceptable to obstruct their McKinney-Vento activities. According to virtually every liaison I have spoken with, having this level of top administrative support was absolutely imperative. Given that we can almost guarantee there is going to be at least some level of prejudice and/or deficit type thinking in every organization—this tendency of blaming the victim for their situation has simply permeated society's view of homelessness for such a long time—someone like the superintendent must be visibly unambiguous in declaring their unqualified support.²⁰ Again, the liaison in the effective LEA concurred that this support was critical to her organizations success.

Compliance: My final recommendation is to change how the state ensures districts comply with McKinney-Vento. At the LEA I investigated there was very little oversight from the state about how they were operating their program. This was evidenced by the dearth of professional development opportunities provided for teachers to better understand this vulnerable population, even though providing increased awareness was part of the charge of McKinney-Vento. It was obvious in the almost afterthought position of the liaison who was almost completely free of regular supervision. It was demonstrated by the principal's admission that his school was underidentifying children and his obvious frustration at having to hunt for information about the law on his own. It was seen in the existence of those in the district who were trying to consciously and illegally turn away homeless students deemed undesirable and would have gotten away with it but not for a determined child making a phone call. And all of these un-

20. Ashlee Anderson, "Teach for America and the Dangers of Deficit Thinking," *Critical Education* 4, no. 11 (2013): 28-46; Richard R. Valencia, *The Evolution of Deficit Thinking: Educational Thought and Practice* (London: Falmer Press, 1997).

fortunate examples were occurring with virtually no one at the state aware of what is going on; they certainly were not proactively working with the LEA to rectify these sorts of problems.

In other words, the state has duly passed along news of the McKinney-Vento mandate to this LEA and is more or less hoping they follow the law. If there are any problems, the Texas Education Agency is largely relying upon the victims—these belonging to a long-marginalized group whom we know are hesitant to bring attention to their homelessness—to report violations of a policy of which the majority of people are ignorant, to a hotline they *might* be aware of. There a system in place if a homeless student is denied access to a school; it consists of a 1-800 number to seek an appeal if a LEA refuses to provide service as the law requires. The question here is how many eligible students even know this process exists or if they are eligible? How easy is it for a school to simply tell a scared 16 year old kid on his or her own that they are not welcome and that be the end of it? Who holds the power of position and has the knowledge of how to manipulate the system in this situation? It hardly seems like a level playing field. Indeed, using as evidence the district I studied that increased its homeless numbers from 30 to around 400 after they received a subgrant and a more effective liaison, it seems safe to hypothesize that self-reporting does not appear to be working very well. A more noticeable compliance presence on the part of the state would likely increase the level of McKinney-Vento implementation simply on account of districts having a more tangible example that it was now being taken more serious.

Ultimately, all three of these recommendations demand that schools and policy makers give the issue of educating homeless children the level of urgency it deserves. We must make it a priority and act accordingly. How many students have we lost in the past decades by not doing so? How many are we losing now? At what point will we say enough is enough?

- o In the home of a friend or relative because I lost my housing (*due to flood, fire, lost job, divorce, domestic violence, kicked out by parents, parent in military and was deployed, parents in jail, etc.*)
- o In a shelter because I do not have permanent housing (*examples: living in a family shelter, domestic violence shelter, child/youth shelter, FEMA housing, etc.*)
- o In transitional housing (*housing that is available for a specific length of time only & partly paid for by a church or another organization*)
- o In a hotel or motel (*because of economic hardship, eviction, cannot get deposits for permanent home, flood, fire, hurricane, etc.*)
- o In a tent, car, van, abandoned building, on the streets, campground or other unsheltered location
- o None of the above describes my present conditions. *Briefly describe the situation:*

Please provide the following information for school-age siblings (brothers and/or sisters) of the student:

Name	Campus
1. _____	_____
2. _____	_____
3. _____	_____
4. _____	_____

X: _____ **Date:** _____

Signature of Parent/Legal Guardian/Caregiver/Unaccompanied Student

Please scan or fax a copy to XXX at Support Services

For School Use Only

I certify the above named student qualifies for the Child Nutrition Program under the provisions of the McKinney-Vento Act.

McKinney-Vento Liaison Signature

Date

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