

HOUSING INSTABILITY & EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES OF SAN MATEO COUNTY YOUTH

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INTRODUCTION

Nationally, an estimated 1.3 to 1.7 million youth experience homelessness each year (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2012; National Center for Homeless Education, 2020). In California alone, during the 2018-2019 school year, 260,000 K-12 students, or 3% of the K-12 student population, were identified as homeless (Burns, Espinoza, Ondrasek, & Yang, 2021; Piazza & Hyatt, 2019). Homelessness is part of a wider crisis of *housing instability*—or the lack of permanent, stable, and adequate housing conditions (Ziol-Guest & McKenna, 2014).

Homelessness and housing instability have far-reaching consequences for local communities and can greatly impact educational outcomes for affected youth. For example, compared to their housing stable peers, youth experiencing housing instability of any duration tend to demonstrate lower levels of academic achievement (Burns et al., 2021; Cutuli et al., 2013; Herbers et al., 2012; Masten et al., 2014; Obradović et al., 2009) and higher rates of absence from school (Burns et al., 2021; Obradović et al., 2009; Pavlakis, Richards, Roberts, & Pierce, 2020). While inequitable patterns in educational outcomes are persistent, they are not necessarily inevitable. Policies and practices can help create the conditions that ensure that all youth, regardless of their housing situation, have access to the tools, resources, and services they need to learn. This is true at a national and state level—but it is also true in California’s San Mateo County.

San Mateo County is one of the wealthiest counties in the nation, but has long struggled with addressing income inequality and housing costs that together create and sustain high rates of housing instability (US Census Bureau, 2019). The devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which worsened county unemployment rates and accumulated rental debt, added to a perfect storm of economic crises that exacerbated the county’s already dire housing landscape and created the conditions that all but ensure that high rates of housing instability will continue over the coming years (Cantu & Kepferle, 2021; CBS SF Bay Area, 2021). These conditions portend to have serious consequences for the youth living in the county. This, in turn, prompts a real call to action for all who engage in shaping and implementing social and educational policies that impact how youth experiencing housing instability are identified and supported and ultimately demonstrate high levels of learning and achievement.

Many leaders who shape and oversee implementation of various policies and practices designed to support youth do not have a clear or shared picture of the current landscape as it relates to housing instability and academic outcomes. This lack of understanding is a central barrier to creating an effective policy response, and it ultimately hinders the county’s ability to support the academic success of youth experiencing housing instability.

In this report, we investigate the size, demographics, and distribution of the K-12 student population experiencing housing instability, how districts identify and support such students, and how their academic outcomes compare to their housing stable peers. To produce this report, the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and their Communities at Stanford University partnered with the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative. We collaborated with 22 of 23 San Mateo County school districts¹ to compile and analyze a rich set of school district administrative data and interviews with school

¹ Brisbane School District, serving roughly 500 students per academic year, declined to participate in this study.

district leaders working across the county. Some of these districts serve students in grades K-8 only (i.e., elementary school districts), others serve student in grades 9-12 only (i.e., union high school districts) and others still serve students in grades K-12 (i.e., unified school districts).

We begin this report by describing the highly varied ways San Mateo County youth experience housing instability. For example, some may be *literally homeless*, which means they are either unsheltered or temporarily sheltered (e.g., residing in a homeless shelter, hotel/motel). Others are *precariously housed*, meaning they are either “doubled up”—where two or more families live together in a single family residence (Hallett, 2012; Low, Hallett, & Mo, 2017) — or in imminent or continuous risk of becoming literally homeless—for example, due to inability to pay rent, changes in guardianship, or other circumstances that render their housing situation to be tenuous (O’Toole et al., 2007; Rossi, 1989).² Together, we refer to this population as “youth experiencing housing instability.” Drawing from this typography of housing or dwelling statuses, we look at the unique characteristics and educational outcomes of youth reported as literally homeless and precariously housed separately, compared to peers who are also economically disadvantaged but stably housed and those who are secure in both housing and family income.

Following a discussion of descriptive results of youth across the county, we move to the crucial question of how San Mateo County school district leadership and staff identify youth experiencing housing instability. State and federal law requires that school districts support youth experiencing housing instability. Provisions set forth under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987—which was reauthorized most recently in 2015 as part of the Every Student Succeeds Act—ensure youth “who lack fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence ... have access to the education and other services ... [and] are afforded the same free, appropriate public education as provided to other children and youths” (McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, 2015). For example, the act requires that transportation services be provided so homeless youth can attend their school of origin, if requested. This and other provisions of the act mean schools, school districts, and county and state education departments are responsible for ensuring educational opportunities for youth experiencing housing instability (Howle, 2019). This responsibility, in turn, raises a number of questions and challenges regarding how to best identify such students in schools (James & Lopez, 2003). Our analysis reveals the strategies and difficulties of identifying youth experiencing housing instability in San Mateo County.

Finally, we describe how site and district staff allocate resources and support youth experiencing housing instability. Many stakeholders—including those working in public schools—need to be involved in identifying and engaging with youth experiencing housing instability, but communication and leadership barriers can inhibit successful collaborations (Altshuler, 2003). Often, efforts to identify students experiencing housing instability fall to the school district’s on-site and central administration staff, at times with supplemental support from outside community-based organizations (Miller, Pavlakis, Samartino, & Bourgeois, 2014). Here in California, where housing instability is much more prevalent than across the country as a whole (U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2020), the State Auditor has declared that the state’s K-12 education system “inadequately identifies and supports” youth experiencing housing instability (Howle,

² District administrative data refer to situations in which multiple families reside in a single-family residence as “temporarily doubled up.” For the purposes of this report, we will use the phrases “temporarily doubled up” and “doubled up” interchangeably.

2019). For example, although California school districts are required to employ liaisons to students identified as housing unstable (McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, 2015), existing staff are often simply assigned the responsibility on top of their other duties in the district, with little training for their liaison role (Howle, 2019). In fact, about 62% of assigned staff spend less than five hours a week attending to their duties as a liaison to students experiencing housing instability (Piazza & Hyatt, 2019). The imperative is clear: public schools need greater support to systematically identify and address the needs of their students who are experiencing housing instability (Howle, 2019; Piazza & Hyatt, 2019).

We conclude this report by offering several strategic recommendations based on the research findings. Our recommendations are designed to foster cross-sector commitment to understand and address the unique needs of students experiencing housing instability.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS, METHODS, AND KEY FINDINGS

To advance efforts addressing the persistent and urgent issue of youth housing instability in San Mateo County, our study examined data from the three school years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (2016-17 through 2018-19). Specifically, we address four research questions:

1. How many K-12 public school students in San Mateo County are reported as experiencing various types of housing instability? What are the demographics of this student population, and how are they distributed across the county's school districts?
2. In San Mateo County, how does a student's housing/dwelling status relate to their educational outcomes?
3. How do San Mateo County school districts identify students experiencing housing instability?
4. How are San Mateo County public school districts' resources distributed to support students known to be experiencing housing instability?

To answer questions (1) and (2), we analyzed K-12 administrative data from 22 of the 23 school districts in San Mateo County for the three academic years (2016-17, 2017-18, and 2018-19). This dataset accounts for roughly 99% of all K-12 students attending public school districts in the county. We relied on district-reported McKinney-Vento dwelling status indicators to investigate the prevalence and demographics (e.g., race, English language proficiency designation) of students experiencing housing instability.³

We analyzed district data to examine how different dwelling status designations and demographic characteristics related to students' educational outcomes (e.g., school attendance and enrollment, out-of-school suspension, GPA, graduation status) compared to their peers who were not experiencing housing instability. Some of their housing stable peers may nonetheless be in a

³ In accordance with reporting requirements established by the McKinney-Vento Act, San Mateo County school districts use four categories to describe or "designate" a student's dwelling status: temporarily unsheltered, temporarily sheltered, hotel/motel, temporarily doubled up.

household experiencing income instability, which is also an important predictor of the educational outcomes we study. With this in mind, we sought to also understand whether students in San Mateo County school districts reported as experiencing housing instability in a given school year have academic outcomes similar to both their housing stable peers who are designated as “low-income” through free or reduced price meal program participation⁴ as well as peers who are “housing and income stable” as measured by having stable housing and not participating in their school’s subsidized meal program.

To answer questions (3) and (4), we conducted 30-to-60-minute interviews with nine district-level staff, including leaders responsible for overseeing district processes for identifying and supporting students and families experiencing housing instability. The nine districts represented by the interviewees included elementary, union high, and unified school districts from different geographic areas of San Mateo County and they reflected a range in the concentration of students experiencing housing instability, from less than 1% to 43% of students enrolled. The interviews considered how districts identify, document, and support youth and families experiencing housing instability.

Together, our mixed methods yielded several key findings:

- About 2% of youth enrolled in the districts studied are identified as experiencing housing instability in a given year. Of those, a large majority (~80-90%) are experiencing temporarily doubled-up housing, whereas the remaining 10-20% are experiencing literal homelessness (e.g., living unsheltered, in temporary shelter, or in a hotel/motel).
- Youth identified as experiencing housing instability are disproportionately Latinx, Black, and designated as English language learners.⁵
- By most school metrics (e.g., chronic absenteeism, elementary and middle school out-of-school suspensions, GPA), youth identified as temporarily doubled up in housing have better outcomes than those identified as literally homeless. However, their four-year high school noncompletion rates are quite similar. This is particularly striking when considering youth identified as experiencing housing instability have four-year high school noncompletion rates three times higher than peers who are both housing and income stable.
- Students experiencing housing instability are not evenly distributed across districts in San Mateo County; for example, in the 2018-19 school year, one district among the 22 we study served 45% of the county’s students who are experiencing housing instability, many of whom were reported as temporarily doubled up.

⁴ While not a perfect proxy, free and reduced-price lunch status provides one indicator of a student’s economic status.

⁵ We use the term “designated as English language learners” to refer to a K-12 student whose family/guardian report the student’s primary home language is one other than English at initial enrollment and who is designated, through an assessment process, to be an English language learner. The administrative data analyzed for this study document these students’ measured “English proficiency.” So, in certain graphs and tables, we use this phrasing to accurately reflect the data set. But throughout the rest of this report, we refer to students’ “designation” status.

- 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.

In the following sections, we discuss our findings in detail. Based on these findings, we highlight three exemplars as promising practices to build the capacity of those charged with meeting the needs of K-12 youth experiencing housing instability. These exemplars include: (1) participating in community collaboratives as sources of support and partnership; (2) employing site structures that facilitate identifying students experiencing housing instability and providing them with resources; and (3) offering training for key personnel. Lastly, we offer several recommendations for state policymakers, local and county leaders, school district leaders, and leaders of youth-serving organizations to understand and address the needs of youth experiencing housing instability.

SCALE AND DISTRIBUTION OF KNOWN YOUTH HOUSING INSTABILITY

We begin by describing the size and distribution of the K-12 public school population experiencing housing instability in San Mateo County. Based on three years of school district administrative data (2016-17 through 2018-19 school years) across 22 public school districts which serve 99% of the county’s K-12 public school student population, we observe over 110,000 unique students, including over 2,600 who experience some form of housing instability during that time (Table 1).

These school districts vary greatly in both annual enrollments and number of students reported as experiencing housing instability per year. For example, five elementary school districts serving a combined total of 4,410 students per school year reported no instances of housing instability over the three years we studied. In comparison, a different elementary school district with an annual enrollment of just under 3,000 students reported over 1,500 unique students experiencing housing instability at some point from 2016-17 to 2018-19. The elementary district with the next largest annual enrollment reports just over 500 students experiencing some form of housing instability among the 16,000 unique students we observe there. Meanwhile, three union high school districts (i.e., Jefferson, San Mateo, and Sequoia Union high school districts) together enroll approximately 22,000 students annually but report just 231 unique students experiencing housing instability over the time period we study.

Table 1. Unique Students Reported, by School District

District	Average Annual Enrollment		Unique Students Across 3-Year Sample	
	All Students	Housing-Unstable Students	All Students	Housing-Unstable Students
Bayshore Elementary	391	10	552	13
Belmont-Redwood Shores Elementary	4,305	4	5,596	9
Burlingame Elementary	3,550	8	4,696	11
Cabrillo Unified	1,348	32	1,603	36
Hillsborough City Elementary	1,428	0	1,841	0
Jefferson Elementary	6,118	86	8,524	147
Jefferson Union High	4,446	44	5,277	71
La Honda-Pescadero Unified	324	0	421	0
Las Lomitas Elementary	1,650	0	1,856	0
Menlo Park City Elementary	3,017	6	4,001	15
Millbrae Elementary	1,647	4	2,876	12
Pacifica Elementary	3,191	4	4,203	10
Portola Valley Elementary	601	0	822	0
Ravenswood Elementary	2,824	948	4,144	1,540
Redwood City Elementary	7,770	16	10,463	35
San Bruno Park Elementary	645	2	1,927	5
San Carlos Elementary	3,158	14	4,100	21
San Mateo-Foster City Elementary	12,116	416	16,259	516
San Mateo Union High	8,199	37	10,370	43
Sequoia Union High	9,126	78	10,474	117
South San Francisco Unified	8,753	36	11,184	51
Woodside Elementary	407	0	509	0
All Districts	84,715	1,762	111,698	2,652

Note: Number of total unique students and housing unstable students is derived from the full records obtained from each district across the 2016-17 through 2018-19 school years. Housing instability is determined using district-reported McKinney-Vento dwelling type status in any school year observed. Brisbane Elementary School District declined to participate in the study.

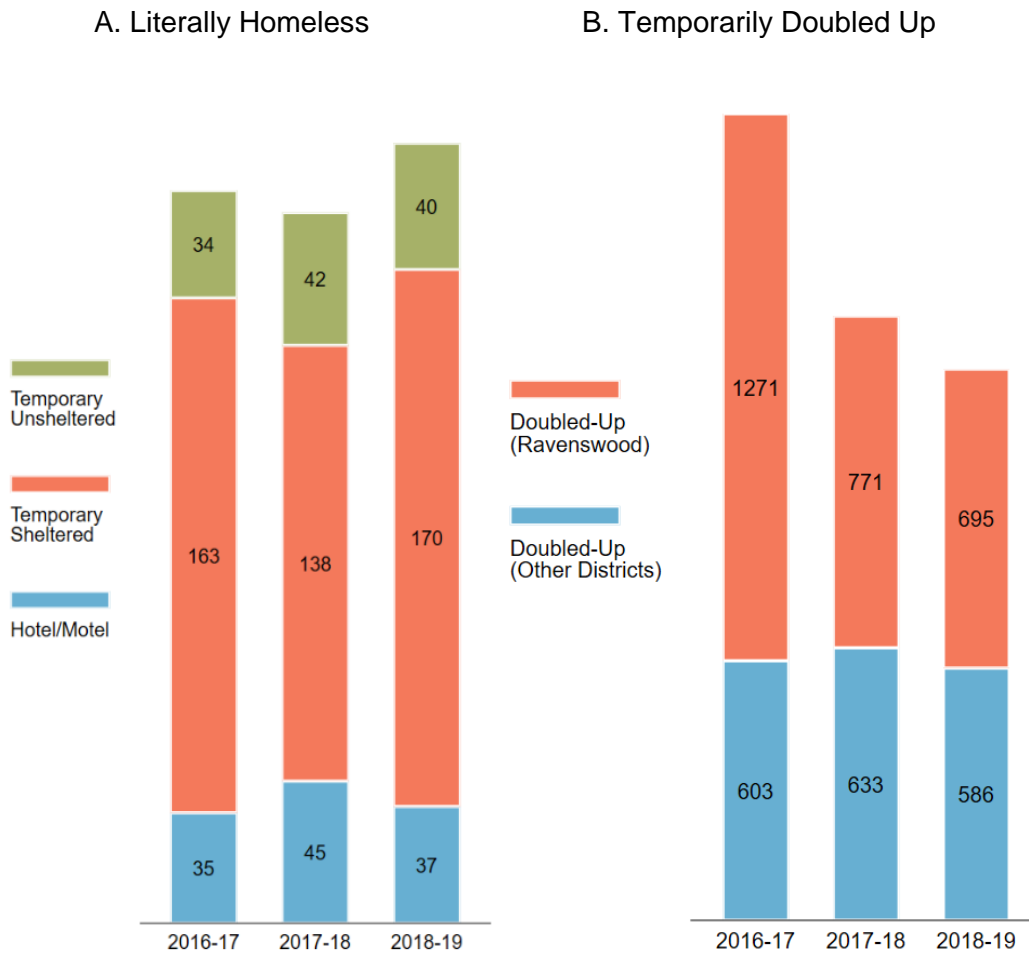
We next consider the prevalence of each dwelling status across all participating districts in each school year we study, and then again disaggregated by school level (i.e., elementary, middle, and high school levels).⁶

⁶ When summed, the numbers reported in Figures 1 and 2 far exceed the unique number of students in the county experiencing housing instability. In an effort to capture how students are represented in housing instability counts across years and grade levels as they age through the school system, we necessarily double or triple count students. Further, students' experience of housing instability varies from year to year. For example, a student may have been temporarily unsheltered in fifth grade in 2016-17 but temporarily doubled up in the 2017-18 school year. Unable to make a certain decision of which category "counts" more for that student (e.g., whether to count that student as "literally homeless" or "doubled up" in the data), we consider frequencies at the student-year level, counting the student once for each school year of housing instability we observe. Additionally, to account for multiple student observations in our educational outcome models, we both control for school year each student is observed and cluster standard errors at the student level.

Figure 1 reports frequencies of students reported as experiencing housing instability among all of the participating public school districts, differentiated by dwelling status, and school year. Figure 1, panel A reports frequencies among the few hundred youth identified in the county in each of these three school years as literally homeless, differentiating students identified as temporarily unsheltered, living in a temporary shelter (e.g., a homeless shelter), or residing in hotel/motel across the county. Specifically, the county's schools report 30-40 instances of youth being temporarily unsheltered, 140-170 living in a temporary shelter, and 35-45 instances of youth living in hotels/motels in a given school year across the 2016-17 through 2018-19 school years.

Figure 1, panel B describes the thousands of youth in a given school year who are temporarily doubled up in housing (i.e., living in a single residence with two or more families)—the most common dwelling status reported among the county's youth. These results suggest that students reported as temporarily doubled up comprise 89% (n = 1,874) of 2016-17 school district reports of housing instability and 83% (n = 1,281) in 2018-19, which is consistent with patterns across the state typically reporting 85% of youth experiencing housing instability as living temporarily doubled up (Piazza & Hyatt, 2019). More than half of those reported as temporarily doubled up in the county attend Ravenswood Elementary School District schools in any given year (e.g., 700 instances in 2018-19).

Figure 1. Reports of Students Experiencing Housing Instability Each Year



Note: Numbers of total students and students experiencing housing instability are derived from the full records obtained from each district across the 2016-17 through 2018-19 school years and count individual students experiencing housing instability each year they are reported as such. Housing instability is determined using district-reported McKinney-Vento dwelling type status in any school year observed. Students identified as literally homeless are either unsheltered or temporarily sheltered (e.g., residing in a homeless shelter, hotel/motel). Students identified as temporarily doubled up reside in a single-family residence with two or more families.

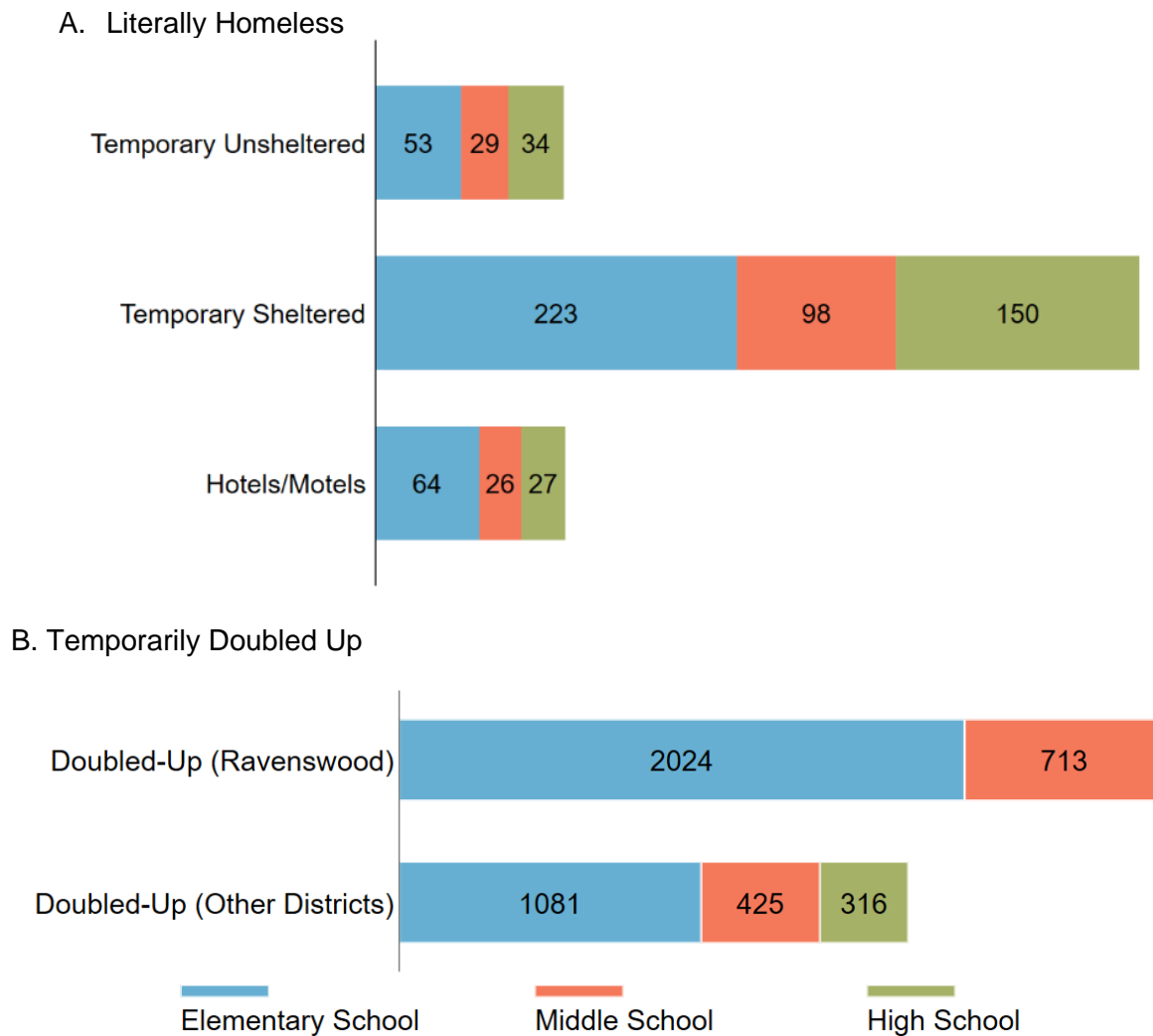
Next, we examined reports of housing instability by school level. For this study’s purposes, we consider elementary school level as serving grades K-5, the middle school level as serving grades 6-8, and the high school level as serving grades 9-12. As Table 1 shows, most reporting of youth housing instability happens among the county’s elementary and middle school students.

Figure 2, panel A clarifies that there are 53 incidents of elementary school students reported as temporarily unsheltered across the three school years we study, while we observe 29 instances among middle school students and 34 incidents among high school students. Far more prevalent are youth living temporarily sheltered across grades K-12; we document 223 incidents of elementary school aged youth reported as temporarily sheltered across the three school years observed, followed by about 100 incidents among middle school aged youth and 150 among high school aged youth. We also observe 64 instances of youth in elementary school being reported

as living in a hotel or motel across the school years studied, with 53 more instances roughly distributed among middle and high school grades.

Figure 2, panel B shows that there are far more instances of students reported as temporarily doubled up compared to instances of literal homelessness across the county. In Ravenswood Elementary School District alone, there are over 2,000 instances of elementary school aged youth being reported as temporarily doubled up across the three years, and over 700 middle school instances. Across all other public school districts we followed in the county combined, there are about 1,000 elementary school instances of students temporarily doubled up across the three years, followed by 425 in middle school and 316 in high schools.

Figure 2. Reports of Students Experiencing Housing Instability by Grade Level



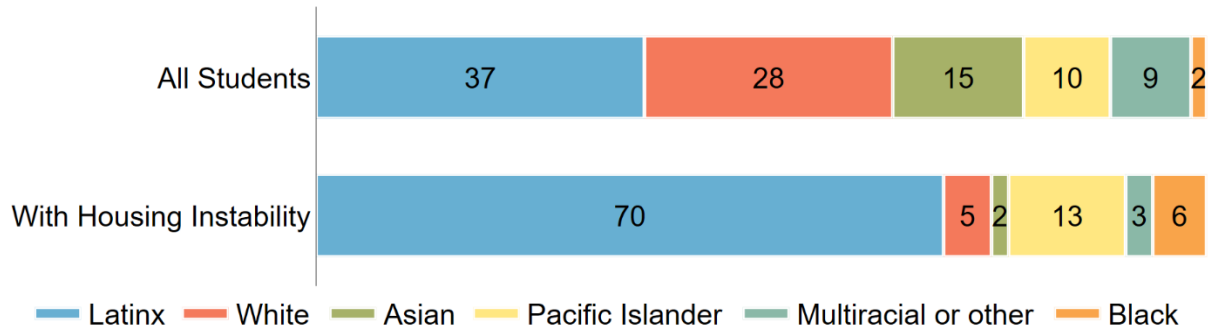
Note: Numbers of total students and students experiencing housing instability are derived from the full records obtained from each district across the 2016-17 through 2018-19 school years and count individual students experiencing housing instability each year they are reported as such. Housing instability is determined using district-reported McKinney-Vento dwelling type status in any school year observed. Students identified as literally homeless are either unsheltered or temporarily sheltered (e.g., residing in a homeless shelter, hotel/motel). Students identified as temporarily doubled up reside in a single-family residence with two or more families.

We now turn to demographic characteristics of students reported as experiencing housing instability from the 2016-17 to 2018-19 school years. Figure 3, panel A shows the percentages of reported race and ethnicity of all students in the county across the three school years, compared to that of students who districts reported as experiencing housing instability. Across the county, 37% of students are Latinx, 28% are White, 15% are Asian, 10% are Pacific Islander, 9% are multiracial or of another racial or ethnic group, and 2% are Black. White students are under-represented among students experiencing housing instability, comprising just 6% of the group, while those reported as Latinx are represented at almost twice the rate as in the full student body, at 70% of students experiencing housing instability. Black students are also disproportionately overrepresented among those experiencing housing instability, at 6%—three times the rate of their representation among all students. Asian students are under-represented among students experiencing housing instability at 2% of the total; those reported as Pacific Islanders are about proportionally represented at 13%. Students reported as multiracial or from other racial or ethnic groups are under-represented among those experiencing housing instability, at 3% of the total.

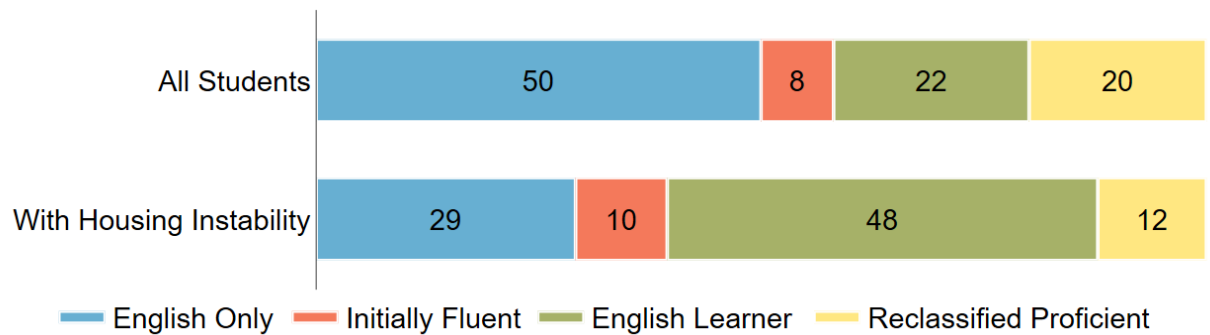
Figure 3, panel B shows the percentages of designated levels of English language proficiency among all students and then among students experiencing housing instability. Among all students, we observe across participating districts, half are designated as native English speakers, roughly a fifth (or close to 20%) are designated as English language learners, another fifth (close to 20%) were reclassified as English proficient, and 8% were designated as fluent English speakers at the time of first examination. Native English speakers are under-represented among youth experiencing housing instability in the county, making up just under 30% of that group. Initially fluent speakers are proportionally represented, at about a tenth of youth experiencing housing instability. Students designated as English language learners are disproportionately over-represented, comprising nearly half of youth experiencing housing instability, while those reclassified proficient are under-represented at 12% of those experiencing housing instability.

Figure 3. Demographic Characteristics of All Public School Students and those Experiencing Housing Instability

Panel A. Percentages by Race and Ethnicity



Panel B. Percentages by Designated levels of English Language Proficiency



Note: Percentages of total students and students experiencing housing instability are derived from the full records obtained from each district across the 2016-17 through 2018-19 school years and count individual students experiencing housing instability each year they are reported as such. Housing instability is determined using district-reported McKinney-Vento dwelling type status in any school year observed. Students identified as literally homeless are either unsheltered, living in a temporary shelter (e.g., residing in a homeless shelter) or living out of a hotel/motel. Students identified as temporarily doubled up reside in a single-family residence with two or more families.

SCHOOL OUTCOMES OF YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOUSING INSTABILITY

We next investigate the second research question regarding the educational outcomes of youth experiencing housing instability. We do so by comparing the educational outcomes of K-12 students in San Mateo County experiencing different kinds of housing instability to the educational outcomes of their peers who (a) are low-income-only (i.e., low income but have stable housing) and (b) are both housing and income stable.⁷ By differentiating these two comparison groups, we are able to better situate students experiencing various forms of housing instability relative to peers who may have similar or quite different economic challenges otherwise. Among students who are experiencing housing instability, we group all students together who are designated as literally homeless (i.e., combining temporarily unsheltered, living in a temporary shelter, or living in a hotel/motel) and only differentiate their average outcomes from those temporarily doubled up on housing.

We first examine chronic absenteeism (defined as missing 10% or more of instructional days in a given school year) and then out-of-school suspension, reporting the proportion of youth in each housing and income category who are either chronically absent or suspended during a given school year at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. We then report on grade point averages of students at the middle and high school levels.⁸ Finally, we consider the graduation rates of students who were enrolled in ninth grade in the county one year prior to our study window to calculate their four-year rates of noncompletion by housing and income status. For each of these results, we average first within and then across school districts and school years to obtain the average within-district rates of each outcome for each school level across the county per year. All differences in estimates between categories of income and housing unstable youth and their housing and income stable peers are statistically significant (see Appendix B for full results).

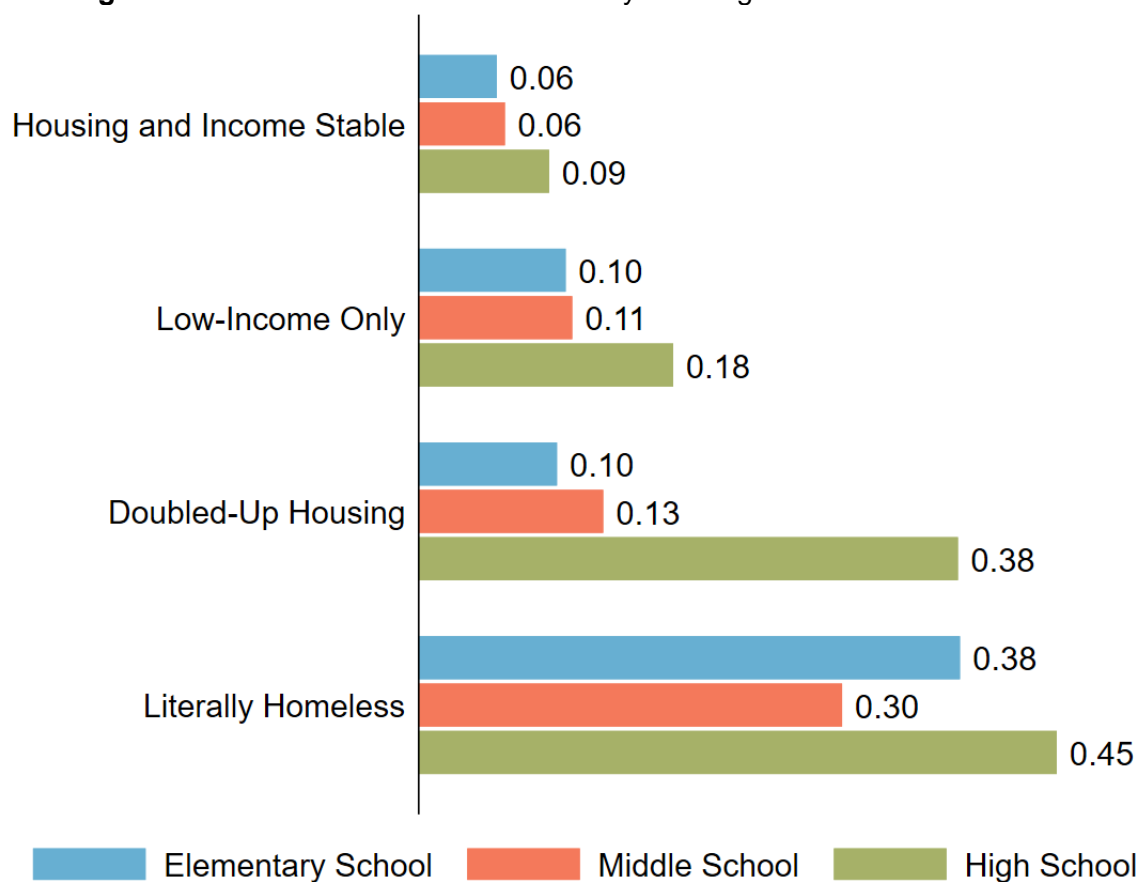
Figure 4 shows average proportions of chronic absenteeism by housing or income status and school level, differentiating elementary, middle, and high school youth. First, 6% of elementary and middle school youth who are reported as both housing and income stable are chronically absent, compared to 9% of such students in high school. About 10% of elementary and middle school peers who are low-income-only are chronically absent, and 18% of low-income-only youth in high school are chronically absent—twice the rate of their peers who are both housing and income stable.

⁷ For the purposes of this discussion, we use the term “low income” to refer to those students who are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch program, and “income-stable” to refer to those students who are not eligible for free and reduced-price lunch programs. This is not a perfect proxy, but it provides us with a way to describe nuanced findings related to different subgroups of students.

⁸ GPAs are not available for grades K-5.

Figure 4 also shows that elementary and middle school youth who are temporarily doubled up in housing have similar rates of chronic absenteeism as their low-income-only peers—at 10% and 13% rates, respectively. However, 38% of high school youth who are temporarily doubled up are chronically absent in a given school year—four times the rate of their housing and income stable peers and nearly twice the rate of their low-income-only peers. By comparison, literally homeless elementary and middle school youth are chronically absent at much higher rates than any of their peers. In elementary school, 38% of literally homeless youth are chronically absent—over six times the rate of their housing and income stable peers and almost four times the rate of their low-income-only and temporarily doubled-up peers. Among literally homeless high school students, nearly half (45%) are chronically absent in a given school year. Together, the data signal that there is a relationship between housing stability and school attendance, and that those who are literally homeless are most vulnerable to higher rates of chronic absenteeism.

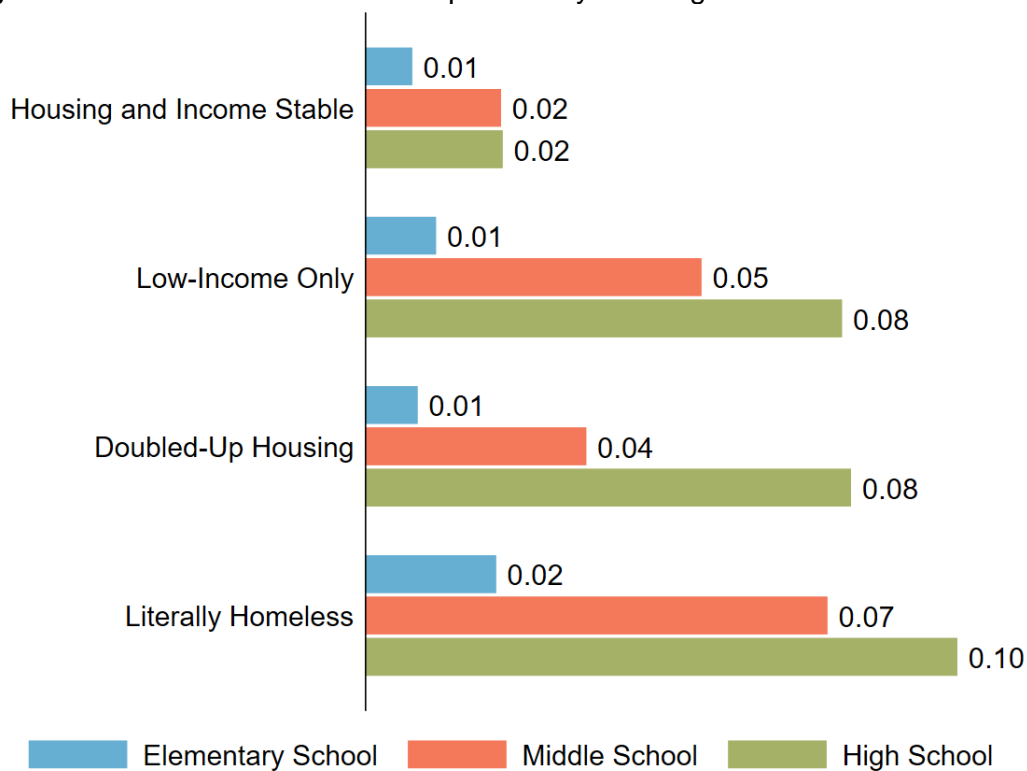
Figure 4. Rates of Chronic Absenteeism by Housing/Income Status and Grade Level



Note: Numbers of total students and students experiencing housing instability are derived from the full records obtained from each district across the 2016-17 through 2018-19 school years and count individual students experiencing housing instability each year they are reported as such. Housing instability is determined using district-reported McKinney-Vento dwelling type status in any school year observed. Students identified as literally homeless are either unsheltered, living in a temporary shelter (e.g., residing in a homeless shelter), or living out of a hotel/motel. Students identified as doubled up reside in a single-family residence with two or more families. All students experiencing housing instability are also considered “low income.” Students identified as “low-income only” are those participating in subsidized school meal programs but do not report a housing instability status. Those considered “housing and income stable” do not report a housing instability status and do not participate in their school’s subsidized meal program.

Figure 5 displays the proportion of students in each housing/income status group who ever received an out-of-school suspension over the course of a given school year at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Very few youth who were both housing and income stable (~1-2%) receive out-of-school suspensions at any school level. About 1% of low-income-only youth receive out-of-school suspension in elementary school, and that percentage climbs to 4-5% for that group in middle school and 8% in high school. The trends are nearly identical among youth temporarily doubled up in housing—about 1% in elementary school receive an out-of-school suspension compared to 4% in middle school and 8% in high school. By comparison, 2% of literally homeless youth in elementary school receive an out-of-school suspension in a given school year, compared to 7% in middle school and 10% in high school—five times the rate of out-of-school suspensions as their high school peers who are both housing and income stable.

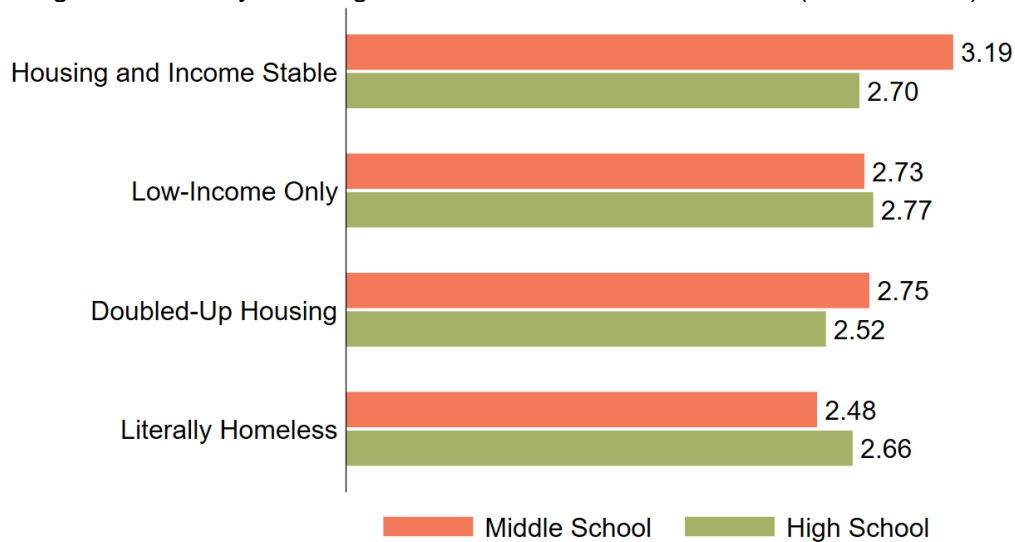
Figure 5. Rates of Out-of-School Suspension by Housing/Income Status and Grade Level



Note: Numbers of total students and students experiencing housing instability are derived from the full records obtained from each district across the 2016-17 through 2018-19 school years and count individual students experiencing housing instability each year they are reported as such. Housing instability is determined using district-reported McKinney-Vento dwelling type status in any school year observed. Students identified as literally homeless are either unsheltered, living in a temporary shelter (e.g., residing in a homeless shelter), or living out of a hotel/motel. Students identified as doubled up reside in a single-family residence with two or more families. All students experiencing housing instability are also considered “low income.” Students identified as “low-income only” are those participating in subsidized school meal programs but do not report a housing instability status. Those considered “housing and income stable” do not report a housing instability status and do not participate in their school’s subsidized meal program.

Grade point averages (GPAs) are more consistent across these groups in high school versus middle school (Figure 6). In middle school, youth who are both housing and income stable have an average GPA of 3.19, which is moderately higher than low-income-only peers and those reported as temporarily doubled up on housing (i.e., 0.44-0.46 grade points, or roughly a B+ vs. B- average) and considerably higher than peers reported as literally homeless (i.e., 0.71 grade, or a B+ vs. C+ average letter grade). Among high school youth in the county’s public schools, youth who are both housing and income stable and those who are low-income-only have similar GPAs (i.e., 2.70-2.77, or a B- letter grade average). Those reported temporarily doubled up on housing have the lowest GPAs of the groups (i.e., 2.52, or a C+ letter grade average), while literally homeless high school youth’s GPAs are slightly higher (i.e., 2.66, or a C+/B- letter grade average).

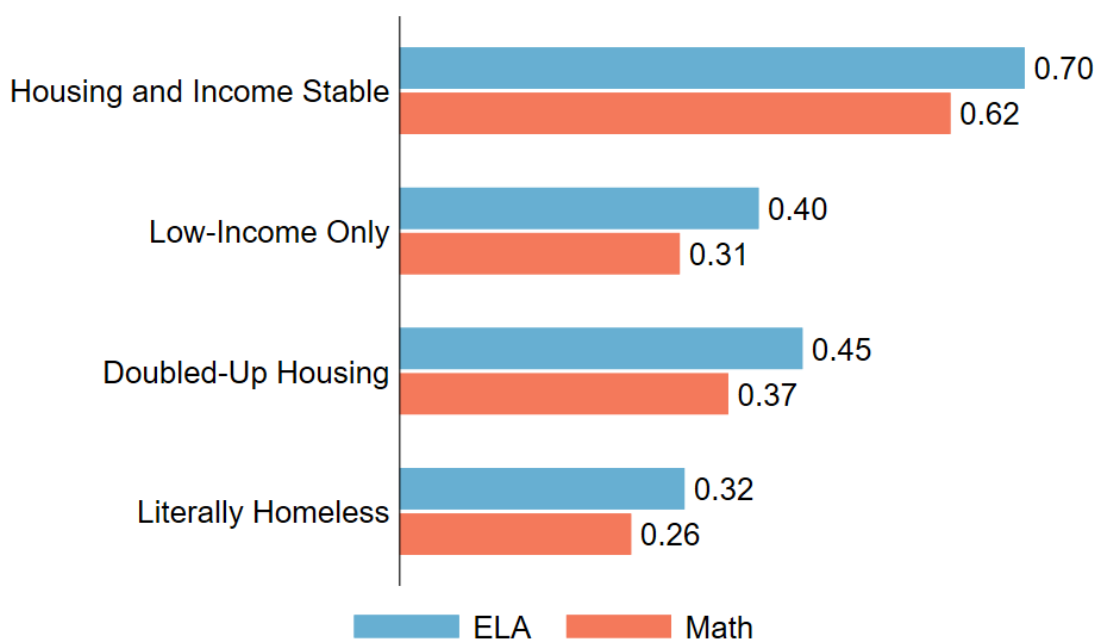
Figure 6. GPA by Housing/Income Status and Grade Level (Grades 6-12)



Note: Numbers of total students and students experiencing housing instability are derived from the full records obtained from each district across the 2016-17 through 2018-19 school years and count individual students experiencing housing instability each year they are reported as such. Housing instability is determined using district-reported McKinney-Vento dwelling type status in any school year observed. Students identified as literally homeless are either unsheltered, living in a temporary shelter (e.g., residing in a homeless shelter), or living out of a hotel/motel. Students identified as doubled up reside in a single-family residence with two or more families. All students experiencing housing instability are also considered “low income.” Students identified as “low-income only” are those participating in subsidized school meal programs but do not report a housing instability status. Those considered “housing and income stable” do not report a housing instability status and do not participate in their school’s subsidized meal program.

California administers state standardized tests to students in third through eighth grades and again in eleventh grade. Figure 7 displays the proportion of students across those grade levels who have scores on English language arts (ELA) and math state tests that meet the state’s expectations for their grade level. Among students who are both housing and income stable, in these grades across the county, 70% meet expectations on the ELA state test and 62% meet expectations on the math test. That compares to just 40% of low-income-only students meeting state expectations on the ELA test and 31% doing so for math. Students reported as temporarily doubled up on housing have similar and only slightly higher rates than their low-income-only peers, with 45% meeting expectations on the ELA test and 37% meeting expectations on the math test. Students reported as literally homeless trail all their other peers; only about 32% meet state expectations on the state’s ELA test, and only 26% meet state expectations on the state’s math test. These results suggest that although low-income-only and temporarily doubled-up students are much less likely to meet state expectations in ELA and math tests than their peers who are both housing and income stable, students reported as literally homeless are the least likely to meet state expectations on these tests.

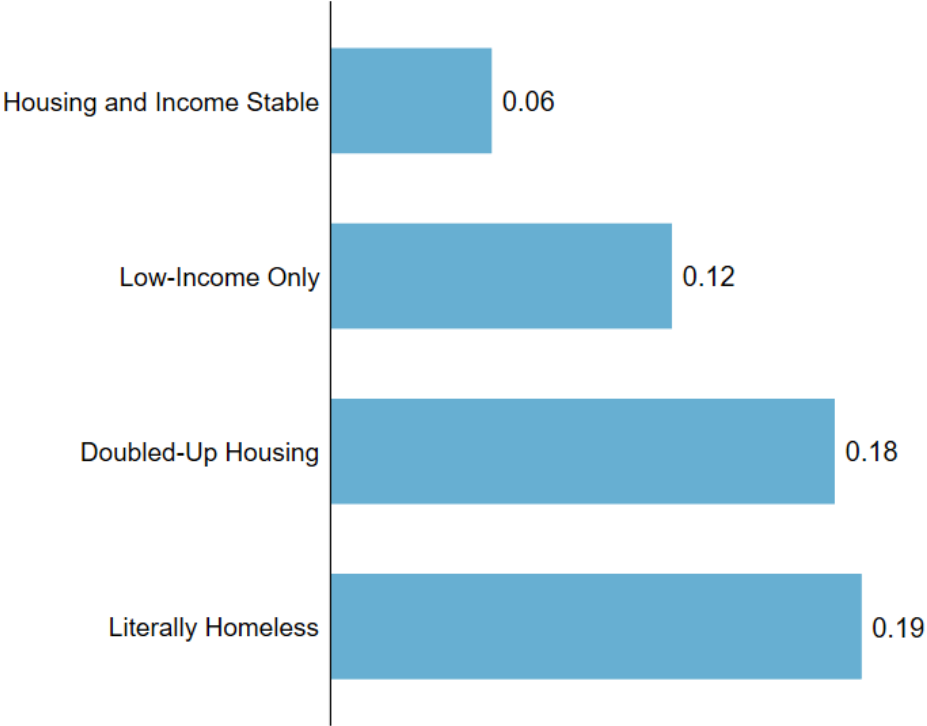
Figure 7. Proportion Proficient on State Standardized Tests, by Housing/Income Status (Grades 3-8, 11)



Note: Numbers of total students and students experiencing housing instability are derived from the full records obtained from each district across the 2016-17 through 2018-19 school years and count individual students experiencing housing instability each year they are reported as such. Housing instability is determined using district-reported McKinney-Vento dwelling type status in any school year observed. Students identified as literally homeless are either unsheltered, living in a temporary shelter (e.g., residing in a homeless shelter), or living out of a hotel/motel. Students identified as doubled up reside in a single-family residence with two or more families. All students experiencing housing instability are also considered “low income.” Students identified as “low-income only” are those participating in subsidized school meal programs but do not report a housing instability status. Those considered “housing and income stable” do not report a housing instability status and do not participate in their school’s subsidized meal program.

Finally, we examine the four-year noncompletion rates of each of the four status groups, among those who were in ninth grade one year prior to our study window and would have completed high school in four years by the end of the 2018-19 school year (Figure 8). Very few housing- and income-stable youth (i.e., 6%) do not complete high school in four years. That compares to 12% of low-income-only peers who do not complete high school in four years. Those numbers are far lower than the 18 to 19% of youth reported as doubled up or literally homeless who do not complete high school in four years—four-year noncompletion rates that are at or over three times higher than peers who are both housing and income stable.

Figure 8. Four-Year Noncompletion Rates by Housing Status



Note: Numbers of total students and students experiencing housing instability are derived from the full records obtained from each district across the 2016-17 through 2018-19 school years and count individual students experiencing housing instability each year they are reported as such. Housing instability is determined using district-reported McKinney-Vento dwelling type status in any school year observed. Students identified as literally homeless are either unsheltered, living in a temporary shelter (e.g., residing in a homeless shelter), or living out of a hotel/motel. Students identified as doubled up reside in a single-family residence with two or more families. All students experiencing housing instability are also considered “low income.” Students identified as “low-income only” are those participating in subsidized school meal programs but do not report a housing instability status. Those considered “housing and income stable” do not report a housing instability status and do not participate in their school’s subsidized meal program.

DISTRICTS' IDENTIFICATION OF YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOUSING INSTABILITY

We now turn to the third research question which examines how San Mateo County school districts identify students experiencing housing instability. To investigate districts' identification strategies, we conducted in-depth interviews with nine district administrative staff, each representing a different school district in San Mateo County. All nine interview participants were district leaders who oversee the identification and support of youth experiencing homelessness and housing instability in their districts, and therefore provided meaningful insight into the existing processes and practices. After analyzing the data using a deductive approach, we applied analytic lenses informed by the literature (including the work synthesized above) and the county's desire for actionable findings. We differentiate these analyses by first focusing on the strategies school district staff employ to identify students experiencing housing instability, followed by the challenges school district staff face when doing so.

Identification Strategies

Our interviews with district leaders reveal that strategies for identifying students who experience housing instability vary significantly and typically include a combination of formal and informal methods. Formal methods include taking advantage of the annual school district registration process and forming partnerships with local homeless shelters. The annual district registration process involves a combination of digital and pencil-paper reporting methods. In some districts, families fill out a form in which they explicitly indicate their housing instability. In other districts, families experiencing housing instability are identified when the registrar notices that the address a family provides is that of a hotel or motel, or when it matches the address of another district student/family. In addition to an annual registration process, a few districts have partnerships with local homeless shelters whereby the shelter notifies the district office when a new family entering the shelter has children attending school in their district. The district contact who receives this information is then responsible for updating the student's dwelling status designation data in the district information system.

According to the interview respondents, districts also identify students through a variety of informal methods. For example, a teacher or staff member may observe something that leads them to reach out to a student's family. During that outreach, they may learn that a family is experiencing housing instability. This primarily occurs when report cards and other school communications are returned as undeliverable, which may then prompt a teacher or staff member to follow up with the student and their family. During such follow-up, teachers/staff gain greater insight into the particular challenges a student and their family are facing, including those related to housing status. Students and families have also been known to disclose their housing status informally to school staff, especially to those who work in the front office and/or as part of student services. When self-disclosure happens outside of the annual registration process, the school or district staff member who receives the information is responsible for communicating the case of housing instability to the district for record keeping.

Regardless of which avenue families take to disclose information regarding their housing instability, most districts respond by conducting some type of intake meeting to better understand the family's particular situation. These meetings typically include family members and a school or

district staff member. During the intake meeting, they work together to fill out a form that includes student name, grade level, school of attendance, parent name, parent contact information, which school/district staff member made the referral, the start date of their housing instability, and their current dwelling type (e.g., car, RV, doubled up). At the intake meeting, the district or school staff member learns more about the extent of the family's needs (e.g., food, transportation) and takes steps to connect them with appropriate resources. It is worth highlighting that across identification methods—formal, informal, and the follow-up intake meetings designed to develop a more nuanced understanding of a family's needs—much of the process relies heavily on individuals (e.g., school staff, family members) for both identifying/disclosing those experiencing housing instability *and* for the proper recording of those data.

Identification strategies vary between elementary and high school contexts.

While identification practices vary widely from district to district, some of these differences reflect the ages and developmental stages of the students each district serves. That is, some districts serve students in grades K-8 only (i.e., elementary school districts), others serve student in grades 9-12 only (i.e., union high school districts), and others still serve students in grades K-12 (i.e., unified school districts). There are only three unified school districts (i.e., districts serving all grades, K-12) in San Mateo County—representing less than 12% of the county's students. One K-8 school district leader who previously worked at a high school with large numbers of students experiencing housing instability describes the stark difference between identification strategies in elementary and secondary settings:

Many high school students had a tough home situation and needed places to go. They couldn't be at home if the situation at home was so bad. We don't have that [in our K-8 district] because we don't have students old enough to make that decision. Instead, at the K-3 level it's very challenging to get accurate data unless parents tell you what's happening, it's hard to track just from young students.

In terms of which staff are involved in identifying students experiencing housing instability, interviewees in elementary school districts emphasize the roles of office staff, while those working in high school districts focus more on the roles of site administrators and mental health staff. Given that younger students are, for developmentally appropriate reasons, less likely than older students to seek support on their own when they are experiencing housing instability, it follows that schools serving younger students (i.e., grades K-8) rely more heavily on front office staff members to identify students and families experiencing housing instability than those serving older students (i.e., grades 9-12). Recognizing this, some districts serving younger students are intentional in their efforts to train front office staff in how to notice when a family might be experiencing housing instability and how to talk with them about this sensitive issue.

Interviewees in elementary districts note that many of their front office staff members are bilingual residents of the local community, and they are skillful at providing a compassionate ear to students and their families. Even so, district leaders are aware that it can be overwhelming for front office staff to be responsible for responding to a wide array of student and family needs. The greatest challenge leaders note is ensuring that new staff are well-trained. Interviewees share that they are “always behind” in training any personnel who might be tasked with identifying and keeping records of students experiencing housing instability.

Schools serving high school students tend to have more people working in administrative and counseling roles than those serving elementary and middle school students. This is clearly the case when speaking with high school staff, who spoke less about the role of front office staff and more about the role of site administrators and mental health professionals (e.g., counselors) in providing the district with information regarding students experiencing housing instability. Our analysis suggests that variations in staffing, coupled with students' developmental ability to express their need for support, appear to contribute to the high schools having more capacity to identify and address the needs of students experiencing housing instability.

Identification strategies vary within and between school districts.

Even when students experiencing housing instability are identified, strategies for communicating this designation across schools and districts vary considerably. As previously noted, there are only three unified school districts representing less than 12% of the county's students. The result is that more than 88% of students (i.e., 98,000) in the county change districts when they transition from middle to high school. Some, but not all, districts serving middle school students have processes in place for meeting with high school district counselors or student services directors to ensure the receiving high school district is aware of incoming middle school students with significant needs related to housing instability. The challenge is that districts with larger numbers of vulnerable students often experience insufficient staffing and frequent turnover of counselors which complicates efforts to communicate and foster continuity in care across the K-12 continuum.

Students are not just vulnerable during transitions between districts; research demonstrates that vulnerable students are also susceptible to discontinuities in services while transitioning between schools within the *same* district, such as during the shift from elementary to middle school (see Eccles, 2004; West & Schwerdt, 2012). As vulnerable students, including those experiencing housing instability, progress from elementary school into middle school or middle into high school, continuity of care is crucial. Yet communication practices supporting a "warm hand-off" that might help to prevent a lapse in support services vary within and between districts and again tend to rely heavily on individuals rather than on any coordinated system.

Identification Challenges

The district leaders we interviewed all agree that students experiencing housing instability are undercounted in their data systems. While current practices provide districts with some relevant data, those we interviewed describe several factors that prevent them from capturing the full extent to which students move in and out of housing instability. As we describe in the following subsections, these constraining factors include district practices, family concerns, and the lack of a common operational definition of housing instability.

District practices contribute to undercounting.

The absence of a coordinated system identifying students experiencing housing instability hinders data accuracy at the school, district, and county levels. Identification and record keeping practices at schools and districts are not sensitive or flexible enough to accurately capture real-time updates regarding student and family housing. While the housing status of a given student could change

on a monthly or even weekly basis, districts do not systematically update the housing status of each student in their district more than once a year as part of the district registration process. Even with yearly reporting, districts have different practices that result in uneven data quality. For example, in some districts we studied, staff ask all families to report their dwelling status during annual enrollment, while in other districts youth may not be identified unless they or their families explicitly disclose their dwelling status to teachers, counselors, or administrative staff.

In the absence of systematic updates, identification relies on individuals to disclose updates and on school and district staff to record those updates properly in the student information system. Responsibility for documenting students experiencing housing instability is therefore distributed complexly and inconsistently throughout districts and schools.

In addition to the challenges related to collecting and recording data on student housing status, district practices related to the maintenance and use of such data also vary significantly. In some districts, students who experience housing instability are flagged for “unstable housing” for the duration of their enrollment. Other districts update students’ housing status as part of the processing of annual registration data. As students transition through the K-12 system there are multiple opportunities for this critical information to be lost, mis-recorded, or outdated.

Finally, school leaders emphasize that when a student presents needs related to housing instability and a staff member is pressed for time, connecting the student to support services takes priority over following the procedure to update the student information system with an accurate housing status. As one district leader describes, “We under-identify [students experiencing housing instability] because the result is the exact same. If they declared they are in shared housing, we still end up enrolling them in food services.” Given the myriad challenges school and district leaders face, some leaders may not see the value of data accuracy relative to the importance of meeting students’ immediate needs.

Family concerns contribute to undercounting.

Multiple family-level concerns contribute to undercounting. For example, shame and stigma about lack of permanent housing influence families’ willingness to declare both housing instability and the need for support. Families also worry about disclosing housing information to formal institutions like schools and districts in fear of repercussions (e.g., increased attention from ICE, CPS). For example, families with mixed documentation status fear that formal records will negatively affect their safety and ability to apply for residency. One district leader explains, “Our families are not that forward. Some families have a hesitation working with a group if they don’t have immigration documents. They’re worried it might impact their immigration status.”

Other families are concerned that their housing status may influence their student’s enrollment in a specific district. Overall mistrust of government systems, and their use of data in particular, are also cited by interviewees as reasons for families’ reticence in declaring housing status.

Insufficient clarity contributes to undercounting.

Under-identification also results from insufficient clarity about what constitutes housing instability and how school personnel ought to proceed when they identify a student who experiences

housing instability. For example, several interviewees share that it is hard to know what constitutes housing instability. One notes, “I tell people, not every shared living situation is homeless, but every homeless situation is shared, at least in this county. Very few are sleeping in cars overnight and not for long.” Others ask, “How unstable is unstable?” Interviewees often proceed to describe the burden they feel as they grapple with understanding a student’s particular housing situation and whether they should be designated as experiencing housing instability. This is especially true in cases where families live in a doubled-up situation. Given the economics of San Mateo County (i.e., stark income inequality, high cost of living), leaders describe how multiple families sharing a dwelling has become quite common.⁹ Many interviewees explain that they hold an explicit bias toward assuming a doubled-up situation constituted unstable housing, while at the same time noting, “To be honest, doubled up becomes a way of living for them.”

When then, is a doubled-up family in a stable situation? Rules of thumb differ among interviewees. For example, according to one interviewee:

If a student has his own bedroom and own bed, then he’s not typically designated as unstable. However, if a student is couch surfing or with an aunt this month and grandparent next month, or if houses are stable but parents and student are moving from home to home then we designate as homeless.

Another adds, “If the family has lived at the address for longer than one year...is this still unstable?”

There are also situations in which the student may not perceive their housing as unstable, but school site and district personnel might have another interpretation. Some interviewees were not sure if students in those situations should be designated as experiencing housing instability.

The theme we heard in interviewees’ comments was this: there is not a clear definition of what constitutes housing instability. Therefore, it takes time to gather the information one would need to make that designation, and then additional time and energy to judge whether such a designation is appropriate. When you add to this the logistics required to record housing status updates properly, interviewees are confident that the result is a significant undercounting of students experiencing housing instability in the district’s schools.

Consequences of Inaccurate Housing Instability Data

Inaccurate documentation and under-identification create significant barriers for districts seeking to effectively serve students and families experiencing housing instability. Students and families who are not identified at the school or district level do not have access to the resources and supports available to those who are identified. One interviewee states, “I am more worried about the families we don’t see as part of outreach. Think about the ones in the shelters. They have meals brought to them, all the wraparound services. It’s the other families I’m more concerned about.”

⁹ According to the Insight Center’s report on “The Cost of Being Californian 2021,” San Mateo County residents saw dramatic increases in the costs for housing, childcare, and healthcare. San Mateo County was rated the most expensive California county in 2021 (Price and Villarosa, 2021).

Undercounting can also lead to an inaccurate picture of actual disparities among youth with different experiences of housing stability and instability. California’s standardized test scores are one common measure used for assessing educational outcomes and disparities among student subgroups. These state tests are administered to grades 3-8, and 11, necessarily omitting half of the students in the county (i.e., grades K-2, 9, 10, 12). When students in vulnerable groups are undercounted, then calculations of disparities in academic outcomes among vulnerable groups are likely to be inaccurate. Furthermore, given their rate of chronic absenteeism, students experiencing housing instability—especially those who are literally homeless—are less likely than their housing-stable peers to be present at school when the tests are administered. As a result, test scores are not a robust measure for understanding the educational outcomes of students experiencing housing instability.

School sites will experience additional challenges due to undercounting. Without accurate information, teachers, counselors, and school leaders will not understand the factors that may be hindering a student’s learning, and in turn, they may miss opportunities to garner public and private resources dedicated to supporting students experiencing housing instability. Undercounting will also influence the amount of funding received through the local control funding formula for these students.

CONNECTING YOUTH AND FAMILIES WITH RESOURCES

To investigate the fourth and final question, we return to the interview data to understand how school district resources are distributed to aid San Mateo County youth experiencing housing instability. We divide our findings among those offering insight into the range of services school districts provide, the variability of resources within and between districts, and the essential role relationships (i.e., between school or district staff and students/families) play in connecting students and families with available resources.

Districts Provide an Array of Services for Food, Basic Needs, and Transportation

Students experiencing housing instability are afforded many supports, including food, basic needs, and transportation. All districts are required to provide students experiencing housing instability with free and reduced-price lunches. Often, students and families are provided with additional supports that might include grocery gift cards, bags and boxes of food, warm meals, and food delivered to shelters and individual homes. Students and families experiencing housing instability are also provided with support for basic needs. Students receive supplies like backpacks, books, school uniforms, support for field trip participation, PE clothing, school sweatshirts, graduation gowns, and yearbooks. Districts also refer students and families to outside agencies that provide temporary housing, mental health services, and housing-related legal services.

Districts are also required to offer students experiencing housing instability support with transportation to and from school. These transportation supports include bus passes, gas cards, taxi services, and credit to rideshare services. For students who reside outside the district during their period of housing instability, the district provides transportation from wherever they are in the county to their school of origin. In these instances, the county will step in to cover the cost of

transporting the student to their school of origin. To obtain that county support, the district needs to organize a meeting with key district leadership (i.e., student services director, business officer, account manager) and various members of county offices to arrange a Purchase Order that will reimburse the district for transportation expenses. This customized level of support has been critically important for students and families experiencing housing instability, yet burdensome for the districts to provide. Some district leaders even decide to forgo pursuing county financial support as they conclude it is more efficient and effective for the district to provide the transportation given the time it takes to convene so many parties.

Resources Vary Within and Between Districts

In addition to food, basic needs, and transportation supports, most district staff we interviewed report that they respond to the needs of students experiencing housing instability on a case-by-case basis. Rather than provide a standard suite of services to those who disclose their housing status, district and/or school staff create individualized responses tailored to the particular needs of the student and their family. This response is driven, in part, by the variability of available resources. One district staff member explains, “At the district level it’s harder because we don’t get general funds. Sites have general funds. It’s a battle every year. Sites have funding that allow them to be flexible. I only have funding for training and for transportation.”

For some, this lack of flexible funding is experienced as limiting the district’s ability to identify and serve students experiencing housing instability. For others, this decentralized approach is seen as “empowering the sites to create what they needed.” And yet, schools often have different resources from which to draw to create their local response. Some of this variability is because many resources are provided by donors or community-based organizations, and their offerings fluctuate over time and across settings. Another factor that compounds such variability involves the relative wealth of a district or even of schools within a district. For example, one district leader described how the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) provided one—and only one—of the district’s principals with \$5,000 in gift cards to distribute to families in need. In the absence of a coordinated system spanning multiple schools or districts, it is hard to allocate resources in such a way that students and families receive the support they need. A systematic approach for distributing resources would streamline this process and ensure that all students and families are served. Interviewees noted that a more coordinated approach would also reduce the stress staff experience as they endeavor to devise and implement customized support plans amid their many other responsibilities.

Relationships Play an Essential Role in Connecting Students and Families with Resources

Simply having resources available is not enough; districts must accurately identify students and families who may need those resources and ensure that they have access to them in their local context. It is yet another thing to create the conditions that enable students and families to feel comfortable enough to step forward to access those services.

Interviewees recognize the sensitive nature of housing instability and emphasize the need for school- and district-level staff to treat families who face this situation with tremendous respect and compassion. In fact, most interviewees report that members of their school and district teams receive training specifically related to serving students and families experiencing housing

instability. One district leader notes, “We always lead with compassion and seek to understand families and be flexible. We want to find solutions rather than tell people ‘No.’ We want to understand the real inner workings of families who are homeless.” Several interviewees also explain how relationship-building is a core component to serving such families. They describe how families that build relationships with school and district staff are more comfortable disclosing their housing status and accessing the resources available to them. One district leader describes their district’s approach to family outreach in this way:

It’s about being able to find ways for families to feel comfortable without them having to ask for help. When we contact the family, we ask them how we can assist you. They have to feel comfortable so they can let us know how we can help.

While schools and districts are making deliberate efforts to equip staff to be thoughtful and sensitive in their outreach and engagement, students and families experiencing housing instability still bear the responsibility for asking for their needs to be met. Given that these families are likely navigating significant crises and trauma related to unmet needs, they may well have the least capacity to ask for help.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND HOUSING INSTABILITY

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing economic hardships for families experiencing housing instability, which, in turn, introduced new challenges to the districts serving this population. Since the beginning of the pandemic, districts have reported an upsurge in families living in unstable housing situations. One district leader observes:

We have had an uptick of homeless students from fall to spring. There are more students [in this situation] now. The number of students in shelters remains more constant because there are only so many rooms. What I have seen is an uptick in the number of students living in hotels and motels for a long period of time. There’s one family that has been living in a hotel for a whole year.

These crowded and unstable conditions make it challenging for students to attend school remotely, complete homework, and rest. In addition, those living with other families (e.g., in a shelter or doubled up in single family residences) are at increased risk for contracting COVID.

Interviewees also report that the COVID-19 pandemic made it more difficult for families experiencing housing instability to make ends meet. Most interviewees note that they experienced an increase in demand for weekly boxes of groceries and access to warm meals. One district staff person shares:

COVID has just exacerbated the families’ situations. Families already struggle for a lot, especially those who need to be in-person to do work. These families are essential workers or providing in-person care. COVID really impacted their ability to find work, to provide for their families.

Another district staff person reports, “Our families experience housing stress in general. Right now, there’s a protection on rent but to be perfectly honest, it doesn’t matter. Families are still in debt. They fear that they’ll lose their housing when these protections go away.”

Tracking down families—either to gather accurate information regarding their housing status, or to connect them with resources—became harder than before once COVID began. Interviewees cite multiple reasons for this, including what some district leaders describe as “COVID-related mobility and a decision not to verify residences.” For example, the remote schooling context enabled some families to travel to places where they might find work or be closer to their extended family. Leaders note that some of their students attended school remotely from Bakersfield, Sacramento, Oregon, and even Mexico. Not only did housing instability increase, but many district leaders report significant concern about families that separated in search of employment. They fear children were often left at home to attend school and be “checked on” by a relative or friend.

During the pandemic, just as student and family needs were increasing, opportunities for identifying and addressing those needs were decreasing. Because of the irregular or nonexistent in-person contact between families and their schools and districts, there were fewer opportunities for families to disclose their change in housing status, for staff to identify students who might be experiencing housing instability, and for families to connect to needed resources. One interviewee reports, “Families are not coming in so there are not as many opportunities for them to disclose their housing situation, for school staff to identify them as homeless, or for families to reach out about the services they need.”

Certainly, the pandemic has only exacerbated conditions for those families who were struggling prior to 2020. More research is needed to understand exactly how the population experiencing housing instability has been faring during this period.

BEST PRACTICES

Our analysis highlights a set of promising practices that effectively aid the work of researchers and practitioners committed to identifying and supporting youth experiencing housing instability. We offer three exemplars that merit further attention.

Community Collaboratives as Source of Support and Partnerships

Some of the district leaders we interviewed described participating in a variety of community partnerships that enabled them to better serve vulnerable families. Districts with informal infrastructures of collaboration leverage these existing partnerships to support students and their families. Half of the participating districts are part of a community collaborative and have strong relationships with local nonprofit organizations. These nonprofits provide services such as housing, mental health counseling, food supports, and a range of afterschool and/or enrichment programs.

Interviewees from these districts report that these partnerships play critical roles in helping them serve students and families. For example, a district leader describes an effective collaboration with a local homeless shelter. The shelter notifies their partner district of families within the district

boundaries who make use of their services. Rather than ask the family to contact the district, which might be challenging on a variety of fronts, the shelter facilitates the identification and support process by offering to reach out to the district on behalf of the family. Without this district-shelter partnership, the district may not identify these families as in need of additional services. Furthermore, these strong partnerships create clear avenues for district and school staff members to refer families to services that the district is not able to provide in-house.

More structured strategies also support districts to better serve these families. Some leaders describe monthly meetings attended by school districts, community organizations, and other agencies to discuss opportunities to improve supports for their most vulnerable families. These regularly scheduled meetings facilitate coordinated communication, which in turn enables creative solutions. Together, cross-sector leaders operate outside the typical institutional silos to find housing, food, health, and transportation supports for those most in need. These meetings are particularly important in communities where there are multiple school districts (i.e., elementary and high school) potentially serving the same families.

Close proximity of services, relationships, and structured communications enable the districts to work in concert with support providers to best serve families experiencing housing and financial instability. At a time when the education sector is challenged to address the effects of persistent inequality, connections with outside agencies and organizations extend their reach.

Site Structures that Facilitate Identification and Resource Provision

Just as structured partnership meetings at the community level make a difference in districts' efforts to better support students and families experiencing unstable housing, so do school sites' practices of convening inclusive, structured conversations. For example, school sites using a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) framework hold monthly (or weekly) meetings that include counselors, administrators, and teachers to coordinate and troubleshoot support for the most vulnerable students. An MTSS framework is designed to address the behavioral, social and emotional, and academic needs of youth requiring support. Districts promote and maintain MTSS practices in a variety of ways. Those districts with large numbers of students presenting acute and/or complex needs utilize the MTSS framework to organize supports and interventions. Although not specifically designed to target students experiencing housing instability, MTSS meetings are described by interviewees as an efficient strategy for identifying and supporting these students.

Training for Key Personnel with Direct Contact

Some district leaders emphasize the importance of providing training for any personnel most likely to identify and support families experiencing housing instability. They highlight training in four specific areas: policies regarding identification and support, legal rights of youth experiencing housing instability, best practices for housing status identification, and more generally, the importance of working as part of a team to avoid compassion fatigue. Policies regarding the district's responsibility to students experiencing housing instability are typically better understood at the district level than in the school setting. In fact, it is a key responsibility of the district's student services team to continually educate school staff to help ensure that schools are fulfilling their

commitment to identify and support students experiencing housing instability. District leaders we interviewed describe the ways they support school site staff—including principals, assistant principals, and administrative assistants—to understand the rights of youth experiencing housing instability or foster care. For example, youth and families do not need to present specific required documents. “We have a declaration form for homeless families to sign without any additional proof necessary,” notes one interviewee. District staff describe training office staff and teachers to identify students experiencing housing instability. For example, staff are encouraged to look for certain signs and to listen for specific opportunities when a family comes by or calls the school. Leaders explain that training school front office staff in how to assume a compassionate posture and identify families experiencing housing instability made a big difference in the schools’ capacity to serve this population. Leaders also acknowledge the burden it places on staff to attend to the needs of students experiencing housing instability. As one leader explains:

They are hearing some really hard stories and are not trained like administrators are. We have to remind them to stay in their lane, take care of themselves and shift the families to trained professionals to listen to those stories as much as possible.

Many leaders note that they are intentional about offering annual training to reinforce these ideas to returning staff and to introduce lessons to new staff in need of learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, and certainly in San Mateo County, housing insecurity has been a critical issue, exacerbated by the public health events of the last two years. The housing instability crisis has had profound effects on vulnerable children, youth, and families. This report has described some of the ways youth experiencing housing instability struggle in the education system. Educational disparities between the county’s population of young people who are experiencing housing instability and their peers who are not can have long term consequences. For example, elementary age students experiencing housing instability have higher rates of absence than their peers, which can be an early indicator of significant difficulties both in and out of school. It is, therefore, critically important to identify and support students experiencing housing instability, and yet we observe the challenges districts encounter as they endeavor to do so. In this section, we will offer a set of recommendations for improving the outcomes of youth experiencing housing instability.

Streamline District Processes for Identifying Vulnerable Youth

Taken together, our results underscore a need for enhanced and streamlined processes to identify youth experiencing housing instability. This population of young people is highly vulnerable and for many reasons remains undetected due often to their low representation in the schools they attend. Systems and strategies must be created so that those stakeholders closest to youth experiencing housing instability are both aware of this vulnerable population’s needs and provide necessary supports once students are identified. For example, while a district staff member and a site principal might know which students are experiencing housing instability in a given school, individual teachers may not be aware. Engaging teachers creates the potential for tuning into earlier signals (e.g., patterns of absenteeism) of larger concerns (e.g., housing

instability), and responding promptly with concrete resources and supports that address the unique barriers to learning that students may be experiencing.

Clear, consistent, and established processes for identifying youth experiencing housing instability are thus essential to inform and improve local, regional, and statewide efforts to support this vulnerable population. California requires public school districts to report each student's McKinney-Vento dwelling status, which includes identifying those who are temporarily unsheltered, living in a temporary shelter, living in a hotel or motel, and living temporarily doubled up on housing. Although reporting dwelling status is required of public schools, there are no standardized guidelines for how these data are to be interpreted or collected. Our findings suggest the following actions are needed to ensure the proper identification of vulnerable students:

- (1) Enhance opportunities for identifying students experiencing housing instability, including self-disclosure. Locally, within school districts and the cities or municipalities encompassing them, leadership can provide multiple methods of identifying students experiencing housing instability. This includes offering discreet opportunities for families to disclose housing instability in ways that reduce or avoid stigma and shame and/or creating incentives for families to disclose their housing-related needs.
- (2) Streamline processes for identifying housing instability. In addition to enhancing opportunities for identification, it is essential that school districts develop at least one consistent practice for explicitly asking families to report dwelling status annually. We recommend including questions meant to identify students experiencing housing instability as part of the annual district registration/enrollment process, which would allow the data to be integrated into an existing data system. Such a data system would, in turn, lend itself to analysis and ultimately to informing practice. For example, data could help with differentiating resource allocations among those experiencing economic hardship from living doubled up or literally homeless—since educational outcomes vary considerably between these two types of housing instability.

Develop State and Regional Engagement in Improving Data Collection

State policymakers can provide explicit data collection guidelines, and create incentives for improving data quality (e.g., equipping districts with sufficient staffing and technology). At the county level, leadership can advance cross-agency understanding of the importance of accurate data regarding youth experiencing housing instability and create the conditions that support improved data practices. For example, county leadership can standardize McKinney-Vento dwelling designations as common measures across youth-serving organizations and agencies, including but not limited to school districts. Additionally, they can advance cross-agency data briefings to foster shared understanding, collective engagement, and investment in gathering and using meaningful data to inform and improve services to this population. These measures will help ensure accurate reporting is met with action to address the specific needs of youth experiencing housing instability.

Identify and Resource Responsible Personnel at Multiple Levels

Our research finds that identifying and providing support to youth experiencing housing instability is a diffuse and distributed responsibility. Personnel involved in identifying and serving such youth include student services directors, administrators on special assignment, assistant principals, front office staff, and more. Everyone interviewed about this project is deeply committed to the best possible support for this vulnerable population. However, we find that district staff currently tasked with addressing the needs of youth experiencing housing instability are often juggling multiple responsibilities. In many districts, this is understandable due to low counts of youth experiencing housing instability in small districts and the disjointed district structure in the county (i.e., bureaucratic structures across 23 public school districts, some serving youth in grades K-8, others in grades 9-12, and some serving grades K-12).

A diffusion of responsibility often disincentivizes people to act, either because they are unclear about their own role and associated duties, or they may assume that student needs will be addressed by someone else. Lack of clarity about responsibility for identifying and providing resources to students experiencing housing instability may contribute to inconsistent implementation of identification processes and missed opportunities to provide students with needed support.

Within school districts, one way to address diffusion of responsibility is to create a simplified and coherent approach for overseeing and supporting efforts to systematically identify and respond to youth experiencing housing instability. Rather than have one staff member responsible for all the district's youth who experience housing instability, the district lead could oversee and support site-level leaders (e.g., social workers in each of the district's schools). These site-level leaders could then be responsible for identifying and supporting students experiencing housing instability in their respective schools. Furthermore, shared protocols could facilitate providing a common set of resources to students experiencing housing instability. Given that some school districts report very few or even no students experiencing housing instability, they may not have many systems or strategies in place for gathering information regarding student housing status; in these contexts, a common and formal protocol could help ensure accurate reporting.

Provide Coordinated and Comprehensive Supports for Families Experiencing Housing Instability

Beyond more accurately identifying youth experiencing housing instability, we recommend county and local leadership structures provide discreet, automatic, and comprehensive universal supports to all youth whose families disclose their housing status. In addition to free and reduced-price lunch and transportation support, students and families experiencing housing instability likely need additional aid to locate more stable housing. The students will also need help with the expenses associated with housing instability (e.g., uniforms, paid field trips, paid yearbooks, free school supplies) that arise throughout the year. Rather than an ad hoc approach, schools will need ways to automatically provide such resources, and more. Given the range of supports a student may need, we recommend that (a) schools have a specific process in place to support youth experiencing housing instability and (b) this process be integrated into the school's broader approach to providing a coordinated and comprehensive system of student support.

County leadership can play an important role in supporting schools and districts developing these coordinated and comprehensive resources. For example, county leadership can provide templates for a needs assessment or intake interview, and an annotated and updated inventory of relevant community-based organizations. County-level supports such as these would equip school and district staff to do what they are best-positioned to do—building relationships with students and families, developing a rich understanding of their situations, and connecting them to resources that are available, accessible, and aligned with their needs. We would also encourage county leaders to convene a community of practice among 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 effectively responding to the needs of youth experiencing housing instability.

CONCLUSION

Nationally and across California, youth experiencing housing instability have for years faced unique and daunting challenges compared to their peers—including those peers who only experience income instability. Early evidence suggests 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. In San Mateo County, where residents face a persistent and growing crisis in the areas of income inequality, cost of living, and financial precarity, the intensity of housing instability may have been compounded by the pandemic's effects, while its prevalence among the county's youth continues to be hidden by the many resources the county maintains. 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 our report's findings we conclude that youth experiencing housing instability face unique challenges from each other and from their housing-stable peers, and public school districts in the county face many challenges in both identifying and serving students experiencing housing instability. 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. In such cases, relatively low educational outcomes (e.g., GPA, attendance, disciplinary involvement, test scores) among students experiencing housing instability may be misattributed to other factors.

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—as evidenced by interviews with school district leadership and staff, adding to the strength of calls for integrated county- and state-wide responses to this ongoing crisis in housing instability. This includes developing cross-sector awareness of youth experiencing housing instability and a similar cross-

sector engagement in taking steps to ensure their positive and equitable educational outcomes. The call to action from these findings is clear: public schools need greater support to identify and address the needs of their large and growing population of students who are experiencing housing instability.

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APPENDIX A. DATA AND METHODS

District Administrative Data

We draw on a sample that includes students at all grade levels in the 2014-15 through 2018-19 school years in partnering public school districts across the San Mateo County (see Appendix Table A1).

Measures of Housing Instability

We rely on district-reported McKinney-Vento dwelling status to investigate the prevalence of housing instability among students. In accordance with the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act, San Mateo County public school districts collect and report records of students who experience housing instability, recording such students as Temporarily Unsheltered, Temporarily Sheltered, Sheltered in a Hotel/Motel, or Temporarily Doubled up (Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2012). According to the McKinney-Vento Act, “Temporarily Doubled up” includes students who are “sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason.” In certain analyses, we define “literally homeless” students by combining the McKinney-Vento categories of Temporarily Unsheltered, Temporarily Sheltered, and Sheltered in a Hotel/Motel. Because we rely on district administrative records, we are limited to discussing only those incidents of housing instability reported to or ascertained by each the school districts under study.

Outcome Measures of Interest

To investigate the relationship between housing instability and educational outcomes, we include measures of student achievement, attendance, and disciplinary involvement. We use course grade records to compute an overall average grade point average (GPA) that is standardized across all districts. GPA is a measure of both academic performance throughout the year and the abilities of students to present work in ways that are pleasing to teachers (Brookhart et al., 2016). GPA is highly predictive of on-time high school completion and college matriculation (Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson, 2014) and thus serves as a proxy for potential long-term challenges students may face related to housing instability. We equally weight each course and take the average of grades A+/A through F using a standard 4.0 scale. We also look at the average number of failing grades by counting any course in which a student earns a letter grade of D+ or lower. Course grade files are available from all districts for grades 7 through 12 (middle school and high school).

Next, we draw on computed scaled scores on the Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments prepared by the Smarter Balance Assessment Consortium (SBAC). The SBAC tests are comprehensive, end-of-year assessments for English language arts/literacy (ELA) and mathematics that are aligned with the Common Core State Standards for ELA and mathematics, and measure progress toward college and career readiness. These tests are administered to students in grades 3 through 8, and again in grade 11, and represent narrowly defined snapshots of academic performance compared to GPA measures. Based on their scaled scores, students fall into one of four categories of performance called “achievement levels.” Students scoring in

achievement levels 3 or 4 are considered “on track” for college and career readiness and scoring at levels 1 and 2 are not. From the computed SBAC scaled scores and published achievement levels, we create a binary indicator differentiating students who are considered on track for each of the two subtests.

We then analyze attendance records to calculate a total number of absences—both excused and unexcused. Attendance files are available across districts for all grade levels. Finally, we analyze disciplinary records to calculate the total number of reported disciplinary incidents and number of out-of-school suspensions for each student in each school year.

Additional Measures Used

We include several other measures obtained from district administrative records in order to investigate variation based on student characteristics. First, we differentiate students by developmental stage—whether they are in early elementary school (kindergarten through second grade), late elementary school (third through fifth grade), middle school (sixth through eighth grade) or high school (ninth through twelfth grade). Next, we differentiate students by reported race or ethnicity, grouping students as White, Latinx, African American, Asian, Pacific Islander, or multiracial or another race/ethnicity. We then identify students’ English proficiency, determining whether students are English speaking only, initially English fluent, English learners, or have been reclassified as English fluent.

Interview Data

We conducted nine 30-60-minute-long interviews with district-level staff at 9 school districts in San Mateo County. All interviewees led their districts’ process for identifying and supporting students and families experiencing housing instability. The participating districts ranged in their concentration of students experiencing housing instability from less than 1% to 43% of students. The interviews centered around how districts identify, record data related to, and support students and their families. Interviews included Directors of Student Services, Assistant Superintendents, and others responsible for overseeing students in transition.

APPENDIX B. SCHOOL OUTCOME MODEL RESULTS

Table B1. Main Housing Instability Results

Independent Variables	Chronic Absences	Out of School Suspensions	GPA	ELA Test	Math Test	Graduation
Housing and Income Category (Ref = Income & Housing Stable)						
Low income only	0.06*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)	-0.15*** (0.01)	-0.30*** (0.00)	-0.30*** (0.00)	-0.06*** (0.00)
Doubled-up	0.08*** (0.01)	0.01*** (0.00)	-0.30*** (0.02)	-0.25*** (0.01)	-0.25*** (0.01)	-0.12*** (0.03)
Literally homeless	0.32*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)	-0.29*** (0.04)	-0.38*** (0.03)	-0.36*** (0.03)	-0.13** (0.04)
Constant	0.06*** (0.01)	-0.02*** (0.00)	3.54*** (0.01)	0.16 (0.55)	0.22 (0.55)	0.98*** (0.01)
Observations	250,758	250,758	116,887	107,070	107,151	36,828
R-squared	0.031	0.022	0.240	0.156	0.200	0.040

Notes: GPA only includes grades 6-12. ELA and math test models only include grades 3-8 and 11. Graduation model includes only 9th grade students observed in the 2015-16 school year. Models also include controls for school district, school year, and grade level fixed effects. Standard errors are in parentheses are clustered at the student level. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.10.

Table B2. Housing Instability Results by School Level

Independent Variables	Chronic Absences	Out of School Suspensions	GPA
Housing and Income Category (Ref= Income & Housing Stable)			
Low income only	0.09*** (0.00)	0.06*** (0.00)	0.07*** (0.01)
Doubled-up	0.29*** (0.02)	0.06*** (0.01)	-0.18*** (0.04)
Literally homeless	0.36*** (0.02)	0.07*** (0.01)	-0.04 (0.06)
School level (Ref = High School)			
Elementary School	-0.04*** (0.00)	-0.01*** (0.00)	-- --
Middle School	-0.03*** (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.49*** (0.01)
Low income only X Elementary	-0.04*** (0.00)	-0.05*** (0.00)	-- --
Low income only X Middle	-0.04*** (0.00)	-0.02*** (0.00)	-0.54*** (0.01)
Doubled-up X Elementary	-0.25*** (0.02)	-0.06*** (0.01)	-- --
Doubled-up X Middle	-0.22*** (0.02)	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.26*** (0.05)
Literally homeless X Elementary	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.06*** (0.01)	-- --
Literally homeless X Middle	-0.12*** (0.03)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.68*** (0.09)
Constant	0.10*** (0.01)	-0.00 (0.00)	3.06*** (0.02)
Observations	250,758	250,758	116,887
R-squared	0.034	0.031	0.257

Notes: GPA only includes grades 6-12. Models also include controls for school district and school year fixed effects. GPA is not collected by districts prior to middle school. Standard errors are in parentheses are clustered at the student level. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.10.