



The Voices Behind the Numbers: Understanding the Experiences of Homeless Students

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Abstract

In a given year, approximately 1.6 million children in the United States experience homelessness, and research shows that their living conditions generally place these children at risk for educational underperformance and failure at school (Hall, 2007; Love, 2009). Although lack of education or low levels of education on the part of a head of household are often identified as indicators of poverty, or associated with the persistence of poverty, too few researchers have attempted to understand the lived experience of poverty and its impact on educational experiences through the eyes of children and youth. In this article, we bring the harsh realities of children's experiences to light through portraits of five homeless children. After situating homelessness within the context of the McKinney-Vento Act, and within the broader context of empirical research on homelessness and its impact on children's educational experiences, we attempt to put a human face on the challenge of child homelessness and poverty in America.

Keywords: *homelessness, poverty, McKinney-Vento Act, portraiture*

"The equation is simple: education is the most basic insurance against poverty. Education represents opportunity. At all ages, it empowers people with the knowledge, skills and confidence they need to shape a better future."

--Irina Bokova¹

Despite Lyndon Johnson's "war on poverty," explicitly initiated over 50 years ago, 46 million Americans, eight million of them children, live in households with incomes the government considers inadequate. In a given year, approximately 1.6 million children are not only considered poor, but homeless, due to no fault of their own, and research shows that their living conditions generally place these children at risk for educational under performance and failure at school.²

1. Irina Bokova, "Foreword," "Education Counts: Towards the Millenium Development Goals," *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*, accessed November 3, 2014, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0019/001902/190214e.pdf>.

2. Ramona A. Hall, "Homeless Students and the Public School System," *The Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin* 73, (Spring 2007), 9-12; David A. Love, "Commentary: We shouldn't have Homeless Children in America," *McClatchy Washington Bureau*, September 24, 2009, accessed November 3, 2014, http://www.homelesschildrenamerica.org/documents/McClatchy_CommentaryWeShouldntHave.pdf.

The prevalence and extent of poverty have been extensively studied and documented. Scholars have identified and written about numerous indicators of multi-dimensional poverty, most of them associated with lack of resources, unemployment, and lack of education.³ In most cases, the authors focus on understanding the characteristics of poverty so that it can be addressed through public policy or social interventions. Although lack of education or low levels of education on the part of a head of household are often identified as indicators of poverty, or associated with the persistence of poverty, too few researchers have attempted to understand the lived experience of poverty and its impact on educational experiences through the eyes of children and youth. Indeed, the authors of this paper, much of whose work addresses the influence of poverty and homelessness on children and schools, are frequently surprised by the numerous prevailing misconceptions about children living in poverty, their housing and economic situations, and their educational rights and opportunities (or lack thereof).

Thus, in this article, we bring the harsh realities of children's experiences to light through portraits of five homeless children. Each situation described here, each comment, each challenge is real—drawn directly from our data. It is our intent to put a human face on the challenge of child homelessness and poverty in America. First, however, we situate homelessness within the context of the McKinney-Vento Act and within the broader context of empirical research on homelessness and its impact on children's educational experiences.

Background

The signing of the McKinney–Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 by President Ronald Reagan (since reauthorized several times) represented the first large-scale federal response to homelessness.⁴ Although the McKinney-Vento Act has a broad range of programs that directly and indirectly affect homeless children, our interest here is in the “Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program.” The definition of homeless children provided in the Act has become the prevailing definition used by most agencies and entities and is the definition used for the purpose of this paper. It includes: children and youths who are sharing the housing of others due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; who are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; who are living in emergency or transitional shelters; who are awaiting foster care placement; who have a primary night-time residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings; or who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings (See the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act of 2001, section 725). According to the United States Department of Education,

3. Massimo Amadio, “Inclusive Education in Latin America and the Caribbean: Exploratory Analysis of the National Reports Presented at the 2008 International Conference on Education,” *Springer Prospects*, 39 (2009), 293–305; Diego Battiston, Guillermo Cruces, Luis Lopez-Calva, Maria Lugo, and Maria Santos, “Income and Beyond: Multidimensional Poverty in Six Latin American Countries,” *Springer Soc Indic Res*, 112 (2013), 291–314; Luis F. Gamboa and Fabio L. Waltenberg, “Inequality of Opportunity for Educational Achievement in Latin America: Evidence from PISA 2006–2009,” *Economics of Education Review* 31 (2012), 694–708.

4. National Coalition for the Homeless, “NCH Fact Sheet #18: McKinney-Vento Act,” accessed July 30, 2014, <http://web.archive.org/web/20071203073025/http://www.nationalhomeless.org/publications/facts/McKinney.pdf>.

The McKinney-Vento program is designed to address the problems that homeless children and youth have faced in enrolling, attending, and succeeding in school. Under this program, State educational agencies (SEAs) must ensure that each homeless child and youth has equal access to the same free, appropriate public education, including a public preschool education, as other children and youth...[and] access to the educational and other services that they need to enable them to meet the same challenging State student academic achievement standards to which all students are held. In addition, homeless students may not be separated from the mainstream school environment.⁵

To ensure compliance, every local educational agency must designate a staff person to serve as a McKinney-Vento liaison to identify homeless children and youth and ensure that they have a full and fair opportunity to learn (See Section 722). Further, under the Act, homeless children are automatically eligible for free meals at school and cannot be excluded from any enrichment programs or supplemental services (See Section 722).

Given this comprehensive legislation, one could reasonably expect to find that homeless children, once enrolled in school, are adequately supported and able to fully participate in the academic life of the school. One might also anticipate finding that homeless children perform well compared to their housed, less-mobile peers. Yet, according to Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness, “less than one-quarter of homeless elementary school students nationwide are proficient in math (21.5%) and reading (24.4%), as opposed to over one-third (39.6% and 33.8%, respectively) of their housed peers. Homeless high school students are even less likely to be proficient in these subject areas (11.4% in math and 14.6% in reading, versus 32.2% and 30.9%, respectively).”⁶ These and similarly alarming statistics seem to have spawned a recent interest among academics in the experiences and educational outcomes of homeless youth, hence this special issue of *Critical Questions in Education*.

In December 2012, *Educational Researcher* published a special section, “Mobility and Homelessness in School-Aged Children.” The four articles included in this section analyzed quantitative data related to the effects of mobility and homelessness on students’ math and reading skills, executive function (e.g. skills related to planning, organizing, strategizing, paying attention, and time management), and academic achievement. We learned that residential mobility in the early elementary years is associated with lower math and reading scores in third grade and that these gaps in achievement are not made up over time.⁷ We also learned that, for children in Philadelphia, “instability in both home and schooling environments is associated with the poorest educational outcomes.”⁸ Likewise, Herbers, Cutuli, Supkoff, Heistad, Chan, Hinz, and Masten, pointed to persistent achievement gaps between homeless and highly mobile students and their

5. See the “Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program,” Title vii-b of the *McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act*, as amended by the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, accessed May 7, 2014, <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/homeless/guidance.pdf>.

6. Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness (ICPH), “America Almanac: Improving Special Education Services for Homeless Students with Disabilities,” accessed May 30, 2014, <http://www.icphusa.org/index.asp?page=55&americanalmanac=2&story=85&pg=348>.

7. Adam Voight, Marybeth Shinn, and Maury Nation, “The Longitudinal Effects of Residential Mobility on the Academic Achievement of Urban Elementary and Middle School Students,” *Educational Researcher* 41, no. 9 (December, 2012): 385-392.

8. John W. Fantuzzo, Whitney A. LeBoeuf, Chin-Chih Chen, Heather L. Rouse, and Dennis P. Culhane, “The Unique and Combined Effects of Homelessness and School Mobility on the Educational Outcomes of Young Children,” *Educational Researcher* 41 (December, 2012): 397.

more economically advantaged peers, although they found that “For families living in extreme poverty with high risk for homelessness and residential instability, a strong start in the early school years may have a particular significance as a protective factor for child achievement.”⁹ Finally, Masten, Herbers, Desjardins, Cutuli, McCormick, Sapienza, Long, and Zelazo, studied the executive function skills of 138 children living in shelters for homeless families and found that children with stronger executive function skills adjusted better to kindergarten or first grade, experienced better academic achievement and peer acceptance, and demonstrated fewer behavioral issues.¹⁰

The publication of the special issue of *Educational Researcher* was bookended by two New York Times publications: “Homeless Families, Cloaked in Normality” and “Invisible Child” both of which qualitatively examined the experiences of homeless children and families.¹¹ More recently, publications by the *Huffington Post* and *One Miracle at a Time* provided additional glimpses of the lived realities of homeless youth—where they might live, the health challenges they face, the social difficulties they often encounter, and various support systems available to them.¹² Still missing, however, is a deep understanding of the daily educational experiences of homeless youth from their perspectives. While not limited to education, the following portraits of homeless students include a focus on their schooling experiences and the impact of their housing status on their educational opportunities and outcomes. We believe that the close and humanizing examination of schooling experiences (which, of course, are influenced by a broad range of other factors) afforded by our data demonstrates the limitations of school policies and isolated school-level interventions and the shortcomings of public policy and the shelter/affordable/transitional/supportive housing systems, while at the same time debunking many of the myths and misperceptions about homeless youth.

The Lived Experiences of Homelessness

The data presented here come from five interviews conducted with children from urban areas across the US (four female, one male) who are considered homeless under a provision of the McKinney-Vento Act. Participants were identified by a snowball technique starting with educators and personnel from homeless shelters. Parents and siblings were invited to join and participate in the interviews. In every instance, they did so; thus, 17 people participated in the five interviews. Each semi-structured interview was transcribed and analyzed and salient and recurring themes identified. On reflection, we decided that presenting the data through portraits, as

9. Janette E. Herbers, J.J. Cutuli, Laura M. Supkoff, David Heistad, Chi-Keung Chan, Elizabeth Hinz, and Ann S. Masten, “Early Reading Skills and Academic Achievement Trajectories of Students Facing Poverty, Homelessness, and High Residential Mobility,” *Educational Researcher* 41 (December, 2012): 367.

10. Ann S. Masten, Janette E. Herbers, Christopher David Desjardins, J.J. Cutuli, Christopher M. McCormick, Julianna K. Sapienza, Jeffrey D. Long, and Philip David Zelazo, “Executive Function Skills and School Success in Young Children Experiencing Homelessness,” *Educational Researcher* 41 (December, 2012): 375-384.

11. Alan Feuer, “Homeless Families, Cloaked in Normality,” *New York Times* (New York, NY), February 3, 2012, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/05/nyregion/ordinary-families-cloaked-in-a-veil-of-homelessness.html?pagewanted=all>; Andrea Elliott, “Invisible Child: Dasani’s Homeless Life,” *New York Times* (New York, NY), December 9, 2013, accessed May 30, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/projects/2013/invisible-child/#/?chapt=1>.

12. Ann Brenoff, “7 Things About Homeless Kids You Probably Didn’t Know,” *Huffington Post*, May 25, 2014, accessed May 28, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/25/homeless-kids_n_5359430.html?utm_source=Copy+of+Volunteers+go+above+and+beyond+to+help+homeless+children&utm_campaign=Huff+Post+Press+Release&utm_medium=email.

opposed to a thematic analysis, allowed for a better understanding of the experiences of those we interviewed and would more effectively put a human face on the challenge of childhood homelessness.¹³ We therefore arranged the data into the following portraits written in the first person and used, to the extent possible, the children's and family members' words. The data were "cleaned up" for readability and to maintain anonymity and then organized into portraits that demonstrate the realities of homelessness, the impact of public policies, and, in some cases, the ways in which schools and community organizations either support or exacerbate the many challenges related to childhood homelessness. Despite the common images evoked by the term "homeless," the realities of childhood homelessness are varied and nuanced—something we hope to portray here.

Mariah

My name is Mariah, I am 10 years old and I am in 5th grade. About five years ago, my family had it all. My mom, dad, and I were living in a three-bedroom house in a quiet neighborhood, with a lemon tree in the backyard and a park down the street. Then my brother was born and things started to fall apart. My mom had really bad post-partum depression and we were robbed. Not knowing what to do or who to turn to, we moved here—two states away—hoping that my grandma could help us out. We ended up in one emergency shelter after another, two weeks here, three weeks there. My parents couldn't find work and I wasn't going to school very much. That was the year I attended four different schools.

We finally got a spot in a transitional house, where we have been for almost two years. The transitional house is for women and children, so my dad had to go to a nearby men's shelter. He decided to leave the shelter because he said it felt like a prison—you have to wake up really early in the morning, you can't unpack your things, you have to leave each day and you can't come back until 5pm, and then you have to line up and hope you get a bed that night. Now he lives in our car on the street outside the transitional house. We have to leave at the end of next month because our time here is up, but I don't know where we are going next.

Finally things are starting to get better for me at school, and I am really worried that I will have to change schools again. My teacher is really nice and I see a counselor at school who has been helping me feel better about myself. At school I get breakfast and lunch and they also have given me some school supplies. They are also trying to get glasses for me because my eyesight isn't so good. There are a lot of families living at the transitional home, so there is a school bus that stops right outside and all the kids take the bus together in the morning and afternoon. The neighborhood isn't very safe, but it is ok because we all take the bus together.

I have a tutor who is helping me with reading, spelling, and math. Math is the only subject I really struggle in and she has helped me so much. In fact, my mom just went to the parent-teacher conference and found out that I am doing really well in every subject. I know a lot of the families living here have lots of problems, but not my family. We just don't have a place to live. We keep waiting to hear if we have been approved for Section 8 housing so we can move into our own place. My mom keeps saying that if we can just get our own place, everything will start to get better. I really hope so.

13. Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffman Davis, *The Art and Science of Portraiture* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 1997).

Reba

My name is Reba. I am 8 years old, and I am in special education. I am so tired of moving around. My mom and my brother and I were living in a nice house, but then my mom quit her job and we had to move in with my grandmother. After a while, she didn't want us anymore, because she said my mom was too loud. I was really glad to leave that apartment though, because while we were there my uncle physically abused us. For a long time, I was too afraid to tell anyone.

We moved to a shelter for a while and then we moved in with my dad. There were three mattresses on the floor and one bed and we all slept in that one room—me, my brother, my mom, and my dad (but mom and dad aren't married). Every morning, me and my dad tried to kill as many gnats as possible because they were everywhere. It's hard to do my homework because there is no room for a desk and when I want to work my brother wants to watch TV.

I've been to two schools this year. At the first one, people were mean to me and scratched me and pulled my hair. People have been a lot nicer at my new school. I have to take a taxi to school and I am so embarrassed when the driver calls out my address, because then the kids know I don't live near the school. I wish I could stay at school and join a club but they say the taxi won't pick me up late. I also hate it when we get to school late because of traffic and they make me go and get breakfast. I already had breakfast at home but they say I have to eat at school. Sometimes they give us things at school. Once they gave some of us backpacks, but they all looked the same, so if you were carrying one, everyone knew you were poor or homeless. My brother brought his home and never used it again. Sometimes the teachers say things like, "Oh, Reba, you don't have to pay for this trip...." We don't have to pay because we are homeless, but when the teacher says it out loud, all of the kids stare at me and know we are poor. I hate that! Then one day I was wearing a coat that I had been given by my school and one of the teachers grabbed me and made fun of it; she said it came from Old Navy and wasn't really a coat at all, but it was one the school had actually given me.

My mom says she wishes the school would help us with rent and then we could live near the school. It would be cheaper than taxis, but I guess rent isn't something they can give us. That's stupid.

Ramona

My name is Ramona. I am 13 and I rarely talk to anyone. I am in middle school but it is hard to concentrate on my schoolwork. I don't want anyone to know about my family; when I talk about it, it hurts and I don't know what to do. Now we are living in a townhouse, but the money Catholic Charities pays for our rent runs out in a few months. Two years ago, my mom got really sick with a brain tumor and we were all scared. My dad was so worried he did something stupid and now he is in jail. Of course, that made things much worse. Before we had everything. Now we have nothing. We tried to put our things in storage when we lost our house, but then we couldn't pay for the storage space either.

We ended up sleeping in dad's taxi (which we're not supposed to do). But it was much better than the shelters. I was scared sleeping in a big room with so many other people, and then my big brother couldn't stay with us. After they are 12, boys have to go to the men's shelter—he was scared and so were we. And when we were in the shelter system, we never knew which shel-

ter we would be in on a given night. We sometimes saw other homeless people with babies walking and would give them a ride, because everyone was trying to get there before it was too late. And we all had to be there together, so if mom got an evening job or one of us had an activity at school, we couldn't stay in the shelter either.

I wish I could do cheerleading but I know mom wouldn't want to pay for it and I don't want to tell the school my situation and ask for them to pay. My brother's elementary school principal knows we are homeless and she is amazing. One day she noticed that my brother had been wearing the same shirt for a couple of days and she phoned my mom to ask if we needed help with laundry or something. I heard mom crying on the phone because she was so surprised and happy. She said that no one from a school had ever called to offer help but that they usually call to complain about something.

So Charlie's school knows, but I just can't tell anyone at my middle school. That's probably why, when mom asked about tutoring, they suggested someone really expensive; they say they have no tutoring at my school. But I find school difficult and sometimes I just can't concentrate. Sometimes I am just emotional if I have had a letter from my dad. But mom grounds me if I don't get a B+. It is really important to her that we all do our best in school. But sometimes I just can't. I don't care like I used to. I wish I never grew up.

Michael

My name is Michael and I am 11. I have two brothers and two sisters, and all seven of us live in one hotel room. As you can guess, it is pretty crowded. Four years ago, my parents were buying a house but then the payments got too high, and they got involved with someone who scammed them. The company promised to take over the mortgage for two years, fix the things that needed to be fixed, and then to sell the house back to them, but of course that didn't happen. After several years, they settled out of court, and used the money to rent a really nice house that had three bedrooms, two bathrooms, and even had a washer and dryer so we did not have to go to the Laundromat. But after the settlement money ran out, that house was too expensive too, so Family Services helped us find this hotel room.

We don't like to tell anyone where we live and so sometimes I say we live in an apartment. Once I told my best friend where we live and told him not to tell, but he did anyway, so now we don't tell anyone. I want my own room and not to have to share with my brothers and sisters.

My mom works at Macy's; before she worked at a bank but after someone she worked with drove her home one day, she lost her job. She thinks it's because they didn't want anyone who is homeless to work at the bank. And my dad works too. In fact, he makes pretty good money, \$47,000/year, but he says he doesn't know how to manage money—that's why we are in this situation. He lies awake at night wondering why we are living in a hotel when both of them have jobs. I guess he needs some help to manage money but the real reason we can't rent a place and move out of here is that there are laws about how many people can live in what size apartment. That means that seven people cannot live in a two-bedroom apartment and all of the bigger ones in this area are too expensive.

I suppose we could move to a cheaper area, but mom and dad really want us to be able to stay in our schools. The last schools we went to were awful, but now we are in really good schools. Here I feel part of the school. We found it by accident. The Family Service people had said it was good, and one day we were driving and there it was. It is a good thing we changed

schools. Tommy was a premature baby and has some delays and is a bit hyperactive and the old school did not handle it well. In our new school, they are wonderful. They developed a game plan for him and he is doing really well. No one bullies him anymore. We were the only African Americans in our last school and people used to ask why we were there and why we didn't go to school in the city instead of the suburb.

My parents say they just want us to have a normal life and to fit in. No one would know we are homeless just by looking at us. In fact, just a few days ago, our pastor said, "You don't look like you live there; you don't look like you are homeless." And we thought that was the best compliment. We have each other and we have food and we have a place to sleep, so we can make it!

Rosa

My name is Rosa and I am 9 years old. I live with my mom at a transitional home for women who have been abused. My dad lives about half an hour away with his girlfriend. We've been living here for almost six months and I really like it here, but we just found out that we only have six more months until we have to move out. When we first moved in, all of the other kids living here were really young, but now some older kids my age have moved in, which makes it more fun. I like working in the garden here. We are growing beans, and tomatoes, and potatoes and there are some fruit trees.

I can't remember how many schools I have been to, at least five. My favorite school was the first one I went to, but that was a long time ago and that was really far away. The last school I went to was terrible. The teacher was so mean and she was always yelling at me for something. I like my new school OK. The teachers are really nice and helpful, but I don't have a lot of friends. Actually, I don't have any friends. Everyone teases me about my clothes and being mixed race. I get lunch at school but I never get there in time for breakfast. The morning is so busy trying to get up and get ready and then we have to walk to the school, so I just don't eat breakfast. I have a little sister, too, and it is hard for all of us to get to school on time. The lunch food is really good, though, and so are the snacks. I wish I was in the afterschool program, because I know they do a lot of fun activities and have really good snacks.

I don't really like math and reading, but my mom found me a tutor who is helping a lot. My math grade has gotten so much better this year. I really love history and I like learning about all of the people who changed the world. A lot of them look like me. And I can't wait until I am older so I can do science experiments that bubble and explode! Art was always my favorite subject, but not anymore. The teacher is really mean to me. I forgot to bring my art project to class one day and she yelled and yelled at me. I brought it home to show my mom. The principal called and apologized to my mom, but I am still really angry about it.

I don't know where we are going to move next. Maybe I will go and live with my dad, but I want to stay with my mom and keep going to the same school. Mom is looking for a job, but has had some health problems. We'll just have to wait and see.

Discussion and Implications

From these portraits of five homeless children and their families, we can quickly see that many of the very derogatory stereotypes from popular media (the poor live on streets, do drugs, drink heavily, are lazy, and so forth) do not fit our data. Accordingly, we must question the accu-

racy of much of the currently accepted cultural analysis most clearly expressed in the work of Ruby Payne and, unfortunately, often taken as a given by educational leaders and teachers.¹⁴ Paul Gorski not only critiques Payne's self-proclamation as "The Leading U.S. Expert on the Mindsets of Poverty, Middle Class, and Wealth" but offers a strong and rigorous critique in which he identifies "eight elements of oppression in Payne's framework" including her unproblematic acceptance of the concept of a "culture of poverty."¹⁵ Payne depicts poor children as coming from a "culture of poverty" which, she claims, is characterized by specific speech patterns, stereotypical values, and deficit mindsets. Yet, we did not find that our interviews were characterized by rambling, beating "around the bush" or by non-standard English that Payne calls a "casual register discourse pattern." Similarly, we found no evidence that verbal chastisement or corporal punishment followed by food were normal interaction patterns.¹⁶ Neither, of course, was there any evidence of Payne's belief that "the poor simply see jail as a part of life and not necessarily bad."¹⁷ Several assertions, such as her belief that to be successful, and "to move from poverty to middle class ... an individual must give up relationships for achievement for at least some period of time" are not only incorrect, but run contrary to many of the themes identified here as well as to the cultural capital theories of scholars like Nussbaum and Sen or the additive pedagogical approaches of Cummins or Jensen.¹⁸

Indeed, the children we interviewed are, to the extent possible under their living circumstances, clean, well fed, and well cared for. They all have at least one parent who is concerned about, and trying to be actively involved in, their education. Strong family ties have sustained them in the face of adversity and the children and parents alike have high expectations for each other. Payne's deficit and paternalistic approaches and her "compassionate conservatism" have no place in the thinking of educators wanting to dispel common misperceptions and effect meaningful and positive change.¹⁹

Multiple Causes of Homelessness

There are many causes of the homelessness of our participants who have utilized numerous different housing arrangements (e.g. shelters, transitional homes, staying with family, living in cars, hotels). Some had experienced illness or depression; one was robbed; one fled abuse; others acknowledged that they had simply made "bad choices," in part because they were "not good at managing money" (as Michael's Dad stated). In fact, every participant told us of having lived in a middle class situation until "things changed." None discussed anything suggesting that growing up in a "culture of poverty" was to blame for their current situation. This is not to say

14. Ruby Payne, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (Highlands, TX: aha! Process, Inc., 2005), Kindle Edition.

15. Paul C. Gorski, "Peddling Poverty for Profit: Elements of Oppression in Ruby Payne's Framework," *Equity & Excellence in Education* 41, no. 1 (2008): 130, 133 and 135.

16. Payne, *Framework*, 23.

17. *Ibid.*, 22-23.

18. *Ibid.*, ?; Martha C. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge, MA: Bellknap Press, 2007), Kindle Edition; Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), Kindle Edition; Jim Cummins, "Empowering Minority Students: a Framework for Intervention," in *Facing Racism in Education*, ed. Nitza M. Hidalgo, Ceasar L. McDowell, and Emilie V. Siddle (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Educational Review), *Reprint Series 21*, 50-68; Eric Jensen, *Engaging Students with Poverty in Mind: Practical Strategies for Raising Achievement* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2013).

19. Gorski, "Peddling Poverty," 143.

that generational poverty does not exist; it simply was not the cause of homelessness for our participants. This, of course, points to the need for more resources and opportunities (e.g. affordable housing, accessible healthcare, better mental health services, jobs offering a living wage, career training) for families at risk of or already slipping into poverty.

Housing and Housing Policies

In every interview, housing seemed to be the key variable—if they could simply sort out the housing, everything would get better. Yet, in 2014, the National Low Income Housing Coalition found that “In no state can a full-time minimum wage worker afford a one-bedroom or a two-bedroom rental unit at Fair Market Rent.”²⁰ Affordable housing is scarce. Moreover, if a state or region then imposes zoning laws that require a certain body-to-bedroom ratio, housing is even less accessible to larger families who then (as in the case of Michael’s family), may find themselves in the ironic situation of living crowded into an even smaller, single hotel room. Other policies that need to be examined are those that separate families because there is an interdiction against men and post-pubescent boys living in the same place as women and girls, as discussed by Mariah and Ramona. Restrictive shelter rules punish intact families and families with teenage boys. Similarly, rules that require the presence of all family members at all times exacerbate the difficulties of parents finding work or of children participating in extra-curricular activities.

Schooling

In the meantime, the homeless children we interviewed are trying to do exactly what they should be doing: persevering in their education, often with a lot of family support and high expectations. Ramona gets grounded if she doesn’t get a B+; Mariah’s mom regularly meets with Mariah’s teacher and counselor; Michael’s parents worked with the school to develop a “game plan” for his younger brother Tommy; Rosa’s mom sought a tutor for her daughter. But succeeding at school is still difficult. The students told us it was hard to concentrate when they did not feel safe, when they did not know where they would be living next, when they did not have a quiet space to work. School assignments that required specific materials placed an additional burden on the families, and students indicated that sometimes, as a result, completing assignments is a challenge.

We know that, according to the McKinney-Vento Act, financial barriers to full participation in classroom and enrichment activities must be removed, but students discussed concerns about not being able to pay for specific activities; sometimes because they were not aware of their rights, but more often because of the shame or embarrassment they felt when they had to ask for money or support. They also told us that it was difficult to hide their situation from friends and they expressed both concern and resilience as they described the number of schools they had attended, despite the intent of the McKinney-Vento legislation to keep children in their home school.²¹

We heard repeatedly that the attitudes of school personnel, both teachers and administrators, made a tremendous difference—that in some schools, homeless families felt able to share their situations and to seek help, while in others, they believed their situations were better kept

20. Althea Arnold, Sheila Crowley, Elina Bravve, Sarah Brundage, and Christine Biddlecombe, "Out of Reach 2014," accessed May 30, 2014, <http://nlihc.org/oor/2014>, para. 2.

21. See the *McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act of 2001*, Section 722.

secret. These children reported that they were often teased for being poor/homeless and hence did not want their peers to know. Thus, thoughtless comments by a teacher about a child's need to pay for a trip, or by a taxi driver shouting an out-of-area address were cause for concern. Similarly, well-intentioned "gifts" of backpacks or Christmas baskets that actually identified children as homeless or poor need to be reconsidered and handled more judiciously in most cases. School meals were generally appreciated by our respondents, except when they were required to eat specific food at specific times regardless of their desire or need to eat.

Across the board, we found parents doing their best to secure resources and opportunities for their children. Mariah and Rosa both have tutors provided by community-based organizations that seem to be having a significant positive impact on their learning. Beyond Mariah and Rosa, though, the students did not discuss educational support from outside organizations. Surprisingly, although explicitly asked about additional assistance or services they were receiving from school, no one identified their district's McKinney-Vento liaison as a resource. This finding points to clear shortcomings in the outreach efforts of schools and districts and a lack of enforcement of the McKinney-Vento Act on the part of schools, districts, and states. Whether these deficiencies stem from negligence or constraints, we do not know, but the interviewed families' lack of awareness about the services and resources available to them should cause concern among educators at all levels.

Conclusion

Overall we found that there is a lack of a social safety net for families who unexpectedly encounter difficult economic circumstances. Market-rate housing is simply too expensive; affordable housing is too scarce. But most significant are the uncertainty and the stigmas attached to homelessness and poverty. Mariah, Ramona, Michael, and Rosa all talk about not knowing where they are going next but knowing that they will be moving again soon, and we know from the studies referenced above that homelessness and high mobility are the worst combination for academic outcomes.

Despite the fact that homelessness is never the child's fault, we also know that because of the constant moving and uncertainty, children often experience trauma, self-doubt, and shame that exacerbate their family's challenges and impede their academic progress. They may recognize the individual actions and decisions that have led to their impoverished circumstances, but because of the social stigma attached to homelessness and the pervasive silence related to childhood poverty, children rarely understand that poverty is a social problem and needs widespread social solutions. According to Beegle,

Very early on, children from poverty understand from other people that their "poor" choices or "bad" behavior placed them into poverty. Structural causes of poverty such as a lack of living-wage jobs for people with limited literacy or a lack of affordable housing for people with limited incomes are rarely discussed or understood.²²

These are issues schools and educators must take up if we are to provide a truly equitable and excellent education for homeless children that might actually break the cycle of poverty and not simply purport to do so.

22. Donna Beegle, "Overcoming the Silence of Generational Poverty," *Talking Points* 15, no. 1, 16.

The children in our interviews were articulate, resilient, and hopeful but they have been marginalized, stigmatized, and traumatized in numerous and unacceptable ways. Knowing the statistics and the extent of childhood poverty and homelessness in America is important, but hearing their voices, and understanding their situations should create a sense of urgency among policy makers, educators and caring citizens everywhere. Although extensive and current statistical data and analyses are important, we believe it is also critical to keep in mind the voices and stories of the homeless children themselves. They are not nameless, faceless, or hopeless, but certainly fearful and uncertain about their futures. These children deeply want to be accepted. They want to succeed. They want their families to stay together. They want some stability. And mostly they do not want to be blamed, marginalized, or singled out. They need sensitivity and support. They need reassurance and encouragement. They need adults in schools to believe in them. And they need to be able to trust that educators have their best interests at heart. If, as posited by UNESCO, education is “the most basic insurance against poverty,” then we must ensure that the children in our schools today, homeless or housed, have every opportunity to get an excellent education, rise above the constraints of poverty, and shape, for themselves, with our help, a better future.²³ Achieving this goal starts with awareness but must extend beyond talk to action – enforcement of the McKinney-Vento Act and a concerted effort to remove the barriers to educational opportunities that homeless children too often face.

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23. Bokova, “Foreword,” para. 2.

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