



# HOMELESS HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN AMERICA: WHO COUNTS?

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*After interviewing homeless high school students, the research team in a Colorado school district discovered that many students had not revealed their true living conditions (homelessness) to anyone in the school district. This research team developed an anonymous survey written around the homeless categories identified in the McKinney-Vento federal legislation. Results revealed students who identified as homeless for a portion of their high school years in numbers and percentages alarmingly higher than the district had on file. In fact, over 25 times as many homeless students were identified by this process than by the previously-used district system for identifying homelessness. An equally alarming finding is that very few students identified their homeless status to a teacher, counselor, or school administrator. This article identifies statistical patterns to predict homelessness and provides recommendations for administrative practices.*

*Keywords: homeless, students, predictors, McKinney-Vento*

The increasing number of homeless high school students has made national news over the past few years. The current national unemployment rate continues to hover around 10%, adding to the likelihood of the importance of this issue (United States Department of Labor, 2011). This article reviews the national issue, briefly reviews the McKinney-Vento Act, provides details of a study identifying issues related to homelessness, and offers policy suggestions for secondary school principals.

## NATIONAL NEED: THE INCREASING NUMBERS OF HOMELESS TEENS

The number of individuals and families who become homeless due to economic hardship, mental illness, or domestic violence has steadily increased on a national level as our economy has declined (NCFH, 2010). The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) 2008 Executive Summary report indicated that of the approximately 750,000 people who were homeless on a January night in 2006, around 330,000 (44%) were left unsheltered, while 420,000 (56%) were housed in shelters. The report adds that, on average, around 20% of the people in a shelter at any given time are children.

According to the National Center on Family Homelessness (NCFH), as many as 1.5 million children, or 1 in 50, experience homelessness each year (NCFH, 2009). Homeless children not only experience a lack of safety and privacy, but also lack adequate health care. As time goes by, these children often lose their sense of community and sustained relationships and are likely to become among the highly mobile and move from school to school. According to data from NCFH, homeless children often have to repeat grades, are more likely than their non-homeless counterparts to be suspended or expelled, and are among the growing numbers of high-school dropouts (NCFH, 2009; 2010).

## THE HIGH COST OF HOMELESSNESS

Mobility and/or residential instability have a negative effect on student academic achievement (Heinlein & Shinn, 2000). Residential instability and extreme poverty are two major factors that influence academic failure (National

Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2009). Homeless youth often come from unstable families (Paradise & Cauce, 2002), but, more recently, research has shown that a large percentage of homeless youth were once part of the foster care system (Aviles de Bradley, 2010; Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010). Mobility not only increases the probability of academic failure and drop out, but is also related to health and behavioral problems (Wood, Halfon, Scarlata, Newacheck, & Nessim, 1993). It is estimated that around 5,000 runaway or homeless youth die each year due to illness, suicide, or assault (Klein, Woods, Wilson, Prospero, Greene, & Ringwalt, 2000).

Homeless high school students number almost 3000 across the state of Colorado where this study was conducted. In the state ranking by The National Center on Family Homelessness (2009), Colorado ranked 35th in its efforts to address this issue on four levels: extent of child homelessness (rank 38); child well-being (rank 12); risk for child homelessness (rank 32); and state policy and planning (in the early stages). Connecticut was ranked number one (the best performance), while Texas was ranked number 50 (the worst performance).

## MCKINNEY-VENTO ACT

Under the McKinney-Vento Act, each state can apply for federal monies to provide coordination of the education of homeless children and youth by gathering comprehensive data on the homeless youth and identifying the barriers that prevent the homeless from attending school regularly (United States Department of Education, 2010). "States are required to have an approved plan for addressing problems associated with the enrollment, attendance, and success of homeless children in school" (DOE website).

Subtitle B of Title VII of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act defines "homeless" as follows:

The term "homeless children and youths"—

(A) means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence (within the meaning of section 103(a)(1)); and

(B) includes:

(i) children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement;

(ii) children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings (within the meaning of section 103(a)(2)(C));

(iii) children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and

(iv) migratory children (as such term is defined in section 1309 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965) who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii). (Title X, Part C, of the No Child Left Behind Act)

## BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In 2006 a team of local administrators from a suburban upper middle class city in the mountain west conducted a qualitative survey regarding homelessness and high mobility. During those interviews, parents and students indicated an awareness of many homeless families previously unidentified by the district. In essence, the interviews revealed the secret world of community homelessness. The interviews also identified a "donut hole" in high school homelessness. In Colorado, services for homeless high school students were not available for students under the age of eighteen. This made it very difficult for students who had run away from home or whose parents were not caring for them or providing assistance of any kind.

Another major issue that emerged from the interview process was the fear students had of being labeled as homeless. Students reported going out of their way to look clean and act as if they were coming from home to school and



returning home after school.

From the qualitative data and a new sense of awareness, an administrative team from the district developed an on-line quantitative survey that included questions directly related to the information gleaned from the interviews and using the definitional language of homelessness as outlined within the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.

First, a pilot quantitative survey was developed and administered to 80 students at one alternative high school within the district where data were collected. The results of that survey were surprising for district administrators. The pilot data indicated that many more students fit into the McKinney-Vento definition of being homeless than were previously identified by the district. Revisions were made to the instrument and a final web based instrument was finalized in the spring of 2008.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

It seemed apparent from the pilot study that homelessness was being underreported within the district. The problem was to develop a process that would better reflect the reality of homeless numbers homeless within the district. The purpose of the study was to provide more realistic data on homelessness and develop recommendations that would help teachers and administrators understand the complexity of the homeless issue. Using the McKinney-Vento Act as a guide for wording, combined with themes identified from the qualitative interviews as well as lessons from the pilot study results, the final instrument was developed.

## RESULTS

### Descriptive Findings

Of the available high school population, the survey return rate was 50% (N=2566). A noticeable variation of response rates occurred within grade level. The response rate for 9th grade students was 32.5% (N=829); 30.8% (N=785) for 10th grade, 23% (N=586) for 11th grade, and 13.8% (N=352) for 12th grade students. This is considered a high response rate (Dillman, 2007).

The sample was representative of the school's population in terms of its demographic makeup. Students represented by sex were 52% females (N=1326) and 48% male (N=1222). The percentage who reported "White" as their ethnicity was 81.2% (N=2064), "Hispanic" 12.9% (N=327), "Black" 2.1% (N=53), "Asian/Pacific Islander" 2.0% (N=50), and "Native American" 1.9% (N=48). For statistical purposes, all who identified as something other than "White" were grouped together (N=478, 18.2%), which is representative of the community population statistics. Table 1 presents the descriptive finding from questions pertaining directly to homelessness. *In accordance with IRB regulations, all student identifiers were removed by the school district prior to the researchers' obtaining the data. Note that the numbers do not always add to the total respondents, due to missing values.*

### Inferential Findings

Of the 2,425 usable responses, there were 584 students (24%) from six high schools who reported that they lived away from their parents at some point during their high school years, but only 177 of the 584 students indicated that they informed the school that they were not living with their parents. Previously, the school district reported 21 students who had self reported as being homeless

### Counselors and Administrators Ill-informed of Student Homelessness

When asked the question, "During your high school years when you weren't living with your parents, who did you go to for help?" only 1.2% (N=30) went to school counselors or school administration for help. A troubling extension to this problem came from the responses of the homeless high school students who, when asked, "In the future, if a situation arose that caused you to stop living with your parents, who would you go to for help?" only 4% of the respondents indicated that they would go to their school counselors or administration for help.

### Student Mobility

There were 258 respondents (11%) who reported changing schools six or more times during their educative years.

**Table 1**  
*Descriptive Results of the Survey*

Number	Percent	Information/question
569	22.2%	Of all respondents reporting being homeless under the federal McKinney-Vento definition.
81	14.2%	Of the 569 reporting being homeless, indicated that they were homeless with their entire family.
124	21.8%	Of the 569 reporting being homeless, indicated that they sought no help while living away from home.
421	73.9%	Of the 569 reporting being homeless, asked relatives and friend for help
31	5.5%	Of the 569 reporting being homeless, reached out to a teacher, counselor, or administrator for help.
399	70.1%	Of the 569 reporting being homeless, did not let the school know that they were living away from their parents.
335	58.9%	Identified transportation as their greatest need.
256	44.9%	Identified food and clothing as their greatest need.
120	21.1%	Identified medical issues as their greatest need.
<b>21</b>	<b>3.6%</b>	<b>Students were listed as homeless in district files prior to this study</b>

Interestingly, 380 (15%) of the respondents reported moving three or more times *within the past four years*, and 57% of those highly mobile students reported that the feeling of being *accepted by other students and teachers/staff related to their homeless condition* was difficult to obtain. The reader should note that *mobility* is referenced in two different ways: first, the number of K through 12 schools attended; second, the number of times a student physically moved in the previous four years. Table 2 displays correlation information for all variables used in the analyses. The correlation of the two mobility variables was  $r_s(2426) = .43, p < .001$ . This indicates that students who reported frequently moving also reported that they attended a higher number of schools than non-mobile students. It is possible to move and still attend the same school, or transfer to another school while staying at the same physical address. Outliers of demographic patterns with the highly mobile students in terms of amount of schools attended raised an issue of concern. On the extreme end, 13 students indicated that they had attended 21 or more schools for their K through 12 education.

The data for the following analyses were not normally distributed because homelessness and living in a juvenile facility is not something that happens to the majority of students; therefore non-parametric statistics were used for all of the analyses. To investigate if there was a statistical significance associated between the number of schools attended and amount of juvenile facilities lived in (treatment center, jail, mental health, and hospital), a correlation (Spearman rho) was computed:  $r_s(2482) = .23, p < .001$ . The positive direction indicates that students who attended more schools tended to have lived in more of the juvenile facilities. Using Cohen's (1988) guidelines, the effect size is considered to be medium or typical. Another correlation was computed to assess the relationship between number of schools



attended and the number of places lived with parents or family members (hotel, RV park, shelter, with another family, car or abandoned building). The Spearman rho statistic was computed:  $r_s(2481) = .20, p < .001$ . Once again the positive direction indicates that students who attended a high number of schools often lived with their family in more of the places previously mentioned (hotel, RV park, shelter, etc.). Using Cohen's guidelines (1998), the effect size is medium or typical.

**Table 2**

*Intercorrelations for the two Mobility Measures (Numbers 1 and 2 Below) as well as for the two "Homeless" Measures (Numbers 3 and 4 Below)*

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Amount of schools attended (K – 12)	--	.43*	.23*	.20*
2. Amount of times moved	--	--	.18*	.26*
3. Amount of juvenile facilities lived in	--	--	--	.34*
4. Amount of classified "homeless" places lived in	--	--	--	--

\*  $p < .001$

To investigate if there was a statistical significance between *number of times moved in the last four years* and *amount of facilities lived in* (treatment center, jail, mental health, and hospital), a correlation was computed,  $r_s(2482) = .18, p < .001$ . The positive direction indicates that as students become more mobile, they are more likely to find themselves spending time in a juvenile facility. Using Cohen's (1988) guidelines, the effect size is considered to be small or smaller than typical, which supports previous research by Mallett, Rosenthal, Myers, Milburn, and Rotheram-Borus (2004), in which they found that, on average, homeless youth had spent more time in juvenile detention centers than their non-homeless counterparts. Another correlation was computed to assess the relationship between number of times moved and number of places lived with parents or family members (hotel, RV park, shelter, with another family, car or abandoned building). The Spearman rho statistic was computed:  $r_s(2499) = .26, p < .001$ . Once again the positive direction indicates that students who moved more often have lived with their family in more of the places mentioned above. Using Cohen's guidelines, the effect size is medium or typical.

Hierarchical logistic regression was conducted to investigate how well number of times moved in the last four years and number of schools attended predict whether or not a student has been homeless or lived in a juvenile facility (treatment center, jail, mental health facility, or hospital), while controlling for gender and ethnicity. The literature indicates that African American and Latino children have higher poverty rates than Caucasian children (Popp, 2004). The goal of the regression analysis was to investigate the relationship of mobility and homelessness, not the effect of demographic variables; therefore, taking out the variance in homelessness accounted for by gender and ethnicity provided a better representation of the relationship between mobility and homelessness. When gender and ethnicity were entered alone, they significantly predicted homeless/lived in a facility,  $\chi^2 = 31.73, df = 2, N = 2407, p < .001$ . However, as indicated by the pseudo  $R^2$  (Nagelkerke), only 2% of the variance in homelessness could be accounted for by knowing the student's gender and ethnicity. When the other variables were added (number of times moved and number of schools attended), the overall predictive model improved,  $R^2$  (Nagelkerke) = .172, indicating that 17% of the variance in homelessness could be predicted, or accounted for, by knowing number of times the student moved and number of schools attended. The hierarchical logistic model correctly classified 97.4% of the students who had never been homeless, but only correctly classified 18.1% of students who had been homeless. The overall model correctly classified 79.8% of students. Table 3 presents the odds ratios, which suggests, that a highly mobile student is almost two times more likely of becoming homeless/ living in a facility than a student who is not highly mobile.

The overall model correctly classified about 80% of the students, but the problem is that it only correctly classified 18% of the students who, at one time, were considered homeless. Correctly classifying students who have never

been homeless is important to the overall model, but the predictive model provided here clearly needs to be improved. Mobility appears to be a significant factor within homelessness, which aligns with previous research (Heinlein & Shinn, 2000; Paradise & Cauce, 2002) but other, yet to be identified factors in combination with mobility, may be better predictors of homelessness.

**Table 3**

*Hierarchical Logistic Regression Predicting Homelessness (level two, after controlling for gender and ethnicity)*

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Odds ratio</i>	<i>p</i>
Number of times moved last 4 years	.50	.06	1.65	<.001
Number of schools attended K-12	.34	.05	1.41	<.001
Constant	-3.17	.29	.04	<.001

*Note: B = the unstandardized coefficient (the effect of the predictor variable on the predicted variable); SE = standard error.*

## DISCUSSION

Not surprisingly in the peer-pressured world of high school students, homelessness carries a stigma that students want to avoid. A survey instrument that identified key elements of McKinney-Vento Act helped construct a more realistic view of homeless high school students. However, caution should be taken when interpreting the statistics. There is little doubt that some of the students who identified themselves as living away from home may have done so for a short time for practical purposes (staying with friends or relatives for a week or two for social reasons or for a break from mom or dad). However, it is equally clear that a survey instrument similar to the one used in this study may be far better in helping administrators obtain a clearer assessment of homelessness numbers in their district or school. At least in this study, district reporting through an anonymous web site identified more than eight times as many homeless students (using the McKinney-Vento federal definition) than the previously used student self-reporting data collection techniques applied within the district. Our findings are supported by a recent meta-analysis of eight different studies by Miller (2011).

Perhaps the most alarming finding was students' *unwillingness* to tell school officials of their homeless plight. Given the response rate of this study and the extreme differences between those who had self reported being homeless to the school and the numbers reported here, there is little reason to believe that similar gaps do not exist across the country.

### Identifying Homeless Students

Homeless students need to be identified before it is possible to adequately predict students who are at risk of becoming homeless and the impact on achievement, behavior, and the school culture. Homeless liaisons funded by some school districts work on identifying homeless families, but not all liaisons are funded full time, and they often have other workloads (Cunningham, Harwood, & Hall, 2010). The McKinney-Vento Act provides services for homeless students, but parents often do not know about these services and/or do not want to identify as homeless because of the stigma and fear of child services involvement.

It is imperative that steps be taken to help identify homeless students. District budget cuts make it difficult to have full time homeless liaisons, especially for rural districts; therefore, low cost methods need to be used. For instance, schools could take on the role of the homeless liaison by asking parents about their living situation at orientation days and providing parents with contact information about support services. In order for homeless students to be identified, they and their parents need to feel safe and have somebody at the school level they can trust.



## Recommendations for Practice

The authors provide the following recommendations for administrators, teachers, and counselors to consider when dealing with district wide homeless issues and with the interpretation of the McKinney-Vento Act. Although this study was from one district within the state of Colorado, the large return rate provides some assurance of external validity to districts with similar demographics nationwide. This study provides evidence that, in at least one district, student self-reporting of homelessness to their school was not an effective way of identifying students who fit the McKinney-Vento homeless definition.

Districts are encouraged to find a safe way for homeless students to report their condition. The process we used was an anonymous web based survey; however, districts might consider techniques such as snowballing (learning who is not reporting their homeless status from students who do report their homeless status), use of teachers, administrators, or counselors who are trusted by homeless students, and/or dealing with church groups and homeless shelters to help identify students in need.

Students who move frequently from school to school or who move geographically are at twice the risk of being homeless than students with less mobility. Although this is not a surprising finding for educators, high mobility is a warning sign that can be used to sensitize teachers, counselors, and administrators to the increased odds of potential homelessness among high school students.

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