ON POINT

Addressing Homelessness in Urban Schools
The mission of The National Institute for Urban School Improvement (NIUSI) is to partner with Regional Resource Centers to develop powerful networks of urban local education agencies and schools that embrace and implement a data-based, continuous improvement approach for inclusive practices. Embedded within this approach is a commitment to evidence-based practice in early intervention, universal design, literacy and positive behavior supports.

The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), of the U.S. Department of Education, has funded NIUSI to facilitate the unification of current general and special education reform efforts as these are implemented in the nation’s urban school districts. NIUSI's creation reflects OSEP’s long-standing commitment to improving educational outcomes for all children, specifically those with disabilities, in communities challenged and enriched by the urban experience.
Addressing Homelessness in Urban Schools

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“A telling portrait of how well a society is performing can be obtained by exploring the lives of its children.”

Jeff Karabanow, 2003, p. 369

HOW DOES HOMELESSNESS AFFECT THE LIVES OF CHILDREN?

Students who experience homelessness are people first. Like their peers, they have unique hopes, dreams, cultural heritages, abilities, disabilities, and unique personality traits. As urban schools become more sophisticated in developing their support systems for students, it is important that systems stress personalization rather than generalization. Rather than conceptualizing students as homeless as if they belong to a homogeneous group, it is important for school personnel to see students who are homeless as individual human beings who need personalized support that will meet their academic and social needs. This stance is not intended to trivialize the stress that homelessness can cause but to remind us all that categorization because of a life circumstance may prevent systems of care to design systems that work.

Students who experience homelessness should not be treated with pity or assumed to be disabled or inept, but helped to understand that they may have developed significant skills that others do not have because of their homelessness. While homeless, they can learn to live peaceably with others in a close and public space and may be able to share this knowledge with classroom peers. Students who experience homelessness may learn to persist with few possessions, little food and warmth, and show gratitude for things that others cast aside and disdain. They may learn early in their lives to value family, health, friendship, and school attendance while their non-homeless peers may take these things for granted. Research conducted by Dr. Bassuk with the National Center on Family Homelessness indicates that students who experience homelessness often provide an effective emotional support system for their parents, who are doubtless struggling, if only temporarily. How to

STUDENTS WHO EXPERIENCE HOMELESSNESS LACK A FIXED, REGULAR, AND ADEQUATE NIGHTTIME RESIDENCE, INCLUDING:

- Children and youth 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;
- Children and youth 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;
- Children and youth who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and
- Migratory children who qualify as homeless because the children are living in circumstances described above.

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, Title VII, Subtitle B, Section 725
support others in times of difficulty is a vital life skill for future healthy relationships. In addition, some students who experience homelessness meet or exceed academic goals with nothing but borrowed school supplies, no access to technology or a library, and little or no academic help outside of the classroom. These accomplishments should be recognized.

Students who experience homelessness frequently display remarkable resiliency. The actions of school personnel can foster resiliency in students who experience homelessness. First, homeless liaisons, required by law in each school district, should facilitate the meeting of physical needs. Students who experience homelessness can be paired with a mentor and academic tutor to assist with academic needs. Also, they should be involved in activities during and after school that serve as constructive escape from their emotional difficulties, such as tutoring younger children, participating in school clubs, service learning, athletics, music, drama, or artistic activities, or reading good books. The more students who experience homelessness can experience success in academics and relationships at school and find productive ways to spend time, the more likely he/she is to value school and to emerge competent in skills heralded by the dominant culture that increase the likelihood of personal success.

**HOMELESS IS A NATIONAL ISSUE**

Homelessness is difficult to measure and may be best estimated by the number of children/youth that experience homelessness over a given period of time. According to the Urban Institute, an estimated 1.35 million children are likely to experience homelessness in a given year. The average length of a period of homelessness is six months. Approximately 1% of the total U.S. population is homeless at some point each year, and about 41% of that group is families with children. Preschool and elementary age children comprise the largest numbers of children experiencing homelessness and that number is increasing.

Unaccompanied minors account for 4-7% of the homeless population. Youth become homeless for numerous reasons. They may leave home due to parental rejection or expulsion, insufficient family resources, parental substance abuse or incarceration, sexual or physical abuse, the perception that they are unloved, avoidance of the law, addictions, or teen parenthood, or parental divorce, separation, or general family dysfunction. Youth without homes have experienced more sexual abuse than their peers with homes. They rarely enroll in school and infrequently attend; 40% have repeated a grade, at least 25% are receiving special education services, and half are doing below average work or failing.

Homelessness is not an easy existence. Emotional/behavioral disorders, identified or unidentified, are the most prevalent type of disability found among students who experience homelessness at a rate three to
four times that expected in the general population. Youth who experience homelessness have higher rates of internalizing and externalizing behavior problems, suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and depression than do their housed peers. They frequently display high levels of misbehavior, social adjustment problems, violence, lower academic achievement, and higher rates of alcohol/drug abuse and risky sexual behaviors than their housed peers. They will also likely exhibit symptoms of anxiety.

These difficulties may result from significant family problems including emotionally needy or dependant parents, mentally or physically ill parents, lack of contact with extended family, or abuse or neglect by family members. Family members sometimes separate in order to survive, the father going to a men’s shelter, the mother to a women’s shelter, and the children to various foster homes or youth facilities. The emotional stress of parents who experience homelessness who lack a strong social support network may cause them to rely on their children for emotional support. In their 1986 study, Bassuk, Rubin, and Lauriat asked parents who experience homelessness to name three persons on whom they could depend during times of stress. About a fourth named their children as their major means of emotional support.

Although homelessness is prevalent in both urban and rural areas and the needs of students who experience homelessness are similar, additional trials may exist for some urban students who experience homelessness. Urban students who experience homelessness tend to experience less domestic violence but more drug and alcohol abuse and more time in shelters than rural homeless. Further, urban students who experience homelessness are in districts where schools typically have large classes, inexperienced teachers, low expectations, multiple languages and cultures, and an overall lack of resources. Regardless of circumstances, schools leaders can be change agents for students who experience homelessness.

WHAT KINDS OF ASSISTANCE IS MANDATED BY LAW?

In the late 1980’s, the U.S. government began to address the problems affecting students who experience homelessness with
the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 (P.L. 100-77). It was revised and renamed in 1990 as the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Act (P. L. 100-645), and later reauthorized under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) (P.L. 107-110). The McKinney-Vento Act, Section 725 defines “Homeless children and youth” as individuals who “lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.” This definition includes children/youth who share housing with other families; live in motels, trailer parks, cars, abandoned buildings, camping grounds, or substandard housing; live in public places such as parks, train, or bus stations; live in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals or garbage cans; or await foster care placement.

In January of 2002, NCLB reauthorized the McKinney-Vento legislation to include, (a) forbidding homeless children from being placed in segregated classes or schools as a result of their homeless status, (b) mandating states and districts to provide transportation for homeless children to and from the student’s school of origin, regardless of where or how often he/she moves, for at least a year, (c) placing a child in the district requested by parent/guardian when there is a disagreement over school assignment until the dispute is resolved, and (d) requiring every district to employ a local liaison for homeless children and youth, whether or not the district receives a homeless education sub-grant. School personnel are forbidden to exclude homeless students when they fail to immediately produce registration records such as birth certificate, immunization, and mailing address and are required to make an honest effort to locate and identify all homeless students within their boundaries.

WHAT NEEDS DO STUDENTS WHO EXPERIENCE HOMELESSNESS HAVE?

**PHYSICAL** The most immediate needs of students who experience homelessness are of a physical nature: food, shelter, clothing, sleep, a place to wash body and clothing, a safe place for belongings, money for school and personal supplies, transportation to and from school, and medical and dental care. Students who experience homelessness often need treatment for health problems such as upper respiratory infections, ear infections, anemia, serious skin disorders, gastrointestinal problems, asthma, and diarrhea. Additionally, some students must be taught self-care and hygiene, nutrition, and other healthy behaviors.

**SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL** Among students who experience homelessness emotional and behavioral needs are paramount. Though students who experience homelessness may hesitate to create relationships because of unsettled, stressful circumstances, they need emotional support, encouragement, and
positive reinforcement from their teachers. Because of their transitory lifestyles, mental and physical health difficulties, poor academic performance, unusual appearance, unique behavior, and lack of accessibility to tools of hygiene, students who experience homelessness may struggle to make and keep friends, or to even be included in the social structure of a school. Difficulties that some have in getting along with students and adults are exacerbated by frequent unexpected moves requiring emotional effort to adjust to new teachers, new peers, new behavioral expectations, and new living conditions. Feelings of being different may lead to feelings of inadequacy and isolation; emotional turmoil may be expressed in aggression, withdrawal, or other inappropriate behaviors. Teachers should be careful to understand the function of these behaviors and not allow their own anger, impatience, or impulsive reactions to further isolate students who experience homelessness. Remember, the best therapy for a student’s lack of skills is always for someone to teach and the student to learn and practice new skills.

ACADEMIC Homelessness may create academic impediments. Difficulties with enrollment, transience, and inconsistent attendance are common among students who experience homelessness and may be the first significant barriers to academic performance. All three have been addressed by law and their impacts may be minimized or improved by school personnel. Although illegal, schools sometimes still make it difficult for students who experience homelessness to register when they do not have required paperwork such as birth certificates, immunization records, and addresses. However, schools report that since the advent of the McKinney Act, the rate of attendance for students who experience homelessness has jumped from 50% to 88%. States reported recently that about 21% of the 205,749 preschool-aged children who experience homelessness were enrolled in preschool programs. Beyond the physical and social/emotional struggles, students who experience homelessness face additional specific special educational needs. In Boston, students who were homeless were found to have a higher incidence of developmental delays (about 50% of students who were homeless experienced developmental delays) as compared to about 16% of all other children from households with similar demographic

THE COMMUNITY CAN AND SHOULD:

- Donate money for basic needs, schools supplies, adequate shelter space, and support services.
- Coordinate and streamline services to poor families by locating psychological, social, and health services in the schools.
- Serve as academic tutors or teach life skills to students and parents (budgeting, personal hygiene, parenting.)
- Advocate and listen.
- Help with the various ways to prevent homelessness.
- Provide after school adult education, GED, or literacy courses to parents of homeless students.
characteristics (i.e., single parent, minority, low socioeconomic status) to the homeless students—but housed. Other factors creating academic challenges for students who experience homelessness include high rates of language disabilities, poor physical health, chronic illness, frequent depression and anxiety, behavior problems, and mental illness. Despite evidence of need, lack of assessment for special education services is common, and only one in four students who experience homelessness typically receive special education services. Yet, one study found that 28% of children/youth in homeless shelters in one city qualified for an evaluation for an emotional/behavioral disorder, 20% for a learning disability, and 8% for mental retardation. Only 23% of the students who were eligible for evaluations had been referred or tested for special education services. In order to best serve students, school personnel must expedite the assessment, placement, and service delivery procedures before children move again.

A final challenge faced by students who experience homelessness is the cultural conflict that occurs between home and school. For instance, in school, students are expected to maintain a certain level of cleanliness, homework completion, and regular school attendance, as well as to produce financial resources to buy lunch and school supplies, provide access to technology, and provide for transportation. Students who experience homelessness infrequently meet those expectations. Therefore, school personnel need to understand the impact of poverty and homelessness on students and advocate for solutions that will meet their students' needs.

WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO?

Given the varied needs of students who experience homelessness, as well as the legal stipulations of services in a public school system, all school personnel should receive training to work with students who experience homelessness and especially with students with disabilities. Such training rarely occurs at the pre-service or in-service levels; we can do better. May, Kundert, and Akpan (1994) surveyed 258 of the 604 existing special education teacher preparation programs in the United States and found that only 72 addressed in their classes the needs of students who experience homelessness, making homelessness the least frequently covered social issue surveyed. The average amount of time spent on the topic was 2.9 hours. In several programs, the issue was only touched on in elective classes. Teachers should be trained in college classes, but should also receive continued training through in-services or conferences; talking to teachers, administrators, state, or university personnel with experience with the population; or reading professional articles and newsletters. Linehan recommended that district in-service training include school personnel as well...
as shelter staff, social service agency personnel, and formerly homeless parents who can help school personnel understand the needs of students who experience homelessness. Quint also recommended that school personnel visit the students’ “home” communities for further enlightenment.

Some components of effective interventions include belief in the student’s ability to succeed, meeting basic physical needs, education in appropriate prosocial behavior, and preventative mental health education. Consistent rules, with frequent positive reinforcement and consequences, regular routines, and reliable adults can also create a secure environment. Additionally, exposure to risky behaviors can be buffered through focusing on individual strengths, community support and mentoring, the development of caring relationships, case management services, life skills training, support groups, and community mental health referrals.

Parents can advocate for education, model learning, encourage learners, and reinforce academic learning and homework completion at home. Parents should be involved in educational planning in a supportive, respectful environment. Empowerment of parents to care for their families and actively pursue job and self improvement should result from strengthening parental competence and confidence. Effective parent liaisons can help families who experience homelessness become involved in the school and community.

**THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY CAN:**

- Provide before and after school programs, homebound or on-site shelter services, mentoring programs, funds for school supplies, daycare for teen parents, tutoring, confidential handling of records, and a warm, safe, and secure environment.
- Allow participation in summer or extra-curricular programs, which may help improve homeless students’ behaviors in the classroom as well as improve academic success.
- Prepare in advance for new students by preparing information packets, providing a video/live orientation, arranging for student and/or teacher mentors, and conducting a brief academic screening to help determine initial placement.
- Provide opportunities for community involvement in recreation and job training.
- Maintain a strength-based focus.
- Provide expedited referrals and assessments for special education services.
- Provide referrals and resources to students and families.
- Train teachers and school staff on issues impacting students who are experiencing homelessness.
- Provide space for students to store personal belongings, if needed.
CONCLUSION: A CONTEMPORARY SNAPSHOT

In many urban shelters like The Road Home in Salt Lake City, Utah, social services assisting homeless individuals to become self-sufficient are available on-site or within reach. People do volunteer, and donations, although down since 9-11, still arrive. Shelters have caring staff, but the number of homeless families with children increases. Younger homeless children attend school in greater numbers than they did 15 years ago, but school enrollment and attendance for homeless youth is sporadic. School is one place where homeless children/youth can go to feel safe, accepted, and to receive the many kinds of physical, emotional, and academic assistance noted previously. School can provide constructive escape. A remarkable young man was once homeless his senior year in high school:

Richard Dutcher is a critically successful moviemaker. His biological father, a truck driver, meatpacker, and bartender had an alcohol addition. As a consequence of the addiction, his parents divorced when Richard was 6. The stepfather his mother subsequently married moved the family from state to state due in part to a string of failed businesses. Richard whiled away countless hours growing up pondering and writing stories. Before the start of his senior year, the family moved once more. This time Richard opted to remain behind. He lived for a time with friends' families but eventually ended up sleeping in his car and showering at school. He had no designer clothes to wear and little to eat, but he survived by working various jobs. Incredibly, Richard earned good grades, edited the school newspaper, acted in school plays, and served as student body vice president. Friends described him as kind, independent, and a hard worker. Upon graduation, he accepted a scholarship to study film at Brigham Young University. Then his stepfather was arrested and imprisoned for sexually abusing several young girls. Almost 20 years later—married, with a talented, gregarious wife and five sons—Richard Dutcher feels grateful to have completed his sixth critically successful film project, including 4 theatrical films.

School as the impetus for numerous services that provide for needs in the physical, social/emotional, and academic realms can be the antidote for homeless students like Richard Dutcher. Homelessness is a serious concern and in order for homeless students to be successful, they need the support of both school and community personnel. We can and must provide this support. In educating ourselves about the needs of students who experience homelessness, our responsibilities toward them become clear. Professional development for school personnel continues to be critical. Collaboration between school
personnel, parents/guardians, and shelters for the sake of our children/youth is critical. The will to help is critical. Wilder, Obiakor, and Algozzine (2003) state:

School personnel should realize that it is not an unpleasant part of the professional task but an honor to have so great an influence on a child’s life. Schools will continue to encounter students who are experiencing homelessness and must rise to the challenge of meeting their physical, social/emotional, and academic needs for the same reason that strangers offered aid to the victims of the terrorist attack in New York: that in offering this assistance to others, we improve our own humanity. The justification is not that it makes us feel good, but that it is right.
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Student Art

- How My Family Helps Me Learn
- My Dream: Reading, Math, Home Work
- Despite Our Difference, We Are All Human
- My Community: School - Diversity
GREAT URBAN SCHOOLS:

- Produce high achieving students.
- Construct education for social justice, access and equity.
- Expand students’ life opportunities, available choices and community contributions.
- Build on the extraordinary resources that urban communities provide for life-long learning.
- Use the valuable knowledge and experience that children and their families bring to school learning.
- Need individuals, family organizations and communities to work together to create future generations of possibility.
- Practice scholarship by creating partnerships for action-based research and inquiry.
- Shape their practice based on evidence of what results in successful learning of each student.
- Foster relationships based on care, respect and responsibility.
- Understand that people learn in different ways throughout their lives.
- Respond with learning opportunities that work.
Great Urban Schools: Learning Together Builds Strong Communities