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Highlighting the Importance of Researching Family Homelessness

Ronald E. Hallett
University of the Pacific, rhallett@pacific.edu

William G. Tierney
University of Southern California, wgtiern@usc.edu

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Shifting public perception of homelessness has been challenging. Often, single men with substance abuse issues are presented as the face of homelessness. Without question, these individuals face significant challenges and warrant continued support. However, using this model to frame public policy mutes the needs of other subgroups facing residential instability. As highlighted in the article “Addressing the Challenges of Child and Family Homelessness,” families are now the fastest growing homeless subgroup. The experiences of parents and their children attempting to survive without a home differ greatly from a single adult who may have substance abuse or mental health issues.

Kerri Tobin and Joseph Murphy’s review of research on child and family homelessness highlights the many challenges residential instability can create, including psychological, physical and developmental health issues. They draw attention to the obstacles residential instability creates for students attempting to navigate educational processes and school policies. One of the key findings emerging from research is that “schools and social service providers can make a difference in the lives of homeless students by helping them gain access to services, providing safe and supportive spaces, and empowering their parents.”

Tobin and Murphy end their discussion by pointing out that social and educational institutions have the potential to serve homeless students. We applaud their optimistic approach to discussing what can be done to assist youth and families. Often the challenges seem so overwhelming that developing a policy or program that might make an impact seems impossible. We agree with the contention that educational institutions have the ability to play a key role in helping youth achieve long-term stability.¹ The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act encourages states and districts to adjust policies that negatively impact the educational participation of homeless youth. For example, improved school attendance and sub-grants provided to school districts that have led to increased student engagement and test scores are due largely to the federal legislation.^{2,3}

In an attempt to extend Tobin and Murphy’s arguments, we offer three points that warrant continued research to improve educational access for homeless youth. First, youth living doubled-up is the largest subpopulation of homeless students. Between 2008 and 2009 the economic crises in the United States dramatically impacted families living on the brink of homelessness.^{4,5} Over 75% of families who lost homes during the foreclosure crisis sought refuge in the home of a friend or family member.⁶ Doubled-up residences tend to be the transitional stage before families seek refuge in homeless shelters or on the streets.^{7,8} Although

60% of students who qualify for services under the McKinney-Vento Act live doubled-up, research with these families has been limited and schools have a difficult time determining how to best serve them, if at all.^{9,10} Providing services for these children and their families is difficult because they do not meet the definition of homelessness used by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). As a result, doubled-up youth can call upon the McKinney-Vento Act to gain access to education, and yet at the same time be excluded from housing provided by HUD. Given that living doubled-up tends to be the precursor to other forms of homelessness, figuring out how to support these families in achieving long-term stability is warranted. In attempting to understand these families, the need exists to understand how to support functioning family arrangements that may differ from traditional families.

In addition, Tobin and Murphy suggest that programs should empower homeless families. The success of the policies and programs designed to improve educational access has been limited due to the social shame associated with identifying as homeless. Families and youth rarely feel comfortable requesting support related to “homeless” services.⁹ Parents may fear that social service agencies will question their ability to adequately provide care for their children without a stable residence. And youth may avoid identifying as homeless in an attempt to protect peer status and relationships. More research needs to be done to understand how to increase access to services without requiring students to compromise their social status.

Finally, the focus of educational research has been on K-12 access and success. Continued work by researchers, policymakers and practitioners is necessary to improve the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act. In conjunction with these discussions should be an exploration of how to improve access to higher education.^{11,12} For homeless youth, a major barrier to attending a postsecondary institution is unacceptably low high school graduation rates.¹³ However, the residential experiences of these youth also complicate the postsecondary transition process. Homeless youth exemplify the need to gain access to degrees and credentials associated with stability. Concerted attention should be given to exploring how to improve access to higher education in an effort to improve long-term success.

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