

Final Policy Paper

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### ***Housing Insecurity's Negative Effect on Education***

The right to secure, stable housing substantially impacts a students' achievement in school and in later years when transitioning into the workforce. The characteristics formed at a young age, whether it's the ability to think critically, make rational decisions, or explore extracurricular opportunities, is strongly dependent on the availability of basic shelter. As these skills develop from preschool all the way through highschool, they instill essential tools that allow individuals to grow and find their place in society. Child development researchers from Housing Matters Urban Institute found that children who lived with leaking roofs, exposed wires, pest infestation, and other problems were more likely to exhibit emotional and behavioral problems, which manifested themselves through anxiety, depression, and other internalizations in some children, and more outwardly aggressive behavior and rule breaking in others. Illustrating the inverse relationship of neglected housing on particular human traits. Specifically, "a home with quality deficiencies may add to other stresses experienced by poor families, leading to a cumulative negative impact on well-being" (Brennan, 2019). Hence the need for fundamental housing to become a basic human right ensured to every resident living in a municipality, state, or country. However, given American context and its history with real estate covenants, financial redlining, and overall racial/ ethnic segregation, that reality doesn't exist. Realistically, the housing platform has shown a trend of unaffordable housing and generational wealth gaps.

Contributing to negative externalities, as seen in education and the outcomes that originate from it like - school access, test scores, graduation rates, and long-term living quality.

Taking into account the systematic and institutional disparities that exist for certain racial, ethnic, and sexual identities, to have housing is the foundation in which individuals can even begin to develop. Essentially surpassing all other types of challenges that the students might face throughout their own lifetime. This is supported by the following statistics conducted on homeless youth by Perry Firth, project coordinator at Seattle University's Project on Family Homelessness: "One third of the preschoolers experiencing homelessness had motor-visual abilities that placed them at the fifth percentile"; "Of children who are homeless under age five, more than 75 percent have at least one major delay, most commonly in impulsivity or speech"; "Only 51 percent of kids who are homeless met statewide standards in reading in grades 3-8 nationally in the 2011-2012 school year" (Firth, 2014). These statistics tell us that homelessness and education are relatively tied. But to what extent, and have programs aimed at remediating these conditions showcased significant results? In the following impact evaluation, we'll be asking - What are the effects of the McKinney-Vento Act on students' educational outcomes (specifically attendance, activity involvement, and class-grade achievement) with students who've been directly serviced or enrolled in the Act for at-least one academic year. So while the framework is that housing benefits individuals with security and safety - which is believed to improve educational outcomes. We want to explore this intervention and dissect the underlying assumptions at play, while examining the multifaceted effects of housing on the students' achievement in school. As well as the long-term impact on employment, well-being, and role in society.

## ***Context***

The McKinney-Vento Act is the only federal program that targets students without regular, fixed, or adequate housing. This includes participants living in temporary housing or shelters, cars, motels, and in places that are not officially recognized for sleeping. The McKinney-Vento Act is a former subsection of the larger Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) Program, and was later reauthorized in 2015 to become part of the Title IX, Part A, of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The program channels federal funding to establish state (SEA) and local (LEA) agencies that carry out multiple responsibilities of implementation. It regulates that any student from pre-k to 12th grade, who is determined as an individual at risk, receives the following services - one, the student enrolls in their school of choice (although factors of accessibility and location are considered) without having to provide official documentation of residence, birth certification, or forms of identification. Second, students are eligible for free lunch programs, school supplies, immunization shots, tutoring, transportation, and personal counseling. The most recent funding cycle was approved in fiscal year 2015 and disbursed a total amount of \$65.042 million. Which is important to note given the extent to which homeless youth are severely under resourced in areas of public education and counseling. The national average graduation rate for homeless students is only 64%. With a 100% increase in student homelessness from 2007-08, at a total quantity of 1,355,821 students.<sup>1</sup>

The McKinney-Vento Act aims, first and foremost, to increase the enrollment and attendance of homeless youth in the US. It ensures that all homeless children and youth have the right to attend school, and removes bureaucratic barriers for students to enroll in schools. The

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<sup>1</sup> National Center for Homeless Education, "Education Leads Home Releases Homeless Student State Snapshots." February 2019. Retrieved from <<https://www.educationleadshome.org/2019/02/12/education-leads-home-releases-homeless-student-state-snapshots-2/>>.

Act assures that students who are homeless should also be provided waivers and/or assistance to completely participate in activities provided by their school such as trip fees, transportation, and tutoring. The structure of operation within the Act is that children and youth who are experiencing homelessness are identified by school personnel, or self-identify and are then enrolled in the schools of their choice. Although preference is usually given to in-district institutions first. The failure to provide identification and residency documents for homeless youth cannot be an obstacle for enrollment for these students. The additional support of SEAs and LEAs, which are local and state points of contact, assist students and families with any logistical questions or concerns they may have with the application of the Act and ESSA implementation in their respective schools. SEAs and LEAs also have the ability to improve existing policies and introduce new policies to help eliminate any barrier that may hinder a student's academic achievement. The McKinney-Vento Act also benefits foster youth and youth who are in transitional homes. Overall, the Act helps students navigate the structural disparities inflicted by homelessness, while working to provide social and academic support students need to address their struggles and help them integrate into society.

Grants offered in accordance with the McKinney-Vento Act are to be purposed for activities aimed at providing services to homeless youth to enroll, attend, and succeed in school. A grant would also be provided to designate a position of a coordinator that would focus on the barriers that homeless youth face in their respective schools and create programming that would effectively target these students and provide the necessary tools for their advancement in their education. Segregation based on residency status shall be denied and full efforts shall be made to equip homeless students with the resources to maintain their educational progress and peer

standards. The grants that are coupled with this act are crucial pieces that will affect how schools respond to their respective homeless populations and improve those students' overall enrollment and attendance.

### ***Why We Should Care About the Success of Homeless Students***

Homelessness amongst youth is an ever growing concern in the United States that requires our attention. The Department of Education began to record homeless children and youth in the 2005-06 school year. The population of homeless youth has since doubled, with a recorded 1,263,323 homeless students in the 2014-15 school year.<sup>2</sup> By law, youth of a certain age are required to attend school, according to compulsory attendance statutes that were established as early as the 1850s.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, homeless youth have greater obstacles in their way that prevent them from meeting school attendance obligations, and subsequently puts them at a greater disadvantage in their future. For homeless youth school is more than a place for education, it plays as a safe haven that provides safety during the day and a reliable meal source. From an economic stand-point, the academic achievement of every student should be of priority to policy makers because they are the future leaders and workers of tomorrow.

According to Education Production Theory, the input of school resources and supports, can impact a students achievement. Homeless youth that aren't provided with mechanisms to alleviate their poor conditions face problems of depressed motivation and rejection of society. According to the National Center for Homeless Education, homeless children and youth are

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<sup>2</sup> National Center for Homeless Education, "Homeless Liaison Toolkit." May 2017. Retrieved from <<https://education.wm.edu/centers/hope/liaison/nchetoolkitcomplete.docx>>.

<sup>3</sup> Diepenbrock, G. "Study finds early U.S. compulsory schooling laws benefited minorities." April 25, 2014. Retrieved from <<https://news.ku.edu/2014/04/24/study-finds-early-us-compulsory-schooling-laws-produced-hidden-gains-minority-students>>.

recorded to have higher levels of illness, depression, and exposure to violence than their peers with housing security.<sup>4</sup> This can ultimately affect their future of becoming independent and successful, while also contributing to their community and society at-large.

### ***The McKinney-Vento Act's Theory of Change***

The intended theory of change of the McKinney-Vento Act is that by removing barriers to enroll in school, such as residency, medical, and birth certificate documents, and by providing additional resources, such as transportation, more homeless children and youth will enroll in school. When youth receive education they acquire knowledge, learn discipline, and increase their level of productivity. Education is an even greater tool for low-income youth because it broadens their career opportunities and increases their lifetime earnings. It allows youth the opportunity to break the cycle of generational poverty, increases their chances of becoming productive citizens in the future, and increases their social mobility by providing a strong network of friends and mentors that could be valuable.

In short, higher levels of enrollment positively affect academic achievements and measurements. This creates a beneficial change in the lives of homeless youth, as they are given more opportunities, more stability, and more hope. Over a long period of time, this will translate to higher graduation rates and college enrollment among the homeless youth population. Long term projected results are that these individuals will have increased opportunities in life and the workforce as they were able to obtain educational milestones.

### ***Measures***

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<sup>4</sup> National Center for Homeless Education, "Homeless Liaison Toolkit."

The McKinney-Vento Act is a federal law that ensures the right of students to go to school even when they are homeless or don't have a permanent address. The Act aims to reduce barriers that have prevented many homeless youth from enrolling, attending, and succeeding in school. This includes barriers to transportation, documentation of residency requirements, and other documentation forms such as birth certificates and medical records.

On transportation, the Act requires that the district in which the student who is experiencing homelessness attends school must provide or arrange transportation. The Act has removed the requirement for residency documentation for all homeless children and youth.<sup>5</sup> This includes children and youth that may be unaccompanied from a physical guardian, children and youth living in shelters or transitional programs, those that are temporarily living with friends or relatives, and those that are temporarily in motels, campgrounds, cars, or any other forms of temporary housing. The McKinney-Vento Act also removed the requirement of any other documentation forms that may be prohibiting homeless students from enrolling, such as birth certificates and medical records.<sup>6</sup> It's also important to note that under the McKinney-Vento Act, youth have the right to attend either the school nearest to where they are living, or their school of origin, otherwise known as the school where they were last enrolled, even if they moved out of the school district. The school in which they choose to attend is legally expected to accommodate them.<sup>7</sup>

The McKinney-Vento Act strongly emphasizes the importance of school stability for homeless children and youth. By increasing homeless students accessibility to be enrolled and

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<sup>5</sup> Practical Application of the McKinney-Vento Act. (n.d.). Retrieved from <<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/fysb/mckvenapp20120829.pdf>>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

stable in school, the Act hopes to measure their success through several key outcomes, both long and short term. Short term, the Act intends to increase academic performance. This includes greater school attendance of homeless students, higher test scores, and higher graduation rates. The theory of change process assumes that removing any additional barriers and providing direct transportation to school for homeless children and youth will directly impact their attendance. From increased attendance in the classroom and extra resources provided, it is expected for the child or youth to have improved test scores and school performance. This translates to a pathway to graduate. Long term outcomes seek to increase social growth from opportunities provided to homeless students both educationally and professionally, greater economic stability, and a higher overall quality of life. Because of achieved educational milestones, these individuals will have qualifications for increased opportunities. This may then translate to higher pay, which directly affects their economic stability and mobility forward.

### ***Evaluation Challenges***

The McKinney-Vento Act works to ensure that children and youth in every state are equipped with resources that assist them in enrolling into their school of choice without having to provide official documentation. Additionally, the Act works to remediate the negative externalities caused by homelessness by providing students with transportation, as well as personal and professional mentoring. The Act is intervened among students from the ages of pre-k through senior year of high school. However, it's important to note that the McKinney-Vento Act doesn't necessarily provide housing for at-risk students, and it only identifies this population when the students self request the help, or contrastly, are recommended by a teacher or counselor. In which they are later connected with state (SEAs) or local (LEAs)



agencies. Due to the program design and organizational structure, it hinders some of the evaluation methods that could be feasible in determining whether or not this program improved educational outcomes, both long-term and short-term. Such as standardized test scores and attendance, or distal outcomes like graduation rates and employment wages. However, by intersecting databases from external organizations like SAT or ACT scores, we're able to overcome some of those challenges and analyze the results to find, or reject, any causal relationships. Outlined, are various obstacles facing a complete and comprehensive evaluation.

To begin, the Act has already been implemented and revised since it's initial legislation in 1987. This poses an issue for evaluation because the original program design wasn't randomized and didn't include an evaluation component in it's framework. Consequently, eliminating any chances for a Randomized Control Test. Additionally, because the program design didn't randomly select schools that would participate in the program, it's plagued by continuous selection bias. Although the Act was federally legislated to provide funding and staff capacity throughout the states, the Act in itself is not equally distributed within the state because each school or school district can voluntarily decide to host the program and a local (LEA) liaisons. In total, this creates systematic disparities that differentiate which type of schools and students receive the assistantship. For example, schools who participate in the program demonstrate a high need to help homeless youth because of demographic or geographic reasons, in which their school is located in a city or community that struggles with generational wealth gaps, private and public disinvestment, as well as poor health conditions. Further, schools that choose to partake in the program could potentially have the time and support systems that allow them to host local liaisons and program administration. While other schools that didn't sign-up could've been

limited by a lack of space, teachers, and time. Representing inequalities, both observable and unobservable, that skew overall data trends.

Moreover, the second tier of selection bias deals with the students' choice. Although the Act allows students to pursue the school and education that best fits their needs, there could exist driving pressures that influence the students' choice when deciding on which school to attend. Factors such as - friends and social circles, the setting of the school (urban or rural, size, curriculum, and activities offered), in addition to pre-existing assumptions the student might have about that school. A subcomponent of this relates to program attrition. This means that the population at study, or the treatment group, does not complete the program because of extensive motives. This could be because of a discriminatory administrator, dangerous living arrangements, or the need for the student to leave the city or neighborhoods. Representing the different layers of selection bias, in which students or street-level administrators influence the intervention's goals by deciding which school participates, which students are enrolled, and who completes the program etc.

Another issue that compromises the quality and integrity of the evaluation is embodied by history threats. The program is naturally dealing with homeless youth and students, so being able to adequately track this population becomes a barrier when administrators need to contact them. This leads to a multitude of complex situations because the Act doesn't provide stable shelter, and by not addressing the root causes of the problem, the program will have to confront problems related to students going missing, dropping the program, and simply not finding a need to use the service anymore. A major part of the history threats include maturation. While we try to measure educational outcomes, the mere presence of the Act and the evaluation might prompt

students, both in the control and treatment groups, to seek individuals or institutions that might improve the periphery of effects induced by homelessness. As mentioned, the improved living standards could derive from surrounding professionals or peers, but it could also naturally occur because we are studying a population that is still growing. Theoretically this population might solely become independent through the means of employment, mentorship, and cognitive abilities that come with growth and real-life experiences. All together, these variables encompass observable and unobservable characteristics that threaten our ability to draw correlation or causation conclusions.

### **Research Design**

Considering the challenges of running a randomized controlled trial, it would be best to operate a difference in difference utilizing panel data from districts. There are too many biases that may arise if an RCT was to be attempted. Selection biases are the biggest obstacle that the research design will need to overcome. The importance of understanding how these biases affect the data that is collected is integral in assessing the impact of the McKinney-Vento Act on students. In regards to the program, students who participate either volunteered their status, or were approached by a school official to learn about their conditions and suggest the resources that were available. It wouldn't make sense to randomly select students because it would be antithetical to the general ethics of the right to an education in the United States. In addition, the students themselves select which schools they want to attend, which tend to be the school closest to what they regard as their hometown neighborhood. A difference in difference would allow for all homeless students to receive the program resources instead of allowing for some to fend for themselves.

Another challenge would be the existence of attrition for students in the program. For example, conditions for students experiencing homelessness can change, either for the better or worse. History threats are bountiful in tracking a demographic where conditions can change based on a myriad of factors outside of the educational institution that can change the life of a homeless student. There may be instances where it is no longer safe for a student to reside in the area of their neighborhood school, and will inevitably have to enroll in another school. On the other hand, something might go very well for the parent(s) of a student and their status as homeless may cease; however, this doesn't mean the barriers that these students face disappear. It can be possible that homelessness strikes again and a student is in the same predicament a period of time later.

Additionally, the sheer fact that students can experience life changing situations throughout their lives can be considered a maturation bias. Students can become interested in school or their general performance over time, even if there was an absence of a program created to support them. A difference in difference using panel data will provide information on students over time, regardless of whether their status as homeless shifted and/or reverted. This is the greatest advantage of performing a difference in difference in this scenario. Due to the nature of homeless students being a hard to track demographic, a difference in difference allows for data to be culled across time, no matter the status of the individual student. An RCT would be susceptible to these conditions and the data would be unreliable and inaccurate.

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