

# **RESIDENTIAL AND ACADEMIC INSTABILITY**

*A Comprehensive Model Linking Youth Homelessness to Poor Academic Achievement*

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According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, between 500,000 and 750,000 American children were homeless in 1990 (Mickelson, 1995). The U.S. Department of Education estimated that in 1995, at least 750,000 children were homeless, and approximately 23% did not attend school (Polakow, 1998). Complete absence from school clearly limits children's academic potential, especially when educational support from other sources is nonexistent. Homeless children who manage to attend school still encounter disproportionate and alarming academic deficits compared to normative samples (Power, Whitty, & Youdell, 1999; Solarz, 1992). While homelessness strongly predicts poor academic outcomes, impoverished children from more stable living arrangements also tend to experience below average scholastic performance, therefore implicating poverty as the root cause of academic failure. However, most comparisons of these two populations have found relatively more scholastic deficits among homeless children (Rafferty, 1991; Rescorla, Parker, & Stolley, 1991; Vostanis, Grattan, Cumella, & Winchester, 1997), inspiring researchers to isolate explanatory mechanisms which underlie this divergence. The higher prevalence of residential mobility found among homeless families, as compared to impoverished, housed families, may be the unique mechanism causing homeless children to have relatively worse educational outcomes (Ziesemer, Marcoux, & Marwell, 1994).

Numerous factors contribute to the damage that residential mobility incurs on homeless families. Three primary mechanisms include persistent educational barriers to children's enrollment and participation in school (Power et al., 1999; Rafferty, 1991; Rafferty, 1995; Rafferty & Shinn, 1991), repeated disruption of parents' and children's supportive social and communal networks (Masten et al., 1993; Power et al., 1999; Rafferty, 1995; Rafferty & Shinn,

1991), and high levels of family stress (Humke & Schaefer, 1995; Masten, Miliotis, Graham-Bermann, Ramirez & Neemann, 1993; Polakow, 1998; Rafferty, 1995). Multiple movements among temporary emergency shelters, often at great distances from one another, disrupt parents' and children's supportive social networks, exacerbate parental and family stress, worsen families' access to schools and educational services, and cause repeated breaks in academic continuity. While poverty may underlie homeless children's academic difficulties, residential mobility intensifies poverty's damaging consequences, creating new obstacles to homeless children's educational success.

#### **HOMELESSNESS: A PREDICTOR OF POOR ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND RESIDENTIAL MOBILITY**

Before examining the mechanisms linking homelessness to poor educational outcomes, it is essential first to establish that a connection does exist. Power et al. (1999) reported that approximately 40% of homeless students were either failing or completing below average work. While younger students scored about one year below grade level, academic performance diminished with age, with many older students scoring three years below grade level (Power et al., 1999). Furthermore, 36% of homeless children had repeated a grade, which was twice the average rate (Better Homes Fund, 1999). In New York City, homeless children performed below grade level in several academic categories, with 75% scoring below average in reading, 72% in spelling, and 54% in mathematics (Better Homes Fund, 1999). In Los Angeles County, Zima, Wells, and Freeman (1994) found that homeless children were four times more likely than the general population to score at or below the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile on a measure of receptive vocabulary,

signifying that disproportionately poor cognitive skills, in addition to educational underachievement, exist among homeless youth.

For example, New York City homeless children in grades three through ten scored significantly lower than impoverished, housed peers on standardized measures of reading and mathematics skills (Rafferty, 1991; Rafferty & Shinn, 1991). Rescorla et al. (1991) found the same difference among preschool children, who tended to have higher rates of behavioral and emotional problems. Homeless children displayed relatively greater cognitive deficits than their impoverished, housed peers, with a more significant difference among school age children than preschool children. While older homeless children scored similarly to housed peers on measures of nonverbal intelligence, single word reading, and visual-motor skills, they scored significantly worse on a measure of vocabulary (Rescorla et al., 1991). Speculating on the underlying reasons for this phenomenon, the researchers contended that homeless children have two divisions of cognitive functioning, one measured by the nonverbal cognitive assessments, and one by the vocabulary assessment. The vocabulary test measured concrete knowledge gained from cultural and social experience, while the nonverbal tasks measured conceptual, fluid problem-solving ability that may stem from more innate, immutable processes. Given this premise, the study's results indicated that homeless children may have certain domains of cognitive functioning that remain relatively intact despite poor social and educational experiences. At the same time, cognitive abilities dependent on environmental learning may be seriously impaired in this population. (Rescorla et al., 1991).

The statistical data presented thus far have demonstrated significant correlations between homelessness and poor academic outcomes. Homelessness has also been found to be associated with high rates of residential mobility, a condition which typically forces children and

adolescents to make multiple school transitions throughout their academic careers. Of 277 homeless families living in New York City, 66% had been placed in two or more shelters while homeless, and 29% had made between four and eleven residential transitions while homeless (Rafferty & Rollins, 1989). Each transition is associated with a multitude of problems, including the stress of moving, the disruption of previous social and communal ties, and often the necessity for children to transfer to new local schools. Seventy percent of New York City homeless children were sheltered in an entirely different borough from the location of their previous permanent home (Rafferty & Rollins, 1989). Furthermore, 76% of these children transferred schools at least once since becoming homeless, and 33% of the sample transferred between two and six times (Rafferty & Rollins, 1989). On average, each school transition resulted in the loss of five school days, with many children missing more. While the amount of school time lost was a relatively simple, direct measure of academic setbacks, residential mobility appears to have more complex and destructive impacts on children's academic achievement.

#### **RESIDENTIAL MOBILITY: LINKING HOMELESSNESS TO POOR ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT**

Impoverished children, regardless of their housing status, face greater societal obstacles to educational success than their more financially secure peers. As a result, teasing apart the effects of poverty and housing status can be difficult, requiring carefully controlled studies in which two groups of families, one homeless and one housed, are matched on low levels of socioeconomic status (SES). Because of the heterogeneity found among impoverished families, such studies have established diverse findings highlighting significant similarities and differences between the two conditions.

Demonstrating that homelessness, compared to poverty alone, is more highly correlated with negative academic outcomes does not sufficiently isolate the aspects of homelessness underlying the association. By definition, to be homeless means that one does not reside in a permanent home. Instead of focusing on this definitional quality of homelessness by lumping heterogeneous homeless families into one category, some researchers have attempted to isolate the specific problems associated with homeless that are most fundamental in manifesting poor academic outcomes. Several associated problems include residential mobility, parental and family stress, disruption of social and communal ties, and barriers to accessing preferred schools and necessary educational services. Families can be both homeless and relatively unencumbered by these conditions. For instance, a family who lives in one shelter for an extended period of time, maintains a supportive social network, and is highly resilient against adversity is still considered to be homeless, even though the conditions typically found among homeless families that are associated with academic failure are absent.

Ziesemer et al. (1994) posited that residential mobility, rather than homelessness per se, was the central underlying mechanism explaining differences between homeless and housed populations matched for low SES on measures of academic performance, social-psychological functioning, and problem behaviors in school. To demonstrate that homelessness itself was not the primary underlying mechanism, the researchers assessed a sample of elementary school age housed children who had similarly high levels of residential mobility to a sample of homeless children matched for low SES. With this design, residential mobility was equally and randomly distributed among children in both groups, so that the definitional quality of homelessness was the only factor differentiating the homeless and housed samples. (Ziesemer et al., 1994).

Participants' teachers were administered the Teacher Report Form (TRF) measuring perceptions of the children's reading and math performance, adaptive functioning, and exhibition of problem behaviors predictive of mental health deficits. A random sample of children from both groups were administered the Self-Perception Profile for Children (SPP), which measured children's feelings of global self-worth, as well as perceived competence in five domains, namely scholastic, social, athletic, physical appearance, and behavior. Finally, student records provided data on grades, academic history, prior enrollment in special education and Chapter I services, and family demographics. (Ziesemer et al., 1994).

The two groups showed remarkable similarities on all performance and self-perception measures, with scores typical of at-risk populations. With roughly equal statistical distribution across conditions, two-thirds of the participants scored below grade level on reading and mathematics, half scored in the clinical range in adaptive functioning on the TRF, and mean scores on teacher-ratings of children's problem behavior were generally below norms. A composite score of all student functioning measures indicated that 70% of the children across groups were at above average academic and behavioral risk. On the self-perception measures, no significant differences were found between homeless and mobile, housed children. Interestingly, both groups scored in the normal range for global self-worth and all five subscales, perhaps indicating that the children maintained resiliency despite negative teacher ratings and the reality of their poor academic performance. (Ziesemer et al., 1994).

The lack of significant differences between the groups clearly supports their hypothesis that the definitional quality of homelessness does not adequately explain why homeless children tend to have poorer academic outcomes than housed children with similar poverty levels. By assembling a group of housed, yet mobile, impoverished children, the researchers were able to

show that residential mobility had a strong enough effect to equalize the typically divergent outcomes between housed and homeless impoverished children. Furthermore, this study provides continued evidence that poverty has a highly detrimental impact on children regardless of housing status, as shown by low scores across the board. The notable exception to this finding was that these children tended to have normal feelings of global self-worth and perceived competence across several domains, which may be crucial in understanding the role of children's resiliency in counteracting serious environmental hazards. (Ziesemer et al., 1994).

**THREE EXPLANATORY MECHANISMS LINKING RESIDENTIAL MOBILITY TO POOR ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: EDUCATIONAL BARRIERS, THE DISRUPTION OF SOCIAL AND COMMUNAL NETWORKS, AND FAMILY STRESS**

Homeless children tend to exhibit worse educational and cognitive outcomes than housed, impoverished children. Furthermore, homelessness is more highly associated with residential mobility than poverty alone. Intuitively and empirically, residential mobility has been implicated as a central factor explaining why homeless children have worse academic outcomes than their housed, impoverished peers. The next logical question is to ask *how* residential mobility predicts academic underachievement. Throughout the research literature, three fundamental modes of linkage surface repeatedly, namely barriers to desired schools and needed educational services, the disruption of social and communal networks following multiple residential and school transitions, and elevated levels of family stress, often resulting from a combination of poverty and the two previous conditions.

## **EDUCATIONAL BARRIERS**

School can potentially provide consistency and stability to the tumultuous, stressful lives of homeless children. However, this potential becomes tragically compromised when children are forced to make multiple school transfers, incur lengthy academic delays during the transfers, and encounter insensitive school personnel (Rafferty, 1995). Furthermore, when an array of institutional barriers limit parental involvement in children's education, students often have to face these obstacles on their own. In many cases, it would be beneficial for children to remain enrolled in the schools nearest to their last permanent residence as to avoid the educational dilemmas of school transfers.

Recent federal legislation has mandated that homeless parents have the authority to choose whether their children attend local schools close to their new temporary shelters, or remain enrolled in their previous schools. This choice should be based solely on the child's best interest (Polakow, 1998; Rafferty, 1995).<sup>1</sup> Despite promising federal progress, the enforcement of these laws remains lax. Local school district enrollment requirements and bureaucratic red tape prevent homeless children from maintaining consistent school attendance and from receiving beneficial educational programs. Several educational barriers most heavily impede parents' ability either to keep children in the schools near their most recent permanent homes, or enrolling them in new local schools in a timely manner. These barriers include local residency requirements for enrollment, insufficient transportation, bureaucratic delays in transferring documents from a child's previous school, and inadequate access to appropriate educational services (Power et al., 1999; Rafferty, 1995).

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed discussion of federal legislation pertaining to homeless children's education will be retained for the policy solution paper. However, brief comments on the import of recent legislation are necessary to analyze this social problem.

Schools typically require that their students reside within the local school district in order to legally enroll, often demanding proof of a permanent local address. Needless to say, homeless families by definition do not meet this requirement, and therefore these children are temporarily barred from attending either their previous schools, or schools nearby their new temporary shelters. Despite federal mandates, many homeless children are prevented from attending school as a result of local institutional barriers (Rafferty, 1995). Furthermore, parents often are uninformed of homeless children's rights and the illegality of residency requirements, therefore feeling powerless in making favorable educational choices for their children. Thirty-three percent of New York City school age children were automatically transferred into local schools without parents having any information about their rights to choose a desired school for their children (Rafferty & Rollins, 1989). In many states, education officials, instead of parents, are given the authority to choose the school that they deem best supports the child's interests. According to Rafferty & Rollins (1989), 32% of the school districts in upstate New York failed to advise school personnel that residency laws could not be used to bar homeless children from school enrollment. Poor communication and misinformation spread among school districts, local educators, and parents prevent children from remaining in their previous school, deterring their ability to succeed academically (Power et al., 1999).

Residency requirements likely bar many homeless parents from enrolling their children in the most beneficial school settings. Another obstacle families often encounter is inadequate transportation between shelters and schools (Rafferty, 1995). Even when children are permitted to attend their previous schools, parents often cannot follow through with the decision due to unavailable or overly expensive transportation. In cases where public transportation is available, as is usually the case in urban areas, school regulations often defer transportation costs to

children's families. Furthermore, many homeless families are forced to move to emergency shelters that are a considerable distance from their previous residences, therefore making the trip to and from school lengthy and usually more expensive. Parents often feel uncomfortable allowing younger children to travel great distances alone on public transportation, and as a result, they need to join them on each trip. This necessity not only creates another hassle for parents, but also limits their ability to find or sustain meaningful employment. In urban, suburban, and rural areas alike, transportation availability and costs exacerbate parents' difficulty in placing their children in beneficial school environments. (Humke & Schaefer, 1995; Power et al., 1999; Rafferty, 1995; Rafferty & Shinn, 1991).

Whether it is for the best interest of the child, a result of residency requirements, or a consequence of inadequate transportation, many children eventually transfer to new local schools. However, at this point, the timeliness of the transition is compromised by the delays and costs of transferring school records, immunization documents, and other official paperwork (Polakow, 1998; Rafferty, 1995; Rafferty & Rollins, 1989). The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty (Rafferty, 1995) reported in 1990 that out of 20 states surveyed, 14 reported that this obstacle kept homeless children from attending school. The problem is amplified when students make multiple school transitions over a brief amount of time; sometimes the receipt of documents at one school is preceded by the child making another transition. As a result, academic and immunization records may be misplaced, delays may lengthen, and costs for replacing documents may be left up to the children's parents. (Rafferty, 1995).

Perhaps more than other at-risk populations, homeless children require special education services to help overcome cognitive, linguistic, and psychological difficulties. Unfortunately,

receiving continuous appropriate services throughout one or more school transfers is extremely difficult, often resulting in their loss for extended amounts of time. Without special attention, homeless children have even more difficulty adjusting to residential and academic transitions. (Rafferty, 1995). Two major impediments to receiving appropriate services in a new school are the delays in transferring previous school records, and the difficulty in evaluating children's special needs in light of their high mobility and the repeated disruption of school-based assessments (Rafferty, 1995). Teachers need a substantial amount of time to accurately identify children's educational needs and to establish an appropriate and effective response. Mobility and attendance delays greatly hinder the development of appropriate educational services for homeless children.

### **THE DISRUPTION OF SOCIAL & COMMUNAL NETWORKS AND FAMILY STRESS**

Local residency requirements, inadequate transportation, delays in transferring school documents, and insufficient development of appropriate services, all leave homeless children with tremendous difficulty in accessing the schools and services that best support their pursuit of academic success. Despite these institutional barriers, some children and families are able to rely on strong social and communal support systems for survival. However, for many homeless families, creating and maintaining social networks is extremely difficult due to high levels of residential and school mobility (Masten et al., 1993; Rafferty, 1995; Rafferty & Shinn, 1991). Moving from one locality to another typically disrupts numerous ties that families and children have to other individuals, social circles, and community groups, particularly when moving to a distant shelter. Furthermore, because many homeless families are bounced around multiple shelters, social and communal networks rarely have the chance to flourish and truly support homeless families. For children, socializing and making friends in new schools may be a painful

experience because of the expectation, and often the reality, of needing to break off relationships in the near future (Masten et al., 1993; Power et al., 1999). Combined with the existing stigma attached to homelessness, making multiple school transitions hinders children's abilities to establish supportive and extensive peer relationships (Power et al., 1999; Humke & Schaefer, 1995).

Social support and communal ties are potentially effective buffers against the numerous external stressors faced by homeless families. Consequently, when residential mobility disrupts social and communal networks, homeless families often have to cope with multiple stressors on their own. Given the quantity and strength of the stressors that typically accompany homelessness, especially residential mobility and persistent educational barriers, living without social supports can be quite debilitating. Even when financially secure parents plan in advance to change residences, and prepare the children for the likely difficulties, residential transitions still cause tremendous stress. (Rafferty, 1995; Humke & Schaefer, 1995). One major source of stress resulting from residential instability is the fear of family breakups. Foster care services often view homelessness as a form of parental neglect, claiming that children's well-being is compromised when living with their families (Pokalow, 1998). Homeless adolescents, especially boys, are often forced to separate from parents. According to a 1992 national survey conducted by Jacobs, Little, and Almeida (Pokalow, 1998), 40% of homeless shelters have specific provisions completely banning adolescent boys from living in them. The apprehension and reality of family dissolution intensifies previously elevated levels of stress faced by these families.

Residential mobility evidently is associated with high stress levels and poor social and communal ties. To fully support the hypothesis that stress and poor social networks serve as

explanatory mechanisms linking residential mobility to poor academic outcomes, a correlation between these mechanisms and poor academic performance needs to be established. Vostanis et al. (1997) compared housed and homeless families with similar SES by assessing their histories of adversity and stress, as well as their psychosocial characteristics and cognitive abilities. Homeless families tended to have histories of multiple, chronic adversities resulting in high levels of stress. Furthermore, homeless mothers and children exhibited abnormally high levels of mental health needs, with mothers typically reporting psychological distress and children displaying behavioral and emotional difficulties. The cross-sectional design of this study did not allow a causal relationship to be established between the families' histories of chronic adversities and their mental health problems, although one could intuitively argue for a bidirectionality of effects. Stressful life events likely have some role in fostering homeless children's high levels of behavioral and emotional difficulties (Vostanis et al., 1997), which are directly associated with poor cognitive and academic outcomes at school (Danseco & Holden, 1998; Masten et al., 1997). With the link between stress and low academic achievement levels now established, the overall model delineating how residential mobility correlates with poor educational outcomes is complete.

#### **A COMPREHENSIVE MODEL LINKING YOUTH HOMELESSNESS TO POOR ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT**

Few researchers doubt that homeless children tend to experience worse academic outcomes than impoverished, housed peers. Stated as such, one could inaccurately presume that the simple characteristic of living without a permanent home (i.e. homelessness) is the central causal factor which disproportionately hampers homeless children's academic achievement. By comparing two groups whose only significant difference was the presence or absence of

homelessness, Ziesemer et al. (1994) revealed that homelessness was not the underlying mechanism causing worse academic outcomes. Residential mobility better explained differences between typical homeless and impoverished, housed children. Again, confirming the existence of a link between two phenomena, in this case residential mobility and poor academic achievement, is not sufficient in explaining how the two conditions interconnect. In the research literature examining the underlying mechanisms linking residential mobility to poor academic achievement, three dominant factors emerge, namely educational barriers, disruption of social and communal ties, and family stress. Each of these conditions results from residential instability, and leads to poor academic achievement in both unique and interrelated ways. Facing repeated educational barriers, and losing supportive social networks, tend to dramatically increase family stress levels. As a direct result of the individual and combined effects of these three mechanisms, homeless children's academic performance worsens, causing overall academic achievement levels to fall below those of impoverished, housed children. These mechanisms can also have indirect effects; for example, high levels of stress may impair children's mental health, increasing emotional and behavioral problems at school, and ultimately leading to poor academic achievement. Through a series of interconnected mechanisms that are both direct and indirect as well as unidirectional and bidirectional, youth homelessness and poor academic achievement are intricately connected. [See Appendix for pictorial representation].

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## Appendix

### A Pictorial Representation of the Comprehensive Model Linking Youth Homelessness To Poor Academic Achievement

