



Assessing the Impact of Homelessness on Academic Performance

By: Henley Moon

On top of the demands of high school, some students are also affected by homelessness. Though everyone goes through unique personal struggles during their youth that can usually be contributed to “part of growing up,” homelessness goes a step beyond struggle and into crisis territory. To better understand homelessness among youth, this article explores some of the existing data regarding the number of youths experiencing homelessness, how it impacts their educational experience, and how someone might help an at-risk youth that they know.

The National Center for Homeless Education predicts there to be 1,384,301 known students enrolled in public school, from kindergarten to twelfth grade, experiencing homelessness. They report that 4.0% of these students are completely unsheltered, meaning they

spend the night in a car, park, abandoned building, or some other place not fit for permanent residence. The majority of homeless students, 76.7% according to Homeless Education, live “doubled up” with other families. That kind of living situation seems tolerable at best, unless the family going through homelessness happens to know a wealthy family with extra room just for them. Otherwise, as is most likely the case, the two families have to compete for sleeping space, hot water, food storage, and network usage. Even the most comfortable homeless situation is far from ideal, especially with school requirements to keep up with.

Despite these challenges, students experiencing homelessness seem to perform well. The National Center for Homeless Education reports that the vast majority—over 90%—of students experiencing homelessness earn a valid score in reading, math, and science assessments in the 2017-2018 academic year. However, less than 30% scored proficient in any one subject, which is roughly 10% lower than the average scores of economically disadvantaged students. The data did not provide a comparison to the average student population, but the significant drop between homeless and disadvantaged shows how these students have been impacted by homelessness. Though they pass with a valid score good enough for high school, they struggle to meet a proficiency required for higher education and more mentally rigorous occupations. Students experiencing homelessness have a clear academic disadvantage.

Despite the apparent level of success in academics, the National Center for Homeless Education reported that the graduation rate of students experiencing homelessness fluctuated greatly per state, but never reached 90%. Most states had much lower rates. Minnesota, for example, dipped to 46.8%. These students clearly are not failing out of high school, as their assessments show that they have the capability to graduate. The American Youth Policy Forum make it clear that these students drop out of school for reasons unique to being homeless.

Without a permanent address, transferring schools and enrolling into school are hurdles. Known homeless students are found “struggling to pay for school supplies, extracurricular fees, and college preparatory materials” (“Youth Experiencing Homelessness”). The American Youth Policy Forum claims that because of these boundaries and more, homeless youth are 87% more likely to drop out of high school.

Yet finances are just one of the problems that America’s Promise Alliance suggests “cluster” against at-risk students. By talking to youth that had dropped out at some point, the Alliance found that students who had left school had the strength and determination to survive struggles far greater than school, but no support group existed to ensure the students knew that school was just as important as their extreme and dire personal situations. Although the Alliance does not directly mention homelessness among the extreme situations at-risk students face, it can be assumed to fit the criteria.

America’s Promise Alliance closes their study with suggestions on how to help struggling youth, and it is no accident that their first suggestion, written in bold, is “listen.” This is not only the easiest but may also be the most essential help a student needs. Teachers, principals, counselors, and community leaders let these young people down by simply not connecting with them. Every students should be guided and encouraged through school, regardless of their living situation, college prospects, or personal dilemmas.

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