Homeless Youth and Educational Policy: A Case Study of Urban Youth in a Metropolitan Area

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HOMELESS YOUTH AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY: A CASE STUDY OF URBAN YOUTH IN A METROPOLITAN AREA

William G. Tierney and Ronald E. Hallett

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the educational barriers that homeless youth face in one large urban area. The text reviews the McKinney–Vento Homeless Assistance Act and discusses how California has attempted to follow the federal mandates, and the implications for Los Angeles. The chapter utilizes interviews with 120 homeless youth and 45 policymakers, school counselors, and after-school program coordinators in Los Angeles to understand how youth experience the education system. The authors identify aspects of the federal mandate that impede the educational progress of homeless youth. The findings highlight that homeless youth are not a homogenous group and educational supports need to be designed recognizing the diversity of their needs. Implications for policy and program implementation are discussed as they pertain to one large city in order to generate future research that might support, contradict, or expand upon the findings.

For over a century a key assumption that has guided educational policy in the United States is that schooling can be a way out of poverty for low-income youth. Two corollary assumptions are that the schools in low-income communities are often inadequate, and that these youth are not as well prepared as their more privileged counterparts when they go to school. Issues such as race, gender, and geography also impact the outcomes of schooling and are of interest to policymakers concerned with overcoming educational obstacles. Students who go to school without a fluency in English, for example, face challenges different from those who grow up in an English-speaking household. Girls and boys encounter different obstacles en route to adulthood. Urban students have issues that differ from rural students. The policies developed for one or another group may be hotly debated and contested – bilingual education is but one example – but the knowledge that a student's characteristics matter remains critical information if public schools are to adequately serve all students. Issues of educational equity concern what is just and fair, not simply abiding by policies that may be inherently flawed (Secada, 1989). The assumption here is that all young people have the ability to learn, but educational organizations need to take into account the social characteristics of those whom they teach.

Accordingly, we discuss problems homeless youth encounter in one large urban city. Homelessness defines a social fact – the individual is homeless – but it also in part circumscribes how youth interact with social organizations such as schools and welfare agencies. The point, of course, is not that all homeless youth act in a particular way any more than all African American youth or young women or gay, lesbian, or transgender youth act in a particular manner. However, to overlook that homelessness impacts youth, often in pernicious and injurious ways, is to ignore the social contexts of their lives and to obscure educational recommendations that might enable them to succeed.

Although a fair amount of research exists with regard to the problem of youth homelessness in general (e.g., Lifson & Halcon, 2001; Rafferty & Shinn, 1991; Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Yoder, 1999), the research is relatively thin with regard to the education of homeless youth (Mawhinney-Rhoads & Stahler, 2006; Quint, 1994). We begin with a discussion that pertains to general information on homeless youth and how to think about them, and then consider federal, state, and local policies that impact homeless students. We delineate the problems that exist with regard to the current situation and consider possible avenues to explore that might help move toward the goal of educational equity. Our purpose is not to provide an exhaustive exegesis on the history of educational and social policy with regard to homeless

youth, but instead to present an overview of the current issues and consider problems as they pertain to one large urban area with the expectation that such an understanding might point toward fruitful avenues for future research and ultimately improve policies and practice.

DEMOGRAPHICS AND EDUCATIONAL PARTICIPATION

The number of individuals homeless in the United States is difficult to confirm with confidence in large part because the lack of a stable residence makes tracking individuals complex; such a point is particularly germane with regard to homeless youth (Lee, Tyler, & Wright, 2010; Witkin et al., 2005). By current estimates, between 3 and 4 million individuals experience some form of homelessness over a 12-month horizon. Over 1 million youth are without stable residence on a given night and more than 750,000 are of school age (Collingnon & Nunez, 1997; National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2004). One explanation for the increased number of families experiencing homelessness is the lack of low-income and subsidized housing. Between 2008 and 2009 economic conditions worsened among four primary indicators associated with homelessness: (1) housing affordability for the poor, (2) unemployment rates, (3) low-income workers' wages, and (4) foreclosure status (Sermons & Witte, 2011). The recession magnified the number of individuals experiencing residential instability (see Fig. 1). The overall population increased by 1% between 2008 and 2009 while the foreclosure and unemployment rates jumped by 21% and 59%, respectively. During this same period the average income for poor individuals decreased from $9,353 to $9,151. A significant deficit exists between the number of families needing affordable or subsidized housing and the availability of housing units (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2005). Nearly one in three families (or 10 million households) qualified for housing subsidies have been put on waiting lists for two to five years because of limited funding (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2006). Ironically, the cost of a homeless shelter for these families often exceeds the housing voucher they would receive for subsidized housing.

The complexity of designing studies that capture the experiences of all homeless students has led to studying subgroups in isolation. Most research explores the experiences of unaccompanied youth; however, the majority of homeless youth live as part of a family unit (Bring Los Angeles Home, 2004;
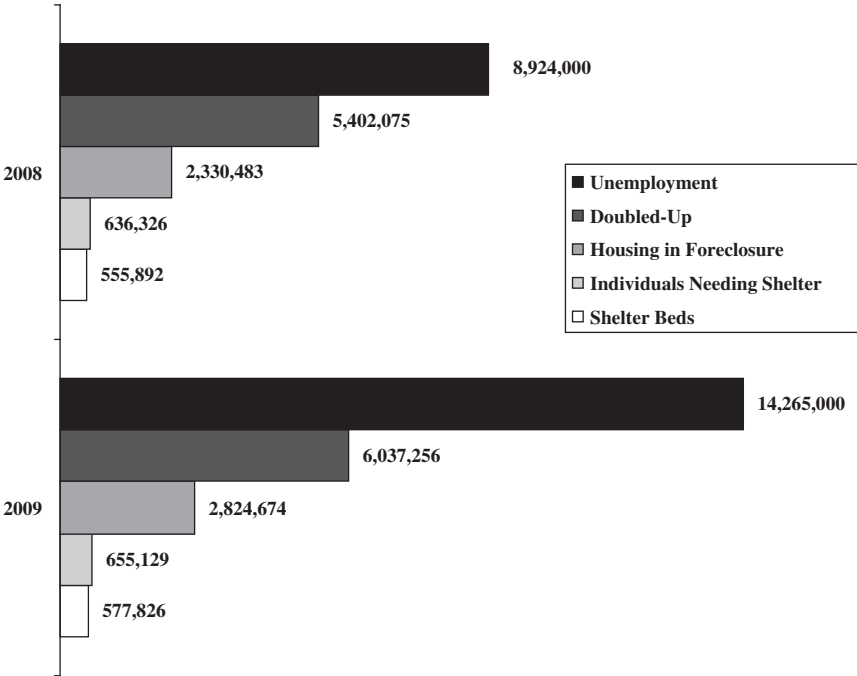
Fig. 1. Factors Influencing Homeless Population (2008–2009). Data are drawn from Sermons and Witte (2011).

National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2006; National Center for Homeless Education, 2007). A rarely studied and often invisible group, doubled-up families, compose over 50% of the homeless youth population (Hallett, 2012; National Center for Homeless Education, 2007), but the vast majority of research has focused on shelter or street residences. Several vulnerable groups are overrepresented among unaccompanied homeless young people, including African American and Hispanic youth (Freeman & Hamilton, 2008; Rescoria, Parker, & Stolley, 1991; Thompson, Maguin, & Pollio, 2003), foster youth who have emancipated or run away from placement (Freeman & Hamilton, 2008; National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2006), and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered youth (Freeman & Hamilton, 2008). The experiences of residential instability in childhood may negatively influence an individual's transition to adulthood (Johnson & Chamberlain, 2008; Simons & Whitbeck, 1991).

General Risk Factors

Previous research has focused on issues that make the transition to adulthood difficult for homeless youth. Issues including sexual activity, substance use, and abusive histories have a negative impact on youth's psycho-social development, and also influence their ability to access public education. Experimentation with drugs, alcohol, and sex is much greater for homeless adolescents than the general population (Halcon & Lifson, 2004). Less than 4% of adolescents in general exchange sex for money (Edwards, Iritani, & Hallfors, 2006); however, 28% of youth living on the street and 10% of those in shelters have engaged in ''survival sex'' in exchange for food, shelter, or money (Greene, Ennett, & Ringwalt, 1999). Females have a higher incidence of pregnancy than their counterparts who have a stable living environment (Greene & Ringwalt, 1998). Homeless youth learn to survive by engaging in antisocial behavior and "the cumulative negative experiences result in interaction chains that continually reinforce low self-concepts and the untrustworthiness of others" (Whitbeck et al., 1999, p. 293). Approximately 75% of homeless youth have suicidal thoughts at some point during their adolescence (Thompson, Zittel-Palamara, & Maccio, 2004). These behaviors influence a youth's preparation for and participation in the educational process.

Educational Risk Factors

The vast majority of research on homeless youth has focused on the physical or psychological aspects of homelessness from a medical-risk perspective (e.g., Buckner, 2008; Greene et al., 1999; Whitbeck et al., 1999). Although education was generally not the primary focus, quantitative data on school attendance and experiences have been collected. Homeless youth have comparatively lower literacy rates and more frequent suspensions from school (Thompson et al., 2004). Nearly two-thirds of homeless youth in high school are not proficient in math and English (National Center for Homeless Education, 2007). They score significantly below grade level, repeat grades, and have poor attendance as compared to their housed peers (Rafferty & Shinn, 1991). Attending school regularly becomes difficult for homeless youth with high rates of mobility (Stronge, 2000). Average daily attendance is 74% for homeless students as compared to 89% for their housed peers; however, the disparity is greater for high school students with daily attendance of only 51% for homeless students as compared to 84% for

the general population (Rafferty & Rollins, 1989). Transitioning between schools and districts is common for homeless youth. Moor (2005) explains that during a school year nearly half of homeless students change schools once; a third will change at least twice. Over 50% of homeless students have been suspended four or more times for such infractions as being tardy, not wearing the proper uniform, and excessive absences (Cardenas, 2005). All of these factors, of course, could be seen as an inevitable consequence of being homeless. These youth are more likely to drop out or attend an alternative school than their peers and over 30% report having unruly behavior in school that causes educational problems (Kurtz, Jarvis, & Kurtz, 1991). Lack of residential stability creates many challenges as students transition to postsecondary education (Hallett, 2010; Tierney & Hallett, 2010). Homeless individuals enter adulthood with low levels of education: roughly 2% are college graduates, 22% have participated in college, 38% either graduated from high school or got their GED, and 39% do not have a high school degree (Tepper, 2004).

RESEARCH METHODS AND CONTEXT

The findings derive from an 18-month study of a school district in Los Angeles. We interviewed 120 homeless youth primarily between the ages of 14 and 18. Unlike many studies, we defined "homeless" by the federal definition and not just one subcategory. Participants experienced multiple forms of residential instability. Some attended school regularly; others had been disconnected from the educational process for years. Five public high schools and eight youth-serving organizations agreed to allow us to observe and interview the youth they served. The high schools had among the highest rates of homeless youth in the city; the organizations served homeless youth as an explicit part of their charter. Interviews lasted approximately one hour; 30 youth were interviewed repeatedly over the course of the project in order to understand how their experiences and perspectives changed over time. We also interviewed 45 policy analysts, school personnel, and individuals involved in the lives of homeless youth – counselors at shelters, runaway coordinators, social workers, clergy, and the like – in order to gain their perspectives on the policies that need to be developed to improve the educational lives of homeless youth. The assumption for this research project was that to conceive of equitable policies we needed multiple voices; most importantly the voices of those directly impacted – homeless youth – and those who will administer the policy at the local level – school personnel. We

review the systematic functioning of policies based upon the data collected (for a more fulsome discussion of the theoretical framework used to guide this study and youth's experiences, see Tierney, Gupton, & Hallett, 2008; Tierney & Hallett, 2010).

One way to understand the educational issues related to homelessness is to investigate the extent of the problem in a particular area or region of the country. The interviews that we conducted for this project occurred in Los Angeles County in 2006 and 2007 with follow-up observations continuing through 2009. As a research site, Los Angeles is a useful choice to look at homelessness insofar as the county and city have a homeless population larger than most states in America (Los Angeles Coalition to End Hunger and Homelessness, 2005). Over the duration of one year, approximately a quarter of a million individuals are homeless in the county; on any given night, slightly less than 100,000 people are homeless (Tepper, 2004). Roughly 500,000 individuals in the county live in acute poverty, which means they are one financial crisis from losing their housing (Flaming &Tepper, 2004). The county has slightly over 25,000 homeless youth and less than half of them attend school on a regular basis (Los Angeles Coalition to End Hunger and Homelessness, 2005). Obviously, with one longitudinal study in one city we are not seeking to generalize findings to all settings in the United States. Instead, the intent is to offer the findings as a way to derive what current policies and practices suggest for one city so that future researchers might then investigate the similarities and differences for other contexts.

DEFINING HOMELESS YOUTH

As we shall elaborate, a piece of federal legislation, the McKinney–Vento Homeless Assistance Act (42 U.S.C. §§ 11431; 42 U.S.C. §§ 11434 A), frames how federal, state, and local policymakers understand and respond to homelessness. Based on McKinney–Vento, a homeless individual is someone without a fixed, regular place to stay; lacks an adequate night-time residence; lives in a welfare hotel, transitional living program, or place without regular sleeping accommodations; or a shared residence with other persons due to the loss of one's housing or economic hardship. The protean definition of homelessness is useful for its inclusiveness, but it presents a problem for school sites and districts with regard to how they might best aid homeless youth other than to mainstream them. That is, a homeless youth who lives in a shelter with a family member, for example, may well have very different problems from his or her counterpart who has run away from a

foster care placement. Adolescents who "couch surf" and sleep on a different friend's couch from night to night have different experiences from the youth who are in a motel with a parent. The foundation of the problem, of course, is that an individual lacks a stable residence. However, how the foundation was laid and why it is maintained has many different rationales. A homeless youth in a shelter or motel with a family member may be there because the adult lacks gainful employment or is an underpaid worker who cannot afford housing; the individual who has run from foster care may have been sexually or emotionally traumatized whereas the couch surfer may lack connection to adult support structures. Educational systems need to be able to respond in different ways to these manifold problems. Just as it would be inappropriate to assume that the solutions for rural and urban schools are the same, we suggest that it is equally true that a generic approach will not benefit all homeless adolescents. Diverse interventions are needed.

How one defines "homeless youth" underscores the various socio-cultural contexts of adolescents without adequate shelter. The categories used by McKinney–Vento identify youth based upon their residential location, whereas researchers have developed categories of why or how youth become homeless (Cauce et al., 1998; Greene, Ennett, & Ringwalt, 1997; Kurtz et al., 1991; Thompson, Safyer, & Pollio, 2001; Zide & Cherry, 1992). Many different subcategories of youth homelessness exist that influence how youth perceive the world (Finley & Finley, 1999). One category of homeless youth – *accompanied youth* – lives with a parent or guardian in an unstable environment. Those individuals who lack parental, foster, or institutional care fall under four additional categories. *Unaccompanied youth* have unstable or inadequate housing without adult supervision (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2004). *Throwaway youth* have been forced to leave home by a parent or guardian, prevented from returning and resort to "couch surfing" or other unstable forms of shelter (Hammer, Finkelhor, & Sedlak, 2002). Individuals seeking refuge in high-risk environments, such as in abandoned buildings or in public parks, are known as *street youth* (Karabanow, 2008). Adolescents in unstable government systems, such as foster care or juvenile justice, are known as *systems youth*. Systems youth fall under the category of "homeless" when they are awaiting a permanent placement or run away from a foster home. In general, researchers have studied the experiences of one or two categories of youth; however, the McKinney–Vento definition is more inclusive.

While the above categorizations are helpful, they do not capture the experiences and situations of the homeless adolescents we interviewed. The youth described experiences that were related to both their residential

location and relationship to their family. The combination of location and familial relationships influenced their rate of mobility and ability to participate in the educational process. As such, we offer a revised typology that merges the location of homeless youth and their relationship to family or social services. The assumption is that policymakers and practitioners need to be cognizant of the location and family dynamics when developing educational policies. Where and how these individuals live frames the sort of educational services they receive. Building on previous research and federal policies, we offer a typology of homeless youth aimed at educational policy:

1. *Accompanied sheltered youth*: Those who live with an adult guardian in an unstable, but secure environment (shelter, storage room).
2. *Accompanied unsheltered youth*: Those who live with an adult guardian in a semi-stable, but potentially dangerous environment (hotel, motel).
3. *Unaccompanied transitional youth*: Those who are unaccompanied, live in an emergency youth shelter, and are transitioning into foster care for the first time or have run away from a foster care placement.
4. *Unaccompanied sheltered youth*: Those who are unaccompanied and live in long-term group homes or youth shelters, but have a recent history of homelessness.
5. *Street youth*: Those who live, or have lived for a significant period of time, with or without a guardian on the street and may be in the care of a shelter or agency.
6. *Doubled-up youth*: Those who are doubled-up with a parent or guardian in another person's home for an extended period of time.
7. *Couch surfing youth*: Those who couch surf without an adult in a different person's home from night to night.

Our point here is to highlight that even within the subpopulation of students known as "homeless" different categories exist. Subpopulations face different problems as a result of the residential location and relationship with family. Educational services need to acknowledge the needs of these subpopulations. Although the federal categorization of homelessness is an expansive definition, the manner in which youth are treated is narrowly focused. As we will elaborate, the high schools we studied define homeless youth in one generic category – homeless – and assume that in large part the resources of the school will suffice to solve the educational problems that these youth face. We have found that the services required of different individuals vary and a "one size fits all" mentality is insufficient if public policy wishes to create an environment for effective solutions to specific problems that homeless youth face.

INTERPRETING AND ENACTING PUBLIC POLICY FOR HOMELESS YOUTH

Policies concerning the education of homeless youth begin with federal legislation. The states, districts, and schools interpret the mandates outlined by the federal government and implement the policies. The following section discusses the process of moving from the federal mandates to implementation of policies at the local level.

Federal Level

The McKinney–Vento Homeless Assistance Act is the major piece of federal legislation that pertains to homelessness in general and education of homeless youth in particular. There are other important federal and state policies that influence the daily lives of homeless persons, including low-income housing units and food stamps; however, we are primarily interested in the educational opportunities for homeless youth. Congressperson Stewart B. McKinney, one of the most notable legislators to take on the issue of homelessness, helped push the McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 through Congress. The McKinney Act, in its original form, mandated that each state review and revise the residency requirements for homeless youth to increase access to school sites. Modest funding was provided for each state to hire a homeless coordinator to oversee the progress. In 1990, the Act was expanded in three areas: removing barriers to attending school for homeless students; encouraging interagency collaboration to promote student success; and mandating that homeless students not be segregated from the general population of students. Because schools are in fixed locations and homeless youth are highly mobile, where an individual begins a school year is not likely to be where he or she ends up. The result is that the legislators have mandated that not only is a child able to attend a school outside of his or her geographic area, but that the child is entitled to transportation of some form (e.g., a bus token) to school from wherever he or she is living.

In 2002, the McKinney Act was reauthorized as the McKinney–Vento Homeless Assistance Act and was placed under the No Child Left Behind Act (Mawhinney-Rhoads & Stahler, 2006). This legislative act requires each school district to assign a liaison responsible for ensuring homeless students have access to public education. Schools are mandated to provide uniforms, backpacks, and supplies that may be "required" for school attendance that

a homeless student may not have access to as a result of his or her living instability. Schools and districts often work with community organizations to locate these supplies and only purchase items as a last resort. The students must be permitted to enroll in school even if their parents do not have the proper immunization records, previous school transcripts, or residency documents. The school district must keep an accurate count of the number of homeless students at each school site and report this information to the state. Although the McKinney–Vento Act impacts the way that state governments view homeless youth and education, it is primarily a federal mandate monitored by the Department of Education. Therefore, the state governments must take the general mandates and definitions from the federal government and find practical ways to enact them. Creating the law represented a philosophical shift in governmental support and intervention (Miller, 2011). Instead of viewing homelessness as a choice, this policy reframed residential instability as a social problem that could be collectively addressed. The concept of homelessness was moved from the abstract and situated within the educational context.

The legislation mandates all state or local laws be reviewed and changed if they hinder the opportunity for homeless students to attend school. States and local communities cannot segregate homeless youth; they must be given the same access to attend a public school as their housed counterparts. Although the legislation is far from perfect, it was the first federal act that provided homeless youth with a right to an equal education akin to their housed counterparts. In doing so, the legislation has tried to eliminate educational barriers such as geographic proximity to a school as a requirement for attendance (Butler, 1994; Mawhinney-Rhoads & Stahler, 2006). McKinney–Vento has positively influenced the educational access of homeless youth. Since it was passed over 20 years ago, state polices restricting access have been changed and the rate of school attendance has increased by 17% (Markward & Biros, 2001). In addition, the competitive subgrants made available to school districts have increased student engagement and improved student test scores (Miller, 2011). Collaboration between schools and community organizations has also begun in some areas.

The focus on access needs continued scrutiny. McKinney–Vento works from the position that the best interests of homeless youth are served when students are mainstreamed into public schools. Two assumptions are at work. First, the only difference between a housed youth and a homeless youth is that one resides in a fixed, adequate, and regular residence and the other does not. The second assumption follows from the first: As no difference exists between the two groups other than housing, the school's role is to ensure that the

homeless student is able to attend the public school. The McKinney–Vento Act is meant to provide general educational assurances for homeless youth. If a child begins the school year and then as a result of being homeless he or she moves to an area beyond the school boundaries, the school is obligated to allow the student to remain enrolled until the school year ends. The school district provides funding for transportation – such as a bus token – from wherever the youth sleeps to the school. This policy is based on the idea that homeless youth lack geographic stability, which is frequently true, and in order for an individual to receive an adequate educational experience he or she must have a stable educational environment. The challenge for homeless youth is that their educational and social problems extend far beyond the need for bus passes and backpacks.

Mawhinney-Rhoads and Stahler state that the values underlying this position "promote student socialization; children will presumably develop and hone their social skills if they are in a mainstreamed school" (2006, p. 295). Such a value assumes that even though students may live in different environments the school will remain stable and such stability is beneficial for the child's well-being. We applaud this assumption and the opportunities homeless youth may be afforded. We appreciate that this absolutist mandate comes from years of exclusion and poorly conceived educational alternatives. However, for some of the homeless youth we interviewed such an assertion is meaningless or counterfactual.

Although the Congress is interested in the issue of homelessness, few representatives have been willing to shepherd the solution. Unlike the success of the special education movement, issues concerning homeless students have received limited attention and mandates have been more easily ignored. This may be due to the fact that government representatives are more likely to have a relative with a special need than one who is homeless (Helm, 1993). Therefore, much of the push has come from local, state, and national advocacy organizations that encourage Congress and states to implement and fund the federal mandates.

State Level

McKinney–Vento funds are distributed to states based upon their ability to meet federal mandates. The current focus at the state level is to count the number of homeless students and increase access to public schools, which includes providing transportation, removing enrollment requirements, and distributing supplies. The federal funding that comes to

California goes from the state capital to local school districts. The state determines how to distribute the funding between the state agencies and local school districts. At the state level, the funding supports the development of a plan to assist homeless youth. The plan consists of several parts: how youth will be given access to the same educational standards; the identification process; resolution procedures for disputes; awareness programs for school sites; modification of supplemental service requirements (i.e., food programs); how youth will be given access to the public school site; modification of enrollment procedures; identification of a homeless liaison in each school district; and adjust transportation policies (42 U.S.C. §§ 11434 et seq.).

The overarching goal is to make adjustments to school policies inhibiting homeless youth from participating in the public school system. Insofar as homeless youth are educationally akin to their housed counterparts, once they are mainstreamed, not only will they be socialized in a manner equivalent to their peers, but they also will be able to take advantage of the supplementary services a school offers. For example, should the child require extra tutoring or if the student simply wishes to participate in a social activity such as football or student government the school will be the facilitator. Simply stated, if the youth is not in school then he or she cannot benefit from the array of supplementary services that a school provides. Thus, the role of the state is to ensure that homeless youth are in school.

As the director of California's program noted in an interview, the emphasis is on documenting the number of homeless youth in schools and districts rather than providing supplementary services. The role of the state of California is to provide indirect support and the job of schools and districts is to ensure that homeless youth have access to school sites. From this perspective, the needs of homeless youth are met once they have enrolled in school, received a uniform, and secured transportation. Monitoring how districts or schools are doing with regard to their intake and processing capacity of homeless youth falls to the district homeless liaisons. Oversight at the state level presumably ensures that when an area overlooks or ignores homeless youth the state is able to demand a remedy. If two similar schools within the same local geographic area, for example, were to record significant discrepancies with regard to the numbers of homeless youth they serve, then an investigation might occur. That is, if a school in California stated it had no homeless youth and its local counterpart had a significant number, then the state or district would question the discrepancy.

District Level

States allow districts to apply for subgrants that support efforts to increase educational access for homeless students. This funding can be used to create after-school programs, summer camps, or other programs (Miller, 2011). The school districts in California apply to receive funding based upon the program they are planning to implement, not the proportion of youth they serve. A ceiling is placed on the amount of money that can be distributed to each district, meaning that a district serving 25 homeless youth might get the same amount as one serving 25,000. The largest school district in Los Angeles County receives a little over $125,000 from McKinney–Vento money distributed by the state. A portion of this money covers the cost of hiring a staff member who answers phone calls that come to the district office and overhead costs associated with running the program. The remaining money is used to purchase clothing vouchers, backpacks, and supplies that are distributed to homeless youth. The main source of income for the district program comes from a portion of Title 1 funds that are set aside by the school district to support homeless youth. This money is used to pay for four homeless education counselors who train staff in the 800 schools in the district and deal with issues that arise at the school sites.

The result is an additional role that the district assumes: training intake counselors and staff at the site level. The purpose of training is threefold. First, because the definition of who is homeless is relatively broad, counselors at the school site need to understand how to identify and process homeless youth when they arrive at school. Second, when a homeless child and the parent or guardian tries to register for school their rights may contradict standard school policy. If a housed student no longer lives in the neighborhood, for example, the standard response is to turn the student away from the school of previous residence and send the child to where he or she resides. Such a response with homeless youth violates federal and state laws; the school staff needs to be educated on how to respond appropriately. Finally, the district liaison responds to complaints filed by parents or social service agencies. If it is brought to the attention of the district liaison that a child has been denied enrollment or transportation, one of the four district homeless education counselors is sent to the site to resolve the problem. The ability to file a complaint assumes that the parents and social service agencies are aware of their rights and persistent enough to call the district office.

The training is targeted for school counselors and attendance clerks who are the first point of contact when a family registers. A school can choose to

budget for an attendance or dropout prevention counselor; however, not all of the schools in Los Angeles allot money for this position. Schools that do not budget for these positions miss out on the primary method of training and youth attending these schools lose a valuable resource.

School Level

Local schools in Los Angeles, especially under-resourced schools, have very little leeway with regard to additional resources that might be spent on activities that vary from what every other school has. Discretionary money may exist at the district level but it is limited. School districts exist in political environments and any discretionary money that is spent occurs in large part because a particular constituency has lobbied for it. Because of the stigma attached to being homeless, children and their parents we spoke with did not feel comfortable using their voice to ask for educational money to be spent on their behalf. Although schools may have clubs or services for gay youth or undocumented students, no such club or related activity exists for homeless youth in Los Angeles. Perhaps if homeless youth lobbied for some service they might be accommodated, but they do not. The federal and state government has made the assumption that mainstreaming homeless youth is optimal. Therefore, a homeless student may benefit from programs that serve subpopulations, for example, if a homeless youth is gay then he or she might join a gay club; if a homeless youth is undocumented then a meeting about how to pay for college might be appropriate. However, the student must seek out these supports and have the time and resources available to participate. Unfortunately, for most of the students we interviewed these extracurricular supports fail to fully meet their needs.

If students are proactive or exhibit behaviors that raise the awareness of a school official, then some sort of support might be forthcoming. A homeless student who is living on the street and comes to school unclean might be guided to the school nurse who has a number of remedies. A student who appears in need of counseling might be referred to social services. But again, these sorts of acts are what happen to all youth whether they are homeless or housed.

On a local level in Los Angeles two forms of activities take place. One activity is what we discussed under the state – the counting of students school-by-school. Although the individuals who assume these roles are school district employees, they actually receive their funding and are guided by the state-wide coordinator. The second activity is what takes place at the

school level by the individual who is appointed to work with various populations (e.g., dropout prevention counselor), one of whom is homeless student.

In Los Angeles, the schools do not have a staff member who specifically works with homeless youth at each school site; the students are referred to the same staff members as other students when a problem arises. If the homeless student has questions about course options he or she is referred to the guidance counselor. If a behavior problem exists they are referred to the administration. The goal is to address the immediate issue. Schools in Los Angeles can choose to budget for an attendance or dropout prevention counselor. Both types of counselors may come in contact with homeless youth if attendance is an issue or the student is at risk of dropping out. Since homeless youth typically attend low performing schools, attendance issues are commonplace. A homeless youth is identified as needing support only after he or she has missed a few weeks or months of school. Ironically, it benefits the homeless youth to have attendance issues; the red flag brings the student to the attention of a staff member. However, the student may be so disconnected from school by the time support is offered that he or she may no longer be motivated to attend school. Further, the high mobility of homeless youth increases the likelihood that they will move to a different school before attendance and academic issues are addressed. The district liaison in Los Angeles created a district level policy that required each school site to identify a contact person for homeless youth; however, the position will likely be little more than an additional job title added to the responsibility of one of the administrators or counselors.

The attendance and dropout counselors are under one bureaucratic hierarchy in Los Angeles and the homeless liaison is under another. As a result of the bureaucratic structure, the homeless liaison only facilitates one training meeting per year with the counselors who work at the school site. A newly hired attendance or dropout counselor may attend a second meeting with the district homeless liaison that outlines the federal and state policies that impact the education of homeless youth; however, homeless students are but one subcategory of students that counselors at the school site must be trained to support. They are responsible for dealing with attendance issues as they relate to pregnant teens, undocumented students, foster youth, and other vulnerable student populations. While the specific need of the students may be different, the goal of the attendance clerk is the same – to improve attendance. The services provided are more uniform than individualized.

The attendance counselor receives the residency questionnaire from the clerk working in the attendance office, which is how a district tracks the
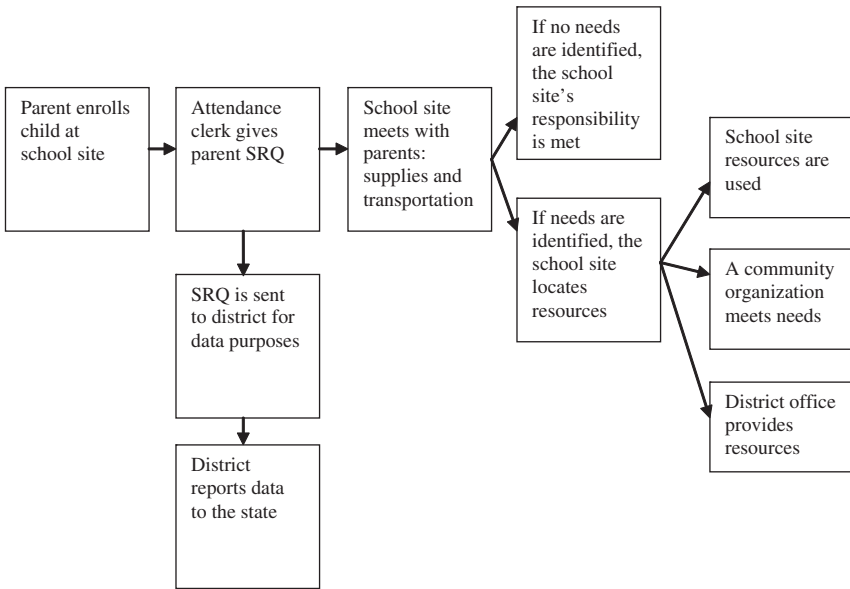
Fig. 2. Enrollment Process for Homeless Students.

number of homeless youth (see Fig. 2). The clerk is the first point of contact that families encounter when registering their children for school. The residency questionnaire asks parents to identify where they live (i.e., home, shelter, doubled-up). Unfortunately, not all of the clerks in the attendance office distribute the residency questionnaire to parents and the parents we spoke with frequently did not know how to request it. In part, this is reflective of the limited training provided to office staff and a belief that families are trying to manipulate the system. The information the attendance counselor and district receive is only as good as the clerk is able, or willing, to collect.

Homeless youth are referred by the attendance counselors to community resources to meet needs that are identified (i.e., school uniforms or backpacks). If the school site is unable to identify community resources to meet those needs, then he or she can contact the district homeless liaison for support. Frequently, no one on the campuses we visited was aware of the individual students who were homeless or the extent of their legal rights. For example, we observed homeless youth being denied enrollment because they lacked transcripts or could not prove neighborhood residency.

A few shelters in Los Angeles have tried to open quasi-schools in collaboration with public schools, but in general, these schools are quite small – fewer than 10 students – and temporary. The assumption of those who work in the shelter is that even if the youth will only be in the shelter for a short period of time they will benefit from an educational experience. In order to have such an undertaking, however, the shelter needs to partner with a local public school district to hire a fully credentialed teacher, who may only work at the shelter part time. A school district may open a small, transitional school in an area where there are shelters for the homeless. The transitional school serves the youth for a month or two. The focus of the program is to help students get used to being in school again and identify academic concerns before transitioning to a typical school environment. Schools specifically for shelter youth are rare. Shelter staff often finds providing basic services difficult enough so to take on the added legal and bureaucratic burden of starting a school is seen as overwhelming and beyond their responsibility. Given the underlying philosophy of McKinney–Vento that mainstreaming is optimal the creation of "separate but equal" facilities is anathema. Funding for such an undertaking is sparse and hard to find. The result is that although such schools exist, in Los Angeles they are rare.

EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF HOMELESS YOUTH

Given the importance of considering the different experiences of homeless youth, we return to the aforementioned typology. The stigma of being homeless is true for all types of homeless youth. However, those who reside in a shelter with a parent face different issues, for example, than their counterparts who are in a short-term group home because they ran away from a foster care placement. Youth with different residential situations face similar and different educational issues (see Table 1). Unaccompanied sheltered youth we spoke with who live in a short-term group home and street youth are frequently disconnected from parents. Reasons for family separation include fleeing physical or sexual abuse, substance abuse issues, and gay, lesbian, and transgender youth who have been told to leave home. Being unaccompanied in Los Angeles leaves them vulnerable to further abuse on the street, including survival sex and a life of addiction. The result is that they frequently have been so psychologically traumatized that attendance at a typical public school is extremely difficult. Unfortunately, shelters where

Table 1. Typology of Homeless Youth and Educational Outcomes.

Type of Homeless Youth	General Issues	Educational Outcomes
Accompanied sheltered	• Unstable residence • Insufficient, impersonal space • Shelter dependent on following rules	• Limited space and resources to complete homework
Accompanied unsheltered	• High mobility • Daily survival concerns	• Frequent movement between schools • Education is secondary to daily survival • Lack space and resources to complete homework
Unaccompanied transitional	• High mobility • Lack of parental guidance	• Frequent movement between schools • Lack space and resources to complete homework
Unaccompanied sheltered	• High mobility • Daily survival concerns • Lack of parental guidance	• Frequent movement between schools • Education is secondary to daily survival • Limited space and resources to complete homework
Street	• High mobility • Daily survival concerns • Lack of parental guidance • High rate of victimization	• Frequent movement between schools • Lack space and resources to complete homework
Doubled-up	• Semi-stable residence • Insufficient space • Shelter dependent on others	• Limited space and resources to complete homework
Couch surfing	• Unstable residence • High mobility • Daily survival concerns • Lack of parental guidance	• Frequent movement between schools • Education is secondary to daily survival • Limited space and resources to complete homework

these students either live or drop-in during the day typically do not offer systematic and sustained educational services for the youth. These youth are perhaps the most at-risk of this at-risk group. Although some extraordinary youth demonstrated the ability to succeed without the social support structures available to other adolescents, the interviews point out that most unaccompanied homeless teenagers do not have the skills, wherewithal, or determination to concentrate on an educational topic over the course of an academic year because of the trauma they have experienced; sustained psychological and social services are frequently unavailable or inadequate.

Unaccompanied transitional youth we met with, who were living in a short-term group home, and street youth in Los Angeles commonly experienced absence from school. Federal law allows homeless students to remain in the same school wherever they reside, but the reality for the youth we interviewed who have run away or been thrown away is that when their lives are in crisis, the maintenance of attendance in a school, much less one that is far from where they are at the moment, becomes problematic. A cycle begins where mobility and absence from school create low performance when they do return to school which in turn creates a dislike of school. Familial and foster care relationships are so problematic that they take precedence to everything else. To many of these youth, school seems irrelevant to daily survival.

Unaccompanied sheltered youth in a long-term group home are more like their housed counterparts than those living on the street or in a shelter. Group homes have the potential to provide a semi-stable residence with adequate space to complete school work, but the social stigma of homelessness remains. Adult supervision is generally well intentioned but education is not a priority and/or these students need more personal and educational support than the personnel in a group home are able to provide. The primary objective is to meet the youth's basic needs and give them access to a typical school environment. A long-term facility will generally allow the youth to stay until they are 18 years of age if they abide by the rules and a social worker approves the placement. Youth are required to complete chores, participate in therapy sessions, and follow curfew policies. Although a lengthy stay is possible, youth may find themselves moving between group homes or returning to the streets when they are unable to submit to the rules. Further, the lack of a stable funding base adds to the instability of the living environment. If funding dries up the youth are without shelter. The desire to create long-term relationships between the staff and youth is muffled. The lack of close relationships with educational

mentors coupled with a lack of stability results in low performance levels and a dislike of school.

Doubled-up students and couch surfers face different challenges from other homeless youth. Doubled-up families may simply be so poor that they cannot afford their own housing. Two or more family units, which could account for more than 10 people, may live in a single apartment. The confined space is an issue; however, the instability of this living situation is due to the number of separate household incomes that are required to pay the rent. If one family unit loses a job or decides to move, the remaining people in the apartment fall into a financial crisis. Although it is possible that the youth have a semblance of stability insofar as parents may live in the dwelling and students may attend the same school over a number of years, the lack of an adequate physical space implies that any area dedicated to learning is unlikely. Adult supervision attuned to educational issues or planning (e.g., homework, college preparation) is not likely to occur.

Couch surfers are always on the cusp of living on the street. Their existence is day-to-day. If they attend school, repeated absences are normal. Because they lack stable adult supervision, no one oversees how they spend their time or structures their daily existence. What separates youth who couch surf from those on the street is the ability to develop relationships with their housed peers. They spend considerable time and energy each day securing a place to sleep. School is one place they are able to access housed peers. The relationships form around meeting basic needs, but do not generally improve educational outcomes. Learning is usually a secondary reason for attending school. When the relationships at the school dry up, those who couch surf spend their day elsewhere. The result is similar to the experience of youth in shelters – they form few long-lasting relationships in school with peers or teachers, frequently perform poorly in classes, and generally dislike school or find it irrelevant.

Many accompanied sheltered youth who reside with a parent in a shelter or hotel, like other groups of homeless individuals, hesitate to request educational services because of the stigma of being homeless. Based on the data from our research, these youth have limited access to a quiet place with the appropriate supplies needed to complete their homework. Looming in the psyche of some youth from our study is that the semi-stable housing they have today could evaporate tomorrow, forcing them back to a state of flux. These youth are keenly aware that people they see today could disappear tomorrow. The result is sustained peer and adult mentor relationships may be difficult to secure.

If students require different services then the policies developed to implement those services not only need to create a template for the provision of different kinds of support, but the policies need to be interpreted in a manner that enables multiple solutions. With policies for homeless youth, however, the opposite has occurred. In what follows we first offer an overview of federal, state, and local policies and then consider the kind of services homeless youth need who are in the different categories we have discussed.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The implementation of McKinney–Vento has yielded positive outcomes. The efforts in California have resulted in more consistent tracking at the state, district, and site levels. The district liaisons have created forms, strategies, and policies designed to more adequately identify students without residential instability. In addition, the funding funneled through the state has resulted in the hiring of additional staff members at the district level who can help students and families in crises. The liaison also coordinates training and professional development sessions to inform site level staff of the legal mandates and district programs. These efforts positively influence educational access for homeless students.

Continued improvement is warranted. Any public policy is open to discussion, debate, and modification. Given how federal policy drives state and local policy, our intent is to suggest modifications for how educational policies deal with homeless youth. Based on what we have discussed, we offer three points that highlight the challenges for homeless youth in Los Angeles. First, if a student is homeless then he or she is likely to be *stigmatized* and *invisible* at school. Most homeless youth do not want anyone to know they are homeless, and at the school no one knows a youth is homeless after he or she has registered, in large part because of federal and state policies. The results are twofold. Attachments and bonds of affiliation with peers or adults are unlikely in schools. Insofar as no one knows who is homeless in a school, any ability to help a child is dependent on the student asking for help. If a student is homeless and needs transportation to reach school from where he or she is currently living then the student must ask. To require that anyone, much less a child, must ask for assistance based on a stigma assures that support for the stigmatized individual will be less than adequate.

Second, the enactment of federal and state policy is based on the assumption of similarity rather than *difference*. Even though how one gets categorized as homeless is a robust definition based on several characteristics,

the manner in which the policy gets carried out in Los Angeles is by assuming that the needs of all homeless youth are similar and their educational needs are equivalent to the needs of housed students. Once a homeless youth registers and receives bus tokens the federal mandate has been fulfilled. Of consequence, the same stance is taken toward a student who is couch surfing, is doubled-up, is a victim of sexual abuse, is living with his or her parents in a motel or shelter, or is in a long-term or short-term group home en route to foster care. If the purpose of education is to educate all students, then the system needs to find judicious ways to accommodate learners with diverse needs. The multiple risks homeless youth face outside of the school context require additional educational interventions. To mainstream everyone is to paper over differences and to assume that what is a correct stance toward a young man who is homeless and living with his parents in a relative's apartment will also be good for the young woman who has endured life on the streets as a child prostitute and that their needs are no different from their counterparts who have had a stable, middle class living environment since birth.

Third, homeless youth have *unmet educational needs*. The McKinney–Vento Act came about to provide equal opportunity for homeless youth. The problem is that the manner in which the policy is carried out at the local level does not provide equal opportunity. Simply mainstreaming children into a public school ought not to suggest that everyone receives the same opportunities. An analogy is apt. Head Start came about because policymakers knew that low-income, urban children were not provided equal opportunity simply because they were able to enter primary school with the same knowledge as their peers. The result was the creation of a program that tried to equip these children with the skills necessary so they could participate fully in educational activities at school.

Obviously, these three points are interrelated, and taken together, they compound the problem. Only 61% of homeless adults have completed high school, whereas 86% of their housed counterparts have completed a high school diploma (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). No more than 2% of homeless adults have a college degree in comparison to 28% in the general population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). If a stigma were not attached to the homeless identity, then presumably homeless youth and their parents or guardians would feel comfortable lobbying for more effective services. If federal policies did not assume a "one size fits all" approach then schools would be compelled to develop an array of services based on the specific challenges a child faces. Unfortunately, the policies that currently exist fall short of the stated goal of providing educational opportunity for one of the country's most vulnerable populations.

We appreciate that in large part the educational problems of homeless youth will not be resolved until they have homes. Such a goal, however necessary, will not be achieved in the near future even if the country demonstrated the economic and political will to make it happen tomorrow. Short of providing everyone with a home, what sorts of educational policies might be considered for those youth who are homeless today? There is no magic answer for how to resolve problems that at times appear intractable. At least four strategies bear consideration based upon the themes developed in this chapter. The recommendations we provide should not be considered a universal solution to the problems every homeless student faces. The experiences of homeless youth vary depending on their residential situations and interventions should be similarly differentiated.

Enforce Federal Law

As with any policy and its enactment over time, changes may be in order if the stated goals of the policy have not been achieved. We have offered an overview of the issues pertaining to the education of homeless students with the intent of demonstrating that changes need to be made to ensure adequate schooling for homeless youth. We are concerned with moving the conversation to student success; however, we acknowledge that barriers to access remain. Over half of the school districts nationwide report that transportation barriers exist for homeless youth (National Center for Homeless Education, 2007). Many school sites require proof of residency and immunization records before a parent can register a student (Mawhinney-Rhoads & Stahler, 2006). Only 26 states submit complete data on homeless youth to the federal government (National Center for Homeless Education, 2007). In 1990, three years after the McKinney Act was first passed, 40% of states fully complied (Helm, 1993). Over 15 years later the nation has taken a small step forward with nearly half of the states in compliance. Clearly enforcement of the federal law is necessary.

Develop Educational Alternatives that Cater to the Needs of Disconnected Homeless Youth

We appreciate why federal, state, and local policies have gravitated away from isolating homeless youth from the mainstream. Although such goals are admirable, and in many instances correct, since McKinney–Vento was

written there has been a sea change in thinking about the optimal structures for educational organizations. For example, there has been a surge in the number of charter schools that serve students as an alternative to the public school system. In 1990, there were no states that approved charter schools (Renzulli & Roscigno, 2005). Currently, there are more than 4,000 charter schools serving over 1 million students (Center for Education Reform, 2007). We are certainly not suggesting that all homeless youth ought to be sent to a school that separates them from their housed peers. Those who experience success in traditional schools should remain at those sites and continued efforts should be made to ensure nothing impedes their access. At the same time, a knee-jerk reaction that mainstreaming all homeless youth is the only educational structure that is in the best interests of all homeless students is shortsighted. Multiple educational experiments are occurring for different types of students so that their needs might be best met. That discussions also are not taking place that might create schools or schools within schools that cater to the needs of homeless youth is missing an opportunity to improve educational opportunity for a disenfranchised group.

Specifically, two types of alternative school designs might be appropriate: (1) temporary transitional schools for homeless youth disconnected from educational institutions; and (2) self-contained schools for youth who have multiple risk factors that have led to dropping out. First, transitional schools offer school districts the opportunity to assess students who have been out of school for a significant period of time. The small school setting would afford the staff an opportunity to identify areas where the student needs support and assist in transitioning to a comprehensive school setting. This allows for thoughtful discussion about how to transition a student and a clear educational plan can be developed that may assist schools sites in meeting the student's needs. Second, self-contained schools could be designed for youth with significant residential and relational barriers, such as homeless youth who are disconnected from school and involved in prostitution or substance abuse. These schools may offer a residential component and address the totality of issues the students are facing. The most disadvantaged and alienated homeless youth need individualized and comprehensive education programs (Powers & Jaklitsch, 1993). A self-contained school site could help stabilize these youth and allow for the coordination of multiple services (e.g., psychological, residential, and educational). As appropriate, the students may then be transitioned to a traditional school site. These alternative school designs give students disengaged from the educational process avenues to continue their education; however, these programs should not be viewed as an appropriate setting for all or even most homeless youth.

Assign Homeless Youth a Long-Term Mentor

One fact that cuts across all homeless youth is that they are typically unattached to an adult primarily concerned with their educational welfare. When one is homeless he or she is likely to be highly transient within a city. McKinney–Vento tried to create a stable educational environment for a student, but that goal in Los Angeles has been in large part unsuccessful. The sporadic attendance over a long period of time at one institution has multiple consequences for a young learner that results in graduation rates that, according to the district homeless liaison, are significantly lower than the district average. Mentoring is one strategy that has the potential to overcome many of the challenges we have outlined. The mentor can be proactive with a school system to ensure that the student receives resources needed to succeed in school. Even if the youth moves to different locations or different schools one possible piece of stability is the relationship that the student will have with a long-term mentor. Schools and districts should work with local organizations, businesses, and universities to develop mentoring programs.

*Develop Sustained Relationships between Shelters and
Educational Organizations*

Education and learning are now seen as activities that occur in and out of the classroom, during school, and when school is not in session. Public policies pertaining to education for the homeless youth in Los Angeles, however, are framed as attendance at a specific site during particular periods of time. Granted, schools remain critically important and simply getting homeless youth to school remains problematic. Rather than a disjuncture between the shelter and school we are suggesting that a closer relationship needs to be built and maintained. School personnel, by and large, do not know those students who are homeless, and they know even less about the shelters where many youth reside. Shelter staff may know the schools where students in their area attend, but they do not have the educational training to create an environment of learning in the shelter or for the student. One strategy would be to create a sustained relationship for shelters and educational organizations since they are both functioning, presumably, in the best interests of the child. Assigning a specific person at the school site to coordinate these efforts with the district liaisons and community organizations would assist in maintaining relationships that could positively influence the educational outcomes of homeless youth attending these schools.

CONCLUSION

Roughly a generation ago, federal policymakers acknowledged that homeless youth were not adequately being served and deserved better services. The same point could be made today, at least for the majority of students with whom we have come into contact: homeless youth are not adequately being served and deserve better services. State and local providers have a better sense of the numbers of homeless youth and the schools they attend – albeit sporadically – but solutions to how to help these students have remained elusive.

We have argued that mainstreaming all homeless youth creates particular problems for one of the country's most vulnerable populations. In turn, we have suggested that moving educational policy toward a stance that acknowledges the unique problems the homeless youth face in general, and specific populations of homeless youth in particular bears consideration as the country grapples with how to improve educational equity. How to create alternative educational opportunities, mentoring programs, and closer working relationships between shelters and educational organizations warrants discussion on federal, state, and local levels in order to improve outcomes for a student population who has historically been overlooked.

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