

Detroit Schools Severely Under-Identify Students Experiencing Homelessness and Housing Instability

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INTRODUCTION

Homelessness and housing instability have negative educational consequences for students in Michigan (Cowen, 2017; Erb-Downward, 2018; Erb-Downward & Watt, 2018). Under the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (1987), schools are required to identify homeless students and ensure they have a “full and equal opportunity” to succeed in school. When schools provide additional resources and support, they can help mitigate the negative educational effects of homelessness and housing instability for students (De Gregorio et al., 2022; Dhaliwal & De Gregorio, 2022).

For Detroit schools to support this vulnerable population of students, the first step is identifying them. Prior research from across the country has shown that homeless students are severely under-counted, including in Detroit (California State Auditor, 2019; Erb-Downward et al., 2021). In this policy brief, we provide clear evidence that Detroit schools under-identify students experiencing homelessness and housing instability, and identify ways that schools and districts can improve identification.

KEY FINDINGS

- At minimum, between 11-16% of Detroit students experienced homelessness or housing instability during the 2021-22 school year. As many as three in four of these students were not identified by their school as homeless at any point during the 2021-22 school year.
- We found three factors that contributed to under-identification of students experiencing homelessness or housing instability: 1) awareness about resources and rights related to student homelessness; 2) parent trust in discussing housing challenges with schools; and 3) staff follow-through when parents do share with their schools.

HOMELESS STUDENTS IN DETROIT ARE SEVERELY UNDER-IDENTIFIED

In a January 2022 representative survey of Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) and Detroit charter students, we found that approximately 13% of Detroit students should be classified as experiencing homelessness or housing instability. Combining our survey data and the district-provided administrative data, we found a housing instability rate of 16% (Table 1). Our findings corroborate prior research-based estimates (Erb-Downward et al., 2021) and evidence from other surveys of Detroit students (Koschmann et al., 2022).

Table 1: Housing Status for Detroit Students, 2021-22

| HOUSING STATUS | SHARE OF STUDENTS |
|--|-------------------|
| Housing unstable | 15.9% |
| <i>Homeless</i> | <i>10.8%</i> |
| <i>Evicted in Past Year but Not Currently Homeless</i> | <i>5.1%</i> |
| Stable Housing | 84.1% |

Source: Detroit PEER representative survey of Detroit students (January 2022) and district-provided administrative data

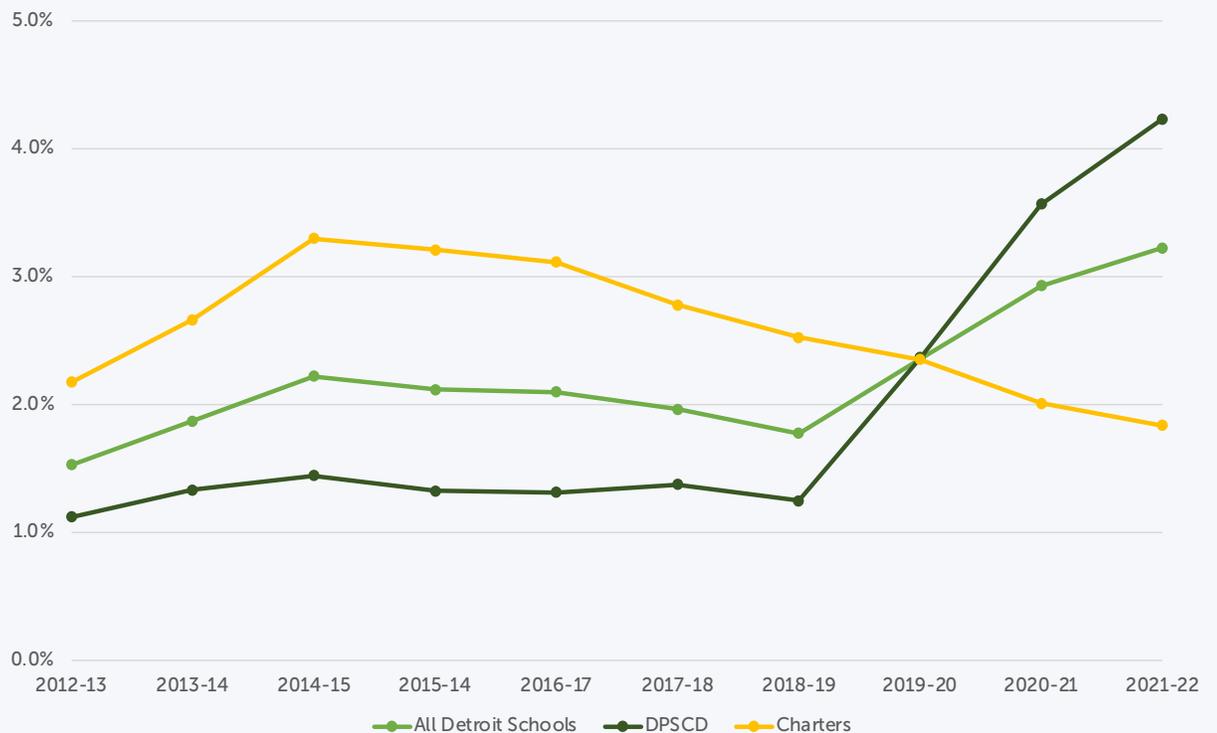
Yet, Detroit schools identified only 4% of students as experiencing homelessness in 2021-22. While 16% of students experience housing instability, the percent of students eligible for McKinney-Vento services would be at least 11% based on our estimates. This is because our estimates capture both homelessness and other forms of housing instability due to evictions. Eviction alone would not be grounds for identification under McKinney-Vento if the family immediately found adequate housing.

The housing market in Detroit is such that the likelihood of being evicted and immediately finding housing that is fixed and adequate (e.g., enough space, has heat and water) is low (Detroit Metro Area Communities Study, 2021; Erb-Downward et al., 2021). Therefore, most people who reported being evicted likely qualified as homeless for a period of time and should have been eligible to receive services for the remainder of the school year. However, according to the law, the school would have had to identify students as McKinney-Vento eligible after the family had been notified of an impending eviction and before the family

had secured new fixed and adequate housing. This window may be narrow for some families, making it challenging for schools to identify students for McKinney-Vento services. Even if we exclude the approximately 5% of students who experienced an eviction but were not currently homeless at the time of the survey, districts would have identified fewer than half of Detroit’s homeless students.

To put this all in context based on recent statewide data, these findings mean that Detroit may have the highest rate of housing instability among large districts in Michigan and would be near or within the top ten of all Michigan districts (Erb-Downward & Evangelist, 2018). This rate would also place homelessness and housing instability in Detroit at similar rates to other large urban districts such as Chicago and New York City (Amin, 2022; Hallberg et al., 2021). Yet, as shown in Figure 1, only 2-3% of Detroit students have been identified as homeless for over a decade.

Figure 1: Homelessness Identification Rates for Detroit Students Over Time



Source: MISchooldata.org public use student count and homeless student count datafiles.

Table 2: Detroit Student Homelessness Identification in Administrative Data, 2021-22

| | PCT. STUDENTS HOMELESS OR HOUSING UNSTABLE | PCT. STUDENTS IDENTIFIED AS HOMELESS |
|----------|--|--------------------------------------|
| All | 15.9% | 4.2% |
| DPSCD | 16.9% | 4.9% |
| Charters | 13.1% | 2.1% |

Source: Detroit PEER representative survey of Detroit students (January 2022) and 2021-22 administrative data from DPSCD and participating charter schools

We also noted differences in identification between DPSCD and participating charter schools. Based on 2021-22 administrative data provided by DPSCD and participating Detroit charter schools, about 4% of the students in our survey sample were identified as homeless (Table 2).¹ Looking at identification by sector, DPSCD identified about 29% of their students who experienced homelessness or housing instability (4.9% out of 16.9%), whereas Detroit charter schools identified only about 16% of their students who experienced homelessness or housing instability (2.1% out of 13.1%). The recent increase and greater percentage of students identified as homeless in DPSCD may reflect the district’s increased investment in identifying and supporting these students over the past several years (Higgins & Booker, 2021). For example, starting in 2019, DPSCD began designating and training a point of contact for students experiencing homelessness at every school.

The identification gap may be even larger than what we presented above because the actual number of homeless students in the city could be higher than our data suggests. There are likely other students who experienced homelessness or housing instability in the 2021-22 school year who were not identified by schools and may not have been captured in our survey data because we capture data directly from parents only at home point in time. Collecting survey data about housing status from multiple points in time could provide a comprehensive estimate of student homelessness.

¹ This share of students identified as homeless is very close to the figure reported in MISchoolData (and shown in Figure 1), providing further confidence for our estimates.

AWARENESS, PARENT TRUST, AND SCHOOL FOLLOW-THROUGH ARE IMPORTANT FACTORS

In follow-up interviews with 20 parents of homeless or housing-unstable families who responded to our survey, we found three primary obstacles for schools and districts to effectively identify students experiencing homelessness or housing instability: 1) awareness about resources and rights related to student homelessness; 2) parent trust in discussing housing challenges with schools; and 3) staff follow-through when parents do share with their schools.

AWARENESS

When asked about the policy by name, only two of the 20 parents experiencing housing instability we spoke to were familiar with McKinney-Vento, the federal law that requires schools to identify students experiencing homelessness and guarantees educational rights to those students. Parents shared that they did not realize their school was legally obligated to address educational barriers caused by homelessness nor that there were resources to which they were entitled. This was especially relevant for the many families we identified as homeless who were living doubled-up or in other inadequate housing but not in a shelter or on the street. As one parent shared: "I'm not on the street, I just got misplaced, which is fine because grownup people get misplaced all the time, and I work, so I try not to ask for help when I feel like I don't necessarily need it. Now, if I was on the street, of course I would have had to, of course I would've told somebody."

PARENT TRUST

Many of the parents we interviewed feared reaching out to their schools about housing because of embarrassment or social stigma. For example, a mother whose children logged onto online school during the pandemic from her car at a homeless shelter shared: "I was embarrassed about our situation, so I didn't necessarily want [anyone] to know we were in the car, even if we were at the shelter." Another parent said, "I don't want to be stereotyped...And I don't want no one to be biased about the situation [as] if I'm just looking for pity or something of that sort."

Beyond the social stigma and embarrassment, some families expressed concern that they or their children would face negative consequences if someone at the school knew they were experiencing homelessness. One parent mentioned that they worried the school would call Child Protective Services (CPS), with the implication that her children might be removed from her care: “No. I wasn’t telling nobody that so they could tell CPS.”

Having and building relationships at the school was a key factor in making successful connections for our housing unstable families. Each of the families we interviewed who received resources and services from their school had been comfortable reaching out to someone at the school because of strong interpersonal relationships. One parent put it this way: “There was definitely understanding. My kids had been at that school since pre-K, so it’s literally a family at that school with the people there.”

SCHOOL FOLLOW-THROUGH

Another factor that may contribute to under-identification is a lack of school follow-through when parents do notify someone at the school about their housing circumstances.

We heard two examples of parents who spoke to staff members about their housing issues and had a staff member follow up. One of those parents explained their experience this way: “Yes, I talked to [the principal] and that’s when they referred me to a program called McKinney-Vento...they was getting me transportation for them to get back and forth to school.”

In contrast, however, several other parents that we interviewed confided in someone at the school who they trusted but ultimately were not offered support or services, nor were they formally identified under McKinney-Vento. This could be the case even when families explicitly asked about transportation assistance while experiencing homelessness. For instance, one mom said “both of my kids’ teachers knew” because she asked them about the “busing situation” while they experienced homelessness. However, she went on to say that no one followed up with her after those conversations and no resources were offered. It may be that teachers or other staff who learn about families’ housing issues did not know about McKinney-Vento or how the school could help. Another possible contributing factor could be that most resources and services are distributed through DPSCD’s

central office or through Wayne RESA, the intermediate school district (for charters), creating an additional barrier for both parents and local school staff.

IMPLICATIONS

The under-identification of homeless students is a substantial issue in Detroit. As many as three out of four students who experience homelessness and housing instability in the city are not being formally identified by their schools, and thus are not receiving the resources and services to which they are entitled to support their education.

To improve the rate of homeless identification, Detroit schools must strengthen their relationships with families and improve their communication about and delivery of available services for students experiencing homelessness or housing instability. McKinney-Vento requires that schools post information about the resources available if they experience homelessness; schools can take more proactive steps than just this. For example, providing this information to families during school registration and enrollment (Higgins & Booker, 2021), as well as using multiple means of informing all families in the district about the McKinney-Vento Act and the resources available if they experience homelessness throughout the year.

Schools should also ensure that families and students know that they qualify for support if they “lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence,” including students residing in other persons’ homes (doubled up); living in motels, hotels, or trailers due to economic hardship or housing loss (McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, 1987). Additionally, since recent surveys of students on their mental health needs and housing instability have been shown to more accurately measure student homelessness (Koschmann et al., 2022), schools may want to find ways to check directly and systematically with students about their housing status, at multiple times throughout the school year, rather than just at the point of enrollment. In addition, districts should ensure that all staff members who interact with students and parents understand the resources and services available under the McKinney-Vento Act and know the process for connecting a student to them.

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Notes:

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